

DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

DEI AWARDS WINNER: MICHAEL HESS



Company Name: Blind Institute of Technology

Official job title: Executive Director and Founder

How long have you been in this position? 9 years

How has diversity, equity and inclusion work impacted your professional path? As an individual who has been blind since childhood, I've only known the world of diversity. I believe that diversity is mandatory, however, true equity and inclusion are concepts of choice and collaboration with others. I spent most of my professional career as the token blind person. It was clear to me that there was a lack of representation for people with disabilities within my former organizations and that is what encouraged me to establish Blind Institute of Technology (BIT) as a vehicle to help drive organizations into true inclusion. At the time, I could not find an organization that was bringing disability inclusion to the fortune 10,000. BIT is driven by the idea that equity and inclusion require collaboration.

Tell us about an initiative you have undertaken to foster diversity in the workplace: BIT, as an organization, recognizes how important certifications are to private industry and we know that traditional technical training organizations do not cater to the broader people with disabilities community. As a result, we created the BIT Academy, which is the world's first technology training program for budding professionals with disabilities, created by professionals with disabilities. BIT Academy is conducted on a remote

platform that is 100% accessible, which allows us to meet the hardest to serve, where they are. When the BIT Academy first began, in 2017, we welcomed a cohort of seven students. Since that time, our cohorts have grown in size with our most recent cohort reaching more than 65 students, with varying abilities. We've had the honor of welcoming many students who are members of the disabled community, including students who are blind, deaf, and neurodiverse. Our process has resulted in 100% of our certified students achieving gainful employment, many for the first time, in the technology field. Based on this success, BIT Academy was named the official training provider for Salesforce globally. Additionally, it is the first nationally recognized apprenticeship program for the blind and visually impaired, per the Department of Labor.

Tell us about your future ideas to further diversity within the workplace: Fundamentally, BIT is a non-profit staffing agency. We have a workforce development model, that includes the BIT Academy, which allows us to have a built-in pipeline generation, on two fronts. First, BIT is always talking to new organizations, both locally and nationally, about professionals with disabilities. We challenge organizations with traditional gender, ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, and veteran inclusion initiatives to be more inclusive of the people with disabilities population. Second, we work with non-profit and public entities that serve the broader people with disabilities community. As a result, our very first Denver Metro area youth apprentice, who is fully blind, will be starting the BIT Academy at the end of 2022.

Who do you mentor and how? I currently mentor multiple community members. At this time, there are very few leaders within private America that are part of the people with disabilities community. As such, I find it necessary to help mentor individual contributors within organizations, through formal and informal conversations. I believe that these conversations have supported their growth within their professions and/or have assisted them in meeting their professional goals. It is relevant to note that, during my career in the private sector, I took advantage of skip level opportunities which allowed me to have C level exposure. This exposure helped prepare me for running my first organization. I believe in giving back and I believe that corporate America needs diverse representation in leadership roles to include professionals with disabilities.

How has your mentorship evolved, and what have you learned? As a professional with a disability, I never had the opportunity to meet other executives/managers with disabilities during my career, which spanned nearly 20 years. Therefore, when I began my

leadership role at BIT I did not immediately recognize that I was experiencing imposter syndrome. It took almost 10 years of creating relationships with international juggernauts like Salesforce and placing professionals with organizations such as JP Morgan Chase, Allstate, Anthem, DaVita and CVS for me to realize that I am the real deal. I know that I am not done growing as a leader, but I also know that I am certainly no imposter. Going through this process and addressing my own imposter syndrome has allowed me to approach interactions with a new perspective. Now, when people with disabilities reach out to me, I am quick to address the 800-pound gorilla in the room. I talk with them to find out where they are in their journey as a professional with a disability, which in turn, helps them transition into professional development more easily. It is incredibly important to address their journey upfront.

How do you hope your work related to diversity, equity and inclusion has impacted the Denver community? I firmly believe that the great city of Denver, and the state of Colorado, have the DNA to become the most inclusion-friendly places on Earth. This is a vision that I once shared with former Governor Hickenlooper. Companies and organizations believe that talent pipelines are becoming increasingly scarce, yet the professionals with disabilities community is greatly untapped, and this community is one of the most valuable resources on the planet. I truly believe that as BIT and other organizations collaborate to employ more professionals with disabilities, we move closer to that vision.

What advice do you have for businesses looking to foster more diverse workplaces? I recognize that the vast majority of business leaders have never had the opportunity to work with a professional with a disability, like me. Chances are, they've never worked with someone who is blind, deaf, or in a wheelchair. This lack of experience creates uncertainty because people question how a person who is blind can be a coder or a Salesforce Administrator. Additionally, people are not sure how to digitally communicate with a person with a disability. I would like organizations to know that BIT is the solution! We empower organizations to overcome that feeling of uncertainty and we help them understand that professionals with disabilities overcome everyday business obstacles via technology. In short, hiring professionals with disabilities is a technology solution that is beneficial for any organization. Overall, my advice to organizations is simple, embrace a truly inclusive environment that includes professionals with disabilities, and your organization will reap the benefits from both a culture and a bottom line perspective.