English articles

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*This page will be updated on **Mondays**. The first article is aimed at a B1 and upwards level and the second article is aimed at a B2 and upwards level*

Articles of the week

Target is ending its diversity goals as a strong DEI opponent occupies the White House

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By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Discount store chain Target said Friday that it would join rival Walmart and a number of other prominent American brands in scaling back diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives that have come under attack from conservative activists and, as of this week, the White House.

The Minneapolis-based retailer said the changes to its “Belonging at the Bullseye” strategy would include ending a program it established to help Black employees build meaningful careers, improve the experience of Black shoppers and to promote Black-owned businesses following the police killing of George Floyd in 2020.

Target, which operates nearly 2,000 stores nationwide and employs more than 400,000 people, said it already had planned to end the racial program this year. The company said Friday that it also would conclude the diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, goals it previously set in three-year cycles.

The goals included hiring and promoting more women and members of racial minority groups, and recruiting more diverse suppliers, including businesses owned by people of color, women, LGBTQ+ people, veterans and people with disabilities.

Target has long been a fierce corporate advocate for the rights of Black and LGBTQ+ people. In a memo to employees, Kiera Fernandez, Target's chief community impact and equity officer, described the DEI decisions as a “next chapter” in the company's decades-long process to create “inclusive work and guest environments that welcome all.”

“Many years of data, insights, listening and learning have been shaping this next chapter in our strategy,” Fernandez wrote in the memo, which Target shared Friday. “And as a retailer that serves millions of consumers every day, we understand the importance of staying in step with the evolving external landscape, now and in the future.”

There's no doubt the U.S. civil rights landscape has undergone a massive transformation in the five years since much of corporate America adopted DEI goals in response to the Black Lives Matter protests that followed Floyd's death in Minneapolis.

A 2023 U.S. Supreme Court decision that outlawed affirmative action in college admissions emboldened conservative groups to bring or threaten lawsuits targeting corporate initiatives such as employee resource groups and hiring practices that prioritize historically marginalized groups.

Walmart, McDonald's, Ford, Harley-Davison and John Deere are among the well-known consumer brands that reduced or phased out their DEI commitments in recent months.

President Donald Trump this week signaled his administration's agreement with conservatives who argue that policies designed to increase minority representation by considering factors such as race, gender and sexual orientation are unconstitutional.

On his first day in office, Trump signed an executive order aimed at ending DEI programs across the federal government. The order calls for revoking all DEI mandates, policies, preferences and activities, along with the review and revision of existing employment practices, union contracts, and training policies or programs.

Still, some prominent companies have resisted public pressure to retreat from their diversity plans. On Thursday, Costco shareholders rejected a proposal urging the wholesale club operator to evaluate any risks posed by its diversity, equity and inclusion practices.

According to preliminary results shared by Costco executives, more than 98% of shares voted against the proposal submitted by a conservative think tank based in Washington. Costco's board of directors had recommended a no vote.

Apple's board and the CEO of JPMorgan bank also have expressed a commitment to preserving their companies' DEI activities.

Unlike some of the companies retooling or retiring their diversity initiatives, Target's work to build a more inclusive workforce predated 2020, and the company also was long seen as a trailblazer with respect to LGBTQ+ inclusion.

But the employee memo shared Friday said Target no longer would participate in surveys designed to gauge the effectiveness of its actions, including an annual index compiled by the Human Rights Campaign, a national LGBTQ+ rights organization. Target said it would further evaluate corporate partnerships to ensure they're connected directly to business objectives, but declined to share details.

Getting corporations to withdraw from the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index and to stop sponsoring Pride activities have been goals of DEI opponents.

Steering clear of a backlash from conservative customers and organizations is something that Target has tried to navigate for a while. As transgender rights became a more prominent issue in 2016, the company declared that “inclusivity is a core belief at Target” and said it supported transgender employees and customers using whichever restroom or fitting room “corresponds with their gender identity.”

But after some customers threatened to boycott Target stores, the company said that more stores would make available a single-toilet bathroom with a door that could be locked.

In 2023, Target removed some of its Pride Month merchandise after online complaints and in-store confrontations that the retailer said threatened employees' well-being. The company decided last year not to stock Pride Month products at every U.S. store.

Big Tech wants to plug data centers right into power plants. Utilities say it's not fair

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By MARC LEVY Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Looking for a quick fix for their fast-growing electricity diets, tech giants are increasingly looking to strike deals with power plant owners to plug in directly, avoiding a potentially longer and more expensive process of hooking into a fraying electric grid that serves everyone else.

It's raising questions over whether diverting power to higher-paying customers will leave enough for others and whether it's fair to excuse big power users from paying for the grid. Federal regulators are trying to figure out what to do about it, and quickly.

Front and center is the data center that Amazon's cloud computing subsidiary, Amazon Web Services, is building next to the Susquehanna nuclear plant in eastern Pennsylvania.

The arrangement between the plant's owners and AWS — called a “behind the meter” connection — is the first such to come before the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. For now, FERC has rejected a deal that could eventually send 960 megawatts — about 40% of the plant's capacity — to the data center. That's enough to power more than a half-million homes.

That leaves the deal and others that likely would follow in limbo. It's not clear when FERC, which blocked the deal on a procedural ground, will take up the matter again or how the change in presidential administrations might affect things.

“The companies, they're very frustrated because they have a business opportunity now that's really big,” said Bill Green, the director of the MIT Energy Initiative. “And if they're delayed five years in the queue, for example — I don't know if it would be five years, but years anyway — they might completely miss the business opportunity.”

What's driving demand for energy-hungry data centers

The rapid growth of cloud computing and artificial intelligence has fueled demand for data centers that need power to run servers, storage systems, networking equipment and cooling systems.

That's spurred proposals to bring nuclear power plants out of retirement, develop small modular nuclear reactors and build utility-scale renewable installations or new natural gas plants. In December, California-based Oklo announced an agreement to provide 12 gigawatts to data center developer Switch from small nuclear reactors powered by nuclear waste.

Federal officials say fast development of data centers is vital to the economy and national security, including to keep pace with China in the artificial intelligence race.

For AWS, the deal with Susquehanna satisfies its need for reliable power that meets its internal requirements for sources that don't emit planet-warming greenhouse gases, like coal, oil or gas-fueled plants.

Big Tech also wants to stand up their centers fast. But tech's voracious appetite for energy comes at a time when the power supply is already strained by efforts to shift away from planet-warming fossil fuels.

They can build data centers in a couple years, said Aaron Tinjum of the Data Center Coalition. But in some areas, getting connected to the congested electricity grid can take four years, and sometimes much more, he said.

Plugging directly into a power plant would take years off their development timelines.

What's in it for power providers

In theory, the AWS deal would let Susquehanna sell power for more than they get by selling into the grid. Talen Energy, Susquehanna's majority owner, projected the deal would bring as much as $140 million in electricity sales in 2028, though it didn't disclose exactly how much AWS will pay for the power.

The profit potential is one that other nuclear plant operators, in particular, are embracing after years of financial distress and frustration with how they are paid in the broader electricity markets. Many say they have been forced to compete in some markets against a flood of cheap natural gas as well as state-subsidized solar and wind energy.

Power plant owners also say the arrangement benefits the wider public, by bypassing the costly buildout of long power lines and leaving more transmission capacity on the grid for everyone else.

FERC's big decision

A favorable ruling from FERC could open the door to many more huge data centers and other massive power users like hydrogen plants and bitcoin miners, analysts say.

FERC's 2-1 rejection in November was procedural. Recent comments by commissioners suggest they weren't ready to decide how to regulate such a novel matter without more study.

In the meantime, the agency is hearing arguments for and against the Susquehanna-AWS deal.

Monitoring Analytics, the market watchdog in the mid-Atlantic grid, wrote in a filing to FERC that the impact would be “extreme” if the Susquehanna-AWS model were extended to all nuclear power plants in the territory.

Energy prices would increase significantly and there's no explanation for how rising demand for power will be met even before big power plants drop out of the supply mix, it said.

Separately, two electric utility owners — which make money in deregulated states from building out the grid and delivering power — have protested that the Susquehanna-AWS arrangement amounts to freeloading off a grid that ordinary customers pay to build and maintain. Chicago-based Exelon and Columbus, Ohio-based American Electric Power say the Susquehanna-AWS arrangement would allow AWS to avoid $140 million a year that it would otherwise owe.

Susquehanna's owners say the data center won't be on the grid and question why it should have to pay to maintain it. But critics contend that the power plant itself is benefiting from taxpayer subsidies and ratepayer-subsidized services, and shouldn't be able to strike deals with private customers that could increase costs for others.

FERC's decision will have “massive repercussions for the entire country” because it will set a precedent for how FERC and grid operators will handle the waiting avalanche of similar requests from data center companies and nuclear plants, said Jackson Morris of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Stacey Burbure, a vice president for American Electric Power, told FERC at a hearing in November that it needs to move quickly.

“The timing of this issue is before us,” she said, “and if we take our typical five years to get this perfect, it will be too late.”

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