

2016 NASPE Award - Advancing the HR Profession

Professional Development Initiative for Pennsylvania's EEO Community

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Summary

Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) is often viewed as an overlooked, undervalued, and insignificant compliance-based function. In Pennsylvania state government, we see it differently. Discrimination comes in many forms and continues to be a serious issue in our society and a significant risk to employers. If left unaddressed, organizations face financial liability, high turnover, lost productivity, low morale and reputational damage. Still, many employers fail to recognize the strategic value of a strong EEO program. In 2014, the commonwealth elevated the importance of the Equal Employment Opportunity Division by merging it into the Governor's Office of Administration's Bureau of Workforce Planning and Development, giving it greater strategic value, significance and input into addressing talent management challenges such as recruitment, retention, EEO, diversity and development. As a result, in 2015, the bureau launched a comprehensive professional development initiative to foster learning and development, communication, knowledge transfer and networking between EEO and HR staff at all levels and to promote a sense of community and value in their roles. The initiative consists of the following: virtual forums and other-related training; EEO community quarterly meetings/consultations; and partnerships with Governor's Advisory Commissions and other states. This comprehensive initiative has been packaged in a way that makes it new, engaging, and fun and could be easily replicated by other states facing similar challenges. Through these efforts, Pennsylvania endeavors to build a state government workforce that is diverse, engaged, innovative and productive, as well as an environment that is accessible, inclusive, free from discrimination, and maximizes the potential of all employees.

1. Brief description of program: The Professional Development Initiative for the EEO Community currently consists of three components:

Virtual forums and other related trainings – The *EEO Exchange* is an online virtual forum designed to promote the exchange of EEO-related knowledge and information; strengthen the knowledge base of the EEO community; and promote collaboration, understanding and idea generation. Eleven forums were offered since January 2015. The curriculum starts with foundational EEO concepts such as the definition of discrimination and applicable laws and policies, and progresses to increasingly complex topics such as theories of discrimination and conducting investigations. Each virtual forum lasts 30-40 minutes. A facilitator presents the information and engages the audience in discussions and interactive exercises in a safe and mutually supportive learning environment. Following each forum, attendees receive an evaluation to assess their knowledge, gauge the quality of content and delivery, and solicit topics for future discussions. Attendees also receive a copy of the presentation and facilitator notes and a document containing answers to any questions addressed during the forum. Finally, an accessible version of each *EEO Exchange* is made available for individuals with visual or hearing impairments and published in the commonwealth’s enterprise learning management system. These materials are housed in a central repository for knowledge management purposes and can be accessed by current staff or new employees who perform EEO-related duties.

Additionally, Pennsylvania developed an instructor-led EEO Investigation training in March of 2016 that consists of a mock witness interview, review of the investigative process, review and analysis of evidence and investigative report writing. Participant feedback indicated that the course was engaging and helpful, especially for someone new to EEO. One participant indicated: “I was on the edge of my seat the whole time. I really needed this.”

Finally, we are using participant feedback to develop additional *EEO Exchanges* on topics including transgender issues in the workplace; pregnancy discrimination; investigation scenarios; and relevant court cases.

EEO Community Quarterly Meetings/Consultations – These meetings provide information about national and commonwealth EEO news; discuss topics relevant to the work that members are performing; and engage members in community interaction. Each meeting also features an interactive learning component consisting of games, group challenges, role plays, etc. to help community members retain and apply the information learned in the *EEO Exchanges*. Future plans include conducting EEO consultations with state agencies to identify any areas where assistance is needed and provide support to community members to fulfill their duties.

Partnerships with the Governor’s Advisory Commissions on Asian Pacific American Affairs, African American Affairs, and Latino Affairs; Women; and People with Disabilities – Governor Wolf has issued three executive orders to create partnerships between his advisory commissions and the Bureau of Workforce Planning, Development and EEO. The purpose of these partnerships is to network; partner; provide recommendations; strengthen the commonwealth’s anti-discriminatory hiring, retention and promotion policies; and promote the acknowledgement of nationally recognized celebratory events, customs and cultures. One of the executive directors spoke at a recent EEO quarterly meeting and shared information about her commission’s functions and the needs of its constituents. Future executive directors will do the same. In addition, we have also developed a directory of state diversity, affirmative action and EEO officers and will contact them to discuss how they ensure a diverse workforce and create inclusive, accessible and discrimination free environments.

2. Length of time program has been operational: The professional development initiative for Pennsylvania’s EEO community was implemented in January 2015.

3. Reason program/effort was created: There are many compelling reasons why Pennsylvania implemented a professional development initiative for its EEO community.

In 2014, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) received 88,788 complaints resulting in monetary damages totaling \$296.1 million. Responding to and investigating EEO complaints can be time-consuming and costly if employers don't have staff who are experienced in these issues. No employer can afford these types of losses, especially ones that could be preventable with appropriate training of EEO staff as well as supervisors and managers.

Pennsylvania has a growing number of retirement-eligible employees. Currently 20% of the Commonwealth's EEO community is eligible to retire and that number is projected to rise to 40% by 2019. In addition, the skills of employees who perform EEO duties in state agencies vary greatly from novices who have never done this type of work previously and perform other HR duties to seasoned practitioners focused solely on performing EEO duties.

In 2014, the Equal Employment Opportunity Division was merged into the Bureau of Workforce Planning to give it greater strategic value, significance, and input into addressing talent management challenges such as recruitment, retention, EEO, diversity, and development. In addition, the initiative was created to awaken and reinvigorate the EEO community, elevate the importance of the work that is done, and enhance skills and knowledge of EEO professionals at the agency level.

Finally, every employee deserves the right to work in an environment that is free from discrimination and harassment, and employers who fail to provide such an environment will lose quality employees. No employer, private or public, can prevail or succeed in an atmosphere that tolerates discrimination.

4. Costs of the program/effort: The program was developed and implemented by existing employees of the Bureau of Workforce Planning, Development and EEO and has minimal operational costs. Staff provides content knowledge, develop training, and use existing software to create the virtual *EEO Exchange* forums.

5. How program/effort is funded: The salaries of the staff involved in the initiative are supported by state funds appropriated by the General Assembly.

6. Measures of program/effort success: We evaluate the success of the initiative by using the following criteria:

Agency interest –Since inception, interest in the virtual forums has grown substantially. Although originally designed for the EEO community, agencies quickly recognized that employees in other classifications such as field human resource officers and HR Directors were conducting discrimination investigations and could benefit from the training. The number of eligible participants for any given virtual forum has more than doubled from approximately 50 to over 100.

Additionally, several agencies have requested to use the presentations in whole or part as reference material to create their own internal trainings and provide guidance when conducting discrimination investigations.

Finally, other agencies and HR program areas have adopted the virtual forum format to present trainings and promote dialogue and interaction.

Participant feedback –

- 94% of respondents reported an increase in their level of EEO-related knowledge from participating in the *virtual forums*
- 94% reported that the virtual forums positively affected their work.
- An average of 95% of all respondents reported that the virtual forums met stated learning objectives.

These quantitative results are supported by participant feedback. In their own words, participants expressed: “*I have lightbulbs going off in my head more and more with each session. I feel like these concepts are really starting to come together for me!*” – Jennifer Hricak, State Employees’ Retirement System

“I really appreciate the time and effort put into the EEO Webinar series that your office presents... I know our office has benefited from the information that has been provided. Thank you to you and your team for your excellent customer service and commitment to EEO and HR in the Commonwealth.” - Linda Miller, HR Director, Department of Revenue

“I’m a newer EEO officer, so the virtual forums gave me knowledge that I don't think I would have gained as quickly otherwise.” - Anonymous

“Just feeling more confident in my own knowledge....” - Anonymous

“Effective and beneficially informative. This year’s training has provided me the opportunity to update our complaint guide with the most accurate information and guidance.” - Anonymous

Strength of the EEO Community –All of the various events bring the EEO community together on a regular basis to learn new information, ask questions, share ideas and knowledge, and collectively develop approaches to ongoing EEO issues. This, in turn, has led to the development of other venues through which members of the community can interact and learn. Overall, the EEO officers and specialists have become more engaged in the learning process and are excited to be part of the EEO community.

7. Ways in which the program/effort has changed since its inception: Based upon participant feedback and program staff observations, the following changes were made to enhance the learning experience:

- Increased emphasis on interactive engagement
- Increased emphasis for agencies to encourage new members of the EEO community to review the web-based versions of the *EEO Exchanges* as part of their basic, foundational training
- Administered a tailored performance feedback instrument after every event in an effort to gather the most relevant responses possible.
- Incorporated specific knowledge check questions into each event.
- Coordinated the schedules of the *EEO Exchanges*, Quarterly Meetings and Investigation Training to complement one another and provide a continuous avenue for learning.