

PwC's Purpose

An Interview with Elena Richards,
Minority Initiatives and Talent Management Leader, Office of Diversity, PwC

EDITORS' NOTE Elena Richards is responsible for PwC's multicultural initiatives designed to retain, develop and advance diverse professionals. Since joining PwC in 1999, she has served in a variety of human resources roles and led the firm's Vanguard program, a year-long leadership development program for the firm's Black/African American new hires. She is also responsible for leading the efforts around unconscious bias education firmwide. Richards is involved



Elena Richards

in various organizations in the industry including Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), NAAHR (National Association of African Americans in Human Resources), and the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants' (AICPA) National Commission on Diversity and Inclusion.

FIRM BRIEF The purpose at PwC (pwc.com) is to build trust in society and solve important problems. It is a network of firms in over 140 territories with more than 250,000 people who are committed to delivering quality in assurance, advisory and tax services.

How do you define your role at PwC and what are your key areas of focus?

In my role, I focus on efforts that help us develop our talent, but also empower a more diverse and inclusive workforce at PwC and outside of our walls as well. I also lead our firmwide efforts around unconscious bias education, which is one of the three commitments of CEO Action for Diversity & Inclusion.

How ingrained is diversity and inclusion in PwC's culture and values?

The effort starts at the top and is a priority for our leaders, but it's also reinforced at every level at PwC. From recruiting to training new employees, as well as our development programs for current staff, we are dedicated to creating an inclusive culture. We're still on this journey and are constantly reinventing our policies and programs to change with the world and ensure our company reflects the lives and values of our employees.

We know that our people can't park their personal lives at the door when they come into work. What happens outside of the office, how we feel, and how we show up in

the workplace, are all interconnected. Therefore, we strive to create a true place where people can bring who they are and what they are dealing with in and outside of work – it shapes who we are both personally and professionally.

How does PwC engage its employees in its diversity efforts?

Our leaders constantly encourage and host conversations that focus on topics that have typically been uncomfortable to discuss in the workplace. For example, we held conversations in the summer of 2016 when police

shootings of unarmed black men were followed by the killing of police officers in Dallas. Now that we're continuing to see shifts in culture around other important topics, these conversations have expanded and staff members have been incredibly receptive to them.

We also put a big focus on unconscious bias, blind spots and other broader inclusive leadership trainings which are offered to all levels of staff. We all have a role to play in building the environment we want to work and thrive in. This approach helps ensure our people feel comfortable having conversations and bringing their full selves to work every day, no matter what's happening in the world.

In your role, how valuable has it been to have such a deep commitment and engagement from the C-Suite and senior management for PwC's diversity initiatives?

As mentioned previously, our D&I efforts are a big priority for leadership and Tim Ryan, our U.S. Chairman, began engaging staff members on the topic incredibly soon after he started in his role, which has been huge. To have the support of senior leaders in putting training and formal policies in place has been key, because our people see that it's important at the top and are encouraged to reinforce it on their own teams and in their offices. However, it takes everyone. Many efforts and changes have been driven by our staff members. For example, our inclusion networks and partner council began raising topics of importance to Tim and our senior leaders which then led to our conversations about respect in the workplace. We began hosting conversations in different offices across the country to talk about

respect in the workplace, with a focus on sexual harassment, specifically after the #MeToo movement began.

What do you see as the impact of having a diverse and inclusive workforce on driving business results?

The key to supporting our employees starts with understanding that what happens outside of work affects what happens on the job. We can't expect our employees to come to work and operate at their full potential if they don't feel comfortable expressing themselves and having trusted conversations with their colleagues, and we can't deliver our best output as a firm if we don't invest in our employees.

And business impact goes far beyond performance within our four walls. Diversity and inclusion is a broader societal issue, and that's the thinking behind CEO Action, which Tim Ryan helped bring to life in 2017. The coalition now includes more than 650 CEOs and creates a space where leaders can share knowledge, provide case studies of what is working, learn from others and open the floor for a societal conversation around D&I so that we can all benefit and drive progress forward in the broader business community.

What advice do you give to young women interested in professional services and do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women at senior levels in the industry?

I absolutely think that there are strong opportunities for women at senior levels in the industry, and we see them every day at PwC. I do believe it's necessary for young women to see their identity in current leadership and connect to them, and while the industry itself still has progress to make, I would encourage young women to look for companies that are prioritizing these efforts. Also, know that you might not always find an advocate that is the same gender and/or race as you, but that doesn't mean they won't be an advocate for you. It is all about surrounding yourself with the right people who can help you be successful, and that won't be a monolithic group.

Look for companies that support women leaders and have clear programs in place to move forward progress on gender equity, create spaces for underrepresented communities and have leaders who are willing to speak out about uncomfortable topics. But also don't be afraid to speak up and advocate for yourself. ●