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In the N.F.L. and at Big Companies, Diversity Playbooks Face Hurdles

The league's successes and struggles are playing out in hundreds of companies that have emulated its Rooney Rule in trying to hire more people from underrepresented groups.


By Ken Belson and Jenny Vrentas

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The end of the National Football League's regular season on Sunday triggered the start of two annual events: the playoffs, and the period when a wave of teams fire head coaches and general managers and start frenzied searches for their replacements.

The league has little control over the outcomes of the games. But over the past 20 years, the N.F.L. has tried, and often failed, to change the composition of the highest ranks in football-related jobs at every club.

For a league in which roughly 70 percent of N.F.L. players are people of color, it has been a source of embarrassment that the vast majority of coaches and executives have historically been white. To diversify teams' leaderships ranks, the N.F.L. has largely relied on the Rooney Rule, named for a Pittsburgh Steelers owner and adopted in 2003, which required every team to interview at least one person of color when hiring a head coach or general manager.

Through expansions of the rule and other initiatives, the league and its teams have diversified assistant coaching ranks and top front-office positions, including team presidents. It has been less successful when it comes to head coaches; the N.F.L. began this season with just six minority head coaches among the 32, three of whom are Black.

"It's tough when something has been done a certain way for so long and you're just trying to break down those barriers," said Troy Vincent, the N.F.L.'s executive vice president of football operations. He said the league's overall progress encouraged him but, referring to head coaches, added: "I still have to live in the reality of what the numbers actually say. And the numbers still are not where we would like them to be."

Still, the Rooney Rule has been the model across corporate America for companies that want to field more diverse slates of candidates, even as the aims of such initiatives are being fiercely debated in the public arena, most notably on college campuses. The recent resignation of Claudine Gay, a Black woman, as the president of Harvard was celebrated by opponents of D.E.I. initiatives and has fanned disagreement about whether they are the best way to increase diversity or can instead be counterproductive.

Companies including Amazon and Facebook now have versions of the Rooney Rule for their boards, and some shareholder advisers specifically look at such initiatives when rating corporate diversity efforts. Like the N.F.L., many of these companies have seen diversity rise in some areas.

Brian Flores, the Minnesota Vikings' defensive coordinator, has accused teams of conducting sham interviews to create the appearance of complying with the Rooney Rule. Bruce Kluckhohn/Associated Press

Yet institutional inertia, a lack of tracking of diverse hiring and little or no incentives have slowed their aims. Companies, just like N.F.L. teams, have also found ways to circumvent the policies.

"It's one thing for the C.E.O. to go out and say, 'Yes, we require a diverse slate,' and then you don't ask any more questions," said Pamela McElvane, whose company, Diversity MBA Media, has been tracking the diversity and talent development efforts of Fortune 500 companies and other large organizations for 17 years. "It all looks good, but you don't consistently see it showing up in those organizations because there's no incentives, there's no accountability and there's no reason for anybody to make that next effort."

Ms. McElvane's data, which hasn't been shared publicly before, encompasses both global and regional companies in more than 30 industries, including financial services, health care and consumer products, with a total of around 40 million employees.

In 2022, 85 percent of the 489 companies she surveyed said they required diverse candidate pools when interviewing for management vacancies, down from 95 percent two years earlier, Ms. McElvane said. Just 36 percent of those companies had some form of incentive or penalty connected to their policies, including performance reviews and bonuses. Other research showed a similar drop in corporate diversity efforts in 2022.

Companies that have tied incentives or penalties to spur the interviewing and development of workers from underrepresented groups have seen results.

The results were particularly striking among senior leadership, which includes vice presidents and other roles that are the pipeline for future C-suite executives. Among companies with incentives or penalties tied to diverse slates, people of color and women held more than 65 percent of those jobs, according to Ms. McElvane's data from 2022. That compared with just over half at companies that said they used diverse slates but didn't hold hiring managers accountable, and only 39 percent among surveyed companies that didn't have a diverse slate requirement.

According to Ms. McElvane's data, the share of companies that say they require diverse slates when hiring grew steadily from 62 percent in 2013 to its 95 percent peak in 2020, the year when the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis led to a national reckoning on race. The percentage slipped in 2022 amid a backlash by those who say efforts to increase diversity and equity are discriminatory and often do not result in the hiring of the best candidates.

Supporters of affirmative action protesting near the Supreme Court in June. The court struck down race-conscious college admissions that month. Kenny Holston/The New York Times

In June, for instance, the Supreme Court struck down race-conscious college admissions. While the decision affects colleges and universities more than corporations, the ruling, along with pushback by conservatives who say diversity efforts exacerbate racial divisions and promote a liberal political agenda, has had a chilling effect.

Valerie Rainford, the founder and chief executive of Elloree Talent Strategies, a firm that uses data analytics to bolster equity at companies, said she had seen a decline in potential clients over the last year, after a surge following Mr. Floyd's murder.

"People in this space will latch on to the latest shiny object that they think is moving the needle, but without looking at it in a deeper way that actually results in outcomes," said Ms. Rainford. "Until we do, I don't think we're going to see real progress."

She has shared a similar message with clients who expressed skepticism about the Rooney Rule by citing the N.F.L.'s mixed results, telling them that such strategies require continuous effort and attention to work.

The N.F.L.'s own efforts have shown that the Rooney Rule alone is not a panacea.

The league enacted the rule only after the lawyers Cyrus Mehri and Johnnie Cochran Jr. threatened to sue the N.F.L. for discriminating against Black coaches. Results quickly followed, particularly because the Steelers' owner, Dan Rooney, championed the rule named after him.

In 2007, Lovie Smith, left, and Tony Dungy became the first two Black coaches to face off in a Super Bowl. Barton Silverman/The New York Times

In 2007, two Black coaches, Tony Dungy and Lovie Smith, faced off at the Super Bowl for the first time, and by 2011 a record eight head coaches were people of color. In the years after Mr. Rooney took leave from the league in 2009 to be the U.S. ambassador to Ireland, however, progress stalled, and Black coaches expressed growing criticism that teams were circumventing the rule and not being penalized for it.

“We didn’t have that moral leadership from within,” said Mr. Mehri, who helped found the Fritz Pollard Alliance, a group that pushes for diversity in the league’s executive and coaching ranks.

The league has been sued for discrimination, including by Brian Flores, a coach of Black and Honduran descent, who in February 2022 accused teams of conducting sham interviews to create the appearance of complying with the Rooney Rule. (Similar complaints have been made about diversity efforts in the corporate world.)

Yet in the 20 years since the Rooney Rule was introduced, only one N.F.L. team has been penalized for sidestepping it.

By the time Mr. Mehri and the alliance met with the league in 2016, the N.F.L. was considering how to strengthen the rule. Mr. Mehri proposed requiring teams to interview at least two people of color for each position, something that research published that year in the Harvard Business Review showed significantly increased the odds that people of diverse backgrounds were hired.

During that meeting at N.F.L. headquarters, the league’s human resources director at the time suggested taking time to study the research before committing to it. Commissioner Roger Goodell interjected, saying, “Let’s just do it.” Even after Mr. Goodell pushed his executives, however, a mandate that two candidates of color must be interviewed for every head coaching vacancy wasn’t adopted for more than three years.

Since then, the league has extended the rule to include team presidents and the level below head coaches — coordinators — and to include women. It has also added incentives. Teams that develop minority head coaches or general managers who are hired away receive draft picks as compensation. At the league office, individual bonuses and performance reviews are tied to execution of a department’s diversity, equity and inclusion plan.

The results are apparent in certain areas. Seven team presidents come from underrepresented groups, including six people of color, and 10 general managers are people of color (including Champ Kelly, the interim G.M. of the Las Vegas Raiders), both records. The overall representation of people of color and women at teams is 51 percent, up from 44 percent three years ago, according to the N.F.L. That includes the number of coaches of color, which grew to 43 percent from 35 percent.

“For equal opportunity to be achieved in an organization, everyone has to be rowing in the same direction, not just the C.E.O. but the direct reports and middle management,” Mr. Mehri said. “This kind of effort is so fragile and needs such constant commitment that if you take your eye off the ball, you’ll drop the ball.”

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