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LEO LOPEZ
Senior Vice President
Community Lending
Market Executive
Old National Bank
leo.lopez@oldnational.com



DR. SHAWN SMITH
Superintendent of Schools
Metropolitan School District
of Lawrence Township
shawnsmith@msdlt.k12.in.us



LINDSAY SZOSTAK
Director of People Operations
Sondhi Solutions
lszostak@sondhisolutions.com

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

Organizations take a hard look at hiring practices

In this week's Thought Leadership Roundtable, leaders at Old National Bank, Sondhi Solutions, and the Metropolitan School District of Lawrence Township talk about the importance of hiring a diverse team and the opportunities and challenges that come with a commitment to Diversity, Equity & Inclusion.

Q: Efforts toward diversity, equity and inclusion have become ubiquitous in the last 18 months. How, if at all, has your organization changed its approach to DEI in that time frame?

LEO LOPEZ: When I joined Old National three years ago, it was

already successfully advancing DEI initiatives. In the last 18 months, we have been strategically building on those efforts. In addition to internal DEI efforts, Old National is focused externally on DEI opportunities throughout our footprint, led by our Chief DEI Officer, Corliss Garner, and Chief Strategic Business Partnerships Officer, Roland Shelton.

DR. SHAWN SMITH: Guided by board policy, the MSD of Lawrence Township practices continual, conscious, and deliberate examination of the institutional beliefs, behaviors, policies, programs, practices, systems, and structures in our school corporation to identify and eliminate those that may perpetuate racial and ethnic disparities in achievement. We are working to counteract the impact of contemporary and historical institutionalized racism and discrimination in student achievement. Part of that effort is a year-long equity audit we recently completed.

diversity, including gender, race and language. According to Dr. Vernita Mayfield, who led the audit and wrote its executive summary, "Educational equity is a state in which dimensions of privilege, skin color, and economic status are not predictive of, or correlated with, educational outcomes in any significant way, and where all learners are able to participate fully in quality learning experiences."

Current practices and future direction will continue to be viewed through the lens of educational equity, because it is imperative that students of all

"It is a challenging time for talent all around, so intentionally prioritizing diversity is that much more important."

LEO LOPEZ, Old National Bank

LINDSAY SZOSTAK: In the past 18 months, we not only trained our managers and employees on DEI, but we also put an emphasis on training our recruiting team on diversity. It could be easy to say that the way we recruited five years ago was the best, because our numbers showed success. Why break what isn't broken? But at Sondhi, one of our core values is excellence. We would not achieve excellence if we were not trying to learn and grow from the world around us.

Additionally, we have implemented company culture screens that are used to single out candidates whose values, beliefs and behavior fit with our culture. These culture screens are designed to give our employees a sense of inclusion from the moment they submit their resume. It is our goal to be sure that from the start of the hiring process, our candidates and employees have a psychological sense that they will be safe being their authentic selves.

Q: Have your efforts focused primarily on racial equity? If so, why?

DR. SHAWN SMITH: The district's Equity Audit focused on all aspects of

racism and ethnicities are not only well educated, but also prepared to succeed in a rapidly changing racially and culturally diverse world.

LINDSAY SZOSTAK: Sondhi Solutions believes a fully developed DEI program supports not only racial equity but people of all backgrounds, including generational diversity, gender balance in a male dominant industry, and sexual orientation. We value a company that expresses different voices, and we encourage those voices to learn from each other. An internal initiative we implemented this year was Sondhi Book Club. It gives employees the opportunity to hear different perspectives and look at the world—both work and personal—from different eyes.

LEO LOPEZ: Old National has focused on diversity in a broader sense, including gender and disability, while doing our best to foster overall diversity of thought. At the same time, we are willing to confront the harsh reality that racial discrimination is a problem that requires thoughtful and intentional solutions within our company and our society. We look for an approach that allows for more of us to be invested in racial equity, together.



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“District graduation data provides a solid example of how, given opportunity and access, all students can reach the finish line.”

DR. SHAWN SMITH, Metropolitan School District of Lawrence Township

Q: What are a few of the biggest obstacles you've faced in implementing your DEI plans?

LINDSAY SZOSTAK: At Sondhi Solutions, we understand that change cannot occur without action, and people are naturally afraid of change. We strive to have a Sondhi community where cultural competence is fostered. We want to ensure that Sondhi Solutions is a place where people feel safe having vulnerable conversations, can admit what they don't know and can assess personal awareness.

DR. SHAWN SMITH: While the objective continues to be for student life to return to normal, the global pandemic has continued to challenge every facet of our organization. Additionally, it has been important to convey to the community the need to, “go slow to go fast.” In 2020, people wanted immediate action. The district equity audit and community engagement approach has been a slow, methodical process that requires patience.

Q: How, if at all, have your DEI efforts changed your hiring practices?

LEO LOPEZ: I think our DEI efforts have made all of us at Old National more passionate about having a workforce that reflects the diversity within our markets. While we have enjoyed some success in our hiring practices, specifically in our commercial banking teams, we have taken a deeper look into other areas to make sure we are doing all we can to attract diverse candidates.

DR. SHAWN SMITH: The district's board of education sets annual goals for the school corporation, including hiring goals. Within that is a goal to increase racial and ethnic staff diversity by 3 percent through recruitment and retention. That commitment extends to recruiting and hiring based on students' language needs. Since 2019, the district has increased staff diversity by 5 percent. The MSD of Lawrence Township values and empowers all employees to positively impact student achievement.

LINDSAY SZOSTAK: We understand that hiring candidates with similar backgrounds and skills can inhibit innovation. Our organization's commitment to understanding and amplifying diverse ideas and backgrounds remains at our core. To act on this commitment, we have implemented the following hiring practices:

- A 12-step, standardized interview process
- Diversity recruiting training with our staffing team
- Company culture screens
- Recruiting via non-traditional outlets, such as diversity job fairs, networking events and college job fairs
- Equal Employment Opportunity statements in all job descriptions and job postings
- Diverse interview panels

We have found that our efforts have provided us with employees who have a wide range of traits, backgrounds, and experiences. This helps all of us learn from people with different perspectives.

Q: How do you balance the challenge of finding employees in a tight labor market with the need to employ a diverse workforce?

DR. SHAWN SMITH: While the tight labor market has impacted education, we remain committed to providing the highest quality educational experience for students. Employment needs are considered while ensuring equitable hiring practices for a diverse workforce.

The MSDLT Human Resources Department continuously reviews recruitment strategies to ensure alignment with local and state universities, job placement companies, and workforce development organizations. The district has worked to foster partnerships across industries that support the sharing of information on organizational needs, strategies, and the growing and nurturing of human capital. This organizational openness supports authentic collaboration with individuals and families of diverse ethnic, religious, economic, and cultural backgrounds and heritages.

LINDSAY SZOSTAK: This is where company culture screenings are important at Sondhi. We have found that these screenings have been highly effective in bringing in candidates with diverse opinions and backgrounds. This enables us to provide a workplace where our candidates and employees feel comfortable, accepted, and part of something they want to contribute to. We have found that a culture-fit screen creates a mutually beneficial experience for our candidates and the organization. It is our goal to ensure

that the candidate experience is prompt, smooth, and respectful from start to finish.

LEO LOPEZ: The old adage is that “it's who you know.” In partnership with our HR team, we are constantly building relationships with candidates. It is a challenging time for talent all around, so intentionally prioritizing diversity is that much more important.

Q: How do you measure the effectiveness of your DEI efforts?

DR. SHAWN SMITH: This work is ongoing as we continuously meet with equity teams in every school building. One marker of our success is student outcomes at the end of their time in MSDLT. In 2021, the district celebrated a 93.5 percent graduation rate and over \$40 million in scholarships awarded across the district with no disparity between racial subgroups.

The action plan from the equity audit will provide additional direction and measurable outcomes to continue to evaluate DEI efforts.

Q: “Achievement gap” and “opportunity gap” are a few terms we often hear in discussions of DEI. Which of the terms do you think is most appropriate and why?

LEO LOPEZ: Although I appreciate trying to be mindful in the use of language, my expectation one way or another is that action must be taken. In speeches I have given, I've said the following. “Imagine a world in which, in America, Black People are equally wealthy as White.” I can. That is the opportunity.

SHAWN SMITH: Opportunity gap is a more appropriate term when referring to racial disparity in outcomes. Emphasis is placed on what a student is capable of, rather

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than areas of weakness. That is the definition of a growth mindset. Given access, what is possible?

District graduation data provides a solid example of how, given opportunity and access, all students can reach the finish line. Now, the focus from the equity audit is on the types of diplomas and experiences for students while maintaining the strong graduation rate for all sub-groups.

Q: Please share some successful DEI initiatives your organization implemented.

DR. SHAWN SMITH: As previously shared, an external equity audit to review and update equity policies and practices in the district was

groups. The findings were discussed by a diverse group of community stakeholders and used to develop an action plan presented to the district school board for approval and implementation.

LINDSAY SZOSTAK: As a minority owned business, we want to ensure our company is a safe space for all and try to meet that standard through constantly evolving our DEI practices. We like to not only strive to set a standard for all small- to mid-sized businesses but also learn from what other companies are doing in their efforts. We have added a multitude of initiatives, particularly throughout the last few years, as our company has moved from a small to mid-size organization.

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LINDSAY SZOSTAK, Sondhi Solutions

conducted throughout the 2020-2021 school year by Dr. Vernita Mayfield of Leadervation Learning. Parents, students, staff, and community members were asked to complete surveys and to participate in focus

We have implemented company culture screens, an Employee Assistance Program, community involvement, organization-wide DEI training, diversity recruiting training, and up-to-date employee handbooks,

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policies and job descriptions to reflect DEI efforts. Although we have found these initiatives to be successful, we have found that true DEI success is built from the often small, everyday actions taken by people at all levels of our organization.

LEO LOPEZ: Our CEO, Jim Ryan, established Old National Bank’s CEO Council. I was fortunate to be part of the inaugural cohort. This hands-on leadership program working on projects directly for the CEO, in collaboration with the C-Suite, is by far the most effective leadership program that I have seen in my 25-year career. In addition to contributing insight and leadership to our executives, the members of the CEO Council are being offered career development opportunities within the bank.

Q: How do you encourage your employees to take DEI initiative out of the workplace and into their everyday lives?

LINDSAY SZOSTAK: DEI is not a problem to solve; it’s an ongoing, ever-evolving effort that involves all employees from top to bottom in the organization. To see long-term change, we must practice this inside and outside of the workplace. We encourage our employees to take

DEI initiatives outside the workplace through community service. One of these initiatives is Jingle Books with the Indianapolis Public Library. We have been the Jingle Books corporate sponsor since 2016. This program invites Indianapolis residents to help provide free books to children of all ages. Our employees donate books for the program throughout the year and work as a Sondhi Solutions committee in December to assist in the program. Over the past five years, our employees and partners have assisted in providing over 8,000 books for local children who may not have easy access at home to build their reading and literacy skills.

LEO LOPEZ: Lead by example. Although we are fortunate that our CEO and our C-Suite are committed to our DEI initiatives, it is also my responsibility to act and show the way. This requires constant communication from leaders, so everyone understands this is a priority for the company.

DR. SHAWN SMITH: Every school has equitable student outcome goals and action plans, down to the classroom level. Varied perspectives facilitate robust discussions, greater knowledge, and mutual respect, both inside and outside the classroom. ●



“As technology changes, diverse perspectives move us forward”

As a registered M/DBE, Sondhi Solutions has partnered with businesses across Indiana to solve problems through innovative technology, staffing and cybersecurity solutions. We have provided value on dozens of important initiatives across state and local governments by welcoming diverse perspectives and collaboration. As the digital landscape changes, our organization’s commitment to understanding and amplifying diverse ideas and backgrounds remains at our core.

Let’s Build a World that Amplifies Diverse Ideas and Backgrounds



Leo Lopez is Community Lending Market Executive, SVP. He is responsible for directing the formation of an expanded Community Lending Program to enhance lending strategies and access to capital with a focus on under-served communities. He has been at Old National Bank for three years and has 25 years of banking experience.



Dr. Shawn A. Smith has served as the Superintendent of Schools for the Metropolitan School District of Lawrence Township since 2014. The district serves more than 16,000 students and has over 2,300 employees. Dr. Smith has 32 years of experience in the field of education and is still a passionate educator whose first love is teaching Social Studies.



Lindsay Szostak is the Director of People Operations at Sondhi Solutions. Since joining Sondhi in 2015 as a technical recruiter, Szostak has created a work environment where employees feel safe, empowered, and heard. Lindsay’s areas of expertise are employee engagement, onboarding, training and development and performance management. She is a member of IndySHRM and the People Ops Society.

Content paid for by the Metropolitan School District of Lawrence Township, Old National Bank, and Sondhi Solutions.