

Hamstrung by 'golden handcuffs': Diversity roles disappear 3 years after George Floyd's murder inspired them

The wave of change in workplaces through diversity, equity and inclusion roles has quelled, and Black workers will feel the brunt of the officers' absence.



— Diversity, equity and inclusion roles increased by 55% in 2020. By the end of last year, DEI professionals were losing their jobs as layoffs across the economy gained momentum.

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By Curtis Bunn

Diversity, equity and inclusion leaders, who were hired in waves to help companies achieve an ethnically balanced workforce after George Floyd's murder in 2020, are being phased out, surveys indicate, leaving experts in the field concerned that corporations' talk of affecting change was just empty words.

DEI roles increased by 55% following demands for broader racial equity and justice after Floyd's murder, the Society for Human Resource Management [reported in 2020](#). But instead of creating fair opportunities and a comfortable work culture for Black employees, a pair of recent reports indicate, DEI professionals are [losing their jobs](#), as layoffs across the economy have gained momentum.



— Chris Metzler. Evelyn Montez

The attrition rate for DEI roles was 33% at the end of 2022, compared to 21% for non-DEI roles. Amazon, Applebees and Twitter [lead the way](#) with DEI layoffs since July 2022, according to Revelio Labs, a New York-based company that uses data to analyze workforce dynamics and trends.

Another survey showed that Black employees represent only [3.8%](#) of chief diversity officers overall, with white people making up 76.1% of the roles. Those of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity make up 7.8% and those of Asian ethnicity make up 7.7%

Reyhan Ayas, a senior economist at Revelio Labs, which surveyed DEI layoffs, said the data shows the pledge to impact change was not followed by genuine effort.

“I always say that it is so easy to make public statements and commitments because no one will eventually check if you’re committed to the things that you committed to,” she said. “I can say: ‘I will be fully vegan by 2025’ because no one will ever call me in 2025 and ask me if I’m actually fully vegan. And that’s really what is going on here. In 2020, a lot of companies made big commitments, big statements around the DEI roles and goals. And as we are observing a turning of that tide, I think it’s very timely that we actually look into companies to see if they have kept up with those big statements they made.”

DEI professional [Nika White](#), author of the book, “Inclusion Uncomplicated,” said the studies also reveal “the harsh reality” of many companies’ commitments to diversity. “This is very disheartening, especially after so many of us were hopeful after George Floyd’s murder that organization leaders would be sensitized and committed to equity and inclusion.”



— Nika White. Stacey Gardin

But the opposite has happened. Revelio Labs' 2023 report on the state of DEI and the impact of last year's layoffs, found that DEI-focused roles "experienced a nearly 40% churn rate at companies engaged in layoffs, as compared to about 24% for non-DEI roles."

The stunning absence of Black people in chief diversity officer roles in companies makes DEI professionals cringe.

"This is a role that is essential to advocating and advancing the progress for underrepresented talent at these organizations," said Wade Hinton, founder of Hinton and Co., a DEI firm in Chattanooga, Tennessee. "And so, you want to make sure that it reflects the diversity of our communities and this country, and it's clear that we've got work to do on this."

Together, the studies mean something more to Chris Metzler, senior vice president, corporate DEI and environmental, social and governance strategies at the [National Urban League](#). The influx of DEI officer hires in 2020, he said, was disingenuous and the positions have largely been weakened to the point of being toothless.



— Wade Hinton. Harlan Breaux

“Most of your diversity professionals at these companies report to human resources, which are [headed by white women](#) and in some cases, white men,” he said. “So, it doesn’t surprise me that Black diversity officers . . . are being moved out. It’s increasingly becoming a dead-end job. Corporations are saying one thing and demonstrating something else. It’s going back to checking the box versus hiring and keeping qualified workers who can impact change in the company.”

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Tai Robinson, a human resources professional in Houston, said the value of Black DEI officers can be significant, if given in-house support because they are specifically trained for the role. “When a white human resources person listens to African Americans voice their concerns,” she said, “they can end up sounding like complaints, although they are just concerns. And that’s a problem.”

Some in the field say two other concerns helped make DEI positions expendable: a lack of support from higher-ups and the hiring of workers who have little or no experience in executing this specialized job.



— Tai Robinson. Courtesy Tai Robinson

“So many of these individuals were receiving these great salaries,” Robinson said. “But in reality, they were wearing golden handcuffs, unable to do but so much because the organization leaders didn’t want much done.”

Metzler agreed, adding that without support, the DEI officers are set up to fail.

“They have the title; they don’t have the authority. In some cases, they don’t have the budgets, so it’s difficult to navigate that terrain,” he said.

“There is a value proposition to this work. It’s an important job that requires trained professionals,” Metzler added. “It is time for organizations to retool the description and to hire the right people for these positions and not just fill a position with someone who has no idea where to even begin.”

Metzler insists the focus should shift from DEI to environmental, social and governance strategy, which has three pillars: how a company’s practices impact the environment; the social consequences of a company’s performance; and governance over an organization’s decisions and ramifications of those decisions.

“ESG is the way forward,” he said. “We’re still in that old, affirmative action, equal employment opportunity definition of diversity, which is part of the reason why we’re not moving in any significant way.”

Still, while bothered by the drop-off of DEI officers, Hinton said he remains encouraged that the trend can be reversed.

“I’m optimistic because I consult with clients every day,” he said. “I know first-hand that there are organizations that truly want to see progress made. But collectively we’ve got to make sure that we’re encouraging those organizations to encourage their peers to work with them to advance this work.”



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