

# Episode 329: DEI Series - How Did You Get Into DEI?



**Intro: [00:00:00.99]** Welcome to the Workology Podcast, a podcast for the disruptive workplace leader. Join host Jessica Miller-Merrell, founder of Workology.com as she sits down and gets to the bottom of trends, tools, and case studies for the business leader HR and recruiting professional who is tired of the status quo. Now here's Jessica with this episode of Workology.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:00:26.89]** This podcast is part of a series on the Workology podcast that's focused on DEI and HR. Diversity, equity, and inclusion, you know, they're not new ideas in the HR and corporate arenas, but in recent months, the importance and significance of DEI in the workplace has gotten leaders throughout corporate America to think about what doing the right thing in our community looks like. For many of us in HR, this means we're not taking our DEI initiatives to stakeholders. They're coming to us looking for answers, and we must be ready to respond. In this podcast episode, I'm sharing excerpts with some of our best interviews on the Workology podcast that are focused on DEI. We're talking with DEI experts and specialists in HR about what led them to focus on DEI in their careers. I'm such a work nerd about this kind of things. This episode, the DEI series, is powered by Align DEI and Ginger.com. Now, the Workology Podcast is sponsored by Upskill HR and Ace The HR Exam. Our first interview in this series is with Cathy Light. She's the founder and CEO of the Lideranca Group and DEInamics.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:01:38.47]** Every conversation I feel like with an HR professional right now is focused on the DEI side of things. And I am so excited that this is something that we're shining a spotlight on. I just want to make sure that the momentum continues and we continue these conversations and grow and evolve. So you have worked in the corporate world in a variety of leadership roles, including Vice President and General Manager of Sunrise Technologies, also the Senior Sales and Marketing Executive at Fuji Optical Systems. And you began your career with a little known startup called Apple Computer. Might have heard of it. Can you talk a little bit about your corporate experience that led you to entrepreneurship and that focus on the DEI side of things?

**Cathy Light: [00:02:24.31]** Sure. I had a very exciting corporate career. All three of my positions stretched my capabilities into new learnings, you know, and certainly invoked creativity. I needed to figure out how to do and reflect upon new and emerging competencies. I was going to college full time at night and then working full time. So this position at Apple in terms of marketing and doing the PR and all the, the tours for the most automated factory in the world, the Macintosh factory was just exciting and everything moved so quickly. It was acceleration, factory acceleration on steroids. So I really had to get up to speed quickly, get things done quickly in order to create some initial success for me in this very market-emerging company. And I was there for over a decade and it was probably one of the most reflective highlights of my corporate career. I had an opportunity to co-create a completely new marketplace in the dental industry. I developed relationships, partnerships, global distribution, agreements, multiple conversations in terms of advisory conversations, people who opened doors for me. Can you imagine how many people get to create a multimillion-dollar

marketplace in their career? I felt very, very fortunate. And then my last corporate job at Sunrise Technology, it was the first time I was an officer of a company and it was definitely, again, fast-paced.

**Cathy Light: [00:04:27.64]** I seem to always do everything at a fast pace. So that seems to be my, my mindset in terms of the jobs that I take on and things that I do in terms of innovation. But it was a very hard job. I mean, I'm not going to sugarcoat that. It was a division turnaround. The stock price had become delisted and we had a lot of angry shareholders. So I just womaned up and created a new team, created a new vision, a whole new market strategy. And we were able to sell the division, turn it around, profitability, great growth within three years. So, you know, it was definitely when I look at the culmination of my corporate experiences and summarizing, you know, what led me to where I am today, I think it's just an innovation mindset, using lots of openness to, to my thinking. I don't like, you know, no, we can't do that. I'm the type that will say, OK, well, we're going to figure out how to do it. If it's meaningful and important, we're going to figure out how to do it. So all the department functionality, learning about processes and I think the agility to move quickly and execute quickly with some of those, I think, key competencies that led me to where I am today.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:05:52.08]** So how did you decide or what led you to get involved in the DEI side of things?

**Cathy Light: [00:05:59.31]** So it was in 2017, I was actually working with a couple of Fortune clients, and within a two-week span, the executives had just asked me, do we have an instrument, a tool that would measure diversity and at that time inclusion. We really didn't have equity. We didn't have it necessarily in, you know, coupled with diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging as it is now. And I did say to my clients, I said, I don't have one. Let me see what's in the marketplace and I'll get back to you. So my team and I, you know, went out and did some discovery, and there really wasn't anything in the marketplace at that time that we thought was meaningful, you know, to showcase to our corporate clients. And so therein lied an opportunity for me to develop it. So we began the journey of creating a data analytics tool and it has evolved. And it's now in phase two with one of the top AI developers recognized by Microsoft, Crayon. Crayon is recognized as a global key partner for Microsoft in the artificial intelligence space. So it has definitely evolved. You know, it's self-funded. We, I've self-funded the, the software development. And so it's been an interesting journey. And what's interesting, Jessica, is while I grew up in Silicon Valley, did both my undergrad and grad in the Silicon Valley area and I worked in technology, I never considered myself a technologist. And then long behold, I'm now running one of our portfolio divisions is DEInamics, which is the software data analytics. So I had to learn how to shift my mindset to becoming a technologist.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:08:04.23]** Our next interview excerpt is with Dr Melissa Horne. She's the Director of Client Experience at Learning Snippets and Dialectic.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:08:13.53]** You have spent your career and education up to your doctorate degree working in the organizational DEI space. What led you to this career path?

**Melissa Horne: [00:08:23.79]** So there's actually kind of a funny story or now maybe it's more of a happy accident. So it actually started in my first year of university. I was picking my fall courses and I'd originally wanted to take a course on the history of witches in witchcraft and apparently so did a number of other students because it had filled up by the time I tried to register. And then the only course left open was one on the civil rights movement. That course really, I think, changed my life as an 18-year-old who'd lived, you know, a relatively privileged life. The stories of black student activists willing to die for many of the rights that I took for granted every day really, really stuck with me. And from there I continued to study the history of racism. I became really interested in the history of scientific racism and how that shaped the narrative of slavery in the US. And from there, I continued to study and research on how white folks in the US reconciled these ideas with emancipation. And I started following different threads and it led me to studying black student activism in the early 19th century because much of this early activism was a rejection of scientific racism and fighting for the rights for self-determination over black higher education. So while I was doing my PhD, though, that sort of coincided with the fight for LGBTQ rights and specifically marriage equality. And so I started volunteering with a number of LGBTQ organizations, including the National Center for Lesbian Rights, which was leading the DOMA (Defense of Marriage Act) case. And so, you know, while I loved the research and work that I was doing in the academy, I really started to pivot and think about what my career could be like after I got my doctorate and how could, how I could pursue a career where I could use my education, my passion for social justice to improve the lives of folks every day.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:10:17.07]** Our next interview is with Kim Crowder, one of my great friends and experts in this area on diversity, equity, inclusion and anti-racism.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:10:27.02]** Talk to us a little bit about your background, how did you get involved in the diversity, inclusion in space?

**Kim Crowder: [00:10:32.66]** Sure. For 16 years I've been working in corporate America, including large non-profits, as you mentioned, and frankly, as I moved up the corporate ladder, I realized that there was some things that were really blatant to me as a woman of color, but both as a woman and as a woman of color around how I was treated and how I was supported and whether or not I was listened to and how I was paid, as a matter of fact. And so as I started to look at that, it naturally happened. I started doing talks with, at large conventions about the conversation. I started doing webinars. And before I knew it, I had fallen into this work. So I was doing my day job and I was also doing diversity, equity, and inclusion work and anti-racism work on the side. And then it just felt natural to me that I would put both feet in and do this full time.

**Break: [00:11:29.36]** Let's take a reset, this is Jessica Miller-Merrell, and you're listening to the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskill HR and Ace The HR Exam. We're sharing in this episode some of the best responses from podcast guests on what led them to focus in DEI. How do they start their careers and get started in diversity, equity and inclusion? This is part of our DEI podcast series, and it is powered by Align DEI. and Ginger.com.

**Break: [00:11:55.64]** Every employee has different mental health needs, from preventive behavioral health coaching to therapy and psychiatry. Ginger offers effective, convenient mental health care for any level of need. All from a smartphone. Learn more. Visit [Ginger.com](https://ginger.com).

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:12:13.67]** Our next interview is with Nadine Augusta. She is the Chief DEI Officer at Cushman and Wakefield.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:12:21.08]** You have worked in a lot of different leadership roles in the corporate world. Can you talk to us about how your early experience led you to working in diversity, equity and inclusion?

**Nadine Augusta: [00:12:33.83]** Well, absolutely, thank you for this question. There are several early experiences that led me to where I am today, and I'm talking early elementary school and I go back that early in, you know, you'll see, you'll see the reason why. I was previously asked a similar question and I talked about my very thick Jamaican accent, which speech therapy did away with. See, I was originally from Jamaica, West Indies, and immigrated to the U.S. when I was nine years old. In response to your question now, though, I am going to speak about a different experience. I'm going to talk about when I was in elementary school. At that time, I was a product of school desegregation in Providence, Rhode Island, which is where I immigrated to from Jamaica. I was bused from the neighborhood that I lived in on the south side of town to a middle to upper-middle-class neighborhood in a much nicer part of town, which had, you know, well-maintained school with large manicured school grounds. And I remember it being a scary and confusing time for me, and I got some very clear messages that from that experience that stayed with me and really informed so much of, of, of my world and where I am today. I got the message that, you know, my race was a deciding factor in a lot of things. The type of school I went to, the resources the school had, and the quality of the education I got. There were some big differences between a school that I was going to prior to being bused to this much nicer school in a much nicer part of town. I was different and I was, I got the message that I was different and, and less than, right? That difference really equated to being less than, for me, at that time. And I learned about inequality, inclusion, and exclusion, even though I didn't have the language at the time to, to, to put to what I was experiencing. And it's not a surprise to me when I think about and reflect on that period in my life that I am where I am today.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:15:06.36]** Another one of my favorite interview excerpts that I wanted to share is with Traci Dunn. She's the CHRO and Head of DEI at VillageMD.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:15:14.61]** Let's talk about your background, because I feel like it's an interesting one. You have worked in HR leadership in a variety of industries for the past 25 years. How did your early experience lead you to working in DEI?

**Traci Dunn: [00:15:27.57]** Yes, I've always had a personal passion for the DEI. You know, growing up on a military base enabled me to see the value very early on of having a variety of people, backgrounds, and experiences. So when I started working in HR, I always just naturally volunteered to help with diversity efforts. Or you know, just use the diversity lens to all the things that were within my remit. And here's one example that I was thinking about from very early in my career when I was a campus recruiter. I recruited at both HBCUs, historically black colleges and universities, and PWI, predominately white institutions. But I always had the largest amount of diversity hires from all of my campuses across the board, because I was always very intentional about casting the net wide. I wasn't one of those, as I like to call, post and prey type of recruiters. I always went that extra mile to network with diverse organizations, professors, and administrators, you know, to build that pipeline of diverse talent. And that success of doing this work kind of, you know, side of the, side of the table, so to speak, really led to my first full-time role in diversity. And from that point on, I just couldn't stay away from the DEI work. Even though I've led multiple aspects of HR, I will always be a DEI practitioner at heart.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:16:52.20]** Our last and final interview is with Ariana González Stokas. She's the DEI Consultant and former VP of DEI at Barnard College.

**Ariana González Stokas: [00:17:01.06]** So for me, the work started, I guess, a while ago, you know, like back in 2008. I started off in what's kind of described in New York state as opportunity programs. Other states have similar programs where they're, they're equity-based access programs to higher education. And essentially what they aim to do is provide both scholarships, but also intensive academic support in the transition into higher education for low-income and first-generation students. So I started off kind of leading as a director of a program but had always been connected to what I'd consider to be equity-based programs or the idea that, you know, higher education in the United States, in particular, isn't always accessible and frequently isn't accessible to everybody. And then, you know, I think DEI sort of in its early versions in higher and at least was known as multicultural affairs, and I started was kind of around that world a little bit, but kind of fully navigated into it, I guess, with the position I held at Bard, which was an inaugural one as a Dean for Inclusive Excellence, which kind of is the notion that, you know, higher education can actually meet its aim of having educational outcomes, which are preparing students for an increasingly complex cosmopolitan world without ensuring that there's many different perspectives both in the curriculum and in the student and faculty and staff population. So it kind of came through first a commitment to I consider it under the umbrella of like the access and equity parts of higher education programs. And then my own kind of personal story, family narrative of being a Puerto Rican woman who kind of watched her own family, my own mother and grandmother, you know, really struggle to ensure that both my mother had access to higher education and then in turn, that I did.

**Closing: [00:19:07.99]** Conversations about leadership and culture and diversity, equity and inclusion are extremely important, and I believe we should be having more of these because these conversations spark change. As HR leaders, we can support our company and our leaders with resources and training that can open up our DEI initiatives in a way that sets our company up for long term success while setting an example of what doing the right thing looks like. This interview series or this podcast is all about how to get into DEI and how some of our past podcast guests made the leap. How did they make the transition into diversity, equity and inclusion positions at their respective organizations. This is part of our DEI podcast series, which

is powered by Align DEI and Ginger.com. The Workology Podcast itself is sponsored by Upskill HR and Ace The HR Exam. This podcast is for the disruptive workplace leader who's tired of the status quo. My name is Jessica Miller-Merrell, and until next time, you can visit [Workology.com](http://Workology.com) to listen to all our Workology Podcast episodes.

**Closing: [00:20:15.37] Personal and professional development is essential for successful HR leaders. Join Upskill HR to access live training, community, and over one hundred on demand courses for the dynamic leader. HR recert credits available. Visit [UpskillHR.com](http://UpskillHR.com) for more.**