Jesse Jackson targets tech's lack of diversity

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In this Friday, July 26, 2013, file photo, the Rev. Jesse Jackson speaks as he takes part in a panel discussion during the National Urban League's annual conference, in Philadelphia. Jackson plans to lead a delegation to the Hewlett Packard annual shareholder meeting on Wednesday, March 19, 2014, to bring attention to Silicon Valley's poor record of including blacks and Latinos in hiring, board appointments and startup funding. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke, File)

The Rev. Jesse Jackson is bringing a strategy borrowed from the traditional civil rights era playbook to the age of social media and a booming tech industry known for its disruptive innovation.

Jackson led a delegation to Hewlett-Packard Co.'s annual shareholders meeting Wednesday to bring attention to Silicon Valley's poor record of including blacks and Latinos in hiring, board appointments and startup funding.

In a nearly 10-minute exchange with HP CEO Meg Whitman, Jackson urged her and the company to ensure blacks and Latinos have prominent leadership roles in the booming technology industry.

"Silicon Valley and tech industry have demonstrated that it can solve the most challenging and complex problems in the whole world," Jackson said during the meeting, which was held in Santa Clara, Calif. "We need you to assume a different level of leadership. Today, too few have too much, too many have too little, and the middle class is sinking."

Whitman defended HP's track record, pointing out that the company has been fighting for racial diversity among its suppliers for more than 40 years. She also boasted that HP may be the only major company that employs women in the positions of CEO and chief financial officer, a reference to Catherine Lesjak.

Jackson congratulated her, but then chided Whitman for the absence of blacks and Latinos on HP's board. "We are not perfect by any means," Whitman conceded and assured Jackson she hoped to continue to discuss ways to promote more racial diversity in Silicon Valley.

In a letter Monday, Jackson raised similar issues with a list of other technology companies that included Apple Inc., Twitter Inc., Facebook Inc. and Google Inc.

Earl "Butch" Graves Jr., president and CEO of Black Enterprise magazine, said Jackson is shining a light on the fact that technology companies don't come close to hiring or spending what is commensurate

with the demographics of their customers.

"Hopefully, what Rev. Jackson is doing will bring attention to the 800-pound gorilla in the room that nobody wants to talk about. It's high time that gets addressed," Graves said.

It's widely recognized that the [tech industry](#) lacks diversity: About 1 in 14 tech workers is black or Latino, both in Silicon Valley and nationally. Blacks and Hispanics make up 13.1 and 16.9 percent of the U.S. population, respectively, according to the most recent census data.

"We agree with you there is much work to be done in the United States and much work to be done in Silicon Valley," Whitman told Jackson during the meeting.

Yet as recently as 2011, The Allstate Corp., in alliance with Jackson's RainbowPUSH organization, recognized HP for its commitment to diversity.

In an emailed statement to The Associated Press, HP Executive Vice President Henry Gomez said HP spent nearly $1 billion with almost 500 minority business enterprises in the U.S. and an additional $500 million with businesses owned by women during 2013.

Apple and Google declined to comment on Jackson's grievances. Facebook and Twitter didn't immediately respond to requests for comment.

Of course, the technology industry isn't without a handful of high-profile black executives. Microsoft Corp. named John Thompson, an African-American, as chairman of its board last month after he led a search that culminated in the appointment of Satya Nadella as the software maker's new CEO. Thompson, the former CEO of security software maker

Symantec Corp., joined Microsoft's board in 2012.

Another African-American, Denise Young-Smith, runs Apple's human resources department, which oversees the personnel policies governing the iPhone maker's nearly 85,000 employees and contractors. She reports directly to Apple CEO Tim Cook.

And Google's chief legal officer, David Drummond, is an African-American who has been one of the company's top executives for the past 12 years.

During a recent speech at Stanford University, Jackson cited the dearth of black and Latino leaders in the tech sector. This got sophomore computer science major Rotimi Opeke, a leader at the school's Society of Black Scientists and Engineers, wondering about his own opportunities.

"I've been thinking that if I can code well and produce good products, I can be successful, but to rise up through the ranks is going to be a challenge," he said. "There's just not a lot of people of color in high levels of tech leadership, which is where, eventually, I'd like to be. I'm hopeful that it's not impossible to get there, but I do feel it would take an extraordinary level of leadership skills to navigate."

Freada Kapor Klein started the Level Playing Field Institute 13 years ago to teach and mentor black and Latino students in science and math. Along with her husband, Mitch Kapor, she also invests in startups with founders who are women and people of color from an underrepresented background through Kapor Capital, a venture capital firm.

The Kapors recently wooed former NAACP President Ben Jealous to Kapor Capital to help boost its social impact investing.

Kapor Klein said she and her husband share Jackson's goals and vision of what Silicon Valley should look like, but they choose to employ different tactics to get there.

"Jesse Jackson wouldn't be heading to Hewlett-Packard or any of the other big tech companies if they had done their job and accomplished diversity," she says. "He's shining a spotlight on one aspect of the growing inequality of this country."

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