

Creating a more inclusive workplace and community

BY JADE SCHNAUBER

Our world is changing, and it is time to make space for other ways of living, being and doing business that do not place groups of people from under-represented populations at a disadvantage.

As a region that is 90-percent white, we have to be ready to change. We need to make space for different types of life experiences and peoples to inhabit the beautiful Berkshires where we reside. It is the only way we will be able to truly offer a higher quality of life for all in our region.

Berkshire employers should make a greater effort to hire more people of color, members of the LGBTQIA+ community and others who have been disadvantaged – not just to satisfy diversity metrics, but because of the value that comes from seeking out employees who have different world views and life experiences.

Hiring managers should look for employees and co-workers whom they believe can challenge the status quo and make their company better. Employers should hire people who can make lasting change at their organization. These types of leaders will innovate the old systems and help us all progress toward a more inclusive future.

Among the many ways individuals from underrepresented groups are disadvantaged is reduced access to opportunity. The *Harvard Business Review* points out that many jobs are offered through “social networks and personal connections” and may never be made open to the public. We know from local workforce experts that many of our local businesses feel they lack access to qualified professionals. It’s in everyone’s interest to make room, to invite new people into our professional networks, and to create new ways of building and growing the Berkshire community.

We must be willing to step away from the traditional way of doing things. The current pandemic has reminded us that we all must be willing to adapt and change in order to survive the times. Our current systems are built by and for white folks. We cannot deny this, as white folks, and we have to be willing to critique and change these systems in favor of a more inclusive local community.

Inclusion is the act of including people within a group or structure. One way to create a more inclusive community is to focus on diversity within the workforce. In order to do this, local employers must present workplaces that will attract people from our underrepresented groups. New job opportunities are simply not enough to draw people from diverse backgrounds to an organization. People want to know they will be well represented within the workplace. Companies that have strong diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies are more attractive to new employees,



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particularly to new employees from under-represented groups.

There are many companies in Berkshire County that have already made changes to their policies and ways of doing business. There are organizations in the Berkshires that are actively working to create an inclusive community. An important advocate for this kind of change is Multicultural BRIDGE. This group offers cultural competency and diversity training to regional organizations to help them grow to “meet the changing needs of the people (they

serve and remain competitive in the marketplace.” They also provide companies with workplace evaluations and assessments to help them understand where they can improve their current DEI policies to create a more effective workplace for all.

People are attracted to the Berkshires for a variety of reasons. Some of us grew up here, like myself, and wish to stay here. Some people come here for the natural beauty, or our laid-back way of life. Many who come here for school are interested in staying and working in the community after graduation. Our local higher educational institutions average white population is 70 percent which is closer to the national average of 60 percent. They are leading the county in diversity, and they are a wonderful resource of new ideas and talent for local companies.

My position in the world may give me a bias. I am a recent graduate of Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, and my job at Lever is to help college students find employment in the Berkshires.

I have spoken with a variety of students

about the local workforce in my time, including those participating in Lever’s Berkshire Interns program, which facilitates the placement of college students and recent graduates in meaningful internship experiences with local employers (*March 2020 BT&C*). One particular conversation with a 2019 Berkshire Intern continues to influence the way I approach the conversation of diversity and inclusion in the Berkshire community.

I asked this student how their internship was going. They said it was going very well. I asked them about their plans after graduating and if they would be interested in staying in the Berkshires for a job. They told me that, while they liked their internship and the area, they planned to move back to Boston because that is where they had a community where they “fit in.”

I have heard many reasons why young people are leaving the Berkshires: lack of career opportunities, lack of a social scene, and even the lack of affordable housing. This student brought a point to my attention that, as a white person, didn’t cross my mind. People need to see themselves reflected in – and supported by – a community in order to permanently put down roots there.

This conversation inspired me to build an inclusive community aspect into the workforce programs at Lever. Our new Inclusive Internship Preparation Program (I2P2) is a free, six-week program for college students who are underrepresented in the Berkshire county workforce. It will run from the end of January through March

and it will consist of three main workshops to help the students prepare resumes, cover letters and sharpen their interview skills. Another main component of I2P2 is our mentorship

network: We will connect the students in our program with local professionals who are also from underrepresented groups. Not only will this allow our students to see themselves reflected in the local workforce, they will also be building up their local professional network which may lead to future job opportunities. At the completion of I2P2 in March, our participants will be confident and ready to apply for internships and job opportunities in the region.

Lever requires any employer that partners with Berkshire Interns to pay at least minimum wage so that our opportunities are accessible to students of all economic backgrounds, including those who receive financial aid. Minimum wage for 10 weeks of full-time work can be a stretch for some employers. That’s why we’ve created a stipend subsidy for I2P2. Up to 25 of the student participants who get an internship in Berkshire County will receive a mon-

etary subsidy towards their summer salary from Lever. It is important to recognize the impact of access to opportunities, but we cannot deny the effect that money can have on someone’s advancement in a society as well.

I2P2 is meant to help address disadvantages caused by the systems of privilege present in our local workforce. I hope to encourage local employers to hire students from diverse backgrounds who will make lasting change to their companies and the local community. I hope that by encouraging inclusive workplace practices we will be able to create high-quality life experiences for everyone who resides in the Berkshire region. ♦



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