Perspective: National Football League Teams Need Chief Diversity Officers

Anne L. DeMartini* and Barbara Nalani Butler

Department of Exercise Science and Sport Management, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA, United States

The National Football League (NFL) and its teams, some of the world’s most profitable sporting properties, face challenges with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). With a history of discriminatory work environments, including a recent high-profile lawsuit, the NFL and its teams have a poor reputation on these issues. This perspective piece investigated NFL teams’ utilization of organization employees dedicated to DEI. Utilizing a content analysis of publicly available data, this piece investigated DEI employees at NFL team organizations. The study analyzed the position’s characteristics including the name of the role, the department in which it was housed, and the reporting structure. The study also examined the demographics and professional background of the employees in the roles. The findings conclude that NFL teams lag behind other American businesses in their adoption of Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) roles. As of 2022, only 31.25% of NFL teams had a dedicated DEI staff person. Three additional teams host diversity councils utilizing employees with other job responsibilities. The employees filling the CDO roles were majority women and majority Black. Though not the only answer to a complex problem, in order to address these challenges and move forward, the NFL teams should create Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) roles. These positions should have appropriate reporting relationships, well-crafted position responsibilities, generous resources, and qualified and experienced employees.

Keywords: diversity and inclusion, National Football League (NFL), Chief Diversity Officers, sport management, professional sport, diversity equity and inclusion (DEI)

INTRODUCTION

National Football League

The National Football League (NFL) is the most powerful organization in American sport (Crepeau, 2020) and is also “one of the most significant engines of contemporary culture” (Oates et al., 2014) (p. 3). The NFL, one of the most popular and profitable sporting leagues, dominates American sports’ viewership ratings (Oates et al., 2014; McGannon and Butryn, 2020). The popularity of American football, along with the massive influx of media dollars, has driven the value of individual NFL franchises to billions of dollars (Crepeau, 2020).

The NFL and its teams have struggled with issues of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the past including the use of racist mascots (Bruyneel, 2016), race norming (Hobson, 2021), and perpetuating discriminatory work environments (Eichhorn, 2020; Shephard, 2021). The NFL generates billions of dollars, to the benefit of its team owners, whose lack of diversity is striking, given the racial
The makeup of the players in the league (McGannon and Butryn, 2020). There was not a non-white NFL team owner until 2012, and there are currently only two owners of color with major ownership interests and significant involvement in the operations of an NFL team (Lapchick, 2020). Team CEO/President positions have been predominantly held by white men (Lapchick, 2020).

Commentators have criticized the NFL’s attempts to address DEI and social justice issues. Researchers analyzed the NFL and its teams’ responses to athlete activism. Montez de Oca characterized the league’s reaction to Black players’ activism as contradictory attempts to appease fans and its mostly Black on-field workers (Montez de Oca, 2021). Rugg argued that the league tried to control the voice of rebellious Black players by subsuming their social justice efforts into a weak, market-friendly version of “justice” based on calls for unity (Rugg, 2019). Niven found that NFL teams punished athletes who protested during games, paying them less and treating them worse than their peers (Niven, 2020).

Most of the literature focuses on NFL coaches and players rather than administrative executives. Scanga identified the lack of diversity among decision makers, the absence of diversity in the final candidate choices, and the anti-tampering policy as factors facilitating and perpetuating a cycle of racial employment discrimination in the National Football League (Scanga, 2004). Conlin and Emerson discovered strong evidence that non-white players face hiring discrimination in the NFL, though they are treated more equitably in retention and promotion decisions (Conlin and Emerson, 2006). Madden found Black coaching candidates were held to a higher standard during the hiring process (Madden, 2004). Some investigators have found that the institution of the Rooney rule may have mitigated that discrimination (Fanning Madden and Ruther, 2010; DuBois, 2016). The Rooney rule requires NFL teams to interview at least one minority candidate for any head coaching vacancy (DuBois, 2016). However, Pitts et al. recently determined after accounting for numerous characteristics of coordinators, Black coordinators were significantly less likely than non-Black coordinators to become head coaches over the 2018–2020 seasons (Pitts et al., 2022).

Very recently, the public eye again focused on the NFL’s treatment of DEI issues. Brian Flores, former Miami Dolphins head coach, filed a lawsuit in February 2022 alleging that “the NFL remains rife with racism, particularly when it comes to the hiring and retention of Black Head Coaches, Coordinators and General Managers” (para 3) (Smith, 2022). The high-profile lawsuit claims that Flores was subjected to “sham” interviews for head coach positions (Smith, 2022).

Also, a now-former head coach’s disparaging emails came to light—containing racist, misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic content (Razack and McKenzie, 2021). These emails were uncovered by an independent investigation into the Washington Football Team’s well-documented misogynistic and toxic culture (Shephard, 2021). Commentators noted the retrograde opinions expressed in the emails, and their wide acceptance among those with whom he shared them, illuminated the extent to which the NFL’s efforts to broaden its audience are a sham (Shephard, 2021). Shephard opined these emails as evidence of “deep cultural rot at the center of the NFL and just how far the league still has to go to fix it” (Shephard, 2021) (para 4) and that the NFL “has no sincere interest in the changes its marketing campaign pretends to take seriously” (Shephard, 2021) (para 7). The NFL’s “systemic and systematic protection of white men in power has bred hypocrisy, race norming, gender exclusion and violence and performative acts of solidarity with the league’s majority racialized player pool” (Razack and McKenzie, 2021) (para 3).

Following a summer of mass political mobilization triggered by the police murder of George Floyd, racial justice activism compelled the NFL to respond to public pressure (Montez de Oca, 2021). In 2020, as an attempt to improve DEI efforts, the NFL made enhancements to the existing Rooney Rule and extended its application from solely coaching and football operations jobs to a wide range of executive positions (Lapchick, 2020). Teams must now include people of color and/or female applicants in the interview processes for senior level front office positions such as club president and senior executives in communications, finance, human resources, legal, football operations, sales, marketing, sponsorship, information technology, and security positions. Additionally, teams that develop women or people of color to be candidates for primary football executive, general manager positions or a head coach position will earn draft pick rewards (Lapchick, 2020). In March 2022, the league announced two enhancements to the Rooney Rule (Jones, 2022). Interviewing a woman for coaching and front office vacancies would count toward fulfilling the Rooney Rule requirement and only interviews conducted in person will count (Jones, 2022).

In 2020, the NFL League Office also hired Jonathan Beane as Senior Vice President and Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, highlighting the increased emphasis on continuing the League’s progress when it comes to improving diversity and inclusion in its workplace and in all aspects of its business (Lapchick, 2020). The League earned an A+ rating from the 2020 Race and Gender report card for its diversity and inclusion initiatives (Lapchick, 2020).

However, even with the increased efforts at the league level, individual teams continue to struggle with DEI. Richard Lapchick, Director of The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport, noted the continued disparity in racial and gender hiring practices between the NFL’s league office and their 32 teams. He identified a serious underrepresentation of women and people of color at the team level in positions with significant decision-making power (Lapchick, 2020). At the team level, only 15.9% of the vice presidents are people of color and only 25.1% are filled by a woman (Lapchick, 2021b). At the beginning of 2021, only 17.3% of C-suite positions at NFL teams were filled by people of color and 28.6% by women (Lapchick, 2021b). By March 2022, all 32 teams are required to fully implement a DEI plan (Lapchick, 2020). One component of those plans should be dedicated DEI staff positions.

**Chief Diversity Officer Roles**

Diversity leads to greater financial performance and drives productivity, innovation, and decision making (U.S. Government
The strategic diversity leadership movement has moved from a narrow focus on access and equity issues to a broader frame that addresses the rich experience of an increasingly diverse, global world. This shift requires organizations to make DEI central to their operation rather than leaving it on the margins (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2013). One way to accomplish that is creating staff roles dedicated to DEI.

Government entities, for-profit and non-profit corporations, and educational institutions have all created the positions, often called Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs). Local governments have been addressing equity issues by adding CDOs or staff with similar titles or focus (Kimbrough, 2017). In recent years, CDOs have assumed an increasingly vital role in higher education. Between 2000 and 2010, at least 60 of the nation’s leading College and Universities reframed their senior diversity administrative role (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2013).

There has been significant progress in the creation of these roles in American business. In 2012, only 198 out of 957 (20.7%) Standard and Poors’s (S&P) 500 firms had adopted CDO positions (Shi et al., 2018). In that same year, Forbes reported about 60% of Fortune 500 companies had CDOs or executive roles designated for diversity (Kwoh, 2012). As of 2021, about 53% of S&P 500 firms have a CDO position or equivalent, up from 47% in 2018 (Green et al., 2021). Institutional pressures, crucial stakeholders that control important resources, or internal powerful actors may motivate firms to adopt CDO positions (Shi et al., 2018).

Recently, US corporations have been setting hiring records for CDOs and large companies have poached peers for management talent in the DEI space (Green, 2021). After the mass protests in 2020, new hires of CDOs in the S&P 500 index tripled the rate of the previous 16 months, increasing to approximately a dozen each month (Green, 2021). At least 60 other publicly traded firms appointed their very first diversity leader in that time frame (Green, 2021). Eighty-five of the 100 largest American corporations have a CDO, 16 of which added or elevated the role in 2020 or 2021 (Green et al., 2021). The increase in CDOs in large American corporations demonstrates firms’ commitment to workforce diversity and attests to their willingness to invest resources to accomplish it (Shi et al., 2018).

However, even with the uptick in hires and recognition of the role’s importance, turnover in the role has been high. The average tenure is 3.2 years, compared with 5.5 years for a CEO (Green, 2021). Additionally, since the adoption of the role is relatively new, though it is becoming more common, there is not a long track record of success (Gabriel, 2019).

Definitions of the CDO role vary. These positions lead diversity, inclusion, and equity efforts on several fronts, internally and externally (Kimbrough, 2017). CDOs generally have hybrid job descriptions that include recruitment, human resources, marketing, ethics and legal compliance (Kwoh, 2012). CDO’s primary duty is to conceptualize, define, assess, nurture and cultivate diversity (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2007; Shi et al., 2018). The CDO also brings a new perspective to the top management team and can coordinate diversity initiatives and foster relationships with important stakeholders (Shi et al., 2018).

In a higher education context, Williams and Wade-Golden’s foundational work defined a CDO as “boundary-spanning senior administrative role that prioritizes diversity-themed organizational change as a shared priority at the highest levels of leadership and governance” (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2013) (Chapter 1, para. 8). Williams and Wade-Golden recommended that as the institution’s highest ranking diversity administration they report to the president (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2013). The CDO’s goal is to create an environment that is inclusive and excellent for all, which requires them to serve “an integrative role that coordinates, leads, enhances, and…supervises formal diversity capabilities of the institution” (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2013) (Chapter 1, para. 8).

CDO roles place high demands on the employees who hold them. To be effective leaders, CDOs must remain highly involved with their communities and in critical conversations, engaged on the subject matter, not defensive, and be able to hear critiques (Wood, 2021). CDOs must have a broad span of knowledge that can be leveraged in different domains, including a detailed and sensitive understanding of diversity topics across identity groups, ranging from race and ethnicity to sexuality, national origins, disability, and veteran status, among others. CDOs must also retain working knowledge of key affirmative action and federal and state policies (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2013). The success of the CDO depends on personal characteristics of this employee including leadership traits, ability to build networks, and understanding organizational change (Leon, 2014).

In 2012, CDOs holding these roles in Fortune 500 companies were 65% female and 37% African-American (Kwoh, 2012). Their professional backgrounds ranged from human resources and marketing to finance and operations (Kwoh, 2012; Shi et al., 2018). Approximately 25% reported directly to the CEO, while the rest answered to human resources or another department (Kwoh, 2012).

Organizational design also impacts the success of the CDO. Rank, support staff, reporting structure, and resources can support or jeopardize their work (Leon, 2014). Historically, workplace diversity has been the domain of human resource departments and managers responsible for DEI issues were considered to have few career options and negative connotations (Anand and Winters, 2008; Shi et al., 2018). In the past, CDOs were one person, with little to no staff, resources, or direct authority (Hancock, 2018).

To set up a CDO for success, firms must make more substantial resources commitments than for the adoption of other types of diversity programs (Shi et al., 2018). Adding a CDO position to the firm’s senior management team represents a significant structural change (Shi et al., 2018). Shi et al. (2018) found most CDOs either belong to the top management team, reporting to the CEO, or report to a top management team member. Creating a new senior position requires investment of people, money, and setting up priorities, goals, channels of communication, and organizational routines that align with the rest of the organization (Shi et al., 2018).
METHODS

This study utilized content analysis of publicly available secondary data. Content analysis defines the process of summarizing and reporting written data (Cohen et al., 2018). Content analysis has become a popular method for qualitative and quantitative analyses in management and international business research (Gaur and Kumar, 2018). Prior studies within the sport management field have also utilized this method (Pederson and Pitts, 2001; Peetz and Reams, 2011; Miller et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2021).

The investigator used Google and the LinkedIn website and entered search terms “[team franchise name]” and diversity, “[team franchise name]” and equity, “[team franchise name]” and inclusion. Investigator also used the Find function for each search term on each NFL team’s website’s front office staff page. See Table 1 for numbers of search results.

After identification of the existence of a DEI role on the NFL team staff and the name of the person holding that position, the investigator then confirmed the role by using the person’s name as a search term on LinkedIn and google. Utilizing the LinkedIn profile and any biographical information found through Google, the investigator coded the available information. The measures used for coding were position (job title, department, reporting structure), education (highest degree earned, degree discipline) and prior professional background and qualifications.

The investigator also coded the photos for demographic characteristics. Visual images can be analyzed similarly to

Table 1

| Google [team franchise name] and | LinkedIn [team franchise name] and | NFL team website front office staff directory word search |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| Diversity | Equity | Inclusion | Diversity | Equity | Inclusion | Diversity, equity or inclusion |
| Arizona Cardinals | 1,080,000 | 830,000 | 479,000 | 12 | 11 | 5 | 0 |
| Atlanta Falcons | 557,000 | 863,000 | 480,000 | 34 | 27 | 24 | 0 |
| Baltimore Ravens | 693,000 | 424,000 | 634,000 | 21 | 14 | 14 | 0 |
| Buffalo Bills | 633,000 | 466,000 | 1,120,000 | 18 | 24 | 16 | 0 |
| Carolina Panthers | 542,000 | 276,000 | 439,000 | 33 | 24 | 16 | 0 |
| Chicago Bears | 1,710,000 | 570,000 | 717,000 | 31 | 34 | 21 | 1 |
| Cincinnati Bengals | 1,270,000 | 286,000 | 1,050,000 | 16 | 15 | 11 | 0 |
| Cleveland Browns | 644,000 | 383,000 | 563,000 | 26 | 24 | 18 | 0 |
| Dallas Cowboys | 991,000 | 606,000 | 1,060,000 | 32 | 35 | 24 | 0 |
| Denver Broncos | 754,000 | 511,000 | 661,000 | 27 | 22 | 15 | 2 |
| Detroit Lions | 401,000 | 393,000 | 483,000 | 29 | 18 | 20 | 1 |
| Green Bay Packers | 552,000 | 545,000 | 848,000 | 25 | 17 | 17 | 0 |
| Houston Texans | 513,000 | 335,000 | 869,000 | 18 | 19 | 13 | 0 |
| Indianapolis Colts | 489,000 | 277,000 | 416,000 | 22 | 13 | 22 | 1 |
| Jacksonville Jaguars | 918,000 | 256,000 | 747,000 | 23 | 21 | 16 | 1 |
| Kansas City Chiefs | 534,000 | 473,000 | 833,000 | 29 | 17 | 17 | 0 |
| Las Vegas Raiders | 383,000 | 323,000 | 366,000 | 9 | 4 | 6 | 0 |
| Los Angeles Chargers | 199,000 | 492,000 | 729,000 | 11 | 6 | 7 | 1 |
| Los Angeles Rams | 630,000 | 350,000 | 475,000 | 17 | 87 | 12 | 0 |
| Miami Dolphins | 669,000 | 446,000 | 592,000 | 39 | 39 | 31 | 0 |
| Minnesota Vikings | 1,180,000 | 1,020,000 | 518,000 | 24 | 19 | 15 | 1 |
| New England Patriots | 1,130,000 | 744,000 | 947,000 | 11 | 39 | 9 | 0 |
| New Orleans Saints | 976,000 | 316,000 | 593,000 | 13 | 26 | 7 | 0 |
| New York Giants | 1,410,000 | 591,000 | 1,380,000 | 6 | 11 | 2 | 0 |
| New York Jets | 1,240,000 | 1,020,000 | 703,000 | 21 | 64 | 23 | 0 |
| Philadelphia Eagles | 741,000 | 1,010,000 | 681,000 | 96 | 42 | 46 | 1 |
| Pittsburgh Steelers | 694,000 | 1,020,000 | 1,460,000 | 10 | 21 | 7 | 0 |
| San Francisco 49ers | 727,000 | 11,090,000 | 640,000 | 30 | 48 | 22 | 1 |
| Seattle Seahawks | 605,000 | 447,000 | 597,000 | 38 | 41 | 20 | 1 |
| Tampa Bay Buccaneers | 437,000 | 375,000 | 542,000 | 28 | 15 | 13 | 0 |
| Tennessee Titans | 410,000 | 665,000 | 360,000 | 13 | 7 | 9 | 0 |
| Washington Football Team | 356,000 | 362,000 | 325,000 | 22 | 12 | 11 | 0 |
| Washington Commanders | 151,000 | 66,700 | 139,000 | 8 | 6 | 7 | 0 |
analyzing texts, for example, through “reading” the meanings (Cohen et al., 2018). Since these characteristics were not self-reported, the investigator was required to perceive them.

The study utilized the ethnicity (Hispanic/Latino/a/x/e or not Hispanic/Latino/a/x/e) and race (White, Black, American Indian, Asian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander) categories as based on the US Office of Management and Budget’s Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity (Department of Health Human Services Office of Minority Health, 2018). The investigator observed socially assigned race, the racial/ethnic categorization of individuals by others (White et al., 2020). Appearance-based observed race is an external classification based solely on readily observable characteristics (Roth, 2016). This includes not only a person’s phenotype but also visible status markers, clothing, hairstyle, and the context of the observation (Roth, 2016). These classifications largely reflect how perceptions by the dominant or mainstream social groups (White et al., 2020). In social research, it is typically measured by the interviewer’s classification of the individual (Roth, 2016).

The investigator determined gender using phenotype and dress. “Determining gender” is the umbrella term for social practices of placing others in gender categories (Westbrook and Schilt, 2013). People present information about their gender and others then interpret this information, placing them in gender categories (Westbrook and Schilt, 2013). The process of gender determination often relies on visual and behavioral cues (Westbrook and Schilt, 2013) that relate to society’s expectations of masculine vs. feminine behavior and presentation (Caffrey, 2021).

FINDINGS

Out of the 32 NFL franchises, 10 (31.25%) had identifiable DEI dedicated staff roles like a CDO. See Table 2. The Jacksonville Jaguars, Chicago Bears, Detroit Lions and Seattle SeaHawks had more than one executive DEI dedicated position. There was evidence three additional teams, the Los Angeles Rams, the New York Jets, and the Miami Dolphins, have created DEI councils utilizing employees who maintained other primary roles.

The most common position title was Director/Vice President of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, with half of teams using this language. Other position titles included Chief People Officer, Vice President of Social of Responsibility and Impact, Director of Latino/a Diversity and Cultural Affairs, and Director of Inclusion and Employee Investment. For positions that were not C-suite level, the most common department in which these positions were housed was Human Resources (also called People and Culture). Other departments represented included Marketing, Strategy, and Communications.

Seven of the employees holding these DEI positions were Black (70%), 20% white and 10% Latina. Eight of the employees were female (80%), 20% male. Five of the ten the employees in these positions held degrees more advanced than Bachelor’s degrees. Twenty (20%) percent of the group attained Ed.D degrees and there were examples of an MBA, an MSHRM, and an MS in Sports Administration. Four of the 10 (40%) of the employees held DEI specific training credentials, the most common of which is the University of South Florida’s Corporate Training and Professional Certification Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Workplace.

The employees in these roles illustrate two dominant pathways to CDO positions. Four of the 10 had previous professional backgrounds in corporate, for-profit businesses including WalMart, Sephora, and Alaska Airlines. The other prominent path was gaining experience in higher education and intercollegiate athletics administration. Most were external hires, with only two of the 10 having spent significant time with the NFL team before assuming the CDO role.

DISCUSSION

Results

The finding that only 31.25% of NFL franchises have a CDO demonstrates that NFL teams are significantly behind other American businesses. Even in 2012, well before the protests following George Floyd’s murder that prompted so much corporate action, about 60% of Fortune 500 companies had CDOs or equivalent (Kwoh, 2012). Almost a decade later, the NFL's teams have still not caught up to that level. Including diversity councils, the number increases to 40.6%. The executive diversity committee may be less ideal for generating diversity strategy because of its potential lack of expertise and the non-representative nature of the group (Williams, 2013).

That many of the CDO positions were housed in human resources is consistent with previous findings. Historically, human resource departments have supervised workforce diversity (Shi et al., 2018). Similarly, 75% of CDOs at Fortune 500 companies in 2012 answered to human resources or another department (Kwoh, 2012).

Half of the NFL teams' CDOs did not report directly to the owner, president, or CEO. Having a direct line to the CEO can give a CDO more power and visibility (Kwoh, 2012). Most CDOs either report to the CEO or report to a top management team member (Shi et al., 2018). This indicates that NFL teams may not be establishing an organizational structure that will best support the CDOs work. A reporting structure that connects the CDO to the president sends a powerful message to the entire organization and allows CDOs to raise issues within the highest levels of leadership (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2013).

The demographics of the employees who hold these positions did show some progress. In 2012, 65% of Fortune 500 CDOs were female, and 37% were Black (Kwoh, 2012). Most organizations choose CDOs from underrepresented minority groups (Ng et al., 2021). The NFL team’s CDOs are 80% female and significantly more racially diverse than the Fortune 500 CDOs, with 70% Black employees. The employees in these positions are significantly more diverse than other executive roles within NFL teams. Only 17.3% of C-suite positions at NFL teams are filled by people of color and 28.6% by women (Lapchick, 2021b). Team senior administration, which includes director and senior manager roles, are 20.1% people of color and 25.3% female (Lapchick, 2021b). Employees in CDO roles do align with the NFL team’s
| Team name       | Title of position                                      | Reports to               | Highest degree | Discipline                                                                 | Race   | Gender | Background                                                                 |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Arizona Cardinals | Chief People Officer                                   | owner                    | MBA            | Human Resources Leadership                                                  | Black  | Male   | Corporate                                                                   |
| Chicago Bears*  | SVP diversity, equity and inclusion                    | President/CEO            | Bachelors      | Business                                                                   | Black  | Female | Intra-organization events and entertainment; intercollegiate athletics administration |
| Denver Broncos  | VP of diversity, equity and inclusion                  | SVP of strategy          | EdD, masters   | Athletic administration                                                    | Black  | Female | Coaching, intercollegiate athletics administration                           |
| Detroit Lions*  | SVP chief people officer and diversity officer         | President/CEO            | BFA            | Musical theater                                                           | White  | Female | Corporate; technology                                                        |
| Indianapolis Colts | Director of diversity, equity and inclusion           | VP of finance            | MS, EdD        | Kinesiology; higher education and student affairs                           | Black  | Male   | Higher education                                                            |
| Jacksonville Jaguars* | SVP and Chief Community Impact Officer               | President/CEO            | MS             | Business administration                                                    | Black  | Female | Higher education                                                            |
| Los Angeles Chargers | Director of Latino/a diversity and cultural affairs | SVP, communications and external affairs | Bachelors | Liberal studies                                                           | Latina | Female | State government                                                            |
| Minnesota Vikings | Director of inclusion and employee investment         | EVP and chief people and culture officer | Bachelors | French                                                                    | White  | Female | Intra-organization since 2006                                                |
| San Francisco 49ers | Director of diversity, equity and inclusion          | VP Human Resources       | MSHRM          | Human resource management                                                  | Black  | Female | Corporate                                                                   |
| Seattle Seahawks* | VP of diversity, equity and inclusion                 | President/CEO            | Bachelors      | Communications                                                             | Black  | Female | Corporate                                                                   |

*Indicates evidence of more than one DEI executive.
production labor racial demographics, as 70.7% of NFL players are Black (Lapchick, 2021b).

The educational and professional background of the NFL team’s CDOs indicate that they do take the employee's qualifications seriously. Fifty (50%) percent of the employees had advanced degrees and four of the 10 had DEI specific certifications or credentials. This is different than in the past when some organizations placed employees into the diversity role who had no previous experience, or whose careers were in decline, or someone who happened to be a visible minority with a passion for diversity (Dexter, 2010).

The NFL team’s reticence in hiring CDOs may be explained by the NFL’s culture and insularity. It is a league run, owned, and coached by a handful of executives which enables systemic oppression (Razack and McKenzie, 2021). Shi et al. (2018) found a strong effect of female top management team representation on firms’ likelihood of adopting CDOs. At the beginning of the 2021 season there were only four women in a CEO/President position of an NFL team (Lapchick, 2021b). The number of women in CEO/President positions has increased from zero in 2017 to one in 2018 and 2019 to two in 2020 and four in 2021 (Lapchick, 2021b). At the team level, only 25.1% of Vice President positions are filled by a woman (Lapchick, 2021b). Therefore, the lack of gender diversity in top management teams may lead to a lack of will to develop and support CDOs.

**Recommendations**

Organizations may adopt a CDO position if doing so would allow them to increase legitimacy, improve efficiency, change the corporate culture, and increase control over external resources and external actors, in response to diversity-specific pressures (Nath and Mahajan, 2008; Menz, 2012; Shi et al., 2018). The NFL is experiencing diversity-specific pressures and calls to prove that their expressed commitment to diversity and social justice is more than just lip service. Also, Shi et al. (2018) found accumulative industry adoptions impacted firms’ decision to adopt CDOs. The NFL teams may feel pressure from other major American professional sports teams, like NBA teams, that are perceived as doing better in terms of diverse hiring and social justice initiatives (Lapchick, 2020, 2021a; Beard, 2021; Butler et al., 2022). Therefore, NFL teams that do not have staff dedicated to DEI should create CDO positions.

CDOs advance an organization’s diversity agenda but cannot be solely responsible for transforming an organization’s culture (Gabriel, 2019). If firms adopt CDOs simply for impression management, it can waste resources (Shi et al., 2018). Creating a new leadership position sends a strong signal, but it takes more than one executive to make an impact in the face of institutional pushback (Green, 2021). Therefore, these roles deserve support from the owner and CEO/President, appropriate reporting relationships, well-crafted position responsibilities, generous resources, and talented employees.

NFL teams with current CDO positions should audit that role's reporting structure. All NFL team’s CDOs should report to the President/CEO, even though the trend of developing new roles at the senior level is fairly recent (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2013). Allowing the CDO to report directly to the President/CEO gives credibility, indicates the value the organization places on the role, and places final accountability with the President/CEO. Businesses characterized as DEI high performers were twice as likely as low performers to report that the CEO/President is primarily responsible for DEI issues (HR Research Institute, 2021). Reporting to the President/CEO, allows the CDO to strengthen alliances and networks across different levels of the organization’s hierarchy (Leon, 2014). Raising the profile of the CDO reflects an organization’s willingness to expose and close long-standing equity gaps (Zalaznick, 2020).

To truly shift the organization’s structure and strengthen its commitment to DEI, the CDO needs to supervise other DEI staff across divisions. The development of a vertically integrated CDO division offers a powerful way of creating a more responsive organizational infrastructure by creating economic, organizational, and strategic effects (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2013). Diversity management has evolved out from under the traditional human resources and talent acquisition roles, to assume more dotted-line responsibilities including corporate strategy, corporate social responsibility, organizational design and effectiveness, corporate marketing and even sales (Llopis, 2011). Change rarely happens when a diversity leader is separated from other departments (Green, 2021).

Since many of the NFL teams have already created diversity councils, teams could ensure that each division is represented on these councils, designate that person as the “Diversity lead” and allocate some percentage of their workload to DEI work. Then, each of these leads report to the CDO as well as their division head. Relying on diversity committees without a CDO can be ineffective, since they are commonly not supported by senior leadership or a true institutional commitment to producing results (Williams, 2013).

The CDOs job description should be carefully drafted. The position’s designers should delineate an area of work they define as “strategic diversity leadership work” (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2013). Changing culture and making progress on DEI issues is not easy nor fast (Hancock, 2018). Achieving these goals requires expanding expectations for CDOs outside of tactical areas like compliance, training, problem solving, recruiting, and event planning (Hancock, 2018). CDOs must learn to play a more integral strategic role in the design of new business models, including operating more holistically in a general management and operational capacity (Llopis, 2011). Effective CDOs work to ensure that a DEI lens is rooted throughout all functional areas (internal) and the supply chain (external) (Llopis, 2011).

Once installed, diversity chiefs often face challenges such as lack of budget and direct reports (Green, 2021). NFL teams should ensure CDOs receive the support they need. Organizations must be prepared to give CDOs the resources necessary to succeed (Geisler, 2021). CDOs should be part of strategic planning and all employees should know that the CDO is a power player and not just the organization’s conscience (Geisler, 2021). Fully empowering the CDO allows them to leverage diversity as an integral part of the organization’s overall strategy (Shi et al., 2018).

Finding the right hire for a CDO position is difficult, because it requires a wide range of competencies.
NFL teams should vet candidates carefully and focus the search on those who can lead and guide change. If not, the teams risk hiring employees who are underprepared for the demands of such a complex, high-profile, and politically charged position (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2013). When an area of responsibility becomes critically important, organizations specialists who are content experts (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2013). The NFL should continue the practice of external hires who have a professional background in corporate DEI.

“The development of the CDO role marks a step toward creating specialized capacity to engage in strategic diversity leadership work” (Williams and Wade-Golden, 2013) (Chapter 1, para. 70). Adopting CDO positions leads stakeholders to perceive organizations are strongly committed to workforce diversity and can be considered role models (Shi et al., 2018). It is time for NFL teams to catch up with American businesses and truly prioritize diversity, equity and inclusion. Though not the only answer to a complex problem, NFL teams should add or modify existing CDO roles to ensure an organization-wide commitment.

REFERENCES

Anand, R., and Winters, M.-F. A. (2008). Retrospective view of corporate diversity training From 1964 to the present. Acad. Manag. Learn. Educ. 7, 356–372. doi: 10.5465/amle.2008.34251673

Beard, A. (2021). Diversity study: NBA has racial-hiring gains in GMs, coaches. Associated Press. Press online at: https://apnews.com/article/sports-nba-business-race-and-ethnicity-84707a9e344a1e88f6064453c2d426d42 (accessed April 27, 2022).

Bruyneel, K. (2016). Multiculturalism and colonialism: the politics of Indian sports names and mascots: the Washington football team case. Native Am. Indig. Stud. 3, 1–24. doi: 10.5749/nativestud.3.2.0001

Butler, B. N., DeMartini, A., and Kelly, D. (2022). What’s in a title?: NBA chief diversity officer’s and a call to action. J. Sport Manag.

Caffrey, C. (2021). Doing Gender. Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., and Morrison, K. (2018). Research Methods in Education. 8th Edn. London: Routledge. doi: 10.4324/9781315455639

Conlin, M., and Emerson, P. M. (2006). Discrimination in hiring versus retention and promotion: an empirical analysis of within-firm treatment of players in the NFL. J. L. Econ. Org. 22, 115–36. doi: 10.1093/jeo/ewj005

Crepeau, R. C. (2020). NFL Football: A History of America’s New National Pastime. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. doi: 10.5622/illinois/9780252043581.001.0001

Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health. (2018). Data Collection Standards for Race, Ethnicity, Primary Language, Sex, and Disability Status. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health.

Dexter, B. (2010). The Chief Diversity Officer Today: Inclusion Gets Down to Business. Chicago, IL: Heidrick and Struggles.

Dubois, C. (2016). The impact of soft affirmative action policies on minority hiring in executive leadership: the case of the NFL’s Rooney rule. Am. L. Econ. Rev. 18, 208–33. doi: 10.1093/aler/ahw109

Eichhorn, F. (2020). How the NFL “protects” cheerleaders with discriminatory policies. A. B. A. J. Lab. Emp. Law. 34, 289–307. Available online at: https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/aba_journals_of_labor_employment_law/v34/number-1/jlabemp34z2-full.pdf

Fanning Madden, J., and Ruther, M. (2010). Has the NFL’s Rooney rule efforts “levelled the field” for African American head coach candidates? J. Sports Econ. 12, 127–42. doi: 10.1177/1527002510379641

Gabriel M. Sr. (2019). Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs): The Relationships Between Organizational Structure, Institutional Commitment to Inclusive Excellence, and CDOs’ Perceptions of Their Performance in Facilitating Transformational Change. Rochester, NY: St. John Fisher College. Available online at: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd/395/

Gaur, A., and Kumar, M. (2018). A systematic approach to conducting review studies: an assessment of content analysis in 25 years of IB research. J. World Bus. 53, 280–9. doi: 10.1016/j.jwb.2017.11.003

Geider, J. (2021). How Organizations Can Take a Comprehensive Approach to DEI Initiatives. HFMA. Available online at: https://www.hfma.org/topics/leadership/article/how-organizations-can-take-a-comprehensive-approach-to-dei-initi.html (accessed April 27, 2022).

Green, J. (2021). Companies Scramble to Hire Diversity Officers, But Progress Is Slow. Available online at: https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2021-03-12/companies-are-scrambling-to-hire-diversity-officers (accessed March 12, 2021).

Green, J., Gerald Porter, J., and Sam, C. (2021). Is Your Company Diverse? See How Top Employers Stack Up. Bloomberg. Available online at: https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/diversity-equality-in-american-business/ (accessed April 1, 2022).

Hancock, M. A. (2018). Equity, inclusion, and beyond: today’s urban Chief Diversity Officer. Metropolitan Univs. 29, 53–63. doi: 10.18060/22173

Hobson, W. (2021). How ‘race-norming’ was built into the NFL concussion settlement. Washington Post. Available online at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2021/08/02/race-norming-nfl-concussion-settlement/ (accessed April 27, 2022).

HR Research Institute. (2021). The Future of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion 2021. Jacksons Point, ON: HR Research Institute.

Jones, L. (2022). NFL says Rooney Rule remains a ‘critical part’ of hiring process; women now count toward filling interview requirement. The Athletic. Available online at: https://theathletic.com/news/nfl-says-rooney-rule-remains-a-critical-part-of-hiring-process-women-now-count-toward-filling-interview-requirement/jw7cZiFmKIfI/ (accessed March 28, 2022).

Kimbrough, C. (2017). Local governments hiring Chief Diversity Officers to lead equity and inclusion work. Natl. Civ. Rev. 106, 55–63. doi: 10.1002/ncc.21329

Kwok, L. (2012). Firms hail new chiefs (of diversity) CDOs join senior ranks to include more women, minorities; some report direct to CEO. Wall Str. J. Available online at: https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203899504577129261732884578 (accessed April 27, 2022).

Lapchick, R. (2020). The 2020 Race and gender report card: National Football League. The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport. Available online at: https://www.tidesport.org/files/ugd/138a69_8715a573e51742ce95d3dbb0461cfce82.pdf (accessed April 1, 2022).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article-supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

AD and BB contributed to conception and design of the study. AD conducted the content analysis and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

FUNDING

The publication fee was funded by WellStar College of Health and Human Services at Kennesaw State University for this work.
