

From Clandestine Endeavors to Highly Visible Work in DEI

By Lin Gensing-Pophal, Contributing Editor | Jun 12, 2023

| Diversity & Inclusion (<https://hrdailyadvisor.blr.com/category/diversity-insight/>)

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Christina Schelling is Senior Vice President (SVP) and Chief Talent and Diversity Officer at Verizon (https://www.google.com/aclk?sa=l&ai=DChcSEwidpN31rdT-AhU9E60GHfM-BEKYABAAGjwdg&sig=AOD64_0Y8fdyRquuFjVModa2M0mzuu74qw&q&adurl&ved=2ahUKEwj3ttX1rdT-AhXXADQIHxJaD38Q0Qx6BAgFEAE). While she was the first person at Verizon to hold this position, Verizon has a long tradition of embracing diversity and inclusion (D&I), and Schelling's passion for this discipline has helped the company further those goals.



(https://hrdailyadvisor.blr.com/app/uploads/sites/3/2023/06/Christina_Schelling.jpg)

Christina Schelling

An Unlikely DEI Origin Story

Schelling is certainly not the first diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) leader we've spoken with who didn't start her career in DEI, but she may be the first who started her career with a clandestine organization.

"I began my career working at the CIA as a leadership analyst," she explains. "I never really thought I would end up working in a corporate setting, but I was offered an opportunity to learn management consulting at IBM. That transition was the bridge to the work that I do today."

Before joining Verizon, Schelling was the Head of Human Resources for The Estée Lauder Companies Global Corporate Functions, and before that, she spent 6 years at Prudential and over 7 years at American Express in a variety of global leadership roles related to people, culture, and organizational strategies.

DEI at Verizon

Schelling then moved to Verizon, where she's the first person to hold the title of SVP/chief talent and diversity officer. In this role, she oversees all aspects of Verizon's talent practices, including hiring, learning, career development, succession planning, DEI, and more, for nearly 120,000 employees globally. "Having an integrated Talent & DEI team allows us to work closely together setting the foundation for a differentiated employee experience, a stronger, more inspired workforce and better business results," she says.

While Schelling's role is new at Verizon, DEI efforts aren't. "Verizon has long been a leader in diversity, equity, and inclusion all thanks to the work of dedicated team members, incredible employee resource groups and many strong leaders," she notes. "I am so lucky to lead a dedicated team within an amazing company with such a strong background in this work. It's not a trend for us—it's embedded throughout our organization, it's core to who we are, and it's part of who we've always been."

Schelling says diversity and inclusion (D&I) are integrated into Verizon's systems, processes, and operations. "D&I is in our DNA," she says. "Not only is D&I good for business, it is who we are as a V Team and how we show up in the communities where we do business. D&I is not a separate stream of thought. It is a shared accountability that requires engagement and action at all levels. The richness in background, experience, thought and all of the elements of diversity throughout our employee base is so powerful and provides the unique perspectives to serve our customers better."

Verizon also boasts a number of employee resource groups (ERGs):

- **ADVANCE**—Advocates for Disability, Accessibility, Neurodiversity, and Caregiver Empowerment
- **BOLD**—Black Originators, Leaders, and Doers
- **NAV**—Native Americans of Verizon
- **PACE**—Pan Asian Corporate Excellence
- **PACT**—Parents And Caregivers Together
- **PRISM**—Lead with Pride
- **SOMOS**—The Voice of the Hispanic/LatinX Community
- **UNITED**—Progress Through Unity
- **VALOR**—Veterans and Advocates Leading the Organization Responsibly
- **WAVE**—Womxn's Association of Verizon Employees

Each of Verizon's ERGs has C-suite executive sponsors and an executive advisory board. "In 2022, we hosted almost 250 ERG events globally to support career development, employee wellbeing and community engagement," Schelling says. "ERG members completed over 42,000 hours of volunteering last year. Our ERGs are essential to creating and sustaining Verizon's diverse and inclusive culture and play a significant role in achieving Verizon's mission to move the world forward."

A Holistic DEI Approach

Verizon, like most companies that do DEI well, recognizes that DEI impacts and is impacted by every aspect of the business ecosystem, not just a small corner of HR. Accordingly, Verizon's responsible marketing action plan (<https://www.verizon.com/about/news/one-year-after-responsible-marketing-action-plan-verizon>) sets ambitious goals around the creative supply chain, talent, bias in advertising and media, and content policies and includes the following goals:

1. Increase diversity across the creative supply chain.
2. Continue to build an inclusive work environment and retain diverse talent.
3. Fight racism, bias, and stereotypes in all advertising, content, and media.
4. Responsible content policies.

“And we’re not doing this work just for ourselves,” Schelling adds. “To help other companies implement the responsible marketing practices outlined, Verizon created the Responsible Marketing Action Blueprint (https://verizon.turtl.co/story/responsible-marketing-blueprint/page/1?CMP=OOH_NA_OTH_11111_NA_20211005_NA_M20210126_00001)—a set of free online tools that packages together the learnings from Verizon’s work around DEI, to help other marketers identify where they can make an impact and take measurable actions to get there.”

Verizon leverages its 10 ERGs to embrace cultural differences and bring awareness to key cultural moments and heritage months and to provide input on business initiatives through grassroots efforts. “Verizon’s 28k+ ERG members account for 23% of Verizon’s workforce and supports Verizon’s Credo to embrace diversity and cultural difference for all employees allowing V Teamers to show up as their authentic self,” Schelling continues. “In 2022, Verizon ERGs accounted for 69% of the total volunteer hours supporting the CSR goal to reach 2.5M hours by 2025. Actions completed during the volunteer events ranged from letter writing to vets, creating stuffed animals for youth, and supporting in-person Junior Achievement Events.”

Staying at the Cutting Edge in a Dynamic Discipline

The business environment and the broader world in which it exists are constantly changing, meaning there are always new challenges to meet and opportunities to exploit when it comes to DEI. The companies that thrive in this dynamic environment are those that are agile and quick to adapt to changing circumstances.

“It’s a myriad of things that foster a culture of inclusivity,” says Schelling. “At Verizon, we’re always examining different ways to be more inclusive, especially with the ever-changing work landscape. To ensure an inclusive culture, we examine and implement tactical things day-to-day that employees can engage in. For example, we regularly come together (whether virtually on BlueJeans or in-person) for moments that matter including all-employee webcasts for big picture business conversations, town halls for teams to dive deeper on the work they are doing, roundtables to gather insights and feedback from our V Team, and volunteering opportunities.”

Schelling and Verizon have had great success fostering D&I in a major global company. While many factors have contributed to their achievements, corporate commitment, passion among DEI leaders, and a holistic approach that embeds DEI into all facets of the organization are a great recipe for success.

Lin Gensing-Pophal is a Contributing Editor at HR Daily Advisor.

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