Boards expect CEO candidates to grasp possibilities of AI

Associations are still making choices on remote work and commitment to DEI; job seekers can no longer delegate tech knowledge

By William Ehart

Artificial intelligence (AI); diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI); social media; and remote work are hot topics in executive recruiting today.

Associations looking for new top executives are following different paths on working from home and DEI initiatives. But they are increasingly asking job seekers what they know about artificial intelligence, said T onya Muse, executive search consultant at Heidrick & Struggles.

“Search committees are really looking for CEOs or candidates who just have a familiarity or awareness of the impact of technology, particularly AI, on the profession or the industry,” Muse told CEO Update.

Recruiter Jim Zaniello, founder and president of Vetted Solutions, said sometimes it’s just a matter of CEO candidates knowing enough about AI to be able to ask the right questions about the opportunities and risks it presents.

“Anyone who wants to be a CEO today or is just looking to make a move needs to have some understanding of AI, even if they don’t have definitive answers,” said Zaniello, who is also an executive recruiter member of CEO Update’s CEO Roundtable. “It will continue to change greatly over the next 18 months.”

Leslie Hortum, manager of recruitment firm Spencer Stuart’s Washington, D.C., office, said that while she

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Associations find success making DEI part of strategic plan

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said Rhonda Payne, CEO of Flock Theory in Washington, D.C. She and Lavet both stressed that DEI efforts need a commitment from leadership that includes a strategic plan with measurable goals, budget allocation and organization-wide dedication.

“Folks new to the work will have to challenge themselves to learn about long-term practices, processes, policies, culture, structure and strategy,” Payne said. “Those things together create DEI that works.”

Constructing tomorrow’s workforce

As in every industry, a problem faced by the 19,000 members of the Construction Management Association of America (CMAA) is knowing who is going to do the work 10, 20 and 30 years from now, explained CEO Andrea S. Rutledge. Industry leaders have understood for years that recruiting and retaining a more diverse workforce, and creating a culture of inclusion and belonging, are crucial.

“Recruiting and retaining workers are inextricably linked,” she said. “The leaders of our largest organizations want to be successful and they’re asking for our help.”

Since becoming CEO six years ago, Rutledge has answered the call. With just 23 employees, CMAA doesn’t have a CDO. The fully remote association, headquartered in northern Virginia, switched from event-based DEI&B (the B represents belonging) to adding a three-year DEI&B work plan to its strategic framework. The goal is to create a workforce that reflects the communities it serves.

Rather than lead with a social justice point of view, which doesn’t resonate with everyone, Rutledge said that CMAA made a business case for workforce development.

“Diverse teams make better decisions and achieve better outcomes,” she said. Rutledge advises CEOs of other associations to find out the point of view that resonates with their members and begin there.

“We always look at the difference between what we can control and what we can influence, and start with what we can control,” Rutledge said, noting they can control who is presenting at conferences and pictured on the website.

DEI&B activities within the strategic plan focus on language (sensitivity with words), learning (continuous DEI&B education) and leadership (DEI&B as a collective effort).

Examples of DEI&B activities include building a more diverse board, promoting inclusion and belonging through messaging and imaging, establishing protocols to ensure nobody is unintentionally excluded from events, and recruiting from multicultural colleges and universities. The list continues to grow, Rutledge said.

“Research tells us that normative change takes five to seven years to embed in an organization’s culture. For us, it’s still the early days.”

Building a diverse talent pool

As CEO of Casualty Actuarial Society (CAS), Victor Carter-Bey spends a lot of time helping members understand the intention of the association’s DEI program: growing a profession that aims to represent society as a whole.

“There’s a lot of evidence out there that supports the benefits of DEI, from promoting a more innovative culture by solving different problems in a more creative fashion and helping companies improve their bottom lines,” Carter-Bey said. “It presents a significant case for change and we’re excited to be part of that equation.”

CAS collects data to gauge how well it’s doing. For years, DEI has been a primary focus for its staff of approximately 55 employees. The Arlington, Va.-based association’s commitment to diversity began in the 1970s and was elevated in 2017 when “diversity of pipeline” became a core value. It refers to the race and ethnicity of actuarial candidates, as well as the colleges, universities and professions they come from, Carter-Bey said.

“CAS achieves this through investment, influence and partnership.”

Investment alludes to scholarships and a diversification of thought-provoking research papers to help its members understand the intention of the association’s DEI program: growing a profession that aims to represent society as a whole. Right now, we’re keeping that long-term view and essentially keeping our eyes on the prize—a profession that starts to represent society as a whole. Right now, we’re not there and we have a long way to go.”

Bringing diversity close to home

The National Association of Realtors (NAR) hired its first DEI practitioner in the 1980s to
normalize fair housing discussions across the nation, focus on affordable housing and build a more diverse profession, according to Bob Goldberg, Goldberg made DEI a priority when he became CEO of the Chicago-based association in 2017. Three years later, the association’s Fair Housing Action Plan was launched to conquer inequities in housing that have long plagued the industry.

The plan focuses on accountability, culture change and training of NAR’s more than 1.5 million members to protect housing rights in America. Its Race and Homebuying report outlines where there’s work to be done. In 2021, it reported the homeownership rate for white Americans across the country varied by state from 50% to 81%. That compares with Black, 15% to 55%; Asian, 28% to 76%; and Hispanic, 27% to 67%.

In 2022, DEI became part of NAR’s strategic plan. The association has additional staff committed to DEI; a team focused on equity in housing policy; and DEI efforts to enhance the workplace and volunteer culture. Rather than create a “silo” and have one person focused on DEI, Goldberg’s approach is having each person in the organization understand their impact on DEI. At NAR, it’s part of the performance review process.

The association utilizes tools like Fairhaven, an online sales simulation based on true stories, to help agents identify, prevent and address discriminatory practices. Implicit bias training videos highlight unconscious bias and promote serving all clients equally. Certification courses like At Home with Diversity educate agents about working with multicultural populations. Moreover, all of NAR’s leadership teams take its DEI and Fair Housing courses.

Speaking of diversity

To Vicki Deal-Williams, CEO of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) in Rockville, Md., infusing DEI within an association helps ensure that all people are respected and valued.

“It boils down to humanity, to being able to acknowledge people and what they’ve experienced and using that to help your organization become more effective,” she said.

ASHA has 228,000 members and about 308 employees. Its chief staff officer for multicultural affairs is one of six CSOs on the facilitating team responsible for managing the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) and the association’s operations. OMA began in 1969 as the Office of Urban and Ethnic Affairs. In the beginning, it focused on helping members make the distinction between a language difference and a speech disorder—to avoid treating people, particularly Black people, for disorders when they actually have language differences.

For example, African American English is a rule-governed dialect of English. Therefore, it’s a language difference, not a disorder. Someone with a speech disorder may not be able to make their point known to a listener. Someone with a language difference can make their point, but does it differently, Deal-Williams explained.

OMA also focused on developing policies and plans to improve or enhance the way services were provided to individuals from diverse backgrounds. “The office started with a focus directly on Black populations,” she said, noting discrimination in employment was another concern. “It has evolved to a multicultural perspective, looking at issues related to every dimension of diversity you can imagine—gender, gender identity, age, disability, hearing loss, race and ethnicity.”

ASHA’s OMA department is focused on providing resources to enhance members clinical decision-making when working with multicultural populations. “How people identify themselves is critical for clinicians to consider as they’re determining how they work with that individual,” she said. “Our assumption is that everyone is diverse, everybody has a culture.”

OMA covers diversity, equity, inclusion, access, belonging, justice, cultural competence, cultural humility and culturally responsive practice. Cultural competence is understanding how culture and language influence each other, Deal-Williams said. Cultural humility is examining your own beliefs and cultural background to better understand others. And culturally responsive practice is basing an individual’s services on the circumstances that they’re communicating in.

“Initially we spent a lot of time justifying the need for addressing issues of culture and language,” she said. “Now we provide resources to empower our clinicians to make decisions that will be culturally responsive.”

ASHA has an intentionally diverse board and continuously provides members with DEI educational programs and resources, such as a phonemic inventory of different languages and lessons in ethics. It has multicultural constituency groups, a partnership with the National Black Association for Speech-Language and Hearing to address DEI issues and mentoring programs that pair students with professionals.

ASHA’s minority student leadership program has had over 700 individuals since 1999. Many of those individuals have ascended to positions on ASHA’s board, earned PhDs and become committee leaders, state association presidents, supervisors and administrators. ASHA still struggles with the fact that 95% of its members are female, 51% of whom work in schools. They continue to look for ways to attract more men to the profession. But it’s a societal issue, she said: men don’t want to work at schools.

Her advice to other association leaders on planning DEI strategies: “Don’t try to eat the elephant. Decide what’s important to your membership, what’s consistent with the organization’s values, and work on both infusion and specific programming.”

Sinking their teeth into underrepresentation

DEI was embedded within the policy department of American Dental Education Association (ADEA) in 2019, when Karen P. West, became president and CEO. There were only two employees involved in it at the time. Three months later, West promoted Sonya Smith to chief diversity officer and created a separate department for DEI.

“I felt we needed to change within our own organization structure before we could model something for our academic institutions who are our members,” she said. ADEA has more than 60,000 members, representing dental education programs, institutions, staff, students and faculty in the U.S. and Canada.
In 2020, ADEA created a DEI staff advisory committee dedicated to guiding West on DEI&B issues. The “B” was added, she said, because belonging concerns members.

West, who is a member of CEO Update’s CEO Roundtable, said she experienced the consequences of a lack of belonging herself. She graduated dental school in 1982 and was among 10 women in a class of 90. She recalls two female faculty members among a team of 60 or 70 males.

“Currently we’ve moved forward and actually have more female students than male students presently in dental school,” she said. “But faculty and administrator numbers are still very inclined toward white males.”

Experiencing that disparity made West determined to even the playing field for the profession and dental community at large. When West arrived at ADEA, the staff was about 70% people of color, but there were no people of color within management. That was before a CDO and department were dedicated to it. Today, ADEA’s management team is almost 50/50, the most diverse C-suite ADEA has ever had.

DEI&B programming is woven into ADEA’s strategic framework, and a number of resources help keep it top of mind for members. A recent ADEA webinar explained what the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to end affirmative action programs means for member institutions. DEI&B issues are regularly the focus of articles in ADEA’s monthly scholarly journal. Once a year, the publication is entirely dedicated to the subject.

Climate surveys, conference programming and a faculty diversity toolkit on recruiting and retaining multicultural employees and advocacy are part of the mix. In 2022, ADEA joined the Federation of Associations of Schools of the Health Professions in declaring the lack of men of color in health professions a national crisis. The media took note. In turn, ADEA created a “men of color” initiative to increase the number of men of color entering and graduating from academic health-care programs. It formed a coalition and held a symposium about the initiative at its annual conference.

On the equity front, after conducting a market analysis, West raised the salaries of approximately 40 employees from ADEA’s staff of 70+ workers whose pay had been too low. ADEA has a diverse staff consisting of 55% people of color, West said.

All of these efforts made West a finalist for a 2023 Corporate Social Responsibility and Diversity Award from Ragan Communications. To her, it’s validation of the work ADEA is doing to effect change in the health-care sector.

She advises other associations who want to do the same with their DEI&B plans: “Have a game plan, timeline and goals of what you want to accomplish. And make sure it’s action-oriented, not pie in the sky.” ■