

# Equity & Inclusion

## A government strategic plan case study

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### Equity and Inclusion Strategic Plan, Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh (URA)

The case study providing professional insights in equity and inclusion is taken directly from the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh (URA). The URA is the City of Pittsburgh's (in Pennsylvania) economic development agency with approximately 100 employees supporting the City's economic development goals, which are designed to create a city of inclusive opportunity for residents, stakeholders and communities. The URA's purpose is to create more affordable housing; encourage more entrepreneurship and small business development; promote inclusive growth and quality job creation; expand neighborhood and main streets revitalization efforts; and develop a talented workforce equipped with the skills of the future.<sup>1</sup>

"It's nice to have a salad, it's healthy, but the salad is better when it has olives, cucumbers, etc. – diverse vegetables." – Columbus Brooks, Chief Human Resources Officer, URA

Columbus Brooks has created a lot of change in the URA's human resources practices to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion since he was hired in 2016. When Brooks arrived, he saw that although there were minorities and women that worked at the URA, they were not in key positions or roles nor representative of the City's demographics. Brooks, determined to address this problem, began by looking at the culture from the inside, interviewing employees on how they viewed their workplace and producing a human resources audit with the help of a consultant.

The initial research led to a [Racial Equity Assessment](#) in 2018 to help the URA understand its organizational climate and understand perspectives on its racial equity efforts. The results were used to improve the URA's racial equity policies and performance and promote an inclusive work environment. The assessment, conducted by an outside agency, included the review of relevant documents and data, and conducting focus groups, personal interviews, and surveys. These interviews included discussions on equity, diversity and inclusion relating to the URA's workforce and sought input to where the URA should focus its efforts and ways to improve performance. (The surveys and questionnaires used can be found in the appendices to the assessment)

The assessment included recommendations for human resources practices:

- State and demonstrate commitment and leadership on issues of equity, diversity and inclusion
  - The organization should make clear the organization and its leaders' commitment to these issues – not only by developing and promoting a statement, but by

demonstrating that commitment in their hiring and promotion practices. Progress on this commitment should be shared with employees and constituents.

- Include racial equity in routine decision making
  - This included the use of the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) Racial Equity Tool.
- Provide racial equity training to all employees
  - Trainings include equity, diversity and inclusion so all employees understand the concepts and their importance in development of appropriate skills
- Ensure fairness and equity in position classification, compensation, and qualification requirements
  - There should not be discrepancies in the position titles and compensation of employees performing the same function. This includes participation in senior leadership meetings, if applicable to the position.
  - Job qualifications should be reviewed for elements that may not be necessary for the job's function, such as requiring a certain level of education, which may eliminate qualified candidates who did not have the same access to higher education.
  - A compensation audit should be performed to focus on areas such as pay differences, wage-setting policies, job classification and educational requirements.
- Widen recruitment pools and sources to identify diverse talent
  - Consider sourcing from diversity organizations or developing relationships with schools that have a strong focus on minority students.
- Develop a stand-alone recruitment, hiring and retention strategic plan
  - This plan should include specific goals and objectives and be a companion to a diversity, equity and inclusion strategic plan
- Engage employees and seek their feedback on racial equity and other matters that affect their employment
  - Consider ongoing group discussions and surveying employees periodically to measure perceptions and obtain feedback

The incorporated information from the assessment and other related activities resulted in the URA's [Equity and Inclusion Strategic Plan](#) which includes Human Resources goals and strategies to recruit, retain and develop a diverse workforce. The strategic plan was developed by the Human Resources department with input from the Equity Working Group and the new MWBE Director. The primary goals are:

1. Recruitment – to compete for top talent
2. Inclusive Excellence – to create an environment where employees of all backgrounds can thrive
3. Retention – improve retention by creating a positive climate
4. Talent Development – support development of all employees
5. Value Added human resources – deliver human resources services, programs and communication that add value for prospective employees, current employees, and retirees

The URA has an Equity Working Group comprised of staff members, directors, and board members whose purpose is to assist staff and leadership in their commitment to equity and

inclusion. The URA hired an Equity and Inclusion Coordinator who coordinates the development, implementation, and measurement of the URA's diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

## Implementing the Plan

Brooks began incorporating diversity and inclusion practices in the URA's hiring and promotion practices. These strategies include

- Identifying gaps in women and minorities in key positions and salaries
  - Brooks had a third party perform a complete assessment on the URA's positions, wages and paygrades and was able to identify gaps and disparities.
- Ensuring minority and women candidates were included in the job interview pool
  - Brooks examined where hiring directors historically pulled their candidates from and expanded the recruiting to a more diversified mix of candidate pools from a wider range of institutions.
- Training management on best interviewing and hiring practices
  - Goals and performance award systems were instituted in hiring, promoting and adjustment practices to encourage diversifying. The re-evaluation of the organization through a workforce analysis resulted in goals and strategies which can be modified as needed.
  - Some best practices include<sup>3</sup> integrating racial equity into job descriptions, use of interview questions to assess candidates understanding of equity and inclusion, regular updates of job descriptions and review of existing hiring policies and procedures
- Training management and staff on recognizing unconscious biases and equipping them with tools to address such biases. Trainings may include those on personal identity, implicit bias, diverse culture, understanding of terminology and a racial equity tool.
- Reevaluating the employee review and promotion process.

It's also necessary to debunk myths. Diverse candidates are equally as qualified; however, they sometimes lack equal access to opportunities. Furthermore, there is ample research which shows that diversity improves quality. A McKinsey report<sup>2</sup> shows that companies in the top 25% of gender, ethnic and cultural diversity were more likely to have above-average profitability than similar companies in the bottom 25%. Knowing that, if two candidates were equal in their qualifications, the director should consider picking the candidate that brings diverse perspectives that don't currently exist within their department.

As a result of implementing these strategies, more women and minorities have been hired and promoted since 2019. This includes increased promotion opportunities and promotions, a rebalancing of the seven-member executive leadership team (two women, two minorities and three men) and of the 67 new hires from 2019 through 2021

- 85% have been women
- 34% have been black/African American
- 4% have been Hispanic

Brooks states, “By having a diverse team, we have gained different perspectives and ideas. We see the mission through various eyes and opinions. It has changed how we operate the organization.”

In 2021, the URA won the Engaging Pittsburgh: Innovative People Practices Award for employee engagement and inclusion from the Pittsburgh Human Resources Association based on their equity and inclusion plan. This was due to the URA’s initiatives to better understand and address business and workforce policies and practices relative to its racial equity objectives and included the establishment of the Equity Working Group whose focus included creating an Equity and Inclusion Plan and implementing hiring strategies to obtain the best pool of diverse talent.

*Tip for Implementation - Defining Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. The URA’s Equity and Inclusion Strategic Plan defines them as follows:*

Diversity: Diversity refers to the various backgrounds and races that comprise a community, nation or other grouping. In many cases the term diversity does not just acknowledge the existence of diversity of background, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation and so on, but implies an appreciation of these differences.

Equity: Fairness or justice in the way people are treated

Inclusion: The active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity—in people and in communities (intellectual, social, cultural, geographical) with which individuals might connect that increase one’s awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication, and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within systems and institutions.

## A Continuing Process

Analyze, revisit, and perform gap analyses frequently and consistently and based on the review, modify plans and strategies to ensure adherence. This may include

- **Benchmark:** Review your data to see what areas you’ve made strides in and where you need to improve. The URA follows up with annual human resource reports on women and minorities hiring, promotions and management levels.
- **Analyze:** Seek new methods of relevant analyses to identify areas where improvements can be identified. The URA hired a law firm to review their hiring practices and performed a wage analysis to ensure women, men and minorities performing the same jobs receive equal wages.
- **Update:** Update your plan based on your benchmarking, analyses, and changes in society. Create new goals as you meet the original goals. Currently, the URA is in the process of updating its Equity and Inclusion Strategic plan to include nonbinary terminology and LGBTQ and are using nonbinary language for job applications and reporting
- **Continue Training:** Training is an ongoing process. The URA provides updated trainings and currently include those on unconscious bias, microaggressions, inclusivity training for managers, how to give performance feedback and how to have difficult conversations (discussing different cultures/backgrounds)
- **Report:** Report metrics throughout the organization at all levels to demonstrate growth in diversifying the workforce.

### **Tip for Implementation – Addressing Common Challenges.**

*Burnout over trainings: It can be tempting to ‘make up for lost time’ by implementing a comprehensive programme of diversity, inclusion and gender trainings, but management should be selective with trainings, encouraging buy-in to diversity goals without overloading staff. Management should make clear to employees the importance of these trainings and how the organization will benefit from them.*

*Addressing micro-aggressions: Change can be difficult to accept if it is not understood. Social justice, racial equity, and institutional racism training help employees to think differently about situations and behaviours previously considered acceptable or ‘the norm’.*

*Normalizing conversations about race: When employees have taken racial equity training, discussions about race become routine and set clear norms of behavior. These trainings and discussions can reduce racial anxiety and stereotype threat.<sup>3</sup>*

*Hearing everyone’s voice: To address issues such as men speaking over women in meetings, or minorities being overlooked, the URA sought to ensure that the voices of minorities and women are heard. One useful tool is for the leader of the meeting to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to speak if they want to. Coaching employees on how to speak up and be heard can be helpful as well.*

## References

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ura.org/pages/about-us>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.racialequityalliance.org/resources/public-sector-jobs-opportunity-for-advancing-racial-equity/>

## Tools and resources/further reading

- [URA’s Racial Equity Assessment](#)
- City of Portland, Oregon’s [Promising Practices in Government](#) to Advance Racial Equity includes links to other racial equity plans -
- Business and Professional Women’s Foundation provides an [equal pay tool](#)
- Maine DOL has an [Equal Pay Self Audit](#)
- Inclusive workplace resources

### *Author Bio*

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Katherine Patnaude is a Senior Manager with PKF O’Connor Davies, LLP with over ten years of experience in Governmental Auditing and Accounting. She is responsible for providing audit, review, agreed-upon procedures, and consulting services for a wide variety of municipal entities including cities, towns, boroughs, and districts. Katherine is a 2014 graduate of the AICPA’s Leadership Academy and is a member of the AICPA’s GPAC. Additionally, Katherine has served the Connecticut Society of CPAs in many capacities, including the Governmental Accounting and Auditing Committee, Board of Directors, Advisory Council, and Accounting Scholarship Foundation.



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