

SPORT

What's in a Title?: NBA Chief Diversity Officers and A Call to Action

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Abstract

This research study took an in-depth look at the role of Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) within the National Basketball Association (NBA). This study investigated the expansion of CDOs in the NBA and analyzed the number of NBA franchises with a designated CDO. This study reviewed the titles, roles, and demographics of CDOs within the NBA. A case study methodology used a content analysis and semi-structured interview protocol and assisted in compiling and coding information about the role of the CDO within an NBA franchise (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In addition, two CDOs in the NBA were interviewed to understand how the 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstrations and the murder of George Floyd put a spotlight on how organizations addressed issues around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The study found that 16 NBA teams have a CDO role, and most were spearheaded by Black professionals. The titles and reporting structures of the roles varied greatly, as did the educational degrees held by employees in the positions. Findings indicate that organizations

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must provide the CDO with sufficient authority and support to ensure that employees in the role can accomplish the range of responsibilities required for transformative DEI work.

Introduction

The National Basketball Association (NBA) is the leading professional basketball league worldwide. Since the inception of the NBA in 1946, the organization has been a trailblazer in the promotion and marketing of basketball around the globe and has inspired many generations of individuals to pursue the sport of basketball (Garder & O'Brien, 2005). The NBA has established itself as a league that has paved the way for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) due to the number of non-white and non-American players on NBA rosters (Gough, 2022). Over 70% of NBA players identify as Black, with 2.2% identifying as Latino, 0.4% as Asian, and 6.3% as Other (Lapchick, 2020). Based on The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES) standards, the NBA boasts diversity on the court, on the sideline, and in the front office. For over 10 years, the NBA has received an A+ or A rating for its inclusive hiring practices (Lapchick, 2020). The NBA has been consistent and intentional about having a diverse front office and players on the court. Compared to other professional sports leagues within the U.S., the NBA has been steady with its hiring practices and as an advocate for social justice within the league and beyond (Moran, 2020). The NBA has demonstrated this by supporting player demonstrations for social causes and creating positions within NBA team front offices related to DEI (NBA Diversity and Inclusion, 2022).

2020 marked a year of social and civil unrest as a direct response to the murder of George Floyd by law enforcement, which was recorded and went viral during a time when many worldwide were home quarantining during the COVID-19 pandemic (Onwuachi-Willig, 2021). The murder of George Floyd sparked a wave of demonstrations throughout the U.S. and globally. This great awakening of a new wave of a movement for racial equality brought individuals from all corners of the world to the streets to march and demonstrate for social justice in the name of Black Lives Matter (BLM) (Reny & Newman, 2021). What made the 2020 BLM demonstrations different from the social justice demonstrations of the 1960s was the di-

verse nature of the demonstrations and that generations of individuals marched together to stop racial injustices (Parker et al., 2020). This research study used a case study methodology, in which data collected included both a content analysis and interviews of two current Chief Diversity Officer (CDOs) in the NBA to learn more about their role as CDOs and the impact of the 2020 BLM protests on their position within their NBA organization. The results of this investigation can be used as a model for sports teams looking to implement DEI initiatives and create CDO positions.

What is the Role of a Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer (CDO)?

Research shows that diverse organizations are higher performing and attract more qualified talent than those lacking in diversity. According to Hunt et al. (2015), “Companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity are 35% more likely to have financial returns above their respective national industry medians” p. 1. The Boston Consulting Group found that “companies with more diverse management teams have 19% higher revenues due to innovation” (Lorenzo et al., 2018). Companies that do not put the effort or support toward DEI issues can see a direct and negative impact on their bottom line. Diversity matters, yet some individuals are unwilling to get on board until they feel pressure to be more intentional about DEI within their organization. Even with research showing that a more diverse work group leads to a better and more successful work environment, some organizations are still not incentivized to support CDO positions fully.

Having a position dedicated to diversity and inclusion is nothing new. In fact, CDO roles are a part of many Fortune 500 companies, institutions of higher learning, and various federal agencies (Minor, 2021). Currently, professional sports leagues and teams around the globe are starting to implement or put more emphasis on the role of the CDO due to the 2020 BLM demonstrations around racial equality and inclusion (Moran, 2020). While CDO is an all-encompassing title for those in positions that work in the realm of DEI, the title can take on many different names, such as Chief Inclusion Officer, Diversity and Inclusion Director, Chief Equity Officer, or Social Responsibility Officer. For the sake of this article, we will use the

term CDO throughout the research paper to describe individuals who are in a leadership position within the DEI space.

According to Minor (2021), “The primary role of the Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) is to ensure the organization’s cultural values. The CDO is tasked with being accountable for compliance, advocacy, and education of the company. He/She uses interpersonal skills to promote collaboration among multiple business units” (p. 1). In many cases, the CDO role entails managing DEI within the organization and recruiting individuals to be a part of the organization while also being immersed in community outreach efforts related to marginalized groups with whom the company is trying to build a relationship. The role of CDO does not entail performing one specific task in one department but being the leader of DEI initiatives for the organization. Based on research from Cooper and Gerlach (2019), out of 250 of the largest cities in the U.S., one out of four hired a CDO for the city, showing that the position is growing in number and importance within local government entities. Within higher education, the role of CDO has grown significantly in recent years, and the role has been initiated because of various crises on campus, such as racial tension, gender discrimination, or prejudice (Wilson, 2013).

According to McGirt (2019), 47% of companies on the Standard and Poor’s (S&P) 500 index currently have a CDO or equivalent, and just two-thirds have been hired or promoted into those roles since 2016. One important concern for the CDO role is the intention and the support the role receives. While creating a role due to a crisis may be in good faith, some see it as an appeal for positive publicity or a symbolic gesture rather than an attempt at true transformative change within the organization. This is because the role is often created yet is not always well supported or funded, and many CDOs are tasked with unrealistic expectations (McGirt, 2019). Leon (2014) found that positional authority, support staff, funding, and reporting structure pave the way for a CDO to be successful. Positional authority, support staff, funding, and reporting structure are four pillars crucial in creating the foundation for the success of the CDO. Without these four pillars, the CDO does not have the financial support, resources, or power to influence the company’s organizational structure and make transformative change, even though

they may be tasked with the responsibility. In addition, the CDO has a high turnover rate due to the lack of resources, unrealistic expectations, and absence of support from top-level executives (Shi et al., 2021). Many in the CDO role do not have the power to make a difference due to the odds being stacked against them, in the form of not having data to make a difference and not having the support of their colleagues, who are the ones that ultimately decide if they want to be a part of cultural shifts within the organization or not.

The NBA and Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs)

The NBA is an example of an organization that was a visible champion of social justice during the 2020 BLM demonstrations. The NBA started to embed the CDO role within various franchises years before 2020. 2020 propelled the NBA and various other sports organizations to emphasize the CDO role more and encourage more franchises to create a dedicated DEI position within their organization. In 2014, the Atlanta Hawks hired the first person in NBA history to oversee DEI within a team franchise. That person was Nzinga Shaw, and she was hired in 2014 as the Vice President of Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, eventually being promoted to a senior DEI role within the organization (Mullen, 2021).

Nzinga Shaw was hired as the Vice President Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer for the Atlanta Hawks in 2014 as a direct response to the Bruce Levenson incident (Gill et al., 2017) when the former owner of the Atlanta Hawks created and sent a racially insensitive email to individuals within the Hawks organization in 2012. In the email, Levenson used inappropriate and offensive language in reference to Atlanta Hawks fans and stereotyped fans and their interests based on race and not market research (Schwartz, 2014). The Atlanta Hawks received backlash from this email, which went viral. It put a dim spotlight on the Hawks organization, representing the city of Atlanta, which is over 50% Black (Census, 2021). Atlanta is a city known worldwide for its civil rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, and Andrew Young, who are all trailblazers in social justice and racial equality. For that reason, the team owner's creation of an insensitive and racially charged email created backlash from Hawks fans, the city of Atlanta, and the NBA, and the response of the Hawks organization was swift and intentional.

By 2014, the Hawks hired Nzinga Shaw, who focused on diversity, inclusion, and community-building initiatives in the greater Atlanta area (Mullen, 2021). While Shaw was brought on as a direct response to racist tension within the organization due to the Levenson email, she set her sights on being inclusive in all aspects of DEI, with outreach to the LGBTQ+ community, people with physical and intellectual disabilities, and various minority groups within the Atlanta area and beyond. According to an interview with Shaw, she stated that Internal Human Resources (HR) issues accounted for 30% of what she did. However, most of her job entailed working with fan experience and community engagement (Earth Equity Advisors, 2016).

The Atlanta Hawks are an example of how one NBA franchise reacted to issues around racial tension and their basketball organization. The Hawks addressed the social issue and created a position within the organization to respond to the backlash. The Hawks organization was proactive with equity, inclusion, and community outreach initiatives. While the Atlanta Hawks are just one example, the NBA, as an entire league, addressed issues of race and equity directly (Medina, 2020). 2020 showcased how the NBA dealt with issues related to racial inequality worldwide. The tragic police-related shooting of George Floyd created a direct response from the NBA in relation to social justice, and the league made very clear its stance regarding racial equality through its support of BLM and players who wanted to protest (Butler & DeMartini, 2022).

Methodology

A case study methodology was employed for this research study (Yin, 2018). Within the case study methodology, a content analysis and a semi-structured interview protocol were used to collect information on Chief Diversity Officers for NBA teams. The study also had a small sample of interview participants. Therefore, we cannot generalize in a propositional sense customary in positivist research (Simons, 2009). However, “in many contexts where we conduct case study research, we have an obligation not necessarily to generalize but to demonstrate how and in what ways our findings may be transferable to other contexts or used by others” (Simons, 2009, p. 164). Our findings and implications create knowledge through naturalistic generalizations (Stake, 2008). They derive from the tacit understand-

ing of how things are and how they will likely be later or in other places with which this person is familiar and guides action (Stake, 2008). Therefore, while this information may not be generalizable to an entire population, information about the titles, responsibilities, and experiences of NBA CDOs can be useful to other sports scholars, sports managers, and those interested in DEI in the workplace. The following sections will outline how the methodologies were utilized for data collection and analysis.

This research study gathered and analyzed publicly available data on the individuals hired to be CDOs in the NBA. Content analysis is defined as the summarization and reporting of written data (Cohen, 2018). Content analysis analyzes linguistic or visual content (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001; White & Marsh, 2006). Using the content analysis methodology assisted in seeing patterns and trends when discussing the role of the CDO. The review of pictures, texts, and position descriptions helped understand a CDO's role in the NBA.

The methodology included each principal investigator data mining NBA official websites and searching for official NBA league and team announcements in the media using keywords such as NBA and Diversity and Inclusion Officer, a specific team franchise name, and the term Chief Diversity Officer (CDO). In addition, LinkedIn was used as a secondary source to confirm the name, position, background, and image of each NBA CDO.

The investigators then coded data for position (job title within the NBA organization), education level, race, and gender. The investigators used the same methodology employed by the TIDES Race and Gender report card to code data on the race and gender of NBA CDOs (Lapchick, 2020). While the race and gender of all individual CDOs were not based on personal identification, the investigators coded images for demographic characteristics based on perception since personal information on race and gender was not self-reported (DeMartini & Butler, 2022). In some instances, the race and gender of the individual were self-reported through the interview process or on the CDO's personal LinkedIn profile page. Visual images were analyzed just as texts were analyzed by reading the meaning behind the words (Cohen et al., 2018).

In addition to a content analysis within the case study methodology, a semi-structured interview protocol was used as a guideline to

interview two current NBA CDOs (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The case study interviews were conducted via video chat and consisted of a semi-structured interview protocol. This was a typical case study (Yin, 2018). The objective was to obtain and understand the role, responsibilities, and impact of the 2020 BLM demonstration on the role of NBA CDOs and the CDOs' perspective on how their organization viewed DEI.

Study participants were selected because they held a current role as a CDO for an NBA team. All participants agreed to participate in this study and had the choice to opt out of answering questions they did not feel comfortable answering. In addition, all participants in this study will remain anonymous. This is because of their high-profile job responsibilities, and as one CDO put it, "We are in the court of public opinion, not law." Having anonymity in this study allowed participants to speak freely about their experiences without the fear of retribution from their employer or being targeted for their position on societal issues.

Interviews lasted for precisely 30 minutes each. There was a timer on the virtual call, and the participants were busy with back-to-back meetings. Therefore, additional inquiries and follow-up questions could only be answered via email after the interview. Semi-structured interview questions entailed learning about the skillsets and background to go into the CDO field, various DEI initiatives that the CDO implemented within their organization, the positionality of the CDO role within the organizational structure of their team, as well as the impact of the 2020 BLM demonstrations on the CDO position.

NBA CDOs in this study were contacted via LinkedIn, and two CDOs from the 16 teams (12.5%) responded to be a part of this study and to be interviewed about their roles. While we were hoping to have more participation, it was challenging to gain access to this population due to their high-profile title and the fact that there were only 16 CDOs in the NBA during the time the study was conducted. The principal investigators gained access to these high-profile individuals through their connections with the sports industry from working in professional sports. Two Black males were interviewed for this study, and participants were labeled Participant #1 and Participant #2 for confidentiality purposes. Participants #1

and #2 provided opportunities to connect with other NBA CDOs in their network; however, no additional CDOs followed through with confirming a date or time to have a virtual interview. Based on conversations with Participants #1 and #2, the authors transcribed, coded, and triangulated data to compile results.

Findings

Table 1 outlines the NBA teams with CDOs along with the title of the CDO. Based on the findings, there were a total of 16 NBA teams that had a CDO, three NBA teams that were in the process of hiring a CDO, and 11 teams that did not have a designated CDO role. The 11 teams that did not have a CDO or were not in the process of hiring a CDO were not included in Table 1. In total, 16 teams in the NBA had a dedicated CDO role, three teams were hiring a CDO, and 11 did not have a CDO as of March 2022. Please note that the person in CDO with the highest leadership position was the only one included in Table 1. The rationale is that we wanted to illustrate the NBA teams with a CDO in place, not necessarily an entire staff dedicated to DEI. [Based on the analysis, the majority of CDOs in the NBA were people of color, specifically Black people, with 12 being identified as Black, four as white, and then one without a picture (please note that we only focused on the person in the position who had the highest leadership position). As far as gender, there was a nearly even split with nine women and seven men. Based on collected data, the role of CDO seems like a role that has created an opportunity for more people of color to be brought into the world of professional sports and to hold a leadership position.

Interviews created an opportunity for more inquiry into the role of an NBA CDO. The reoccurring themes that came up throughout the interviews with the two NBA CDOs included:

- Organizational support;
- Positional authority;
- Impact of 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations; and
- Background and skillset.

In the following sections, we discuss organizational support, positional authority, the impact of 2020 BLM 2020 demonstrations, and the background and skillset of a CDO in the NBA.

Table 1*Diversity and Inclusion Officers in the NBA*

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Atlanta Hawks | Executive VP and Chief People, Diversity, and Inclusion Officer |
| Brooklyn Nets | Executive Director of Diversity and Inclusion |
| Cleveland Cavaliers | VP of Diversity, Inclusion and Community Engagement |
| Dallas Mavericks | VP Diversity, Equity and Inclusion |
| Detroit Pistons | Director of Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion |
| Golden State Warriors* | |
| Indiana Pacers* | |
| Los Angeles Clippers | Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer & VP, Community Relations and Player Programs |
| Los Angeles Lakers | Director of Racial Equity & Action |
| Milwaukee Bucks | Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Outreach Manager |
| Minnesota Timberwolves | VP Player Programs, Diversity and Inclusion Manager |
| Orlando Magic | Chief Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Officer |
| Philadelphia 76er's | Chief Diversity and Impact Officer |
| Phoenix Suns | Senior VP of People and Culture |
| Portland Trailblazers | Senior Vice President of People and Culture |
| San Antonio Spurs | Sr. Manager Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging Strategy |
| Toronto Raptors | Vice-President, Organizational Culture and Inclusion |
| Utah Jazz | Senior Vice President, People & Culture |
| Washington Wizards* | |

Note. * Team who are in the process of hiring a CDO

Organizational Support

Organizational support is when employees of a company perceive their contributions as valued and that the company cares about their well-being (Kurtessis et al., 2017). According to Organizational Support Theory (OST), the employee and employer relationship sets the tone for the employee's commitment, job satisfaction, goals, and outcomes (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011). Therefore, the perception of the organization's support is important in motivational factors that contribute to the employee's success, commitment to the organizational goals, and mission of their workplace responsibilities.

In this case study, organizational support emerged quite a bit throughout the interviews. In both interviews, the participants discussed organizational support from the league and team levels. They listed various initiatives the league and team were doing to promote DEI. As Participant #1 put it, "I think they [the organization] are completely on board [with DEI] and the reason I say that is because there is a structured budget line for me, and I have the autonomy to do some innovative work. What I've been proud of, is how I've

been able to integrate with the city.” Participant #1 perceived having a budget line dedicated to the position and autonomy as being supported in his role.

In addition, Participant #2 had similar sentiments about the support of the organization he was employed with. Participant #2 felt that his positionality in his role and being able to report directly to the CEO and have DEI in its separate department allowed the initiatives he spearheaded to have a direct impact on the culture of the organization, the engagement with the community, and the bottom line as far as economic opportunity for the organization to increase revenue and sales in niche diverse markets. Participant #2 stated, “I have a great opportunity to have a seat at every table in our organization.” Participant #2 referred to his role in marketing, HR, community relations, and various other departments throughout the NBA franchise he works for. He also had a team of four individuals who worked directly under him to help with DEI initiatives. In contrast, Participant #1 did not have a team and was the sole DEI person within the HR department for his respective team.

Participants #1 and #2 felt supported in their roles, with Participant #1 feeling support because of a dedicated budget line and autonomy and Participant #2 feeling support because of his positionality and autonomy in the organization. Participant #1 was the first person on his team to have the CDO role, and he started employment at his franchise during the 2020 BLM demonstrations. Participant #2 was brought on in 2019 (before the BLM demonstrations). Neither participant had a prescriptive set of duties and responsibilities that they had to follow, but rather, they had to be innovative in creating DEI initiatives to help with hiring practices, organizational culture, and outreach to the community. This sense of autonomy and having a budget line or a senior position within the organization created the perception of organizational support for both participants in the study. While both participants felt supported, they also had many responsibilities since the onus was on the CDO to perform the position’s duties, with very minimal examples to refer to, because of the nuance of their position on their team and within the NBA. While autonomy provided a sense of support and ability for innovation, they were both still responsible for various duties that spanned over many departments.

While the mission of what they were doing in their role was supported, the organizational structure, number of responsibilities, and position of authority that they had come into question throughout both interviews. Participant #2 clarified that putting an instrument in place to measure the metrics of the role was crucial in gaining support from others in the franchise. Participant #2 made sure to have the ability to show measurable outcomes on the impact of DEI so that there was a way to measure success in the position. This measurement helped Participant #2 justify having additional team members and direct access to the organization's president. Participant #2 implemented a way to get the buy-in from his colleagues through metrics and communication; Participant #2 stated, "The language of DEI needs to be the same language of marketing, the language of engineering, operations... whatever that language is. There also needs to be a measurable outcome."

Research shows that many CDOs struggle with the definition of their role and the buy-in from other colleagues about its importance (Leon, 2014). This is based on language and the lack of measurable outcomes. Participant #2 championed this through his ability to connect with everyone based on a shared language within the organizational culture of the NBA franchise he worked with.

Within the NBA league, Adam Silver has consistently been at the forefront of advocacy for social justice and supporting players in their protests for racial equality (Conway, 2020). Adam Silver helped to set the social justice tone with the NBA, but each NBA franchise can decide how they want to incorporate DEI into the infrastructure of their respective team. While it is a top-down initiative coming from the league commissioner, the CDO position is not always fully supported at the team level because of a perceived lack of importance or the lack of resources allocated to the CDO role. This may be because the position is somewhat new to professional sports, and it is still being tailored to have a strong foundation for those that follow the path to be a CDO for a sports team.

Positional Authority

Positional authority is a situation in which the individual makes or is responsible for evaluating an individual, group, or situation (Law Insider, 2020). Positional authority enables the CDO to accomplish tasks and to make sure tasks are carried out through oversight and

the ability to add value within the organization. CDOs who lack positional authority have leadership challenges presented to them and often have difficulty making an impact in the organization because of bureaucratic barriers by not having their position fully supported (Bergmann, 1999). Positional authority breeds an inherent trust that the position is important; therefore, positional authority is essential for a CDO's success.

The two individuals interviewed for this study discussed their roles and how they were structured within their specific NBA franchise. As Participant #2 put it, "All CDO roles are not created equal. I have been in different places, and I held this position, and the responsibilities were all very different." Participant #1 was the sole DEI person in his organization and worked directly with HR. Participant #1 stated, "70% of my job is internal training I would say anything that relates to implicit bias, unconscious bias. I just try to provide a platform to educate our coaches, players, staff, anybody under our umbrella." While Participant #2 had a department that he oversaw, Participant #1 was under the HR umbrella and did not have a team. Even with 70% of Participant #1's responsibilities being in HR, he also worked with community relations, creating outreach initiatives, and worked with the marketing department on outreach around belonging and engaging marginalized populations in the city. Participant #1 came from being a CDO in a Division I athletic department and felt that his jump to the NBA was astronomical regarding supported resources and the fast-paced environment. According to Participant #1, "This is light years different in terms of resources and impact and support... where I was doing that for three years at [university] with \$0 in the bank."

When Participant #2 was hired, he was able to position himself to report directly to the president of the organization. Participant #2 stated, "It [the CDO role] absolutely has to report to the CEO or president of the organization. Needs to be a separate structure.... if it's not structured that way then it becomes a part of the organization that's looked upon as an expense and not an asset. It becomes secondary to the organization." Participant #2 said that he would not accept a position as CDO unless it was a C-Suite position with its own department and if it reported to the head of the organization. In his interview, he discussed how the downfall of CDOs in organizations

stemmed from the positional authority of the role and the department in which the role was housed. In Participant #2's opinion, the position should never be housed under HR or Community Relations because that is when it would become a secondary role. Participant #2 felt that DEI should be a stand-alone department that could have a hand in every department at the organization. In Participant #2's opinion, DEI had to be embedded throughout the entire organization and not sit at the bottom of a department but stand on its own. Participant #2 was in a C-Suite position, so he could speak about his lived experiences and the positionality of his CDO role. Participant #2 was able to have an impact on the organization from HR to marketing, arena management, sales, etc. He was able to have the power to make DEI a priority and not a side item within the organization.

Positional authority had a direct correlation with how someone can do their job, the level of support they received, and the retention of a CDO. In this study, Participant #1 left the role as CDO less than two years into being in the CDO role. In contrast, Participant #2 started the position in 2019 and was consulting with other teams on how he implemented specific DEI strategies. Positional authority is crucial to having sustainability in the DEI space and supporting the CDO and its efforts. If the CDO is not valued and does not have a direct line to the president of the organization, then they may not be viewed as an important member in the organization, or as Participant #2 liked to call the employees within the organization he worked for, his "teammates."

Impact of BLM 2020 Demonstrations

The 2020 BLM demonstrations created a call to action for individuals and organizations around the globe to take a stand for racial equality. The NBA as a league employs many minority candidates, and about 74% of NBA players are Black (Lapchick, 2020). The murder of George Floyd had a direct impact on NBA players, and many started to mobilize and called on the NBA as a league to support their social justice efforts (Pina, 2022). This was very evident with the mobilization of Black voters to NBA arenas during the 2020 presidential election (Garcia-Hodges, 2020), the images of BLM on NBA courts in Orlando during NBA bubble play, and through the NBA creating and giving more support to DEI as a whole with the creation of more CDO roles (Andrews & Spears, 2020). When asked

about the BLM demonstrations and the impact on the CDO role, Participant #1 stated:

I came in in the heat of it [BLM demonstrations]. George Floyd... everything we saw... I think it changed the whole scope of where we are today. I think it really allowed me to see our posture in a very unique way. We as an entire organization allowed our players to express themselves and our community to express frustration... and the action steps we were taking. That was part of me being here, because you needed someone doing this role full-time because you can't have one foot in and out... you had to go all in and I'm thankful that we did.

Participant #1 was brought on as a direct call to action because of the murder of George Floyd. At that moment, the franchise he worked for decided they needed a full-time person to be in the DEI space. Participant #2 felt the same way about the BLM demonstrations, stating:

2020 significantly impacted the value of my role. It wasn't just because I have the title, but it gave me the flexibility and it gave me the demands of being able to demonstrate how this role [role of CDO] is important. In the case of that time with everything that was going on from George Floyd to others that were killed and the whole social and racial uprising... I became a go-to person in the organization and that wasn't necessarily the case before. People started to understand my role but now I had a chance to demonstrate what a role like this actually does. So, the rise to see CDO's being very popular... a lot of that was just lip service and a lot of it was them saying "we just got to go get one," without really knowing what to do with a chief diversity officer.

Participant #2 was already in the CDO position as of 2019, yet 2020 brought a new lens and sense of urgency to the position. Then, his organization started to be more receptive and show gratitude and appreciation towards the CDO role.

Both participants felt the impact of BLM on their current positions. The 2020 demonstrations spotlighted their positions, and more

people within their organization and beyond started to respect and understand them because of the social climate that BLM brought about.

Background and Skillset for the CDO position

The NBA CDOs in that role all held different degrees (please refer to Table 2). Within this study, it was important to understand the background and skillset needed to be in a DEI position. Table 2 refers to the type of degrees that NBA CDOs held. Based on Table 2, the background of the CDO was diverse, with some having bachelor's degrees, master's, and law degrees. In addition, we asked the participants in this study to elaborate on how background and skillset play a role for an NBA CDO.

Table 2
Degrees of NBA CDOs

| Name of Degree |
|---|
| Master of Business Administration (MBA) |
| Organizational Management/Leadership |
| Public Policy |
| Law |
| Marketing |
| Business Administration/Management |
| Management |
| Psychology |
| Sports Management |
| Finance |
| Human Resources |
| Education Policy |
| Accounting |

According to the two participants that were interviewed, one must be multifaceted to be a CDO. Participant #1 stated:

You have to be a very strategic thinker, intuitive, visionary as well... because that's the next challenge. Diversity equity and inclusion is the thing right now and you have to make it sustainable. You really have to have those analytical skills as well as written and oral communication skills because anything you can say to can be used not in the court of law

but in the court of public opinion, based on what people see so you have to be very nimble and everything that you do.

Participant #2 had the same sentiment. Participant #2 had a background in marketing and sales and felt that to have a good grasp of the position, it would take a people management background and the ability to align a business approach in addition to working with people from diverse backgrounds. He felt that having a general business background would be helpful, stating:

This work is about impacting the organization's bottom line, or mission... whatever it might be so a business background would be helpful, some sort of psychology background would be helpful or something that talks about groups her understanding groupthink or how people think or would have you how people think.

In Participant #2's estimation, business and psychology were two pillars that helped with the position and to be successful. Please keep in mind that Participant #2 had more years of experience in this position and oversaw an entire department, whereas Participant #1 had just started the role as a call to action because of the BLM protests and was under the HR umbrella. Based on the degrees held by the CDOs, all came from a different background (see Table 2), and no distinguishable degree propelled these individuals to be CDOs.

Implications and Discussion

Organizations must decide how they want to move forward with DEI in the workplace and whether to check a box or embed it in their culture. 2020 brought the conversation about DEI to the forefront through the 2020 BLM demonstrations. Due to this, many organizations have been tasked with how they want to address racial equality and social justice and to what extent they support the BLM movement. The role of CDO is a delicate one, and without financial and institutional support, those in the role are not able to have the power to succeed and, therefore, are set up for failure (Cutter & Weber, 2022). Based on interviews and research, it is a matter of funding, resources, and support from the top down that leads to transformative change when it comes to DEI within an organization.

In a DEI panel with Oris Stuart, the Chief People and Inclusion Officer for the NBA, Stuart stated, “There are those that are seeing the light... then those that are feeling the heat with the movement for social justice and equality” (National Sports Forum Summit, 2021). The NBA has continuously strived to create and sustain diversity within the organization. The NBA has been a leading example in professional sports through the NBA’s support of social justice initiatives, specifically during the 2020 BLM demonstrations. The NBA answered a call to action and is a proactive league with issues revolving around DEI. Notably, the placement of CDOs on teams within NBA organizations has created a dedicated space to address issues such as racial discrimination, gender equality, and social justice.

Based on this current research study, organizational support, positional authority, impact of 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations, and background and skillset should be considered when looking at the roles and responsibilities of CDOs in the sports industry and beyond. The support a CDO receives from an organization allows them to have the autonomy and the funding to execute tasks and initiatives (DeMartini & Butler, 2022). The positional authority increases the likelihood that a fundamental change may be made because the position was placed at a level of importance with a direct line to the president or CEO of the organization. Lastly, the background and skillset reveal the person’s profile in a CDO position.

Based on research, minority applicants are securing positions as CDOs within sports organizations, government agencies, institutions of higher learning, and for-profit businesses. This is not surprising, seeing as organizations may want to put someone in the role who can identify as a minority and can speak from a lived and experienced narrative of feeling marginalized. It is important to note that with people of color being called upon to take this role, organizations must make sure that the structure is in place to be supportive so that they are not set up for failure. The high turnover rate and the lack of support must be seen as a call to action (Cutter & Weber, 2020). The role cannot be merely a figurehead position but a position funded and supported so that the person in the role can succeed. Regardless, if the person in the role is a minority, the position will fail and will not be sustainable unless there is clear support from various stakeholders within the company. One of the individuals

who was a part of this study transitioned from the role of CDO and could not connect us to additional contacts within the NBA due to his lack of access at the time and his abruptness in leaving the position. This was interesting because the role of CDO has a high turnover rate (Buttner & Lowe, 2017), and the person we talked to had been in the position for just over a year before leaving. This person was Participant #1, who did not have any staff support for the role he was in and lacked a direct line to the organization's president, yet was tasked with many responsibilities outside of the purview of HR, which was the department he was in.

With the CDO position being a delicate role with a high turnover rate, sports organizations must ask themselves how CDOs can be placed in a position to be successful. Funding, resources, and power dynamics within the organization all influence how supported a CDO may be within their company. Suppose organizational support, positional authority, impact of 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations, and background and skillset are not considered and elevated to a place where transformative change can be made. In that case, organizations will see turnover and a lackluster approach to dealing with issues around DEI, which are issues that affect everyone in society, not just a small segment of the population.

In addition, not one team had the same title for their CDO. Within the 16 NBA teams, 11 incorporated the term diversity, 12 used the term inclusion, and those that did not use the term diversity and/or inclusion focused on people, culture, and/or racial equity. All the NBA CDO roles included more than one title. All the titles held a minimum of two responsibilities, while the maximum was four responsibilities (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging Strategy). In total, at least 10 of 16 NBA CDOs had at least three titles. Future research should investigate how a position's title aligns with that position's roles and responsibilities and if more titles equate to more responsibilities in different roles. In addition, future research should focus on other sports entities to see how the position of CDO may be similar or different to the NBA. While autonomy and flexibility are necessary for the role, sometimes having too many responsibilities within a title can overly burden the person because of the number of duties they are expected to perform. When looking at the front office of an NBA team, most roles have one title that oversees one depart-

ment or specific task. Yet, the CDO role always has an “and” attached to the role and is not singular, usually a role that is diversity and inclusion, not just diversity. While diversity and inclusion go hand in hand, a person in this role needs support. One person tasked with two titles needs to be compensated for their two roles, in addition to having supportive resources to reinforce those two roles since that is part of their title and, most likely, their responsibilities.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that the investigator’s perceptions of race and gender may not match a person’s self-identified race (Roth, 2016) or gender. Characteristics of the observer influence how they perceive another individual’s race (Feliciano, 2016). This study also relied on publicly available information, which may have omitted some personnel data from NBA teams. In addition, a larger sample size of our population would have provided a more in-depth understanding of the various experiences of CDOs within the NBA (Charter, 1999).

Conclusion

CDOs are people in dedicated roles who focus on DEI of all populations based on race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, ability, sexuality, and religion, to name a few (Arnold & Kowalski-Braun, 2012). The creation of the majority of the CDO NBA roles was a direct response to the social justice demonstrations that happened in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd. Many NBA franchises responded by restructuring their team offices to include a role dedicated to DEI.

The NBA has been very vocal about supporting social justice initiatives, where other organizations may not be. Therefore, the position of CDO and how it is valued and positioned differs among leagues worldwide. In addition, more quantitative data on the experiences, motivations, and background of CDOs would be helpful regarding how this role can be supported so that the person in the role can thrive in their position. While we were able to interview two NBA CDOs, more data on sports CDOs, in general, will help in understanding how teams implement a call to social justice and work with issues related to DEI.

Oris Stuart was named the NBA’s Chief People and Inclusion Officer in 2021. According to Stuart, “the murder of George Floyd

triggered a deep and passionate response across the league and has guaranteed a continued commitment to fighting for social justice” (Sky Sports, 2021). This trigger created many initiatives, such as the NBA Social Justice Task Force, which put forward the question of meaningful contribution in the space of DEI and how the NBA can be a game changer in the movement for racial equality and various DEI issues in general. One of the meaningful contributions that was made was the creation of CDOs on NBA teams throughout the league, in addition to the responses of the NBA during the 2020 BLM protests.

The NBA reacted to the murders of George Floyd by demonstrating their support of the BLM movement in addition to funding opportunities within the Black community and creating more accessible ways for people to vote and have their voices heard. These were all reactions; however, the NBA created more sustainable ways to be proactive with DEI efforts by hiring CDOs. We have learned that not only do pandemics stop sports, but so do racial injustices. Now, organizations and companies are taking notice and starting to put the building blocks in place to take action, with the NBA being an example for those looking to create meaningful change with the CDO role. However, one must remember that in order for a CDO to be successful, they must be fully supported by their organization by having the funding, autonomy, and access to the president or CEO of the organization.

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