

My Take: Appreciating the Power of ACC Connections

Community



In September 2020, Eric Reicin, a former ACC member who became CEO of National Programs at the Better Business Bureau, kindly recommended me to speak on a plenary program alongside Charlotte Burrows, whom many speculated would be named incoming chair of the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) should Joe Biden be elected US President.

Biden won. Charlotte Burrows was named Chair of the EEOC, and interest in our program on Racial Justice in the Workplace grew exponentially as we faced the gravity of world-wide protests around Black Lives Matter (BLM) policing practices, George Floyd's murder, anti-Asian hate crimes, and more.

By April 2021, the pandemic had most of the world in lockdown and our program in Memphis, Tennessee was converted to a virtual session. Thanks to participation in that program, Chair Burrows was introduced to the depth and breadth of ACC membership, and I was able to hear her thoughts on today's fast-evolving workplaces and priorities for the EEOC. It would prove to be a valuable introduction to one another.

Fast forward to Jan. 19, 2022, and the EEOC and the US Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) hosted a virtual public roundtable to commemorate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and launch "HIRE" – a Hiring Initiative to Reimagine Equity.



Launched under the leadership of Chair Burrows and OFCCP Director Jenny Yang, HIRE will be a multi-year collaborative effort to engage stakeholders in expanding access to good jobs, while addressing key hiring and recruiting challenges. HIRE will seek to identify strategies to remove hiring barriers across a range of dimensions, including race, color, ethnicity, gender, LGBTQ+ status, religion, disability, age, and veteran status.

The first roundtable in a series of convenings brought together employers, worker and civil rights organizations, and social scientists to discuss how we can reimagine hiring practices to advance equity and access to good jobs for underrepresented communities, especially as our nation rebuilds from the pandemic and adapts to a changing economy.

It was an honor for ACC to play a role in the launch as one of only six organizations invited to speak. What a powerful opportunity for in-house counsel to claim a seat at the table of this groundbreaking initiative, especially as our invitation reflects the power of the ACC membership and the important connections we've maintained.

ACC's seat at the table has been hard-won and makes good sense as in-house counsel are central to the development of workplace strategies. As the leading global bar association for in-house counsel, ACC has over 45,000 members, about 8,000 of whom are the chief lawyer at their company, and a membership base that spans 84 countries — 74 percent of which are US-based.

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Additionally, per ACC's 2021 CLO Survey, 73 percent of CLOs reported that diversity and inclusion issues were a priority that would continue to accelerate in importance. ACC's 2022 CLO Survey (to be released on January 25) reinforces that CLOs expect "increased attention to diversity and inclusion."

ACC survey data also paints a strong picture of companies increasingly turning to the CLO to both lead environmental, social, and governance (ESG) and oversee HR functions. In fact, 24 percent of CLOs now have oversight for ESG — that's up from 15 percent from last year.

Further, 40 percent of CLOs reported that ESG issues are forcing their companies to improve compliance efforts, and CLOs are again playing a role. And 16 percent of CLOs oversee HR.

Such sizable gains over just one year suggest that societal challenges we're facing — racial, gender, cultural, socio-economic — have created a powder-keg, especially as companies issued statements regarding BLM, George Floyd, anti-Asian hate crimes, and more. Customers and investors are increasingly vocal about expecting results.

During the most recent proxy season, ESG and inclusion, diversity, equity, and access (IDEA) were hot topics on shareholders' minds. And when solutions are needed, organizations turn to the Office of the General Counsel.

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By giving CLOs greater responsibility than ever over HR, ESG, and compliance, in addition to the legal counseling role, employers are signaling that legal and compliance risks pose challenges to advancing IDEA. An employer's effort to support or boost one group (regardless of how disadvantaged or under-represented) runs the risk of triggering claims of reverse discrimination, exclusion, or being passed over by another group.

Yet, when CLOs were asked about organizational priorities over the next five years, "investing in employees" saw a nine-percentage point increase over the past two years and rated almost as high as "maximizing profits." Therefore, it's clear that CLOs will play instrumental roles as we reimagine the workforces of the future and we look forward to engaging ACC's 6,300+ strong Labor & Employment Network in that effort.

Let me close by thanking Eric Reicin. The HIRE initiative is well-timed and needed, and ACC is pleased to have a seat at the table to contribute.

Veta T. Richardson



Former President & CEO

Association of Corporate Counsel

Veta T. Richardson is the immediate past president and chief executive officer of the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC). Headquartered in Washington, DC, ACC is the world's largest legal association dedicated exclusively to serving the interests of in-house counsel. With an international membership of more than 45,000 in-house lawyers at more than 10,000 organizations in 85 countries, ACC serves as the "voice of the in-house bar" for corporate lawyers at 98 percent of the Fortune 100 and 51 percent of the Global 1000.

With more than 60 chapter operations around the world, Richardson's top priorities as CEO involve continuing to increase ACC's global footprint and charting the organization through a strategic plan and vision designed to strengthen its position as the global voice for in-house counsel. Members look to ACC to advocate in support of their rights and interests as in-house counsel, as well as to offer the practice resources, education, global legal and regulatory analysis, and networking opportunities needed to advance their professional development.