

BUSINESS EXCHANGE

By William Reed

BLACK TELECOM PROFESSIONALS CITED FOR VERIZON'S SUCCESSES

“To be equal in opportunity, recognition and respect” is the goal of CITE executive Jaye Richardson. Amid celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the Consortium of Information and Telecommunications Executives (CITE) in Washington, D.C. Richardson exhibited high confidence that the African-American employee resource group (ERG) has created such an environment at Verizon Communications Inc.

Verizon Communications Inc. is an American broadband and telecommunications company. Just 8 years old, Verizon was formed in 2000 when Bell Atlantic's Regional Bell Operating Company merged with GTE. Listed number 17 on the Fortune 100 List, Verizon is a \$100 billion a year company that operates coast-to-coast, serves 70 million customers and has almost a quarter million employees.

Verizon and CITE are real success stories. CITE represents the interest of Verizon's 35,000 African-American employees. An employee resource group, CITE has aided and monitored Verizon's commitment to excellence in community service, and personal and professional development for over 25 years. *Black Enterprise* magazine says Verizon “has set the bar in terms of workforce diversity”. Long-time members of the company's senior leadership CITE activists have had a seat at the table making company policy and kept diversity issues at the forefront of practices. The annual DiversityInc Top 50 Companies for Diversity currently rates Verizon Number 2 for “recruitment and retention” and says the company demonstrates “consistent strength” in CEO commitment, human capital, corporate and organizational communications, and supplier diversity.

The CITE model is timely and ongoing. CITE members argue for African American interests inside and out the company. Prior to its transformation into Verizon, Bell Atlantic had merged with another Bell Operating Company, NYNEX, in 1997 and the CITE concept evolved with the telecommunications giant. CITE & Company provides voice, video and data services to residential and small business customers in 28 states and Washington, D.C. It is in a competitive market and operates a Fiber-to-the-Premises (FTTP) network under the FiOS service mark. FTTP network offers bandwidth for voice, data, and video services, and FiOS provides broadband access speeds and digital voice services. The Verizon network operates 41 million wireline access lines, 8.2 million broadband connections, and had 943,000 FiOS television customers

Ivan Seidenberg, Verizon Chairman/CEO, supports CITE and says, “Diversity isn't just a concept at Verizon. It's an integral part of our business. Diversity drives everything from the best people with the leadership skills we need, the best products and services built through our innovation and customer focus, and the best network maintained by our ability to drive results. The diverse minds, experiences, culture and unique perspectives of our employees are what give us our competitive advantage. Diversity and inclusion are a critical link to our customers, communities and shareholders. Verizon firmly believes that developing the right skills and providing the resources for our employees is essential to create our winning culture. Our employees have access and are encouraged to utilize our training opportunities, including our diversity leadership workshops and extensive online library, connect with a mentor, join one of our many support networks, and utilize our work / life tools”.

CITE is a model for all American enterprises. At its "25 Years of Excellence -- Continuing the Legacy" Conference, Verizon's Regional President Bill Roberts was the host; and as a CITE member illustrated the employee resource group's longevity and legacy.

These types of networks of employees with common interests increasingly are being used to strategically advance businesses by involving and using members' ideas for marketing campaigns targeting fast-growing markets and as a means of increasing recruitment, retention and promotion of top talent. Like many African Americans, not all black Verizon employees buy into “that race stuff”. Of Verizon's 34,000 African American employees, just 12,000 are active in CITE.

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Despite the established recognition of diversity as a business imperative, discussions around diversity remain sensitive, and implementation of such practices is often met with ambivalence. The fact that most companies remain largely indifferent to changing corporate America's predominately white status quo makes it all the more important to laud those who are aggressively pursuing initiatives for African Americans' "opportunities, recognition and respect".

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