

# Fostering a Sense of Belonging

An Interview with Karen L. Pavlin, Managing Director, North America Inclusion & Diversity Lead, Accenture



Karen Pavlin in front of the Apollo Theater in Harlem, New York City

**EDITORS' NOTE** Karen Pavlin is Accenture's North America Inclusion & Diversity lead and a managing director in Accenture's Northeast (NE) market unit. In her role as North America I&D lead, Pavlin leads the firm's efforts to advance change and continue accelerating equality for all across North America, creating a sense of belonging and ensuring all of Accenture's people feel seen, safe, connected and courageous. Prior to her current role, she led account strategies to drive large-scale transformation, thought leadership and innovation for the firm's top Financial Services and Communications, Media and Technology (CMT) clients. Pavlin joined Accenture in September 2017 after spending 20+ years at Xerox Corporation. She sits on the Board of Directors of the Apollo Theater and iMentor National Organization. She was also the recipient of The Network Journal's Top 25 Black Women in Business in 2019. Pavlin holds a BA and a Master's degree in Marketing from the University of Virginia.

**COMPANY BRIEF** Accenture ([accenture.com](https://www.accenture.com)) is a global professional services company with leading capabilities in digital, cloud and security. Combining unmatched experience and specialized skills across more than 40 industries, it offers

Strategy and Consulting, Interactive, Technology and Operations services— all powered by the world's largest network of Advanced Technology and Intelligent Operations centers. Its 569,000 people deliver on the promise of technology and human ingenuity every day, serving clients in more than 120 countries. Accenture embraces the power of change to create value and shared success for its clients, people, shareholders, partners, and communities.

**Will you discuss your new role and how you will focus your efforts as North America Inclusion & Diversity Lead?**

In May 2021, I proudly took on a new role as Accenture's North America Inclusion & Diversity (I&D) lead. I direct the company's efforts to build support for and accelerate our efforts to promote a culture of equality and inclusion across North America. Success for me will be measured in many ways, but most clearly, I want to focus on fostering a sense of belonging. I want to help create space for people to safely share their life experiences and lived experiences. That's how you begin to create a culture of inclusion.

**How critical is it for Accenture to build a diverse and inclusive workforce in order to bring diverse perspectives and experience to the table when addressing client needs?**

It's critical to our culture that we build a team where everyone can be seen, safe, connected and courageous – that means that diversity and inclusion programs and initiatives are critical to who we are as an organization. We believe this deeply, and from this belief comes a commitment to make change for all of us to do better. Diversity and inclusion isn't just the right thing to do – it's the smart thing to do. It matters in our work. But more than that, it matters in what we stand for.

**Will you highlight Accenture's initiatives in regard to diversity and inclusion and the importance of having metrics to track the impact of these efforts?**

We have set bold goals for our workforce demographics, and we are holding ourselves

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accountable to them. In 2021, we are making progress on our 2025 goals to increase African American and Black representation from 9 percent to 12 percent and managing director representation from 2.8 percent to 4.4 percent, and increase Hispanic American and Latinx representation from 9.5 percent to 13 percent and managing director representation from 3.5 percent to 4.7 percent. We’re making progress – sometimes slower than we would like, but in our view, if we want to drive large-scale transformation, we have to track where we’ve been and identify where we want to go.

**How do you plan to engage Accenture’s workforce in its diversity and inclusion efforts?**

I’m taking the time to learn more about how inclusion makes us a stronger organization, and how each of us can do our part to help build bridges, to build trust, so that we can all show up as ourselves. I participated in a Women in Tech panel with producer and director Mimi Valdes and a MLK Day event with Mary J. Blige. Recently, I had the privilege of leading a conversation with Common for our African American/Hispanic American Employee Resource Group (ERG) Leadership Summit.

If anyone wants to be active in diversity & inclusion issues at Accenture, there are many ways to get involved. I have many great resources to tap into and learn from. We launched the Black Founders Development Fund, we are active in the MOM Project, we have relationships with the Hispanic IT Executive Council, Girls Who Code, the

Reaching Out MBA Conference, and the National Urban League. We’ve also built strong networks and employee resource groups across more than 20 dimensions of diversity.

**How critical is it for you to have such deep commitment and engagement from Accenture’s board and management team for its diversity and inclusion work?**

It’s critical because leadership matters – if leaders value inclusion, it will happen. I am honored to sit on the North America Leadership Team – that demonstrates the kind of commitment Accenture is devoting at the highest levels to these issues. I’ll give you an example: our global management committee has 40 members, 27 percent of whom are women, including our Chief Executive Officer, Julie Sweet. We have deep commitment and engagement from the board and management team on gender goals, and we cascade those goals down through the organization and even include them as part of performance evaluation and reward for our senior leaders.

**How do you define Accenture’s culture and how critical is culture to the success of the company?**

Our culture is defined by a focus on each person. Each one of us – in every position, at every level, in every country – we are Accenture. We also know that getting to this kind of culture takes decades and the work never ends. We’ve been deliberate about building a culture where our behaviors and beliefs, the way we grow our people, and the way we do business every single day, reflect our core beliefs and bring out the best in our people.

When we do this work well, not only do we succeed as a company, but we are a place where people are excited to work, and that is really what matters. When you start from that position, it becomes easier to see diversity and inclusion as paths to a stronger culture, a stronger team, a stronger company.

**What do you see as the responsibility that leading companies have to being engaged in the communities they serve and to being a force for good in society?**

We have long believed that building trust with our people, clients and communities is essential to our future as an organization. Maybe because of the way I was raised, that is all I’ve ever known in my professional life. People want to work in organizations which are part of solutions, part of positive change, part of making things better. Doing that consistently will make you a better organization.

**Are you optimistic about New York’s recovery and rebuilding from the pandemic?**

I am proud to live in the New York area and I love it. New York City continues to recover and for good reason. There’s no better place to work and live – it’s got incredible energy. In our recent survey from Accenture and Tech:NYC, 58 percent of C-suite participants report their organization is planning to increase the number of tech hires in 2021 as much as 20 percent above 2020. A majority of respondents are confident they can find the tech talent they need within the New York City talent pool, though brain drain remains a potential concern.

**What advice do you offer young people beginning their careers during this unprecedented time?**

Three things: First, push yourself. I love the fact that I’m deep into my career and I’m still learning. Second, be comfortable in your own shoes. I am so glad that I work at a place where I don’t have to leave myself “in the car” and come into work as a different person. Don’t let “silent identity” creep in. Think about what makes you unique and be that person. Third, don’t be afraid to turn “off” every so often. We can be excellent at our jobs and still not be “on” some days. We have to give ourselves and everyone around us the room to say, “I can’t do it today.” ●

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