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The secret to retaining a diverse workforce

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It doesn't matter how many positions you fill if you can't retain the people.

Leadership Insider is an online community where the biggest names in business and beyond answer timely career and leadership questions. Today's answer for: How do you encourage diversity in the workplace? is written by Carol Sawdye, CFO of PwC.

Last year, my firm recruited a young associate named Jerrell Thompson, a graduate of Sacred Heart University where he was a point guard on the school's Division I basketball team. Although Jerrell passed up a chance to play professional basketball to work at PwC, he was still able to combine his passion for sports and business: he joined our firm's basketball team and was recently voted the MVP in PwC's network global championship tournament.

He majored in accounting — something too few African Americans do — and was highly motivated to succeed. Today, businesses around the world are counting on millennials like Jerrell to help build our future, because a more diverse talent pool gives a company a competitive edge. One of the ways PwC enforces diversity is by encouraging more black and Latino students to major in accounting and STEM subjects. Another is by engaging in frank and honest conversations about race. Recently, Mellody Hobson, pres

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Despite our commitment to diversity and Jerrell's passion for PwC, he came leaving us for one important reason: his daughter. He was commuting several the office and needed to be closer to home. Jerrell is a single father in his e serious responsibilities. His personal circumstances were making it hard for the job he loved — the job he had chosen over pro basketball.

That's when I met Jerrell, completely by chance. Though Jerrell and I technically together, it was my good friend John — a writer who lives in New Jersey — us. John plays basketball in an adult league with Jerrell on weekends and for worked for PwC. He immediately connected us via email and encouraged J up. Jerrell and I chatted and discovered we have a lot in common: we both Jersey, we are both certified public accountants (Jerrell recently passed his both have deep connections to basketball. (I was previously executive vice CFO at the National Basketball Association).

Not long after we met, our firm found a better fit for Jerrell in an office close simple adjustment made a huge difference for Jerrell and his family. It also able to keep him on our Assurance team.

This is not a story about preferential treatment. Most leaders will admit their success has depended in part on support from advocates, coaches, mentors or sponsors at critical points in their careers. When you look different or have different life experiences than the majority — as I did starting out as a woman with C-suite ambitions 30 years ago, or as Jerrell does now — having an advocate is a necessity.

Mellody Hobson [said](#) that to succeed in today's global economy, businesses must acknowledge diverse talent pools, understand them and make them part of their strategy. "If you want to survive, this is not a question of, again, the right thing to do. This is a question of a must do," she said. "If you were trying to solve a really hard problem, the best way to do it is a group of diverse people, including diverse intellect," Mellody said. "Invite people in your life who don't look like you, who don't think like you, who don't come from where you come from."

When we recruit diverse professionals, we need to be open and creative about retaining them. That means understanding there's no longer just one road to success, a road where everyone tries to look and act the same way. It is vital that we make our work environments flexible, inclusive and culturally aware so that once our MVPs are in the game, we never want to let them go.

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We need to start thinking about the future and to find out where are we now, and our from PwC member firms in different regions thought there was value for that, and if so, is.

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Contributing Editor at Tax Analysts on Cross-Border Corporate Tax

Great piece! I loved the discussion surrounding this point: "When you look different or experiences than the majority — as I did starting out as a woman with C-suite ambition as Jerrell does now — having an advocate is a necessity." Oftentimes I find that folks a colleague that must assess them or gather assessments. Sometimes this person also ac These roles can create tension. While good advocates and mentors also provide valuab

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Global Chief Operating Officer at PwC

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