

Anti-DEI push spreads across sectors

David Sherfinski

REUTERS

RICHMOND – In Dima Ghawi’s early career in finance and tech, she recalls companies having some form of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies that tried to increase the number of women working in certain fields.

“That was before DEI was the cool thing to do, like a few years ago,” said Ghawi, who is now a leadership coach and considers herself a DEI success story.

“Now when I look back, I feel the reason I am doing what I’m doing – being successful, driving positive change in the world – is because somebody opened a door for me that maybe was not available to women before me.”

When she interviewed for a teller job at Bank of America, she recalled the hiring manager telling her “everybody starts someplace, everybody deserves a chance.”

“It opened a small little door to help me prove myself,” she said.

“And at the same time, he didn’t let his bias affect how he perceived me at that time – maybe the bias that I have an accent, maybe the bias that I’m female, maybe the bias related to I’m from a different country,” she said.

She said when it comes to DEI, she’s not advocating to hire or promote people solely because of factors like gender or ethnicity.

“All we’re saying, at least what I’m teaching people, is let’s pause and address these biases that we may not be aware of,” she said.

Stories like Ghawi’s could become harder to come by under President Trump’s administration, which is aggressively rooting out DEI initiatives throughout federal government, and major companies from Meta to Amazon.com Inc. are likewise winding down some of their own programs.

Trump has strongly promoted the push, casting DEI policies as illegal and even pointing to DEI efforts as having weakened federal air safety in his remarks about the deadly plane crash near Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport last week.

The impacts will be felt among underrepresented groups, along with a shrinking number of people in DEI-re-

lated positions in both the public and private sectors, experts said.

“This is professionally jarring,” said Ella Washington, a workplace consultant, professor and author of books including “The Necessary Journey: Making Real Progress on Equity and Inclusion.”

Action in D.C.

During his first days back in office, Trump signed executive orders aimed at ending DEI programs in the federal government, and his administration directed agencies to put all employees of DEI offices on administrative leave.

He also rescinded an order, in place since the 1960s, that barred discrimination on the part of federal contractors.

The president put DEI front and center after the devastating Jan. 29 mid-air crash that killed 67 people, in which a commercial airliner collided with a Black Hawk helicopter, saying the incident “could have been” the result of diversity hiring.

“Certainly, for an air traffic controller, we want the brightest, the smartest, the sharpest, we want somebody that’s psychologically superior, and that’s what we’re going to have,” he said.

Asked how he could conclude that diversity had something to do with the crash, Trump said: “Because I have common sense, OK? And, unfortunately, a lot of people don’t.”

His administration also has directed federal employees to report any colleagues attempting to disguise DEI programs as something else, threatening “adverse consequences” if individuals didn’t quickly disclose any attempted subterfuge.

The moves came as a string of companies, including Meta, Walmart Inc., McDonald’s Corp. and Target Corp., announced in recent weeks that they would be winding down DEI or diversity-related programs or initiatives.

Washington pointed out, however, that anti-DEI sentiment has been percolating for at least a few years, following calls for racial justice – and backlash – after the 2020 death of George Floyd, a Black man, at the hands of police in Minnesota.

She said she already has seen colleagues getting laid off, chief diversity

officers losing their jobs or not having positions backfilled and, in academia, colleagues asked or told to change the names of their courses.

“The chilling effect did not just start for people like myself,” she said.

States have been passing their own anti-DEI laws in recent years. Last year, the University of Texas at Austin made waves by summarily dismissing some diversity staff to avoid conflict with an anti-DEI state law.

The U.S. Supreme Court’s 2023 ruling that effectively ended affirmative action in admissions at U.S. colleges and universities was also a seismic move still having repercussions throughout higher education.

Paulette Granberry Russell, president of the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education, told Context/Thomson Reuters Foundation that the White House’s recent executive orders misrepresent DEI efforts “as divisive rather than as essential to fostering opportunity and institutional excellence.”

Granberry Russell said her organization is still encouraging institutions “to continue to collect and share evidence of how diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives contribute to student success, workforce preparedness, and institutional strength, reinforcing the idea that these programs are essential to academic and economic progress.”

Studies have found that diversity principles enacted by companies were correlated to increased profitability.

Pro-Trump and conservative groups, meanwhile, are hailing the anti-DEI trend, saying such policies worked to perpetuate discrimination rather than break through it.

Pushing back

At the other end of the corporate world, however, companies like Costco Wholesale Corp. and Delta Air Lines Inc. have rejected the recent anti-DEI push.

Nevertheless, Washington said the recent trends are jarring, noting that at least one of Trump’s orders reversed protections in place since the 1960s.

“This is literally a political attack on people’s professions that actually had nothing to do with politics.”