

SMALL BUSINESS LEADERS OFFER EFFECTIVE WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS

If you are a business owner or manager looking to approach diversity and inclusion (D&I) in a more intentional way, you could benefit from the insights of a group of successful businesswomen who recently met for a thought-provoking panel discussion.

The panel and this accompanying article explore the results of a comprehensive survey of small businesses in the Greater Washington Region conducted by Research America Inc., in the Spring of 2019, for the Washington Business Journal in partnership with Sandy Spring Bank. Highlights of that research were published in a special advertising section in the Washington Business Journal on April 26, 2019.

Participants in the event included Kathy Albarado, CEO of Helios HR, a human capital, consulting and talent acquisition firm based in Reston, Va.; Nina DiSandro, manager of operations for Bethesda, Md.-based Potomac Construction Services; Joan Fletcher, founder and president of Winning Ways in Reston; Stephenie Foster, a partner at D.C. consulting firm Smash Strategies; and Kathy Hollinger, CEO of the Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington.

The group offered solutions to a variety of opportunities and challenges, such as creative ways to attract and retain top talent, strategies for integrating D&I into a business plan, and the benefits and risks of corporate quotas. These issues came to light as a result of the Spring 2019 survey. Intentionality was at the heart of the discussion. The concept was summed up well by Foster, whose Smash Strategies helps businesses, large nonprofits, foundations and large NGOs focus on gender equality and women's leadership.

"It's great to have philanthropy focused on women's organizations," she said, "but if your business strategy doesn't take women into account as customers, and if you don't have great internal HR policies, it doesn't work as well."

Leaders in Greater Washington who want to be intentional about attracting and retaining talent are exactly the kind of people who turn to Helios HR for help, said Albarado, who launched the firm 18 years ago. Helios has both consulting and talent-acquisition practices, and the recent talent shortage in the D.C. area has kept the company especially busy for



ABOVE, FROM LEFT:
Kathy Albarado, CEO of Helios HR
Nina DiSandro, manager of operations, Potomac Construction Services
Joan Fletcher, founder and president, Winning Ways
LEFT: **Stephenie Foster**, partner, Smash Strategies;
RIGHT: **Kathy Hollinger**, CEO, Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington



the past decade.

"A lot of it is about the culture and the programs that we help our clients put in place," Albarado said. "We can be an extension of their team in an outsource capacity. There is no silver bullet that works for everybody. But there are a lot of little shifts and adjustments that people can make, and when you add them up, it's really exciting."

For instance, she reminds clients about the importance of their website and social media presence as the first impressions that most job candidates will have of their companies. Many business leaders, she added, "don't spend enough time talking about what their culture is like, showing videos of their people, their community impact and events – that's really the heart

of the organization."

The local talent shortage is a major concern for Hollinger, from the restaurant association, which has about 1,200 members.

"Staffing right now is the biggest crisis we're dealing with," she said. "We're trying to find the right programs and have the right support to create the proper pipelines, fill jobs – back of the house, front of the house, all sides of business."

Given the shortage, it's natural for businesses to look for new and innovative ways to attract the best talent. One strategy discussed during the event was making an office feel like a home.

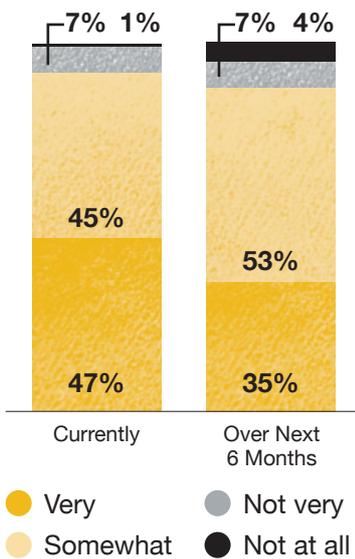
One of Winning Ways' clients, for example, has had success hiring a diverse set of employees

and treating them like family, "even down to providing lunch every single day," said Fletcher, who founded Winning Ways more than 30 years ago to offer strategic planning, executive coaching, and training and development.

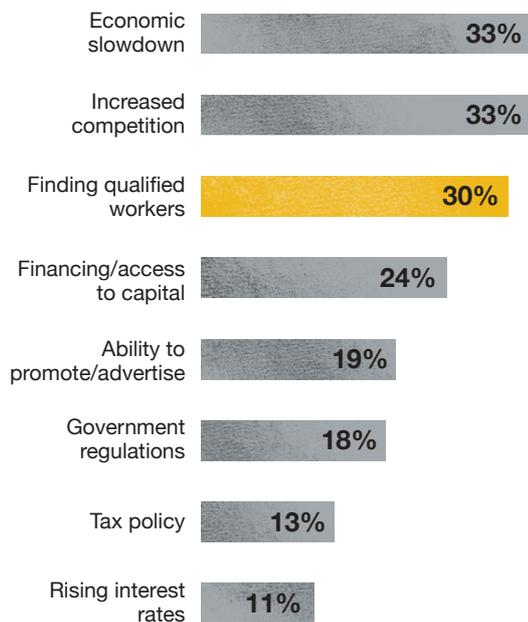
"I would think that's not that big of a deal, but it's a really huge draw" for employees from a variety of backgrounds, Fletcher continued. "They all eat together. Everybody comes into the kitchen and warms things up, and it's family. They advertise it in their job ads, that one of their perks is lunch."

A feeling of family also rings true for DiSandro of Potomac Construction, which has more than 30 employees and does more than \$30 million in annual sales. For one,

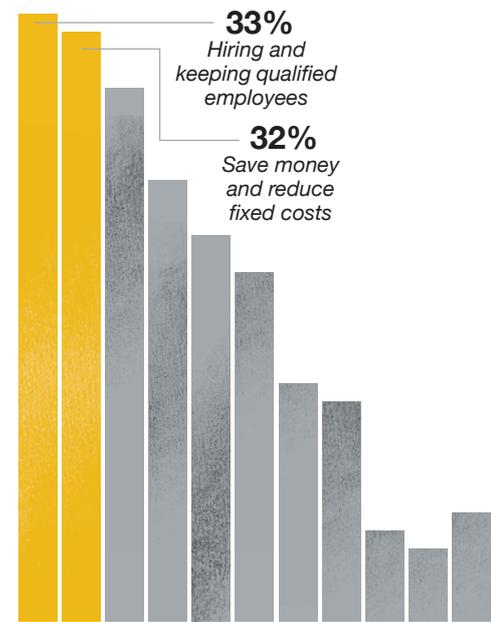
KEY FINDINGS FROM THE STATE OF SMALL BUSINESS SURVEY IN THE SPRING, 2019



At the time the survey was conducted, **almost half** the respondents were very confident they had the talent to run their business. However, only about a third felt confident they had the talent to grow their business over the next 6 months.



Minority-Owned Businesses and Women-Owned Businesses said that finding qualified workers is one of their most significant **challenges to growth**.



Hiring and keeping qualified employees and finding ways to save money and reduce fixed costs were seen as **top financial-related challenges**.

she is married to the company's founder, Tom Dailey. "He has the construction expertise, and I have more of the operational financing strategy expertise," DiSandro said, "so it's a nice marriage of skills in the business."

In addition, while doing primary interviews of job candidates, DiSandro always reminds herself "to go back and ask the critical thinking questions to see if they're a fit culturally" for the company. And, Potomac also has company-wide lunch at least every other Friday.

"We care," DiSandro said. "We've got vegans, we've got vegetarians. Really understanding the differences and making sure that everyone feels welcome at our table, that's very important to us."

Of course, attracting top talent is only half the battle. The other half is retaining them. As a retention strategy, Foster from Smash Strategies encourages employers to help staff members earn recognition. An employee doesn't need official spokesperson status in order to be seen as an expert by his or her peers and industry.

"That's an opportunity that you can give somebody that doesn't really cost anything," she said, adding that it can reinforce the company's commitment to diversity. "If you were going to send someone anyway, you can think about sending a woman or someone who's from a diverse part of the community, or someone you don't normally send."

Flexibility is increasingly important to employees, Albarado said, whether that means casual

dress days, the ability to work remotely or support for a healthy work-life balance. Her company, Helios, has implemented a paid parental-leave policy, a bereavement day for employees who lose a pet, as well as a 30-day sabbatical available to anyone who's been with the company at least eight years.

"People are very excited about it, and we have a progression of people who will be eligible over the next two years for this," she said. "It's really centered around what flexibility do people need in their lives and how do we offer it individually? What is the culture that's going to keep our folks here? And that comes with knowing them really well, being flexible and allowing them to bring their whole selves to work."

One of Fletcher's large, national clients offers employees the flexibility to pursue other roles within the company.

"Say you're there a couple years and you're not really feeling like that's what you want to be when you grow up, you can go to your boss and say very openly, 'I would like to try something in the finance area,'" Fletcher explained. And the manager would respond, "OK, well, let's figure out how to get you over there. I'm going to set you up with some meetings.' It's very, very open, and I have seen many people move to different divisions. That's a real plus at that company."

To foster openness and culture at Potomac Construction, employees are allowed to bring their pets to the office. The company also has outdoor spaces

for relaxing and socializing, along with a nearly complete wellness room "for us to all decompress and have some quiet space," DiSandro said.

DiSandro also keeps an open mind when employees show an interest in different job roles or if they're not excelling in their current positions. For instance, her new office manager "lights up like a Christmas tree" when she's asked to go out in the field, so DiSandro plans to help her transition into a new job at Potomac over the next few months.

Panelists agreed that D&I initiatives and innovative strategies for recruitment and retention should be part of a company's business plan. Hollinger said the restaurant association thinks about D&I programmatically, whether in regards to a training program or the association's board.

"The industry in this market is incredibly diverse, but the people around the table are not always," she said. "The bigger issue is that we need more female restaurant owners. We need more people of color who are making decisions and running their businesses. We need to make sure that we have

a pool of talent that can then be asked to join the conversation and be at the table to represent what we see out in the community every day."

Albarado said it's not enough for companies to be intentional about attracting diverse employees; they also need to create a welcoming environment for everyone.

"How do we make sure that they feel a sense of belonging?" she asked. "That requires a lot of intentionality, because they could come, but they may not stay if they feel like this is part of a quota system or just for appearance's sake."

To increase diversity, panelists recommended a more robust, long-term approach to D&I rather than simply trying to meet a single benchmark.

Albarado emphasized making D&I part of company culture, not just an isolated program.

"It's part of your culture. It doesn't go away in six months or when we've met a certain number. If it means it's going to take you longer to hire ... because it's harder to find these candidates, then that's what happens. But it becomes part of the fabric of the organization."

Small businesses play a pivotal role in fueling our local economy. They create jobs, make critical investments in communities and help grow our region. Sandy Spring Bank is a leader in serving the needs of small businesses throughout Greater Washington. That's why the bank partnered with the Washington Business Journal to survey local business owners and decision makers in the Spring of 2019. This advertorial article is focused on exploring solutions to the challenges raised by the business leaders who were surveyed. The leaders who are quoted in this article participated in a roundtable discussion with the Washington Business Journal in October 2019.