

# Business

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Section H

## Affirmative action gets high marks

Local human resources  
executives support measure

By Diana Kunde

Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

It may be creating a firestorm in Congress, but affirmative action got generally good grades from a group of corporate human resource executives who met recently in Dallas.

Nearly two-thirds of 101 human resources managers who completed an informal, anonymous survey for *The Dallas Morning News* said affirmative action is still needed.

The remaining third were more inclined to say the programs have outlived their usefulness.

Tim Huepp, president of the Dallas Human Resources Association and senior vice president for human resources and administration at the Federal Home Loan Bank of Dallas, said he wasn't surprised by the survey results.

"I think the key thing affirmative action plans do is force companies to look at the issue. If you don't have anything forcing organizations to do that, there's a likelihood we may reverse some of the progress that has occurred. That's why HR folks are generally supportive," Mr. Huepp said.

The survey was taken at a monthly meeting of the association. It wasn't scientific and doesn't necessarily represent the association membership's views. Also, 15 percent didn't provide race or gender data, and of the remainder, nearly three-fourths were white females, 6 percent were African-American and 3 percent were Hispanic.

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# Affirmative action may still be needed

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But the survey does provide a snapshot of opinions on one of the most divisive issues in politics today, from the people whose task it is to make sure their own firms comply with federal employment laws.

Critics contend that efforts originally designed to level the playing field for women and minorities are now discriminating against white males, or are burdensome and ineffective. Supporters say affirmative action is still needed in a working world where about 97 percent of top corporate jobs are held by white males.

Republican Sen. Robert Dole of Kansas has called for a review of the federal government's policies. President Clinton, meanwhile, has launched his own review. The U.S. Supreme Court will consider an action brought by a white Colorado contractor who claims reverse discrimination.

Amid such initiatives, major employers like J.C. Penney Co. and Xerox Corp. have launched their own programs aimed at breaking barriers for women and minorities. Diversity, not affirmative action, is the popular term.

In Dallas, a strong majority of the surveyed human resource managers said diversity was a business goal at their company. Three in 10 rated it a "high priority."

Recognition International, for instance, has a volunteer diversity awareness group that plans educational and social events celebrating different cultures. "We have an annual affirmative action program, and we also have a diversity program that goes a step further" — including monthly reviews of hiring and promotion, said Mary Beth Wurzbach, employment manager.

"We've done a lot more purchasing with minority and women-owned vendors, and we appointed our first woman director last year," Ms. Wurzbach said.

Among survey respondents, diversity training and goals for hiring and advancement were the most common components of diversity or affirmative action plans. A few went further with formal mentoring programs. Very few companies linked management pay to diversity goals.

Affirmative action has opened up opportunities at their firms, a majority said. Women have been bigger beneficiaries than minorities. Eight in 10 said more jobs, including supervision, had opened to women. Six in 10 rated their programs successful in paving the way for minorities.

Still, the Dallas group members said their workplaces fell far short of parity among the upper management ranks. Just two in 10 said women and minorities were proportionately represented in "nearly all" management positions. The majority — six in 10 — said fewer than half of management layers were diverse.

"There is still a lot of inborn bias in corporate management that I have experienced — both large and small companies," said one respondent. "While most of the top managers don't think they're prejudiced, they are. This is probably because most are white males over 40."

Has affirmative action discriminated against white males? Not at all or scarcely at all, said about 90 percent of the surveyed managers — although 10 percent disagreed sharply, saying affirmative action leads to "a lot" of discrimination against white males.

Nor has it resulted in hiring less qualified people — a common criticism — most of the executives said. But one respondent said affirmative action mandates are at odds with business goals on diversity.

"Diversity makes good business sense because if your employee population matches your customer population you will more successful," this respondent said. "However, I believe that affirmative action plans encourage companies to select employees based on their race or gender rather than their skills, and are not in the best interests of companies."

Hattie Hill-Storks, a Dallas-based diversity and customer service

trainer, traces a lot of the disillusionment with affirmative action back to its early days, when desperate managers who didn't know the black or Hispanic communities "picked the first person they saw, and put them in a suit."

"Companies that are smart can't afford to hire unqualified people anymore. In the early days, they did that, and that's how the stigma developed," said Ms. Hill-Storks, who is African-American.

Rogge Dunn, a labor law specialist who teaches at Southern Methodist University, said the survey results track what he generally hears from human resources managers among his legal clients.

"They're generally not against the concept ... but what they want is a program they can implement so they don't need to be concerned with reverse discrimination lawsuits. Business is looking for a safe harbor," he said.