

DIVERSITY & INCLUSION
HALL OF FAME

THE SECRET POWERS OF
NEURODIVERGENT TEAMS

PUSHING FOR GENDER
PAY EQUITY

INCLUSION

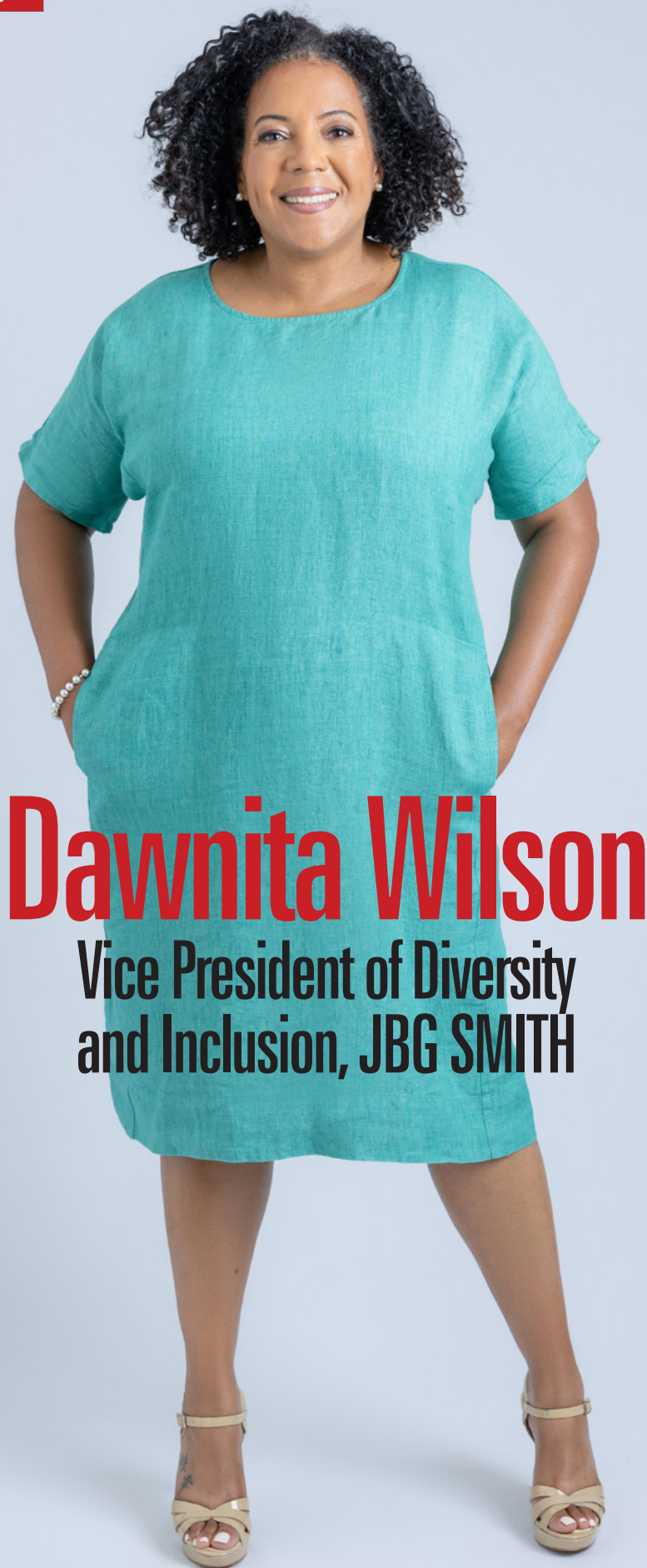
*Creating Globally
Inclusive &
Culturally
Competent
Workplaces*

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JBG SMITH'S

DAWNITA WILSON

Leading the Charge
on Implementing
Inclusive and
Equitable Practices



Dawnita Wilson

Vice President of Diversity and Inclusion, JBG SMITH

Dawnita Wilson is the vice president of diversity and inclusion for JBG SMITH, an S&P 400 company that owns, operates, invests in, and develops a dynamic portfolio of quality mixed-use properties in and around the Washington, DC, metro area.

Wilson joined JBG SMITH in late 2019, bringing 15 years of strategic diversity and inclusion experience. She previously led diversity and inclusion efforts at Sodexo, Highmark, and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

Since joining JBG SMITH, Wilson has successfully developed and executed a comprehensive, multiyear diversity and inclusion strategy focused on sustainable cultural and behavioral change. In just one year under her leadership, diversity and inclusion became one of the top five drivers of overall employee engagement at JBG SMITH, increasing favorable employee perceptions by 18 percent. In less than 18 months, she developed and executed a formal employee mentorship program called the Lion's Guild, formed the JBG SMITH Inclusion Community, and launched a monthly D&I newsletter, the JBG SMITH "Community Connection," to name just a few accomplishments.

She holds a master's degree in human resources management from La Roche University and a bachelor's degree in administration of justice from the University of Pittsburgh. She has maintained her Professional in Human Resources Certification since June of 2006.

Wilson was the individual recipient of the National Association of Real Estate Investment

Trusts (NAREIT) 2020 Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Recognition Award, was recently recognized as one of the 2021 Top 100 Diversity Officers by the National Diversity Council, and was featured as one of the 10 Most Influential Black Women in Business to Follow in 2021 by *CIO Views* magazine. She is also a 2021 Washington Business Journal Diversity in Business Award honoree.

Inclusion: Equity is now taking center stage over diversity and even inclusion. How can an organization best ensure equity?

Dawnita Wilson: Achieving equity requires organizations to prioritize and, in many cases, scrutinize their internal systems and structures. Equity is about fairness and equal access—both of which require intentionality. For organizations to ensure equity, they must be willing to challenge the status quo, advance legitimate change, and drive accountability.

I see equity as an outcome of the work that is required to achieve real, systemic impact. That said, I don't think it's "taking center stage" as much as I think it's becoming something that companies feel the need to explicitly state. I'm also not convinced the addition of or focus on the word *equity* has necessarily changed the way work is being done, just as putting the word *inclusion* in front of diversity doesn't automatically change how people experience organizations. I believe equity is the result of changed behaviors, practices, and thought patterns—all of which require not only intentionality but commitment and consistency.

IN: What brought you to do this work? Is there a personal motivation or a story from your childhood or past that inspired you in this direction?

DW: As a young Black girl growing up in a predominantly white community, I learned early about the impact and importance of diversity and inclusion and, even more so, belonging. From always being the "only one" to turning a blind eye to what I now know was overt prejudice and racism, I spent a lot of my developmental years focusing on the best way to fit in and conform, an experience that I believe unintentionally led me to the very work that I do today.

I remember one summer night running around my neighborhood with a group of kids, of which I

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was the only Black person. One of the kids walked over someone's car and a neighbor saw him. About 15 minutes later, the cops showed up at my house questioning my mother about the incident and letting her know I was spotted among the group of teens who were seen that night—not because I was the one who walked over the car, but because I was the only one they "recognized." I remember my mother calling me at my friends' house, telling me not to come home right away until things were sorted out—more than likely because she assumed that I would be blamed. That was one of my many moments of clarity, realizing that how I experienced the world would be far different from that of my neighborhood peers. It also taught me that no matter how much I wanted to fit in, the color of my skin would always make me stand out.

Luckily, I had a built-in best friend in my sister, and together, we eventually found people and places where we felt a stronger sense of belonging and connection. And as time passed, I realized just how important that was.

I often reflect on my journey and what led me here. And while not carefree or perfectly planned, somehow, I'm exactly where I am supposed to be—leading the passion and purpose-driven work that my very own experiences have inspired me to lead. It's something I no longer consider a job, but a responsibility.

IN: Tell us about your greatest success story—and the greatest challenge you are currently facing.

DW: I feel I've defined success differently at different phases in my life and career. I also believe success means different things to different people.

I started with JBG SMITH in late 2019, and in just one year, diversity and inclusion became one of the top five drivers of overall employee engagement, increasing favorable employee perceptions by 18 percent. This was a reflection of the impact the

work had on our employees in a relatively short period of time and during a pandemic when many of us were working remotely. So, from a career perspective, that's something I would consider a success. However, from a personal perspective, I feel success is more about being content and confident in who you are, what you do, and how you show up in the world. We're all inspired and motivated by different things. For some people, success is simply about surviving, and for others it's about thriving, and everything in between. For me, success is being able to do work that I love and live the life I want to live, while ultimately being healthy and happy doing it.

As for the greatest challenge I'm currently facing, I'd say it's continuing to keep people engaged and committed to changing the status quo. As diversity and inclusion leaders, we often spend less time doing the work and more time convincing people that the work needs to be done. While it's an essential part of the job, it can be taxing, especially as external influences continue to impact our internal workplaces. I feel like the more negative events take place in the world, the harder the work becomes. And the challenge is in the constant desire for people to just do better and be better.

IN: What are some of the recent thought leader topics and trends in the world of DEI that organizations are learning about and implementing?

DW: Two things come to mind when I think about DEI thought leader topics and trends.

One is around mental health and wellness. I think the COVID-19 pandemic and the George Floyd tragedy greatly influenced how companies are thinking about this. The effects of racism, along with the emotional and personal impact that it has on people, is very real. Providing employees with resources and coping mechanisms to support their mental well-being is something I think progressive organizations will need to prioritize.

The second is around gender identity and expression in the workplace. To truly foster an inclusive culture and environment, companies will need to be more intentional in how they support gender differences. Considerations like

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gender-neutral versus gender-specific restrooms, health-care benefits for those who are transitioning, and education around language and pronoun use are just some of the things companies should be learning about and implementing.

IN: What will be some of the most pressing issues and challenges in the coming years for corporate diversity and inclusion leaders like yourself?

DW: On the heels of the George Floyd tragedy, we saw companies large and small hire diversity and inclusion leaders, in many cases for the first time ever. We also saw a lot of these same companies leveraging the racial justice movement as an opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to diversity and inclusion—through either financial contributions or corporate statements. Many fell flat in the months that followed.

That said, I think the most pressing issue and challenge for diversity and inclusion leaders will be driving accountability and influencing real, systemic change. Too often we end up in situations where the intent doesn't match the impact. It's up to us, as leaders, to change that.

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

DW: The pandemic forced many of us to reimagine how and where work can get done. It created a situation where we had to pivot and come up with creative ways to collaborate and engage with one another, while also allowing us to realize that productivity doesn't have to diminish just because we're not in a traditional office space. The number of organizations that have transitioned to hybrid or other flexible work models is a clear indication that they are recognizing the importance of creating cultures that work for everyone, which is another element of inclusion.

Personally, I think COVID-19 changed how I think about diversity and inclusion. It required me to think more critically about things that I might not have considered previously—such as pandemic anxiety, access to productive spaces, Zoom fatigue, home schooling, living conditions, technology gaps, etcetera—all of which can greatly impact our mental health and well-being. And all of which are diversity and inclusion implications of the pandemic. **IN**