

Diversifying tech: Black professionals are finding success in spite of the odds

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Tech is an industry that's known for moving fast.

Companies can go from zero to millions, even billions in little time. Products seem to be perpetually evolving and apps literally update overnight.

Still, there is one area where the sector has seen very little movement—diversity.

The latest diversity reports from Twitter, Google and Facebook say that less than 5 percent of the companies' tech workers identify as black. In Silicon Valley as a whole, blacks and Hispanics make up between 3 percent and 6 percent of workers, and women of color are 1 percent or less.

There are various reasons why the racial imbalance in tech continues to exist, including negative stereotypes, insular networks and roadblocks to getting venture capital. And studies suggest that black people in the industry are especially concerned.

In fact, 84 percent of blacks employed in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) professions place a high level of importance on workplace diversity, according to 2018 Pew Research data, compared with 49 percent of whites.

59 percent of Hispanics and 64 percent of Asians said they thought racial and ethnic diversity in the workplace is extremely or very important.

Despite the [challenges](#), there's a long list of people who are working to change the industry's outlook as more [black people](#) move into prominent roles in [technology companies](#), develop products and found their own companies.

"My whole experience in the industry over the past 10 years has created this desire to create solutions to these problems," said Jewel Burks Solomon

who is black. She co-founded visual-recognition tech startup Partpic in 2013 and sold it to Amazon for an undisclosed sum in 2016.

"There is a lot of promise in the industry for the playing field to be leveled. That's why I dedicate a lot of my time to give other people a chance to thrive," Burks Solomon said.

Since selling her company to Amazon, Burks Solomon has invested in seven black-owned businesses and has partnered with three other black entrepreneurs to launch a project called Collab, an investment firm that connects black business owners to investors, resources, and partners.

About half of STEM workers believe limited access to quality education is one of the major reasons why blacks and Hispanics are underrepresented in STEM jobs, according to Pew Research.

Kimberly Bryant, the founder of Black Girls Code (BGC), works to introduce a strong pipeline of academically excellent girls of color to computer science.

Since its launch in 2011, BGC has introduced more than 8,000 girls to computer science with 13 chapters in the U.S. and one international chapter in Johannesburg. By 2040, Bryant wants to reach 1 million girls.

"We want to see companies making a good faith effort and putting some tangible initiatives behind their pledge for diversity," Bryant told USA TODAY in 2018.

Still, there is a wide range of black professionals like Burks Solomon and Bryant who have found success in spite of the odds. Many hold the tech industry accountable for its low number of minority professionals.

Take Erica Joy Baker, for example, who serves as the principal group engineering manager at Microsoft. Baker has called out the tech industry on Twitter for years for narrowly focusing its diversity efforts.

She also rallied her colleagues to create a spreadsheet of their salaries which she says exposed some inequity issues when she worked at Google.

"I see as my duty to hold companies accountable until stuff gets better," Baker told USA Today in 2016 when she worked as a senior engineer at Slack. "I am trying to keep moving the needle, to make sure the stuff that we didn't talk about, the stuff that gets brushed under the rug, gets discussed and gets solved."

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