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Conversations About Diversity: From Hitting The Numbers To Shifting The Culture

Consider the backgrounds of three successful accounting professionals with a personal interest in increasing diversity within the profession.

As a mixed-race child growing up in the '60s, **Jina Etienne** found she wasn't always accepted, and even when she was, she sometimes didn't feel included.

At American University in Washington, D.C., “often the only black face in class,” she obtained a co-op position in a “Big 8” accounting firm, starting what she calls a journey of self-discovery in a predominantly white, male profession. Now she is president and CEO of the **National Association of Black Accountants**.



Jina Etienne

Barnard Ingram grew up in a rural Georgia, loving math and finance and intending to attend a historically black college and university like his parents before him. After Citadel Military College and Florida A&M, he still was unaware of what a big impact CPAs make on individual lives and on helping establish and build businesses in the community. Had he and his fellow students known, “Everyone I know would’ve said, ‘Wow, you’ve got my attention!’ ” Now he is assistant vice president of business development at the consulting firm **1st Global**.

Kimberly Ellison-Taylor, as a third-grader in Baltimore, heard an overview of various career choices: doctor, lawyer, engineer and finally, CPA. Something clicked. “If you’re managing the money, you’re the boss, you’re in charge, and everyone has to listen to you.” She attended a business-oriented high school and under her yearbook photo her career choice was listed: CPA. After an education in IT and an MBA, she got her accounting certificate at a community college and failed her first attempt at the CPA Exam. Now she is chair of the **American Institute of CPAs (AICPA)**.

All three took very different routes to find the profession and to succeed within it, and all three have closely watched the profession’s efforts to bring more people of color into the ranks. In interviews with INSIDE Public Accounting, they say the effort must go beyond recruitment, to creating a culture that is not only diverse, but accepting and welcoming from the top down.

Attracting minorities to the profession is one thing, but “on the other side, firms have to have initiatives on keeping them there,” Ellison-Taylor says.



Kimberly Ellison-Taylor

Demographic shifts clearly show a business case for creating workplaces that better reflect their communities. While U.S. Census data shows blacks make up 14% of the population, blacks made up only 4% of all employees at CPA firms in 2012, according to the AICPA’s most recent data. At the same time, minority-owned businesses increased receipts by nearly 35% between 2007 and 2012, and more than half of all Americans are projected to belong to a “minority” group by 2044. The trends show that not only are minority populations increasing as a percentage of the U.S. population, but so is their buying power and economic muscle.

And yet, Ingram, who sometimes finds himself the only African-American at accounting conferences he attends, is frustrated by hearing the same refrains about diversity initiatives as he did in the early 2000s: “We know we’ve got to do it, we’re trying, but we haven’t had the success we’ve liked, so we’re going to keep doing it” [the same thing we have always done]. While he truly believes CPAs seek to build a diverse community at their firms, something isn’t working.

Most firms recognize the need to make their workforce more diverse, but some firm leaders feel stalled. Etienne says the business world still doesn’t fully understand how to educate, hire, train, develop, nurture and grow black leaders. Ellison-Taylor says, “I can appreciate this is a daunting task for many, and we are relentlessly focused on moving the ball forward.” Here is a look at some of the obstacles:



Barnard Ingram

Limited understanding of the link between diversity and performance – Without this understanding, companies will “continue to invest significant resources without moving the needle,” says *Forbes* contributors **Paolo Gaudiano** and **Ellen Hunt**, founders of **Aleria.Tech**, a “Diversity Tech” company. They contend in a February article that diversity helps companies attract and retain talent, operate more efficiently and gain market appeal and that “diversity creates positive feedback loops that give it a multiplicative effect.”

Outdated hiring practices – Some estimates say about three-quarters of all jobs are found through social networks, but a recent study shows that relying on referrals may lead to inequality in firms that are dominated by white males. “After all, who you know often mirrors what you look like,” says an article published in the *Harvard Business Review*. If everyone looks, dresses and thinks the same, lives in the same community and their kids all play together, Ingram says, it’s pretty challenging to find someone outside the box to fit into your culture.

Unconscious bias – This occurs when a woman is considered “too aggressive,” while that behavior would be rewarded in a man; or when minorities are told they “don’t fit the culture,” or when managers are overly critical of someone unlike them.

Failing to make minorities welcome – Etienne says diversity and inclusion are two different things: Diversity is being invited to the party, but inclusion is being asked to dance. It’s one thing to be hired, but quite another for minorities to have friends and alliances and to feel free to be themselves. NABA, she says, seeks to “empower our members to feel more confident so they can go to the dance and ask how to do it.”

Retention – Ellison-Taylor suggests that firms should go beyond hitting their hiring numbers and pay more attention to mentorship, to sharing personal stories and helping minorities navigate a very complex environment. “If they’re funneling in but don’t see people progressing, that can be frustrating.” Ingram adds that if the only strategy is to hire blacks who then feel like tokens, “it’s doomed to fail.”



Recent research backs up the observations of Etienne, Ingram and Ellison-Taylor. A study of 500 people who had reported workplace discrimination, for example, shows bias takes many forms. The respondents said they got the message that they should not be themselves (those in same-sex marriages are expected to never talk about their spouses, for example), that they were excluded from conversations or social events, or not considered credible, which took the form of being “interrupted, discounted, excluded or passed over for high-profile assignments or promotions,” says an April article published by the *Society for Human Resource Management*.

“We catalogued hundreds of moments when victims were left questioning others’ intentions and their own perceptions,” says **Judith Honesty**, CEO of Honesty Consulting, who helped conduct the study. “At best, this shadowy bias is exhausting. At worst, it’s soul-destroying to both the individual and the organization.”

It follows, then, that the best hope to make accounting more attractive to people of color is to retain more of those hired and promote them. New employees who see that their managers and leaders look nothing like them are less likely to stay; if they encounter bias, conscious or not, they are less likely to stay; if leadership is homogenous and tone deaf to their needs, they’re less likely to stay. “When people genuinely care about you, you can tell,” Etienne says, noting that some firms are doing great work in this area – Dixon Hughes Goodman, Plante Moran and Crowe Howath are three positive examples.

Ellison-Taylor says firms have numerous resources available to them through the work of the **AICPA's National Commission on Diversity and Inclusion**. College students can check out thiswaytocpa.com, and high school students can explore options at startheregoplaces.com.

Ingram believes minority children (“the younger the better”) should be exposed to the multitude of opportunities in business and finance. As a mentor to high school students, mainly African-Americans in middle Georgia, he tries to impart the message that they are not destined for the peach orchards or the school bus assembly plant, but can be computer code writers, financial planners, wealth managers, Naval officers, engineers or whatever else they want to be.

Ellison-Taylor also returns to her high school, believing that underprivileged kids should see role models who look just like they do, “and that’s what I’m asking all CPAs and accountants to do.” Seeing a black woman, raised in the inner city without a private school background, has sparked energy and enthusiasm in high school students, she says.

Diversity and inclusion is a nuanced and complex issue. There’s not one solution, but leaders who are authentic, genuinely interested in helping minorities succeed through coaching and mentorship, who ask for help and take advantage of the numerous resources available, can go far in shifting the culture from one of mere diversity to total inclusion. Taking personal responsibility is another piece of the puzzle. “We can’t outsource this back to the profession,” Ellison-Taylor says. “Each one of us has the responsibility to be a visible role model. When minorities see other minorities, they want to give accounting another look.” ■IPA