

# Activate Equity

An Interview with Kavitha Prabhakar, Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer, Deloitte US

**EDITORS' NOTE** Kavitha Prabhakar is a principal and serves as the Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) leader for Deloitte US. She also co-leads the Black Action Council for Deloitte, focused on architecting Deloitte's long-term strategy to advance its Black colleagues and communities by developing a culture of anti-racism for its people, firm and communities. Previously, she led a \$1 billion practice with nearly 5,000 professionals as Deloitte Consulting's Civil Government sector leader,



Kavitha Prabhakar

overseeing a wide range of clients including: The Departments of State, Treasury, Commerce, Transportation, Energy, Agriculture, as well as the U.S. Postal Service, NASA, and U.S. Agency for International Development. Prabhakar was a member of Deloitte's Nominating Committee, Board Council and leads the Executive Women in technology initiative for Deloitte's CIO Program. She has also led various Women's Initiative (WIN) programs for financial services including 100 Wise Women and Women on Wall Street. Prabhakar has been recognized as one of Fortune's Most Powerful Women Next Gen and as Crain's Notable Minorities in Accounting, Consulting & Law. She has an MS in computer science and MBA with concentrations in strategy and finance from University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She also holds a BS in computer science and mathematics from the State University of New York, Buffalo.

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**This is a time when Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are top of mind for every company. How do you think about your role as Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer and how critical is it for the role to be engaged in business strategy?**

My role as Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Officer is part relentless optimist, because we have to believe things can improve and that every small inch of progress matters, and part realist, because we have to

be honest about where we're starting and the barriers that exist. I also believe that my role as CDEIO is a role I share with every other person at the organization. We need a culture of allyship and advocacy to achieve the change we believe is needed within our organization and in the communities we serve.

To create meaningful change, DEI cannot be treated as a separate or "extra-curricular" activity – DEI needs to be a business imperative and embedded into the DNA of the organization. At Deloitte, DEI is a strategic priority and a crucial component of our business strategy, shared values, culture, and ability to innovate. We do this by challenging long-held orthodoxies (e.g., we can't do something because it's too risky or because there is no precedent) and stepping up the pace of change by creating a measurable, positive impact in all areas of business – from talent acquisition and retention strategies to business choices and decision-making around the diversity of suppliers, investments, and acquisitions.

**Will you provide an overview of Deloitte's diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy?**

The heart of our strategy is the need to "activate equity" by extending our DEI focus across our talent practices, all client-facing and operational activities, and our impact on society. There was a growing realization that all the best programs and trainings don't amount to progress if they don't impact the outcome of creating a more equitable workplace and society. Equity is a critical lens through which we are examining our systems and processes to continuously improve the talent experience for our professionals, including career trajectory interventions to proactively monitoring flat or downward trajectories and leadership investment and accountability. By helping address some of the root issues of inequity in society more broadly, we can even the playing field and ensure everyone has a fair shot at succeeding. This year Deloitte published The Equity Imperative which helps organizations think about how to activate equity within their own walls.

**How engrained is diversity and inclusion in Deloitte's culture and values?**

We have been a purpose-driven organization from the moment our doors opened more than 175 years ago. Our DEI journey has many firsts including the naming of the first woman chair, the first Hispanic CEO, the first minority CEO, and the first woman CEO of any Big Four organizations. We also set the industry standard with a transformational family leave program that provides eligible professionals with up to 16 weeks of paid leave. Our ability to thrive is because of our long history of

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creating an environment that is inclusive for all, where diversity in every sense of the word is valued, where all professionals feel valued for their work, and where they are growing professionally and are making a positive impact for our clients and in society.

Accountability to live our diversity, equity, and inclusion values is driven from the top down and bottom up. This year, our senior leaders committed to specific DEI quantitative and qualitative goals – this supports our shift of focus from activity to results and outcomes for DEI. Additionally, listening to and learning from others are a critical part of how we can continue to deepen our commitment. For example, our “Race in America” series features moderated discussions that explore the history of diverse cultures, racial identity and how to be an ally.

**How important is it to have diverse perspectives and experiences at the table when addressing client needs?**

There is a well-documented correlation between diversity, equity, and inclusion and an organization’s ability to navigate uncertainty and drive greater innovation. Deloitte’s own research has shown that high-performing teams are both cognitively and demographically diverse. For a professional services organization like ours, the multidimensional perspectives and solutions from our workforce is the value that we deliver to clients. In fact, our clients expect us to bring a wide range of experiences and expertise to the table to help them solve their most complex challenges. In the marketplace more broadly, companies are increasingly adding DEI as an evaluation criterion when selecting service providers.

**How do you engage Deloitte’s employees in its diversity efforts?**

Listening and creating opportunities to engage our people are essential elements of our DEI strategy. It’s letting our people know that we see them, hear them, and that they belong and their stories matter. This past year, we’ve built a number of brave spaces to process difficult topics such as race, identity, and privilege with our leadership and external thought leaders. We’ve also come together to support our colleagues through virtual celebrations such as Black History Month, Women’s History Month, Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month, LGBTQIA+ Pride Month, and Juneteenth.

We’ve created new trainings such as a mandatory anti-racism module and “Say This Not That” to build a culture of allyship and advocacy across the organization. Our Inclusion Councils and cohort specific Communities provide opportunities for our people to bond with colleagues, serve as allies, participate in professional development activities, and contribute to advancing our DEI goals.

**Is it critical to have metrics in place to track the impact of Deloitte’s diversity and inclusion efforts?**

This year we launched our inaugural DEI Transparency Report. I’m incredibly proud of how we took a critical look at our current state, both from a quantitative and qualitative perspective, and set ambitious goals for what we want the future to be. We shared representation data for our U.S. workforce across leadership, job roles, generations, and all phases of the talent life cycle. Additionally, we shared sentiment/experience data that highlighted a professional’s

sense of belonging in the firm – all data points we had never released before. As a firm, we have made tremendous progress around DEI, but the data allows for a critical look at where we are today, how we want to evolve, and what it will take to get there.

**In your role, how valuable has it been to have the commitment of Deloitte’s senior management in the firm’s diversity and inclusion efforts?**

Unwavering commitment to advance DEI from the highest levels of leadership is not only incredibly valuable, but absolutely critical. Our leaders across our Executive Leadership Team and Board have wholeheartedly committed to advancing DEI within Deloitte – ensuring it is directly embedded in our business strategy and culture – and they are holding themselves, and each other, accountable for creating substantive change.

This commitment has propelled tremendous progress in the last year. In the summer of 2020, we established our Black Action Council which consists of 14 leaders and over 50 professionals, representing diversity across our businesses, geography, level, gender, and race. We are committed to enhancing the Black experience and to remove barriers in systems, policies and processes to drive equitable outcomes for all. We’re collaborating across the marketplace through organizations like OneTen, a business coalition commitment to hire one million Black Americans into jobs that provide pathways to opportunity over the next decade. Looking to the future, we’re planning to spend \$1 billion on diverse suppliers by 2025 and more than \$200 million with Black-owned/led businesses by 2025. We were also successful in publishing the previously mentioned first DEI Transparency Report, which would not have been possible without unwavering focus and support of Deloitte’s leadership.

**What are your key priorities as you look to Deloitte’s continued efforts regarding diversity and inclusion?**

The extensive impact we’re able to make in the marketplace and our communities would not be possible without the diverse perspectives and contributions of our 100,000-plus team. We will continue to prioritize our people, advance our DEI strategy, and cultivate an environment that allows all our people to thrive and bring their exceptional self to work every day.

At Deloitte, we have an incredibly strong DEI foundation, and I’m humbled to be a part of our ongoing journey. ●

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