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EXCLUSIVE REPORTS

From the September 24, 2004 print edition

The Business of Diversity

Big challenge: Diversity initiatives face hurdles in other cities

Peg Masterson Edquist

Special to The Business Journal

When Valerie Patton took a job as director of the St. Louis Business Diversity Initiative in 2000, she felt it was a temporary position that would last -- at the most -- three years.

Today it's year four and she sees no end in sight.

"Wow, what a change of perspective," she said. "I see it as a very big Asian elephant, and I've just taken a hold of the big toe and took a bite out of it."

Like Patton, others in markets across the country feel bringing true diversity to the workplace through private enterprise -- like the IDEAL program in Milwaukee -- is something that takes a very long time and is extremely hard to measure.

IDEAL, or the Institute for Diversity Education & Leadership, was officially formed in Milwaukee in October 2003. Its goal, like many around the country, is to promote management-level diversity and also stop the "brain drain" of young professionals of color who were leaving Milwaukee. It is a joint initiative of the Greater Milwaukee Committee, the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, which houses its office.

"There's been a lot of false starts," said Danae Davis, director of diversity affairs at Miller



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Brewing Co. in Milwaukee "The (fact that) Milwaukee and southeast Wisconsin have a lot of room to grow from an inclusion standpoint is a big, huge boulder, and some people over time have said it's way too big to deal with."

Davis, who is on the strategic council for IDEAL and counts Miller as one of the founding partners and charter members, said what's new about this initiative is a strategic approach from the private sector. IDEAL has 45 member companies or institutions that have committed to include diversity as a priority at their workplaces, in the marketplace and in the community.

Hard process

But it hasn't been easy, and that is reflected in other programs in U.S. cities which have been in existence for much longer.

"It is about embracing and celebrating that what's different, but when different makes you uncomfortable -- and what we do is uncomfortable -- that's not so easy," said Patton from St. Louis.

The St. Louis Business Diversity Initiative was founded six years ago and grew out of a committee from an organization called Civic Progress. It now has five collaborative partners and more than 125 members, who pay no dues. It is supported through money from Civic Progress, which has a membership of 30 of the largest local corporations. Initiative members facilitate networks, hold seminars and work inside of companies.

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"It sounds really simple, but when I go into a company, many times they say 'I don't have a clue,' " Patton says. "All of us have to come outside of our boxes, and it's not only thinking outside the box, it's being outside the box."

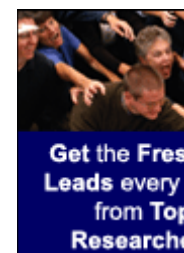
Michelle Holton, manager of inclusion at Edward Jones in St. Louis, said the city has big challenges when it comes to diversity and attracting management level people of color.

"Being in the Midwest, it's a little tougher," Holton said. "You're defined by your personal sphere of influence. If your grandparents thought a certain way, they passed that on to their children and they passed it to you. There's a great parochial perspective in St. Louis. We've had change agents who worked here for some time and they get frustrated. You hope there will be a new cadre of people who will come to help continue it."

Mike Streeter, executive director of the Greater Rochester Diversity Council in Rochester, N.Y., said his organization has changed since it was founded more than six years ago.

"When we started, we were primarily business-focused, but now we have eight colleges and universities and health care organizations, as well as small to medium-size business and nonprofits," he said. "Now it's how do we work on (diversity) in more of a community way."

The Greater Rochester Diversity Council has 45 members who pay dues depending on their size. It recently became a 501c3 nonprofit organization so it could receive grants and foundation funding. Streeter said through the



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years, the concept of diversity has evolved to more than mandates from government.

"The first thing organizations have to decide is what do they think diversity is," he said. "Fifteen or 20 years ago, it was about race and gender and hiring more people who are minorities. But today the concept of diversity has expanded greatly. Now, it's how do you create organizations that enable anybody from any background to do their best, regardless of their differences."

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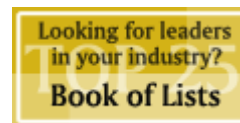
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