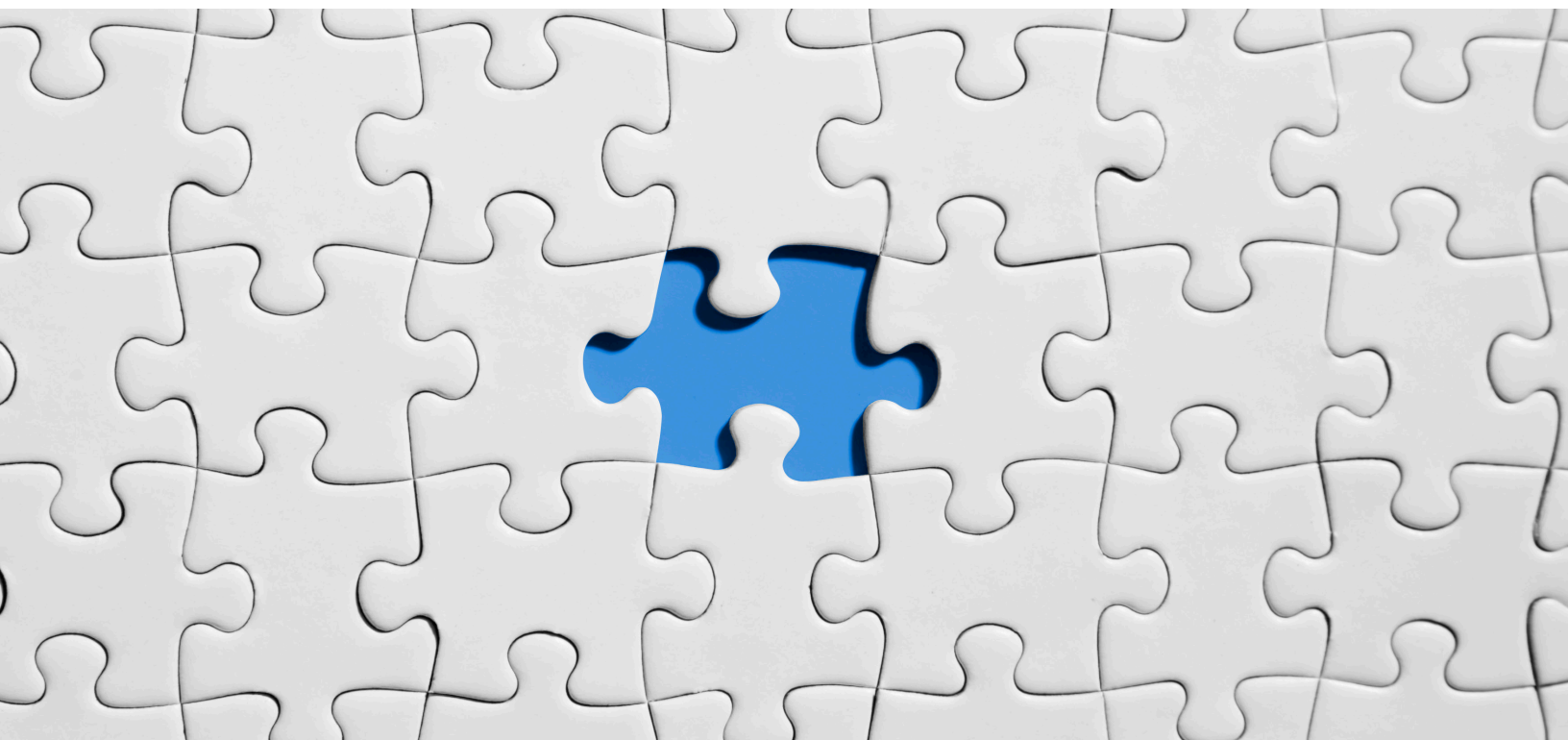


BEING BLACK IN TECH



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Introduction

The word “united” may be a part of our country’s name but it is not a part of our lived experiences. Especially in the technology field.

According to an article from the *Wall Street Journal* from September 2020, just one percent of the chief executives at the top 500 companies are Black. If we break down the numbers, that equates to four out of 500 CEOs that are Black. We may be working together but practicing inclusion is another story. The disproportion of Black technical workers doesn’t just stop at the chief executive level; it trickles down through the ranks.

It’s impossible to truly build a sense of community without prioritizing dialogue around issues that stifle the growth of some and the progress of all. Creating diversity and inclusion departments to address specific concerns but barely supporting or implementing the recommended changes isn’t progress. Take, for example, the mental fortitude required by Black professionals returning to work after witnessing yet another death of an unarmed Black person by law enforcement. This year, for many, was the first time we witnessed staff in leadership genuinely check-in on their Black employees. Imagine working at a company for years and finally being asked, “Are you okay? What can WE do better?” For many Black professionals, the fact that these specific conversations are just starting to be held is beyond disheartening to say the least. And what does that ultimately mean for company culture and morale?

It’s important to note that this topic is relevant not only to myself and other Black professionals, but the broader tech community as a well.

This article is intended to serve as a point of reference for meaningful and sustained change to happen. From a purely anecdotal perspective, it documents and provides insight on being Black in tech. We’ll then examine the role of diversity and inclusion, focusing specifically on the importance of centering those who are inherently affected by implicit bias and expanding company efforts through their lens. (This will require us to address the challenges that Black professionals encounter while working in this industry.) Finally, we’ll explore recommendations that include tangible steps to help companies transform their ideals into reality.

As civil unrest unfolded, many – Black tech professionals specifically – turned their eyes to our company and asked: “What are tech companies determined to do better?”

Hopefully, this article will help build upon and fully execute the promises made by some of the top tech CEOs.

Black in Tech

I started in the technology field at the age of 15. Over the years I went on to work for local and state government as well as a few Fortune 500 companies. Throughout my career, I rarely witnessed management that looked like me, and company board members of color were even harder to come by. Given the lack of representation, this often left me questioning if being at the executive level was even possible. Was becoming a senior level manager the highest threshold that the seeming powers-that-be would allow me to reach? Was it the folks who look like me or was the system in question just flawed? My peers and I debated these questions and more as we continued to pursue our passions and goals in the field, but somehow feeling that we'd soon hit a ceiling.

Turns out, we're not the only ones who've felt like this.

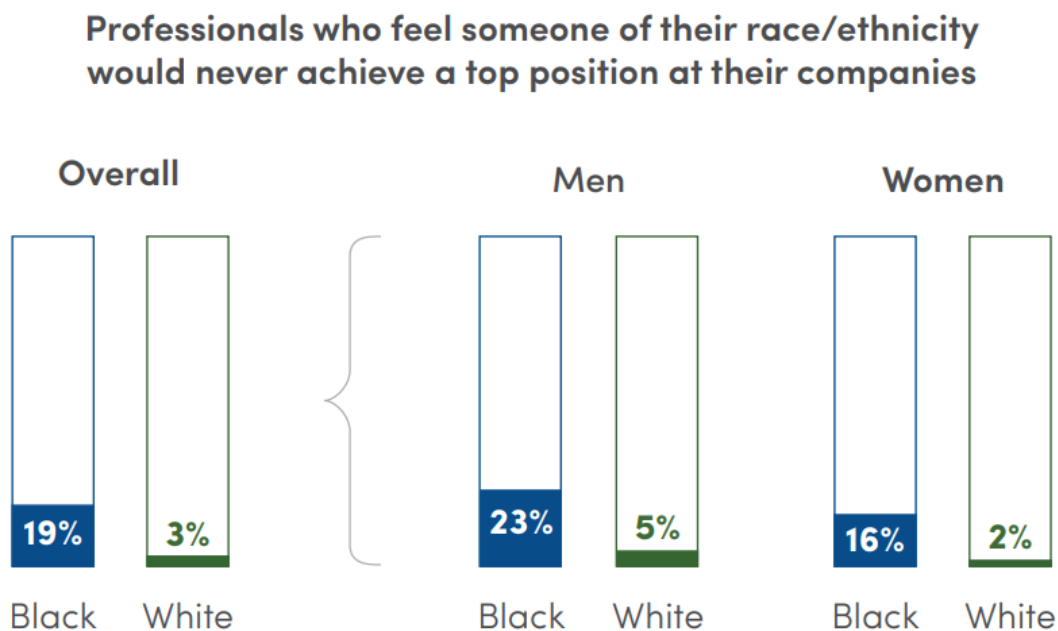


Figure 1: Top Position at Company (Ref.1)

A study conducted by the Center for Talent Innovation revealed that 19% of Black professional workers feel that they would never achieve a top position at their respective companies. As seen in Figure 1, this is on par with the conversations previously mentioned. When examining Figure 1 more closely, the data indicates that there are not only issues for Black technical workers but for Black professionals across industries and sectors.

While alarming, these numbers are not new to any Black professional that works in the tech space. There is much to be navigated on a daily basis when you are the only one of your ethnicity (or one of few) at a certain level in your company in a meeting. For Black technical workers, this has been the reality for the entirety of our existence working in this industry. With it comes micro- and macro-aggressions, a questioning of your abilities, an overlooking of your contributions and ideas, and so much

more. It requires a certain tenacity, strategy, and resilience to withstand. What makes it even harder is living this reality as a more fatal one plays out beyond the meeting rooms and cubicles.

According to an article from *NPR* by Cheryl W. Thompson, there have been 135 Blacks who have been unjustly killed in the last five years. That's 135 times I and colleagues who look like me have had to, once again, witness the brutal and fatal outcome of systemic racism and white supremacy in our country. Each time, we've had to tuck away our humanity, and show up at work for a company that may or may not acknowledge or even care about the reality that its workers face.

That's why the summer of 2020 was an interesting time for the Black community in particular, and the Black tech community specifically. The nation and world watched, in horror, as George Floyd was unjustly killed by a police officer. Across all industries, heads of companies released statements and commitments to the Black community and Black lives mattering.



There is no place for hate and racism in our society. Empathy and shared understanding are a start, but we must do more. I stand with the Black and African American community and we are committed to building on this work in our company and in our communities.

Figure 2: Microsoft CEO Statement (Ref.10)



The unfinished work of racial justice and equality call us all to account. Things must change, and Apple's committed to being a force for that change. Today, I'm proud to announce Apple's Racial Equity and Justice Initiative, with a \$100 million commitment.

Figure 3: Apple CEO Statement (Ref.10)

Funds were pledged to Black organizations in hopes of helping to fill or close gaps in everything from wealth to a guilty conscience. Words like "united", "standing together", and "solidarity" were used to express compassion along with condolences. Virtual meetings were conducted to "check the temperature" of employees and ask Black colleagues, "How are you?" or "What is your experience like?" or the one perhaps most interesting to ask a person in pain, "What can I – we – do better?"

For many in my community, the most pressing question we felt is: why now?

The company I work for pledged \$1 million dollars to a few organizations dedicated to change-making, and again, all I could think is, “why now?” Are companies truly just realizing that this country has some serious challenges to address when it comes to systemic racism? Or is this all performative?

The statements made by Satya Nadella in Figure 2 and Tim Cook in Figure 3 reflect the tone of many that were issued internally and externally from companies of all sizes. With each and every one, Black professional and tech workers wondered just how committed leaders were to being a part of the solution and not the problem of racial injustice and racism in the country. The truth is, while the statements were nice, our reality has remained the same. Furthermore, it isn’t just about Black lives mattering when it comes to encountering law enforcement in the streets; they matter in the boardroom too. So when a company states they’re committed to and value the Black community, but don’t have any Black professionals in positions of leadership or pathways to upward mobility or a company culture that reflects such care, it demonstrates a cognitive dissonance. It breeds a sense of distrust.

What does that mean for Black workers be they college degree holders or CEOs at Fortune 500 companies? First, let’s examine how many there actually are. Figure 4 details Blacks in various levels across the professional spectrum.

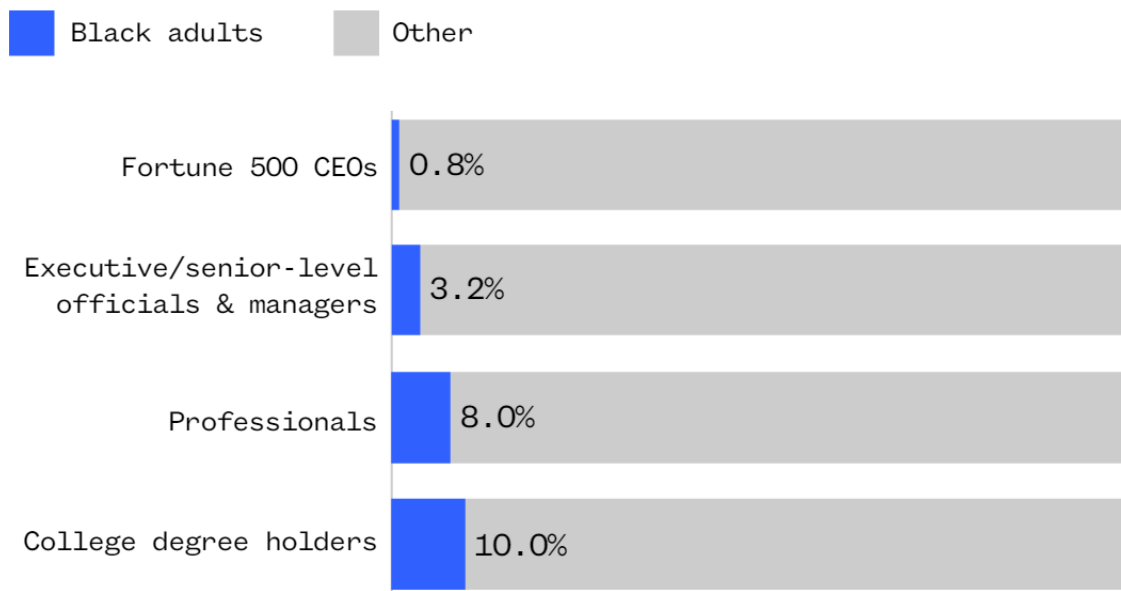


Figure 4: Black Professional positions (Source: Ref.2)

As Figure 4 demonstrates, once a Black professional crosses the executive/senior-level threshold, the percentage of representation drops drastically. Reaching the next level of leadership becomes seemingly impossible. This is the epitome of the saying, “the odds are stacked against you.” This data makes clear that there is a challenge we need to address intentionally. We’ll further explore the story statistics like this tell when it comes to diversity and inclusion.

To fully consider the impact of cognitive dissonance in the tech industry on Black professionals and tech workers, we must look at mental health.

Trayvon Martin. Sandra Bland. Ahmaud Arbery. Breonna Taylor. George Floyd.

These are some of the Black lives unjustly killed that America and the world are familiar with. But there are far more who will never make the news headlines. Their lives have been lost either directly as a result of overt racist practices or covertly through systems that have those practices embedded into their very structure. What this means for far too many Black tech workers is a split consciousness and hyper-awareness that is ever-present. As someone who is Black in tech, these are not issues that I've ever felt able to be truly honest about in the workplace due to the blatant display of cognitive dissonance by a company. Not to mention that job security, perception of capabilities, blatant denial of lived experiences, and gaslighting are all potential threats should one risk speaking up or seeking support in the professional space when navigating and coping with various traumas experienced as a result of being a Black person in America.

Nonetheless, we must live and cope with the reality that America was finally willing to acknowledge if even just for a moment in that summer of 2020: Black people are viewed and treated very differently in this country. Furthermore, there is truth to the fact that a systemic issue exists in law enforcement's treatment of Black people.

According to a study done by the Washington Post, Black people are killed at two times the rate of our white counterparts. Figure 5 offers a more in-depth look.

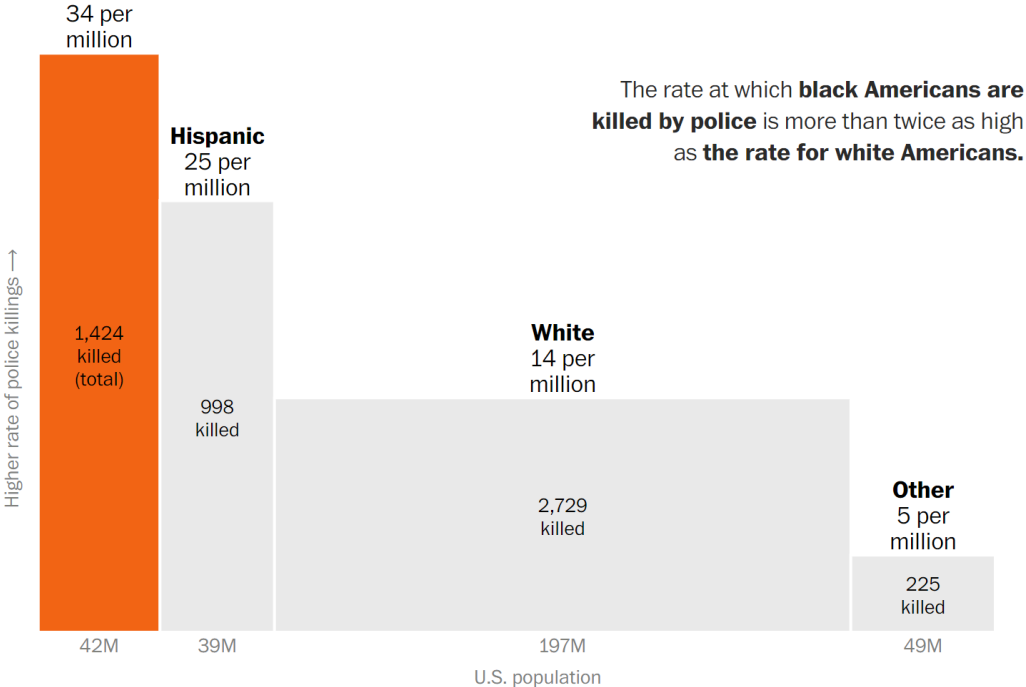


Figure 5: Rates of Killings (Ref.18)

If this is the case in law enforcement, what is the likelihood that it's the case in other industries? That the discrimination or dangerous ideologies present themselves in different forms based on the setting? For example, instead of Black people being killed, it's Black professionals who are blocked from advancing professionally or denied opportunities because of bias or bigotry?

When considering this aspect we must ask ourselves just how much have companies failed their Black employees by being negligent in acknowledging and supporting their psychological fortitude? I would say tremendously. Working in the tech space for over a decade and not ever feeling comfortable to

share my experiences has been a heavy weight to carry. For many, George Floyd’s killing marked the first time leaders and coworkers ever reached out to see how they were doing and acknowledged that they did in fact “see color.” The entire world had seemingly been shaken by what they witnessed from the eight minute and forty-six second clip.

What the world saw was one form of what Black people experience 24 hours, seven days a week, and 365 or 366 days of the year.

These challenges plague Black professionals daily, especially in the workplace. There have been times when security guards at certain locations for companies I’ve worked for have questioned who I was and if I worked for the company. Was it because I had on a tailored suit along with my company badge? For many non-Black or person of color individuals, it can be hard to imagine what it feels like to not belong and be seen as an outsider purely because of the color of your skin. It can be even harder to conceptualize the depths of a society plagued by racism. It can be hard to believe that one can work for years to obtain a degree along with various certifications but your melanated skin seems to call all of that into question. And according to the data, those questions equate to a loss in dollars earned. Just how much? Look in Figure 6 below.

Median Annual Earnings for Workers with Bachelor’s Degrees

Black and Hispanic workers with bachelor’s degrees earn nearly a quarter less than Asian and white workers with equal levels of education.



Source: ThinkNow Research's analysis of the Current Population Survey (CPS), a joint effort between the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau. Data based on information collected in the 2018 CPS Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

Figure 6: Median Annual Earnings for workers (Ref.8)

Let’s review the challenges that Black professional workers have to experience.

1. Systematic racism
2. Negligence related to mental and physical health
3. Possibility of being killed at two times the rate of white counterparts
4. Unequal pay

Although companies have affinity groups for various cultures, beliefs, and other groups there still seems to be a disconnect when it comes to racial identity. It could be argued that this is precisely why conversations around diversity and inclusion have grown over the years even though affinity groups have existed for decades.

Diversity and Inclusion

Merriam-Webster defines “diversity” as the condition of having or being composed of differing elements. It defines “inclusion” as the act of including. These two words combined give us “Diversity and Inclusion” around which companies outline plans, initiatives, and programs to ensure that all employees – regardless of ethnicity, gender, age, etc. – feel welcomed. According to a 2017 article titled “Focusing on what works for workplace diversity” by McKinsey, approximately \$8 billion is spent on diversity training alone in the U.S. yet the results of it are abysmal to say the least. McKinsey asserts that the reason for this is because what we’re up against is something extremely powerful and can’t see: unconscious bias.

In the article, Rik Kirkland and Iris Bohnet, write, “We’ve been throwing money at the problem through diversity-training programs and leadership-training programs, trying to help traditionally disadvantaged groups, including women but also people of color and people with disabilities. That is not the way to go.” They go on to add:

“We have to understand what’s broken and then intervene where the issues are—really tease apart what’s broken, and then try to fix it and use data on what works to inform our decision making.”

A prime example of cognitive dissonance on a company’s part is wasting dollars on diversity training while also having grooming policies about certain hairstyles that ultimately target Black employees.

Let’s look at California’s Senate Bill 188, known as the CROWN (Create a Respectful and Open Workplace for Natural Hair) Act that was recently passed to help eliminate discrimination based on certain cultural hair textures or hairstyles. Figure 7 outlines the CROWN Act along with part of the study that was shared.



Figure 7: Crown Act Bill (Ref.15)

According to the official website, “the CROWN Act was created in 2019 by Dove and the CROWN Coalition to ensure protection against discrimination based on race-based hairstyles by extending statutory protection to hair texture and protective styles such as braids, locs, twists, and knots in the workplace and public schools.” Dove conducted a study of 2000 women (1000 Black women and 1000 White women) and found that “hair discrimination has real, measurable social and economic impact on Black women.” Black women are one and a half times more likely to be sent home from the workplace because of their hair, and 83% more likely to report being judged more harshly on her looks than other women. Additionally, the study found that Black women’s hair is 3.4 times more likely to be perceived as unprofessional.

What is the likelihood that the Black women who participated in this study also participated in diversity training conducted by their company? Given the \$8 billion spent on diversity training nationwide the chances are very high that they have. And what were they likely experiencing that moment? A “double consciousness,” as W.E.B. DuBois termed it, triggered by their company’s cognitive dissonance.

This disconnect can also be considered when looking at the bigger picture and seeing that there have been few gains for Black people in “Big Tech.” Figure 8 accurately illustrates the numbers for Blacks in tech over the last few years.

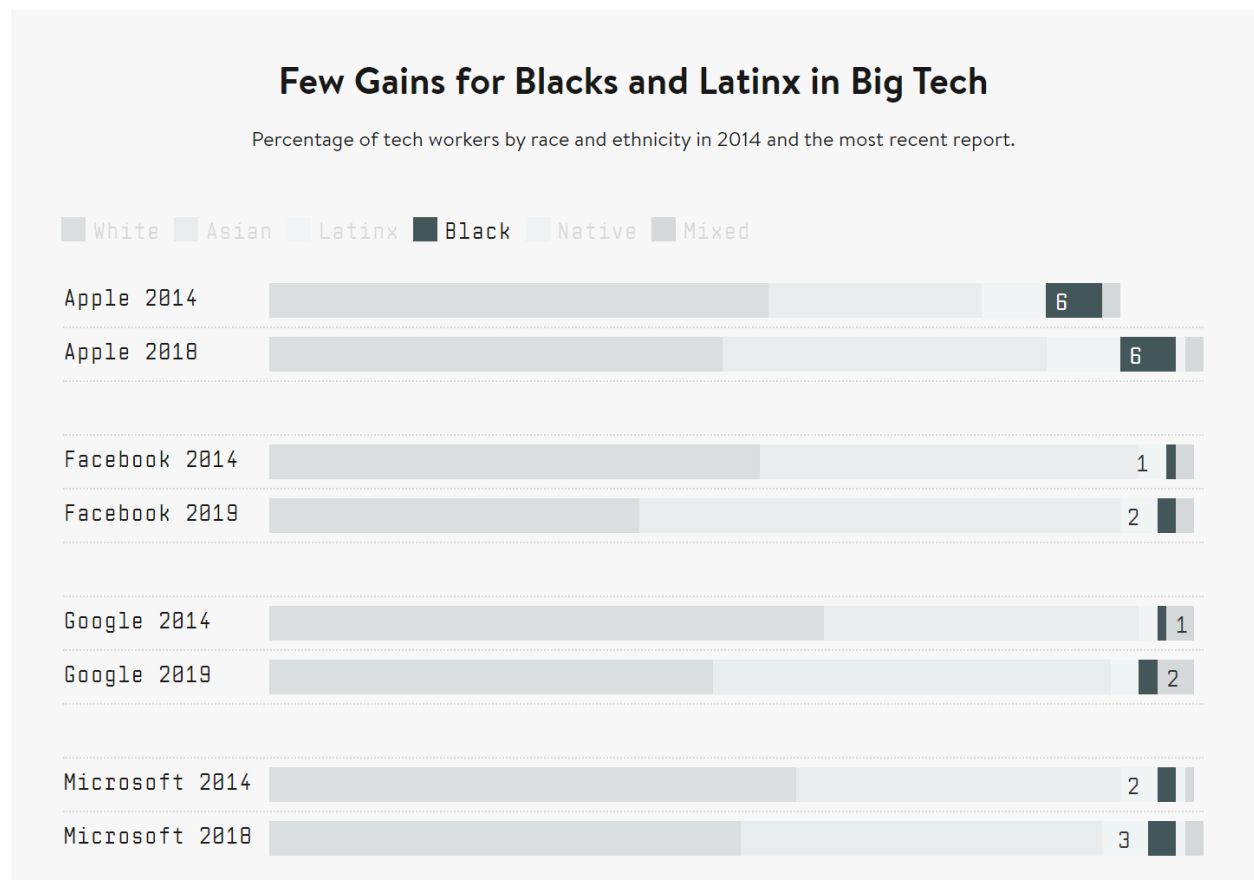


Figure 8: Gains for Black and Latinx in Big Tech (Ref.7)

Each of these companies, along with many others, have programs and policies dedicated to diversity and inclusion but according to their numbers, it’s made – on average – a difference of one percent over the

course of four to five years. Statistically speaking, would this rate of growth be acceptable if it were capturing the company's financial or market standing? I doubt it.

And what message does this data send to aspiring or current Black professionals and technical workers?

Last year, CEO Michael D. wrote in his internal and public letter, "We need to do things differently now so that we can lead measurable change and truly be an employer of choice for all. I encourage you to get involved. Because for all the work we do within our own company, there will never be true justice or equality until we root out the rotten underbelly of racism that is eating away at the most cherished values we hold dear. Real change requires us all to actively participate in the hard work that lies ahead..."

Differently *now*. *Measurable* change. *Real* change. Ahead.

Let's explore some of the recommendations for doing things differently now in a way that brings about measurable, real change in the days, weeks, months, and years ahead for tech companies.

Recommendations

I have been blessed with the opportunity to be a part of some great programs throughout my career in tech. I started out attending Howard High School of Technology which birthed my love for computers. During my tenure at Howard High School, I obtained various certifications while working for a Fortune 500 company. Programs like the one that was established by Maryland National Bank (MBNA) gave students like me a chance that I wouldn't have normally received. The program prepared high school participants to enter the workforce with hands-on job experience or build upon our learning by attending college. The MBNA scholars program went even further by providing scholarships to help offset the financial burden that often comes with post-secondary education. I believe we need more programs like this established, and it would be better suited to start as early as middle school to ensure a solid talent pipeline is created for future Black professionals in tech. Although there are programs launched constantly, companies need to do more than invest money. An investment of time to schools and institutions that serve Black students would enable access to diverse perspectives, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences. If youth are our future, their presence must be our priority.

Further along in my tech career, while a student at North Carolina A&T State University, my chairman (a Black man) gave me the opportunity to turn a dream into reality. I'd always wanted to give back to my community and with his support, I was able to create a summer camp that provided students with life skills using music and technology. We leveraged technology as a way to mentor, learn, and build with our students. We provided them the chance to try new things and explore their views on life. Before Instagram and TikTok, I created a tech-savvy environment which we ran like a radio station allowing students to do interviews, edit videos, create content, and share with the world. I believe programs like this are necessary because it gives students a sense of belonging and ownership of their narrative. It gives them access to resources along with opportunities and the support to grow. One of the main reasons I believe this program was successful was because we could relate to the students. Being in college and having the ability to help those that look like me also gave me a sense of community and commitment. We need tech programs that break the mold at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and enable them to use technology to create solutions that their communities face. We need a sense of urgency on the part of tech companies to become stakeholders in the future of HBCUs.

Following my college graduation and entrance into the workforce, I began to think deeply about how to address the low number of Black professionals in tech. The first thing that came to mind was creating

pathways to leadership roles. Creating spaces where executive leaders are able to establish meaningful relationships with Black employees who show an interest in growing within the company is imperative for true inclusion. I know I would greatly benefit from someone at the executive and C-suite levels sharing their expertise and constructive criticisms. In exchange, they would have the opportunity to keep a real pulse on company culture and whether the company's commitment to diversity and inclusion is being lived. Growth isn't just unilateral; it is bilateral. To put it in tech terminology: let's just say we need full-duplex and not half-duplex communication when it comes to these relationships.

Last, companies need to be anonymously evaluated by their employees to see how they view company culture and its climate as it pertains to diversity and inclusion. It's clear at this point that far too many companies, in tech and beyond, have been putting a band-aid on bleeding wounds that will never heal without proper care and attention. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "the time is always right to do what is right." That time is now. In tech, we know tomorrow is today. Technology is the future and for it to be effective, responsive, and reflective of humanity's need, we must demonstrate our humanity in it and create a more unified front to power the world forward.

Conclusion

I looked at every article submitted for this contest and not one addresses diversity or inclusion. I am a prime example of what it looks like when a company takes interest in the community and this article, this contribution to a larger, important discussion is part of the impact – the outcome – of diverse perspectives being at the table.

This article challenges our current processes through the lens of a Black perspective and help improve them. I believe this article will reach the masses. I believe these words will spill outside of the competition and create new initiatives or better the ones we currently have. I believe that, as a result of all that transpired in 2020, companies will have to focus more on the systems they rely on to build a community of which they can be proud. I believe that we have to be better committed to being proactive instead of reactive. This work is not just limited to big business but every business.

Over the years I've learned that difficult conversations, fueled by continuous reflection and transparency, are necessary if change is the goal. They require accountability (especially by those who hold power) and a strategy to combat the challenges faced. The time is right to do what has always been required. Growth is never comfortable, but comfortability is what got us here. The tech industry will benefit significantly with companies like Google, Apple, Microsoft, Facebook leading the charge to show what real change looks like after the real work has been done internally. Ghandi once said "be the change that you wish to see in the world." Let's be that together!

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