

- **BUSINESS**

Chicago Black executive sues Nielsen, alleging discrimination. She was treated as ‘a walking, talking EEOC charge,’ her lawyer says.

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A longtime Nielsen Holdings executive tasked with improving the company’s outreach to Black consumers has filed a civil rights lawsuit alleging the market research firm discriminated against her.

Cheryl Grace, a Black executive in Nielsen’s Chicago office, alleges Nielsen retaliated against her for speaking out about racial discrimination and the company’s treatment of African Americans. The suit, filed Monday in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, alleges Nielsen refused to promote Grace to executive vice president, instead hiring people from outside the company to “create the optic of inclusion and opportunity.” It seeks financial awards for lost compensation and benefits, among other damages.



Cheryl Grace, a Black executive in Nielsen Holding's Chicago office, alleges Nielsen retaliated against her for speaking out about racial discrimination and the company's treatment of African Americans. (Cheryl Grace)

Grace, who is a senior vice president of U.S. Strategic Alliances and Consumer Engagement, oversaw the company's philanthropic outreach, cultural advertising strategy and government relations, according to the complaint. She also founded Nielsen's Diverse Intelligence Series reports on multicultural consumers and appears in videos on the company's website discussing African American consumers.

In February, Grace was told to justify her team's work amid "noise around reductions" and was asked if she wanted to be "packaged out," the complaint alleges. The company then shifted responsibilities away from Grace and reduced her team and budget, the complaint alleges.

"In her 16 years with Nielsen, Mrs. Grace has been an important part of our company's journey to become a more diverse and inclusive firm. Nielsen has long recognized and appreciated her commitment to our company and

Chicago's Black community as evidenced by her breadth of responsibilities," Nielsen spokeswoman Fernanda Paredes said.

Nielsen Holdings is based in the United Kingdom and in September announced plans to [base a new consumer market research unit in Chicago](#), where Arthur Nielsen founded the research company almost a century ago. The new unit will be split off from the media research business, which is based in New York.

In the suit, Grace alleges she raised issues about Nielsen's treatment of African Americans with company CEO and Chief Diversity Officer David Kenny in a June 3 letter after Kenny had reached out to her in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd, a Black man killed by police. The suit alleges Kenny forwarded the letter to the company's human resources and legal departments and that Grace was offered a severance package.

Grace's attorney, Linda Friedman, said her client had been in dialogue with Nielsen since June trying to resolve the matter but decided to file suit after the parties failed to come to an agreement. Friedman said accepting a severance package would have involved a nondisclosure agreement, something her client was unwilling to sign. She described Nielsen's attempts at inviting employees to have a dialogue about diversity as "little more than symbolic."

"When somebody actually picks up the phone and calls or sends an email or sends a letter like Cheryl did, there's very little interest in seeing that person as a person who wants to fight for reform and for progress," Friedman said, "Instead, they see that person as a walking, talking EEOC charge with potential liability and flip it to the legal department."

The lawsuit alleges Nielsen retaliated against Grace by “rewriting history” of her performance, including claims that she committed expense fraud. It also alleges Nielsen hired Grace in 2004 to build trust with Black, Hispanic and Asian American communities, and that Nielsen used her personal and business contacts, including in the Chicago area, to improve its image with those communities.