

Redgrave

A diverse group of business professionals in a meeting. A man with a beard and a woman with short grey hair are smiling and looking towards the camera. A woman with dark hair is also smiling and looking towards the camera. They are in a meeting room with a whiteboard in the background.

Leading the way to a more
diverse and inclusive
future in consumer-facing
industries

The drive to improve workplace equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is an increasing priority for companies across the broad-ranging hospitality, travel and leisure sector. It's a commitment that's deeply shared by Redgrave.

To explore how consumer-facing businesses can turn this aspiration into reality, I interviewed Tea Colaianni, a passionate EDI advocate and leader who – among other roles – is the Founder and Chair of **WiHTL**, the only Collaboration Community focusing on driving EDI across the hospitality, travel and leisure sector.

Over the years, many women working at a senior level in countless industries have discovered how it feels to be the only woman around the management table. Tea Colaianni is no exception. But rather than being discomfited by being the sole woman on the leadership team, Tea took it as an inspiration – and set up an organisation dedicated to ensuring that fewer women would experience it in the future.

“Throughout my early career in law, and latterly leading HR teams in the hospitality, travel and leisure (HTL) sector, I personally experienced bias and ‘being the only one’ in a boardroom of men,” Tea recalls. “So I set up WiHTL with the specific objective of supporting women on their career journeys across the sector. There are so many incredible women who can positively contribute to the workplace, but whose careers are impeded due to systemic barriers and outdated attitudes.”

WiHTL was founded to confront these embedded issues head-on – and give women the opportunity, confidence and support needed to progress their careers in the sector. But improving the status of women was just the start. “The WiHTL vision has gradually expanded to include other underrepresented groups and create inclusive work environments that benefit all,” explains Tea. “At the heart of the WiHTL Community, there’s a fundamental belief that as an industry we can make a significant difference, that we are better off trying to change the status quo by doing it together.”



Tea Colaianni

Founder and Chair WiHTL – Diversity in Hospitality, Travel & Leisure



Author Dan Rymer

Senior Partner, Head of Consumer

“There is real power in companies collaborating, sharing, learning from each other.”

– Tea Colaianni

Rising to the challenges facing EDI in HTL

Despite the clear benefits of embracing EDI in HTL, fostering it presents unique challenges due to the sector's 24/7 nature. These challenges are more pronounced than in many other industries. "Working schedules are irregular and seasonal and shift work is commonplace, all of which can disproportionately impact some underrepresented groups," explains Tea. "Frequently, the uptake for part-time work is by women with care-taking responsibilities, and the motherhood penalty is a universal issue. The HTL sector already incorporates a degree of worker flexibility on an operational level, but more can be done."

Overcoming the challenges to EDI in HTL clearly requires investment, commitment and hard work. But the benefits more than justify the effort, given the potential to positively influence company culture and overall industry dynamics. Tea says she regularly hears powerful feedback on the positive impact of EDI initiatives from WiHTL members. "Through our leadership development programmes and webinars, we learn how participants not only advance personally, but also communicate their learning back into their workplace, amplifying the message," Tea explains. "This 'compound interest' effect is part of what makes WiHTL's **Collaboration Community** so effective in creating transformational and organisational change." This is just one of WiHTL's many initiatives aimed at bringing together brands from across HTL to share EDI best practices and drive meaningful progress.

Understanding progress on EDI initiatives is crucial for identifying areas for improvement and maximising impact. However, measuring EDI effectiveness can be complex, requiring a holistic integration across all business functions. Recognising this challenge, WiHTL partnered with sister organisation, **inclusion in**, to launch the **EDI Maturity Curve**. This tool enables companies to establish their EDI status and benchmark themselves against industry peers on multiple dimensions. "We've seen incredible dedication and profound thinking from all those who have completed the EDI Maturity Curve," says Tea. "And the feedback bears witness to how each EDI building block is creating real and sustainable progress."

"For robust cultural change, EDI needs to be embedded across every level and function, to be part of an organisation's DNA. But sometimes it's a case of, 'You don't know what you don't know.'"

– Tea Colaianni

Experience consistently reveals that the single most significant factor setting leaders apart in fostering EDI is their commitment, which is demonstrated through consistent actions and support. "Diversity and inclusion has to start from the top," Tea explains. "Once senior leadership is on board, their outlook and actions trickle down through the organisation. But to be meaningful, all the support and actions have to result in tangible impact. Creating awareness and celebrating days on the EDI calendar, for example, is great – but it has to go deeper. Encouraging continuous learning, implementing equitable processes and taking a long-term view by updating policies are all areas where senior leaders can really use their weight to make EDI a reality."



The power of storytelling and role-modelling



Sadly, the degree of change required can't be achieved overnight. To tackle the challenges faced by underrepresented groups, you first need to raise awareness about those challenges. And when it comes to doing this, Tea is a passionate advocate for storytelling as a way to get the message across.

"Storytelling is unquestionably the most authentic and powerful way to raise awareness."

– Tea Colaanni

She says: "I feel privileged to have heard so many accounts of women who didn't think they were good enough, or employees from an ethnically diverse background who felt sidelined or uninvested in, but who – with the unwavering support and backing of a line manager who recognised their potential and a mentor who helped them progress – have gone through transformative personal changes and a realisation that they do have the right to be there and that they really are 'good enough'."

"As part of our development programmes, workshops and webinars, we at WiHTL provide a safe space for people to tell their story."

– Tea Colaanni

Alongside storytelling, role-modelling is also key in fostering EDI. Tea stresses, "For more junior colleagues to see a senior leader who looks as they do, speaks as they do and has reached the highest level of leadership, is invaluable as a way to raise positive awareness," she explains. Driven by this belief, both Tea and WiHTL actively participate in initiatives that showcase successful women leaders across the HTL sector. Their goal is to inspire the next generation and pave the way for a more inclusive future.

"The old adage of 'You can't be what you can't see' still holds true."

– Tea Colaanni

Our own experience working with women leaders highlights the powerful impact of role models. Seeing the success of senior women inspires and empowers others, boosting their confidence and career aspirations. This 'role model' principle extends far beyond the boardroom. It starts at home, where children are exposed to diverse role models, and continues through schools and universities that champion representation. And ultimately, this commitment to visibility and support needs to be reflected in every work environment.

To achieve true EDI progress, we need to ensure all underrepresented groups benefit from similar visibility and support. However, one major challenge arises when large, international HTL businesses strive for a consistent global EDI approach, as local laws or cultural norms can sometimes hinder this progress. This is where initiatives like WiHTL's regular roundtables, championed by Tea, become invaluable. These platforms provide inspiring examples of how to navigate these complexities and achieve progress within a global framework.

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“There is an enormous pool of talent already in existence – but systemic barriers are still creating a block to many candidates from underrepresented groups.”

– Tea Colaianni

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“Societal changes are being mirrored in workplace dynamics,” says Tea. “Businesses need to maintain a 360-degree view on such influences internally and externally, and adapt accordingly.”



Upping the pace

The HTL industry is making strides in EDI, thanks to organisations like WiHTL. Their tireless advocacy has raised awareness and spurred action.

However, as Tea agrees, progress remains slow. There's still a significant gap between where we are and where we need to be. "My belief in working together as a community is unwavering, just as it was at the outset seven years ago," shares Tea. "Our soon to be published Working Women Survey and Career Aspirations in Finance analysis both highlight the need to accelerate the pace of change and the stubborn existence of challenges, unhelpful behaviours and beliefs that hold underrepresented groups back. Our work will continue undeterred for years to come."

"A favourite African proverb of mine is, 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.'"

– Tea Colaianni

A recent encouraging trend has been for privately-owned businesses to align themselves with the UK's mandatory obligations on gender and (currently voluntary) ethnicity pay reporting – but Tea thinks they now need to go further. "For privately-owned businesses to keep pace with their listed competitors, they too need to lift their EDI game overall to remain attractive to both employees and customers," she explains. "However, larger businesses clearly have more resources to create and implement EDI initiatives than smaller ones. This is why our Collaboration Community is so effective: a space where member organisations share their insights and experience for the benefit of all, fast-tracking EDI success across the HTL and Retail sectors."

"Our four pillars are simple: advocate, inspire and raise awareness; share and learn from others; co-create solutions; and support organisations on their EDI journey."

– Tea Colaianni

Driven by stricter ESG reporting requirements, including those related to EDI, and increasing shareholder pressure for corporate social responsibility, we're seeing listed companies re-evaluate their governance approach to human capital. Tea sees this as a hugely positive development. "We hear repeatedly from CEOs that investment in EDI makes good business sense and provides a competitive advantage; that an equitable workplace reflects the global market; and that employees who are made to feel that they belong, perform better," she says. "We've seen more targets being linked to senior leadership performance around EDI in some of our FTSE member organisations, and it will be interesting to see the future impact of the structural changes that this is driving." She also praises the sincere efforts she's seeing among WiHTL's FTSE 350-listed members to create equitable workplaces, and their generosity in sharing their insights and experiences within the Collaboration Community.

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Executives and NEDs: different roles – same EDI goals



While listed and private businesses are on slightly different EDI journeys, a common factor across both is the need for all board members – executive and non-executive – to use their influence to drive meaningful change and promote EDI.

“Both executives and NEDs have a different role to play in reaching the same goals, but this needs to be done holistically to be effective.”
 – Tea Colaianni

“With our WNED programme, we at WiHTL are supporting the creation of the next cadre of women NEDs in our industry.”
 – Tea Colaianni

Both executive directors and NEDs share the responsibility of safeguarding the company’s external reputation through transparent reporting to stakeholders. However, their contributions to fostering EDI differ.

“An NED’s role is bigger-picture and more strategic around the long-term sustainability of the company’s EDI ambition, in alignment with the executive teams bringing about changes from a management perspective. Also, NEDs look at the leadership pipeline and succession planning, and can ensure that future boards are diverse and that fair representation is being promoted,” shares Tea.

Executives, on the other hand, are uniquely positioned to translate strategy into action. Tea highlights this by stating, “If the CEO and the C-suite are driving the strategic agenda, that sets the tone for the rest of the organisation. We see over and over again that it is only when the senior leadership team embraces and models an inclusive leadership style that things really start to change materially.”

It’s clear that by working together and leveraging their distinct strengths, boards can create a powerful force for driving lasting progress on EDI within their organisations.

Leadership diversity attracts top talent

Building a diverse talent pipeline is a critical driver of long-term, sustainable change. However, achieving this doesn't happen passively; it requires deliberate and sustained action.

The underrepresentation of women in board and C-suite positions, a persistent issue across all industries, also creates barriers to EDI at the senior management level within HTL. This lack of diversity can negatively influence organisational cultures. "We want to help speed it up through our programmes aimed at senior leaders such as the [Ethnic Senior Leaders Programme](#), the [Women's NED Programme](#), and soon the [Aspiring CFO Programme](#)," emphasises Tea.

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"The FTSE Women Leaders Review and the Parker Review have reported on progress for women and ethnic groups at leadership levels, but admit that while the direction of travel is good, it is too slow."

– Tea Colaianni

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Lesson learned – in HTL and beyond

While significant progress has been made, the journey towards true EDI in the HTL industry is far from over. Organisations like WiHTL play a crucial role in driving positive change. But what can the HTL industry learn from other sectors on their EDI journeys?

Tea offers a valuable perspective, “It isn’t about comparing like-for-like. Each industry has its own ways of working, its own structural distinctions, and it wouldn’t be possible nor effective to overlay all of them with the same EDI lens.”

She continues, “As a starting point in the EDI journey, businesses need to look inwardly, establish their own status, gain a deep understanding of their employee demographics, review their processes and as part of this information-gathering, make a note of gaps. From this point, they can then look at what is going on externally and make progress through learning what others are doing and benchmark against them.”

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“We all learn from each other, and collaborative learning works brilliantly.”

– Tea Colaianni

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In any industry, a rising tide of EDI can lift all the boats, as organisations make progress together. That’s what WiHTL is achieving in its core sectors. Now it’s time for other industries to chart the same course.

Finally, a sincere thank you to Tea Colaianni for her invaluable insights and tireless work in championing EDI within the HTL industry. Her dedication and the work of WiHTL serve as a powerful inspiration for all businesses striving to create more equitable and inclusive workplaces. We are also grateful to Tea for sharing her knowledge and experience in this article, providing a powerful roadmap for businesses on their EDI journeys.



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