

10 Best Practices for Launching and Growing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Efforts in Biotech and Pharma from Executive Women in Bio - Connecticut

On Nov. 8, Executive Women in Bio-CT held a panel discussion on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) Initiatives in Action, with panelists discussing the ways their organizations have put DE&I initiatives into practice, both internally and externally. The discussion gave rise to a number of DE&I best practices in areas such as company culture, hiring, resource groups, supply chain, clinical trials, and communications.

The discussion was Chaired by Rachael Alford, Head of CMC at Rallybio and featured leaders in biotech and pharma, including Nicole Platzer, Global External Inclusion and Diversity Lead at AstraZeneca, and former Global Head of External Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging at Alexion Pharmaceuticals; Deborah Waltz, VP of Quality at SpringWorks Therapeutics; Deborah Kroeger, Senior Director of Talent Acquisition at Arvinas; and Sarah Ringuette, Executive Director of Regulatory Affairs at Biohaven Pharmaceuticals.

Below, a highlight of the 10 best DE&I practices from the discussion.

- 1. Survey Employees.** At Alexion, an annual employee survey includes reactions to the company culture – with six indicators of inclusion. “It showed the underrepresented group we had that was largest felt the least inclusion,” said Platzer. “So just being represented doesn’t mean that group feels like they belong. That told us that we had work to do and informed the initiatives that we prioritized throughout the year.”
- 2. Train Leadership and Committees.** The DE&I committee at Arvinas felt it was important to establish a shared language and to be led by expertise. They evaluated various consulting firms and chose to follow online modules as a first step. “We thought it was important that we go through that training,” said Kroeger. “We followed a series of five different modules that cover a broad list of topics – 7 ½ hours of training. We listen to the training and come together with our cohort.” Both the DE&I committee and leadership team participate in the training.
- 3. Track Applicants.** In June 2021, Arvinas began to identify and track candidates that apply. This has given them the ability to document their progress on interviewing and hiring women and people of color, particularly at the director level and above. It’s one thing they can do, said Kroeger, “to demonstrate progress and sustained improvements.”
- 4. Create an Innovation Factory.** An intentional network of DE&I champions can test ideas, administer surveys, and form “innovation pods” around challenge areas. “On challenges that were top priorities, we matched passionate employees with subject matter experts and created a working group,” said Platzer. “We did this when rethinking our talent recruitment process — bringing together subject matter experts from talent acquisition and from different parts of the business.”
- 5. Share Employee Stories.** Social media and podcasts are ideal platforms for letting diverse employees share their stories and contribute to a more connected culture. “When you learn about people’s journeys, that’s where a lot of connections and awareness happens. It builds commitment organically,” said Kroeger. “There’s a desire to learn more and to move needle forward.”

6. **Add a DE&I Flex Day.** A built-in DE&I Flex Day allows employees to take a day off when needed for a religious occasion, ethnic celebration, activism, marches or other needs.
7. **Create a CARE Committee.** Launched at Biohaven, the CARE (courage, appreciate, respect, and empower) Committee brings employees together across the commercial space. This group hosts expert-led discussions around topics like mental health, parenting during the pandemic, racial tensions, and promoting a more inclusive workforce.
8. **Remove Barriers to Clinical Trial Participation.** By removing barriers to clinical trial participation, companies can ensure trials that better represent the clinical population. Strategies employed at Biohaven include adding inner city sites to clinical trials; providing translation for clinical study documents; covering costs for transportation and child care; offering remote clinical lab assessments; centralizing labs for tests; and providing visiting nurses.
9. **Establish a Supplier Diversity Program.** Alexion established goals for supplier diversity and partners with sustainability partners to ensure a positive impact on communities.
10. **Develop a Robust Internship Program.** Biohaven brought on 65 interns last year from diverse high schools, colleges, and graduate schools, fully integrating them into the workforce and making them high-level contributors on key projects. “The interns offered fresh perspectives and we provided opportunities to them,” said Ringuette. Over the years, over 100 different institutions have been represented in Biohaven’s internship program, and they are planning to expand the program to international students. “It translates into employment opportunities and a healthy, diverse workforce,” Ringuette said.