



TOP-SHELF DIVERSITY

AHRI's DEI Champion of the Year Award winner, Katie Wyatt, says the path to inclusion in 2024 remains bumpy and unpredictable, but the challenges only make her more determined.

BY CAROLINE RICHES

Head of Culture and Inclusion at Coles Group Katie Wyatt believes it's a fascinating time to work in diversity, equity and inclusion. In some ways, it's getting easier but in other ways, harder, she says.

The proud Noongar Yamatji woman from Whadjuk Noongar country around Perth found the failure of the Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum "incredibly tough".

"It really made me stop and think about the challenge we have as a business in balancing the nuances of social pressures, customer expectations and investor demands."

It's a balance she's managed remarkably well. Wyatt is the recent recipient of AHRI's 2023 DEI Champion of the Year Award, which she describes as a welcome recognition of all the DEI commitments she and her team have helped to achieve over the last four years.

"Winning has been a real high, almost like the certificate to say: 'You did it'. Of course

there is nothing individual about DEI achievements, and this is a reflection of collective effort across our business."

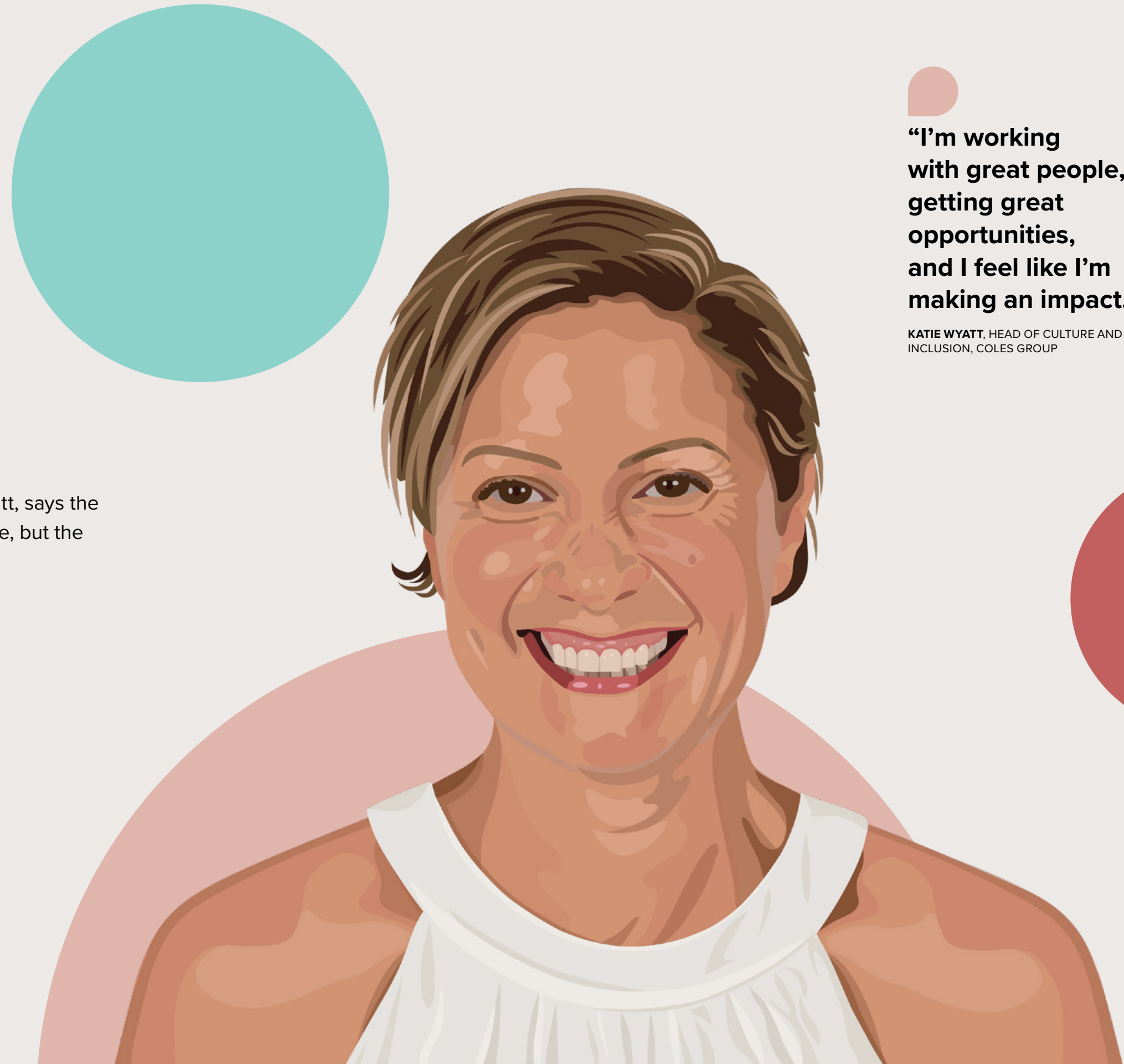
She's immensely passionate about DEI, which is just as well because it can be "an uphill battle" at times.

"DEI practitioners often don't own big teams or budgets, so they have to strategise, influence, convince and persuade, which comes with highs and lows. So it's absolutely awesome to have that recognised with this award," she says.

Wyatt believes her fierce drive for social justice "has been there from birth".

"My dad was a stolen child; he was taken from his mum as a baby. And my mum was a teacher and librarian. It was bred into me to be progressive and socially conscious.

"Whether it was my volunteer work, or my time in the not-for-profit and social enterprise sector, it was always there." >



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Wyatt has more than 17 years’ experience as a senior leader across private, public and for-purpose sectors. Her corporate work includes seven years in professional services and a stint at Australia Post. After her years in the not-for-profit social enterprise space, she was elated to join Coles in 2019.

“This role has brought me back to large corporate life, which I really love.”

Now based in Melbourne, she’s relishing the chance to “create meaningful impact in a huge business that employs and serves so many Australians”.

Big corporates, big thinking

The expectations on organisations to support social change have never been higher, says Wyatt, especially those that employ a huge part of the community.

These expectations arise from the public, investors passionate about ESG and diversity, and employees keen to connect with their employer’s purpose, whether that be caring for the environment or profiling diverse women in senior leadership roles. These are expectations she upholds and believes intrinsically linked to business success.

“Every business, especially large businesses that operate... nationally like we do, is going to struggle in a modern world without diversity of thinking and new ideas.

“People often say it’s the right thing to do. But actually, it’s also very much the smart thing to do. And as a business that serves most of Australia, the more diverse we are, the better we’re able to serve our customers. For

example, we can think about what our customers might want in particular locations, such as in the southeastern suburbs of Melbourne where customers [require] a wider range of foods including Kosher, Middle Eastern, Asian, Indian and so on.

“It’s the best of both worlds. I’m working with great people, getting great opportunities, and I feel like I’m making an impact.”

The path to gender parity

Some of Wyatt’s most important work at Coles has been in the gender space. In 2019, women accounted for 33 per cent of leadership roles, which jumped to 41.5 per cent by 2023. She played a pivotal role in launching the Store Manager Accelerator Program in 2022, which brings in women with diverse backgrounds into store leadership roles, supported by development, which focused on the skills needed in the role over experience.

Since then, 20 women have come through the program, with applications now open for the next cohort. There are now 800 female store managers around Australia. The women are of all diversity groups, including First Nations and culturally diverse women.

To create positive change, Wyatt looks to research and evidence-based systems for guidance. To inspire her gender inclusion strategies at Coles, she used the WGEA’s Employer of Choice for Gender Equality framework, as it’s based on global best practice research.

“We know that offering flexibility, making sure your talent management processes are as

free from bias as they can be, and putting targets on senior leadership roles, all makes a difference,” she says. “You can say, ‘We want more women at the table’. But unless you are actually creating change in your organisation to make it more appealing and accessible for women, nothing’s going to stick. We now have a really healthy female leadership population and pipeline.”

The organisation is also making life easier for transgender people among its 100,000 store workers who have to log on to a roster that displays the legal name they were assigned at birth.

“If they’ve affirmed their gender and now go by a different name, this can be incredibly impactful, and not in a good way. It’s also unnecessary,” says Wyatt. “So we’re reconfiguring our systems to build a solution that shows someone’s name of choice on the roster. While most people won’t notice, for some individuals, it’s going to be massive.”

Owning and driving diversity

While it can be hard to quantify the impact of diversity strategies on an organisation’s bottom line, Wyatt measures Coles’ success in terms of engagement and representation.

Impressively, engagement of all diverse groups has increased, largely thanks to Coles’ five key diversity pillars: Gender Equity, Pride, Accessibility, Belonging and Indigenous Engagement. Each pillar is led by business leaders with cross-business representation, which Wyatt’s team supports by driving

conversation, planning initiatives, and helping those in each pillar to think more strategically.

LGBTQI+ engagement, for example, has jumped from 61 per cent in 2021 to 66 per cent in 2023. To promote LGBTQI+ inclusion, Wyatt found another “evidence-based roadmap” to follow: the Australian Workplace Equality Index for LGBTQ+ inclusion, which has since awarded Coles Gold Employer status. It shows that rather than having one champion in the business, all the systems, processes and training must also be inclusive.

“If the business doesn’t own and drive DEI, then it’s never going to sustain itself.”

And she does mean the entire business – DEI is not just an HR responsibility.

“If people feel like they can be themselves, that drives engagement, which drives performance and therefore revenue and profit. Diversity is absolutely a smart business decision,” she says. “Watching people get involved in these diversity teams and witnessing their individual transformations is what keeps me going.”

An ‘unpredictable future’

Over the past four years, Coles has been on a “maturity journey”, says Wyatt.

“We’ve gone from being passionate about our DEI cause, perhaps because of people we know, to integrating it into how we do business. Now, it’s the way we hire people and the way we develop people. Our leadership population is much more diverse, and that’s

not just gender. That’s cultural diversity, First Nations, LGBTQI+ and people with disability.

“And that’s not just because my team is running around making things happen, it’s because we’ve hardwired it into who we are as a business.”

Over the coming years, Wyatt plans to continue her work in DEI, “learning and adapting along the way”.

As an Australian company with a huge profile, determining how much to wade into public discourse around social issues remains a “tricky” subject, she says. Coles is strongly committed to reconciliation, but didn’t feel it was our role to tell the public or our team how they should vote in last year’s Voice to Parliament referendum, says Wyatt.

“While I personally was hoping to see a ‘Yes vote’, organisations do not vote and it wasn’t our role to tell anyone how to do so.

“It’s a tricky line to walk, but businesses need to make those decisions for themselves, in line with their values and with the information they have at the time. And those decisions have to make sense, both for your people strategy and for your business commercially,” she says.

While promoting the inclusion agenda is certainly getting easier, the road can feel bendy and jolty, she says. But that only fuels her passion and drive.

“In the uncertain economy and global world we’re operating in, DEI feels even more important but even less predictable.

“Sometimes there are moments that can feel like a real setback in the work that we do. But in other ways, they can also feel like a catalyst to do more.” ●●●

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