

Airbnb's Mission

An Interview with David King,
Director of Diversity and Belonging, Airbnb

EDITORS' NOTE David King assumed his current post in 2016. He has worked on diversity issues for more than 10 years, first as the chief for diversity management and outreach at the State Department and most recently as Director of the Office of Civil Rights and Diversity for the Peace Corps.



David King

COMPANY BRIEF Airbnb (Airbnb.com), is a global travel community that offers special end-to-end trips, including where one stays, what one does and the people one meets. People in more than 191 countries and 81,000 cities use Airbnb. The company, which is privately held, is valued at around \$25.5 billion.

How do you define the role of director of diversity and belonging and how is it ingrained within Airbnb's business strategy?

For this space to truly work, we need 4,000 diversity practitioners – that is how many employees we have at Airbnb.

Part of my role is to make sure that I am galvanizing the organization to do this work. It's not possible for one individual or a small team to do all the diversity related work that Airbnb or any other organization has on their plate.

It is possible for the diversity team to lead by serving in a consultancy capacity that gives people the tools they need to do good work.

A great example would be equal pay analysis, which is a construct that is ingrained in the diversity space. However, diversity practitioners aren't necessarily data analysts who can necessarily analyze pay. They're also not necessarily individuals who understand compensation, etc.

Part of our job is to provide the research that can give that team the tools, the validity, the bandwidth, etc. to make sure they get the job done.

Without this, it's hard to succeed.

How broad is the definition of diversity for Airbnb?

The moment we define diversity, we inherently leave someone out of the equation. One thing I don't like to do is to play the diversity Olympics – gender is where the conversation typically starts, but then it goes from gender to race.

We need to be inclusive in our design, making sure that we're taking into consideration all constructs of diversity concurrently in order to succeed. That said, as it relates to prioritizing

within that inclusive design, we need to take into consideration communities that are underrepresented or underserved.

Diversity of thought is very important, but vis-à-vis the recruitment of women, there is probably a higher level of importance based on historic and current day oppression. I want to create an inclusive design, but I need to strategize and prioritize within that design.

I also don't want to put a definition on paper and inherently exclude someone from a place that is all about inclusion.

Are inclusion and belonging the same?

Airbnb's mission is to create a world where anyone can belong anywhere. There is a huge overlap between the two constructs and, of course, organizations might define them differently. Belonging at Airbnb is about the platform and the people. We're thinking about products – do the guests on our platform feel like they belong when they go on that trip to Italy? Are we baking inclusive design into our platform to make sure people aren't rejected on the platform?

Second, internally, we need to ask if we're doing the same thing as it relates to our employee base, as well as to our suppliers who work with us.

Belonging is a comprehensive construct making sure that everyone who touches our products feels they have a place and a voice.

Some people would argue inclusion is the same, so I won't draw a distinction.

If Airbnb is looking to hire the best talent, does that automatically ensure a diverse workforce or do you need to adjust the hiring process to make sure you're achieving the diversity you're seeking?

I don't think it inherently ensures a diverse workforce, because the questions become who is the hiring manager and who is defining diverse talent? Irrespective of one's background, people generally like people who are like themselves.

This is not inherently a bad thing, but as we're trying to affect diversity in our organization, we need to take this into consideration.

I make sure we look at job descriptions to ensure we've rooted out bias in these descriptions. I make sure that our interview process is as bias-free as possible. I also make sure that, at

day's end, we have a diverse set of people from a wide variety of backgrounds looking at all the product inside and outside.

If bias is something we inherently all have, at least if I have a diverse group of biased individuals, I will end up with diversity. There is a lot of work being done in this space to extract bias. Until that becomes a reality, we need to make sure we're at least finding those touchpoints so we can positively affect things.

In the diversity space, are metrics important and is it challenging to establish effective metrics?

Metrics are undoubtedly important. The qualitative and quantitative data helps to refine the work we do. Metrics give us a current state assessment of the issue we're trying to solve. For instance, are we underrepresented as it relates to women or others in the workforce? It helps to create a baseline, but I don't think we can totally rely on metrics.

We're still talking about people, not numbers, so I can determine if my organization is underrepresented with women in leadership through the metrics in front of me. However, that is not how I'm going to solve the problem – I'm going to do that by making sure I interface with organizations that are geared toward advancing women in leadership. I'm also making sure I'm speaking on panels geared toward women in leadership.

Metrics is a foundational tool that lets us know where we are and then we can strategize as to where we'd like to go.

From a recruiting perspective, how critical is having a diversity focus to attracting top talent?

I see many of the millennial generation seeking out companies that are putting diversity and belonging into their strategy. However, I don't want to make it seem that other generations aren't thinking about the same things.

Each generation has similar challenges – they just look different than the prior generation.

What has been the secret to Airbnb's success?

I don't know if there is a secret. We aspire to be leaders.

We're bringing together millions of people daily around the world to stay in homes and connect with each other. With that mission, we truly need to think about what it means to bring people together.

Our platform is inherently about belonging and if that isn't realized, we aren't living up to our mission. ●