

BLACK LIVES MATTER:
MOVING BEYOND D&I

**THE COVID-19 SCAPEGOATING
OF ASIAN AMERICANS**

**MENTAL HEALTH: TAKING
CARE OF OUR TEAMS**

INCLUSION

*Creating Globally
Inclusive & Culturally
Competent
Workplaces*

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Connecting
Employment
Opportunities

THE CONNECTOR

**Denielle
Pemberton-
Heard**





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Connecting Unconventional Talent

Denielle Pemberton-Heard is indeed a connector. As the former chief executive officer of STEMconnector, chief legal officer of Diversified Search, and now a board member of Pod Network, the technology firm that recently acquired STEMconnector, she partners with leaders to identify talent for senior management, corporate boards, and nonprofit leadership roles across multiple sectors.

Pemberton-Heard previously spent fifteen years as group counsel, programming and business affairs at the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), the nation's largest noncommercial media enterprise, where she directed work on behalf of PBS and its 300-plus member stations and led negotiations with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Department of Education, the National Science Foundation, and arts and cultural institutions to create award-winning content. Before joining PBS, she held legal and business affairs leadership roles at Thales Inc., WarnerMedia, and Discovery Communications Inc., where she also supported retail initiatives, corporate philanthropy and community engagement.

She is a former regional judge for President Obama's Presidential Commission on White House Fellowships and has served as a trustee of the Toy Industry of America Foundation, on the Advisory Committee of the DC Volunteer Lawyers Project to end domestic violence, and on the Board of Governors of the Case Western Reserve University School of Law. She has published scholarly works on trademark and copyright law and has been a member of the professional faculty of the Johns Hopkins University Carey Business School. The married mother of two is a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. and The Links Inc. and was recently featured as a guest on the *Michelle Obama Podcast* on Spotify.

INCLUSION: Given your work with Diversified Search, what motivated you to take additional responsibility of STEMconnector.

Denielle Pemberton-Heard: I was asked to step into the role and happily accepted the challenge to lead a phenomenal team. Our goal was to enhance

STEMconnector's technological capabilities, and after assessing the situation, it made sense to merge with Pod Network, an award-winning mobile app and technology platform that will enable STEMconnector to increase the accessibility and networking opportunities for clients and talent while maintaining its brand and clients.

IN: This past summer, as a result of Black Lives Matter protests focused on police reform, there has been increased attention on the need for racial justice and equity in the workplace and in society in general. What is your company doing to advance change, either in your company or in the community, or both?

DPH: STEMconnector has always been about increasing diversity in the STEM workforce and tapping into the desire of educators, corporations, and community organizations to invest in overlooked talent pools. We support corporate leaders as they consider their program initiatives and provide research on the STEM talent ecosystem as a whole, and connect them with the right partners to carry out the work. We connect community and volunteer organizations with philanthropic supporters of this work, and we engage a robust, cross-sector network of leaders to share their insights and best practices.

Our research team was among the first to clearly articulate the key issues that drive the STEM talent crisis. Our *State of STEM Report*, released in 2018, examined the nuanced gaps that make up the wider crisis by exploring demographic, geographic, fundamental skills, postsecondary, and belief gaps that lead to a lack of sustainable, diverse talent in the overall talent pool. In 2020, we launched a series, *Overlooked Talent Pools*, diving into the data about STEM for various communities in which we expect corporate leaders to invest and support.

It is my sincere goal that overlooked talent pools are not merely in vogue or engaged in a time of crisis as a quick response to national outrage. As a leader, I am pleased to be in a position to provide the tools that make the expansion of the talent pipeline a regular part of everyone's hiring practice. Science, technology, engineering, and math should not scare communities of color. There is no job or opportunity that is unachievable. There is no lack of talent, just lack of imagination to find it. I want girls and underrepresented youth to remember that this great country was built not by the hands of people who were engineers, but by those of people who were legally prohibited from reading, writing, or receiving a formal education, and yet they figured out how to design and build structures that remain standing as a testament to their innate abilities. No one group should have a monopoly on opportunity and the prospect of economic success: all are worthy and capable. When you assess who is qualified for a role, you need ask, by whose measure? It is critical that leaders understand the barriers to opportunity that prevent the widening of the talent pool in higher education, government, and Corporate America.

IN: How has COVID-19 changed your perspective and your work?

DPH: Having to shift to virtual so suddenly has drastically changed the way we think about our work and how we connect with each other. I came on as CEO of STEMconnector during the height of the pandemic



Pemberton-Heard with Tracy O'Such, a fellow partner with Diversified Search, and Christian Clerc, president, global operations, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts.

frenzy. I never had an in-person meeting with our staff or attended one of the high-quality events that bind our network together. This has created a huge shift in the way we think about our day-to-day operations and meaningful engagements with each other and our network. While the pandemic has changed our approach to safety, it has also highlighted the need for connections you take for granted when you are in the office, such as the ability to quickly get feedback on something. We have to be more intentional about creating these opportunities. STEMconnector has Chief Fun Officers who look for physically distant ways to engage the staff, knowing those human connections are key to the success of a team. Activities such as virtual background contests, health and wellness challenges, happy hours, and trivia nights are planned to keep the staff connected beyond the day-to-day work.

The *STEMdaily* publication has seen a spike in viewership, and webcasts and Twitter chats have drawn in participants who might otherwise be unable to attend in-person events. There are traditionally over 10 events per year to dive into new research, hear best practices from across our network, and engage with each other in partnerships and networking. We're having to get creative in re-creating these experiences in a virtual world—ensuring we have compelling speakers and fresh content, and changing up the virtual setting to avoid “webinar fatigue.” Though we are virtual, our value proposition remains strong.

IN: Has the onset of COVID-19 and its impact on the economy made it more challenging to implement D&I efforts?

DPH: One of the key difficulties in supporting D&I efforts through the pandemic has been keeping people focused on these issues. When a global crisis affects the workforce at large, most companies start to worry about their ability to keep people employed at all, and keep their businesses alive, regardless of their diversity efforts. However, even early on, the research showed how much more likely the pandemic was to affect underrepresented and marginalized populations. These communities are more likely to have been affected physically and financially. It is more important than ever for D&I leaders to keep focused on this work and keep increasing opportunities for the communities adversely impacted by COVID-19. This is precisely why STEMconnector's research team continues to remain nimble and responsive to the market and the recent upskilling and reskilling presentation is evidence of this. I'm also uniquely positioned and remain committed to leveraging the synergies and legacy relationship between STEMconnector and Diversified Search to support clients and spread knowledge.

IN: As the reported instances of discrimination against Asian Americans have increased because of COVID-19, is this a concern that you and your organization are addressing?

DPH: This is not something we have confronted directly with our work. We ensure the inclusion and support of all of our employees and would not tolerate discrimination of any kind. We recommend that all companies make an effort to ensure they are not discriminating against their Asian or Asian American employees. Science matters, facts matter, the truth matters, and the manipulation of facts to advance discriminatory conduct is wrong—period. We all need allies, and I hope each of us will continue to speak up against discriminatory conduct of any kind.

IN: For years, practitioners of diversity and inclusion have been making the business case for D&I. Do you think this message is sinking in? Has COVID-19 made it more challenging?

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DPH: While COVID-19 has perhaps made it more challenging to promote the business case for D&I, the recent BLM protests have brought the issue more front and center than ever. With employees standing up and demanding justice and equal opportunity and representation, companies that have not previously prioritized D&I efforts now fully realize they will be called out for exclusionary behavior. How a given company demonstrates an anti-racist commitment and builds a culture of inclusion and support for employees is a clear asset to attract and retain quality talent of all backgrounds. If companies can point to leadership from diverse backgrounds, ERGs, community engagement, and equal opportunity for promotions, they are more likely to attract the best diverse talent, which is key to any organization's bottom line. The business case is clear—the world is changing, and companies need to adapt or be left behind.

IN: What will be some of the biggest issues and challenges in 2021 for a corporate D&I leader like yourself?

DPH: None of us knows what to expect going into 2021 other than the only constant is change. There will be a new normal—we just don't know what it is yet.

College students are remaining close to home, and virtual learning demands technological capabilities. Community colleges should be the beneficiaries of a workforce that will operate differently.

The pros and cons of remote work are evolving, but for recruiters focused on D&I, geography may no longer be an impediment to identifying and placing talent. Employers are becoming more flexible to attract top talent as family obligations and existing community ties are discussed more openly. Most importantly, these changes have impacted how companies think about investments in skill building and long-range talent planning.

As a leader in this space, I wake up every day thinking about how I can help companies see the bigger picture. We have to get beyond focusing on the talent we need today or next month and instead look toward the talent we need 10 and 20 years from now and how to prepare people for those roles. We never could have anticipated the new challenges of 2020—in particular, the widening equity gaps for students forced to learn remotely and the blatant revelations of racial animus and hostility. The future starts now, and 2021 should be the year to speak truth to power. CEOs, nomination and governance committee members, and talent acquisition teams all have a role to play. As a collective, we need to support efforts to bridge the equity gaps to shape a workforce that reflects the new normal. **IN**