

what's working

promoting diversity
and inclusion



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by | **Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS**

Elizabeth Byers described herself as “oblivious” to being transgender five years ago when she started working at Associated Bank, a financial services company based in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

“My circle of people was very small, so I just never really knew that these feelings of being female inside were something that was a ‘thing,’ that people would actually transition,” she recalled. As she began to come to terms with being transgender, she started taking what she calls “baby steps” to test the waters of acceptance in the outside world.

One of those baby steps was joining the Pride & Equality Colleague Resource Group (CRG) at Associated Bank. Byers, who is a client delivery specialist working in the bank’s Commercial Deposits and Treasury Management Department, said she felt comfortable with joining the group because she knew allies of the LGBTQ community were welcome to join.

“As I got involved in the group . . . and the more I felt a sense of family or togetherness and not being alone, the more I felt I could get a little bit closer to the springboard of coming out—in my personal life and also on the job,” Byers said.

The prospect of coming out at work caused her a lot of anxiety. And even though she may not have recognized it at the time, she attributes her short tenures at other jobs during her career to the anxiety she felt about not really being herself. When she made the official transition at work, “I really felt like I was coming home.”

Retaining employees like Byers is one of the key benefits of the Associated Bank diversity and inclusion initiative, said Sarah Schwarten, director of talent and HR strategy. “It helps us to not only attract but retain talent,” she said. “If we can create an environment where people can thrive, they’re going to stay.”

Diversity and Inclusion Initiative

Associated Bank has more than 240 banking locations serving more than 120 communities throughout Wisconsin, Illinois and Minnesota, and commercial financial services in Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, Ohio and Texas. The company employs approximately 4,700 people.

The company formally started its diversity and inclusion initiative in 2011 by creating a diversity and inclusion council and a CRG that focused on fostering the growth of female employees and encouraging them to take leadership roles.

The effort has had leadership support since the beginning, and Chief Executive Officer Philip B. Flynn serves on the council, Schwarten said.

Associated Bank now has the following CRGs.

- Forward Abilities CRG
- Pride & Equality CRG
- Veterans CRG
- Women’s CRG
- Cultural Awareness CRG
- Young Professionals CRG



Associated Bank employees celebrate Pride month.

In 2019, more than 43% of employees participated in one or more of the CRGs, which are open to all employees. The groups organize educational and professional development events and also engage with nonprofit partners and other businesses and organizations. The groups held more than 310 events in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a shift to virtual programming, but the events are continuing, Schwarten noted.

During the civil unrest in the summer of 2020 following the death of George Floyd, the company brought in outside experts in diversity and inclusion to host webinars and lead small-group discussions on racial topics. The CRGs also were a resource for those efforts, Schwarten said.

More Inclusive Employee Benefits

The company has made its benefit offerings more inclusive, partly as a result of input from the CRGs, Schwarten said.

The company's parental leave benefit is not gender-specific. It offers eight weeks of 100% paid leave for birth parents, non-birth parents, and parents who adopt or have a child via surrogacy.

Associated Bank provides subsidized backup care for when employees are unexpectedly without a caregiver. Both center-based and in-home care are available for a small copay. The number of subsidized days has been in-



Members of the Associated Bank Pride & Equality Colleague Resource Group attended the Milwaukee Bucks Pride Night game.

creased from five to ten days for 2020 because of the pandemic.

“Over the last few years, we’ve expanded our policies to recognize broader definitions of *family* for sick time, bereavement leave or other things,” Schwarten said. “We wanted to be more expansive and give more discretion to our colleagues.”

Associated Bank stopped offering domestic partner benefits a few years ago following the Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage but now plans to reinstate the benefits beginning January 1, 2021. The change was spurred by input from the Pride & Equality CRG, whose members said many same-sex couples still don’t feel comfortable enough with

the level of social acceptance to marry legally.

Employees needing benefits specific to transgender issues can access the employee assistance program (EAP) for counseling services. The company’s health care benefits also include benefits for gender dysphoria, including psychotherapy, hormone therapy and other medications as well as gender-reassignment surgery.

Byers worked with the human resources team to write guidelines for employees who might go through the gender transition process in the future, including questions to ask and helpful hints.

Human resources policies and practices are a big deal to people like her, Byers said. For example, Associated

Bank recently gave approval for employees to list their preferred pronouns in their email signatures, which is important to a lot of people, she added.

“It’s not enough to say you welcome diversity and you welcome the LGBTQ community in general. I think that having those resources available and putting some backing, some actual weight, behind those resources is something that I would say is a huge deal.”

Impact on Diversity

The percentage of external hires that were people of color increased from 11% in 2011 to 24% in 2019. As of June 30, 2020, hiring of people of color reached 30%. The company’s 2018 diversity and inclusion report showed that 82% of employees felt the company values diversity and inclusion.

In addition to the previously mentioned benefits of attracting and retaining employees, Schwarten said the diver-

sity and inclusion effort is a positive for the bank’s overall business. Having a diverse team means the bank can improve innovation and can be more expansive in terms of meeting customer needs, she explained.

Byers believes that the company’s diversity and inclusion efforts helped lay the groundwork for her journey to come out as transgender. Without it, “I don’t think that the atmosphere would have been here in order for me to feel comfortable with moving forward and transitioning on the job.”

She knows many transgender people who believe they need to leave their preexisting world and move to a new city and start a new job if they transition. “I’m really glad that I didn’t feel like that had to be me,” Byers said. “I love the fact that I feel happier here and happier than I’ve ever felt in a corporate environment, and I’ve worked at a lot of different places. It’s a great home.”

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