

Week 5 • Q&A

How Apple's Former HR Chief Denise Young Smith Is Fixing the Future

After more than two decades at arguably the world's most innovative company, Denise Young Smith is focusing her talent on building a generation of leaders who prize inclusion as much as anything else.

By Benjamin Snyder

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Denise Young Smith just marked her one-year anniversary as Cornell Tech's executive in residence.

At the end of 2017, Denise Young Smith traded in her role as Apple's head of human resources to tackle a new challenge: Help the technology leaders of tomorrow tackle the biggest issues facing diversity and inclusion efforts at organizations around the world.

Instead of going to a rival tech company, though, Young Smith left the corporate world altogether for the Ivy League's Cornell Tech. Since last January, she has served as the New York City institution's executive-in-residence, focusing on driving diversity and inclusion best practices.

Prior to that role, Young Smith worked at Apple for 20 years, making headlines for breaking barriers as one of Apple's only black employees to serve on the tech giant's executive team. In fact, [Fortune once touted Young Smith](#) as Apple's "new voice" for her diversity work. She started at the company in 1997 when she was hired as a senior director and led human resources for Apple's retail stores before becoming CHRO in 2014.

"I'm taking on this project because it will allow me to address the deep sense of urgency I feel to help evolve the thinking of our current and future tech leaders," [she said](#) as part of Cornell's announcement of her new position.

Young Smith recently spoke with D&I In Practice about why she chose to join Cornell Tech, what tomorrow's leaders need to do differently, and how diversity and inclusion should be integrated into the fabric of an organization.

DIIP: What can D&I leaders do to more effectively position their companies for future success?

YOUNG SMITH: If you are a D&I practitioner, you have to look at your entire ecosystem, not simply your old-fashioned filter: recruiting, input, attraction and retention. You've got to look ... [at] even the external components, like contractor support, suppliers, etc. The digital inclusion segment, which differs from organization to organization, also has to be all-encompassing.

The third area that I asked people to really, really focus on is inclusive leadership. You need to do that with a lens of 'we need to build the inclusive leaders of tomorrow...leaders that understand global nuance, leaders who understand how to connect with human-centered systems, leaders who know how to engage fundamentally with people'—those are the new world skills. It's a great big ecosystem of cultural work. It's not a specific function, it's not a specific person.

So many organizations say, 'Oh boy, now I have a D&I person, now it's all going to change.' I spoke at a D&I conference in Atlanta and said, 'If you're an organization that views it like that...then you need to move on. Don't waste another moment.'

DIIP: How did you make the decision to join Cornell Tech? And why the focus on students as a means of increasing diversity?

YOUNG SMITH: I spent a bulk of my Apple career [working on retail arm of the business] before I transitioned into the CHRO role. The first couple of years of that really focused on the cultural components of inclusion. As I was reaching 20 years, I started thinking about what my next thing was going to be. Twenty years at one organization, even as wonderful as the work at Apple was, is a long time, and I stayed for 22.

When I made the transition to Cornell, what was so compelling about that for me wasn't just that it's in academia, but it was this coming together of stakeholders that could be critical to building a whole new world order of leaders. You have the New York City community, hugely diverse, and also an emotionally intelligent community. It's faced so many challenges and adversities, and yet New York has figured out how to come together and move forward better than a lot of other communities around the world.

So you have that kind of organizational and collective social intelligence. You also have Wall Street, the financial community and the institutional investors, as well as the VC groups. You have a premier academic institution in Cornell and the uniqueness of Cornell Tech, which has a huge entrepreneurial spirit. They have a

program at Cornell Tech called the Entrepreneurial Studio and every student has to go through that no matter what [their] discipline is. That is where I have been focusing most of my time and effort because that touches every student.



Cornell Tech in New York City. Photo Courtesy of Jon Mannion, Flickr.

DIIP: What kind of programming are you developing to build these skills? What does your work look like day-to-day?

YOUNG SMITH: I like to call it the inclusion imperative. It starts with the premise: What is it that's going to make that impact? [What is going to] make the difference for these students and their experience? This is of primary importance for whatever they do moving forward.

So we broke that out into [what] is their environment? What are the environmental nuances and touch points and voices that are talking to them, everything from signage to policies that touch the student and inform their experience. Then, we looked at the curriculum opportunities and the lecturing opportunities. I have two

courses. So it's everything from environment to cultural nuance to very specific and strategic things that the school can do to engage with certain communities.

"We've gotten the feedback from students that just talking about diversity and inclusion in this way has made a huge difference. It has sent a very different message to them that 'I do belong here and can succeed here.'"

DIIP: What do you think tomorrow's organizations and leaders need to do that is different from what they do today? How are the students reacting to these big ideas you're teaching them?

YOUNG SMITH: One of the things that I think most organizations forget or fail to do or just don't see is you may have a smaller percentage of representation in some area. You may have a 9 percent or 11 percent [representation of a demographic], but what are you doing to—or for—that 9 and 11 percent? Are you engaging with them? Are you activating them? Are you illuminating? Are you learning from them? And then what narrative are you using to talk to them?

Because what that does is it offers counter thinking and offers counter stereotyping. It speaks to that 9 percent and says the company is interested. We aren't just a number. We aren't just a percentage. They are concerned. They do want to be engaged. They do want this number to grow. That kind of igniting of your demographics is incredibly powerful and compelling.

We've gotten the feedback from students that just talking about diversity and inclusion in this way has made a huge difference. It has sent a very different message to them that 'I do belong here and can succeed here.' Then when in class discussions we talk about impact and outcomes that have social impact, we hope we're getting the point across even more so, that this is what their work will be about, this is how it will be differentiated.

"If [D&I] continues to be labor, separate work, not integrated, the big cultural and transformational changes that shifting demographics require—true inclusion and intelligence around diversity—will continue to elude us."

DIIP: What is your vision for your role as executive-in-residence and what do you hope your students will bring to the organizations where they will ultimately work?

YOUNG SMITH: We have a large, overarching vision of focus areas. So, the environmental, the cultural, the operational, the strategic, and the narrative. But then what we tried to do is kind of have a cluster of initiatives underneath each of those overarching, high-level aspirations. You try to drive work on an ongoing basis. This is not a one-time check. This is not organizational work that you can check the box on it and say, 'Okay, great. Here are all the things that we've done.'

It has to become integral. You don't do that, functionally, in other areas. Nobody stands around and says, 'Okay, here are all the things you said. We expanded our

sales force to do this and this.' These are the things that you must do to grow and evolve your business and integrate into the work. Right?

So, in the D&I world, these are the things that we must do to grow and evolve this work and get business and commerce and institutions and organizations to the right functioning level where [D&I work] is the foregone conclusion. Because if it continues to be labor, separate work, not integrated, the big cultural and transformational changes that shifting demographics require—true inclusion and intelligence around diversity—will continue to elude us.

If we are not able to elevate these things to their proper working level and absorption level into an organization, we're never going to get there. It has to be absorbed into the organizational ecosystem in the same way that other businesses processes are. It has to be part of the business process.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.



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Benjamin Snyder is a writer and editor living in New York City.

We want to hear from you!

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November 26th, 2019 05:40PM EST

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