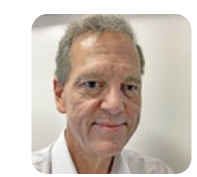


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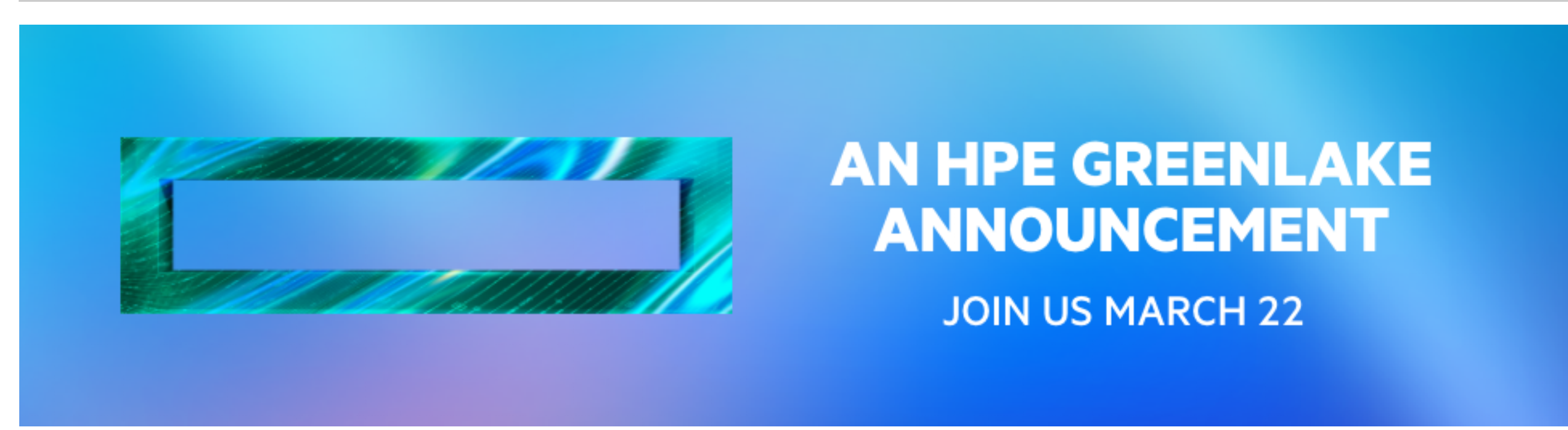
How to hire and retain Black tech pros — for real

Turning diversity intentions into reality means going outside your comfort zone and making a sustained effort engage, honor, and understand the African American community.



By Galen Gruman

Executive Editor for Global Content, Computerworld | FEB 24, 2021 3:00 AM PST



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Be conscious of how people interact, and understand that there will be miscues. If your organization has no or very few Black people, the staff may overcompensate and inadvertently tokenize the employee. They are also likely to miss subtle cues in how people present themselves or interact, or how their own actions are interpreted.

As an example involving women, Romansky notes research that shows women typically won't apply for a job or promotion unless they have all the requirements. But men will do so if they have 70% to 80% of the qualifications. And that leads to women missing opportunities or being seen as disinterested in their career advancement.

Black Tech Talent's Jackson says he sees a similar reaction by Black workers regardless of gender, so he advises that employers "be specific about the things you want and don't add the fluff you don't want. Do you really need three to five years' experience, or is that a preference? Do you really need a senior person?" If you overstate your needs, "you're excluding people who don't totally fit the bill you stated," even if they are qualified.

Jackson also says that Black employees often need more feedback when they do well, but often get no feedback when they put in extra effort or succeed because white culture often takes "ordinary" success for granted and so doesn't reinforce it. "An entitled culture doesn't need to give positive feedback," he says, "but a person from a poor culture needs the reinforcement and feedback."

A good manager can subtly address differences among people's styles to quietly help Black and other employees work better together and understand each other better without embarrassing people about their differences or seeming to favor one style or culture over another. Likewise, mentoring should understand and work with individual differences, without becoming favoritism or tokenism, to help those not in the dominant culture succeed and grow.

Encourage Black workers' identity and participation. People tend to feel safer in groups of people like them, says Gartner's Romansky, so encourage Black employees to create internal groups, councils, or clubs — sometimes called [employee resource groups](#) or affinity groups — where they can support each other. But also encourage other groups in your organization so people of different backgrounds and identities with shared interests can also get to know each other. That not only creates a greater sense of attachment to the company but also helps create personal relationships among people from different departments, with different skills, and at different levels that benefit the company.

Both Cotton and Jackson note the tension many Black professionals feel between asserting and celebrating their identity and becoming pigeonholed as a representative of the race. Likewise, organizations must strike a balance between supporting Black employees intentionally and ensuring that they are truly part of the company's fabric, such as through involvement in nonracial activities, and not viewed only as Black people.

Make career development integral. Large organizations that also do long-term career development, providing mentorship, a series of job opportunities, and the management structure to support it, are more likely to succeed in retaining Black employees and those from other minority groups, says Gartner's Romansky. "Bigger systems that are more stable are less likely to disrupt themselves, and provide those long-term development opportunities."

That long-term view is often lacking, says Black Tech Talent's Jackson, due to lack of a sustainable business plan around diversity and often to low expectations about Black talent. "It's not so much about qualifications but how far can you go? No one is hiring unqualified Black people, but companies don't think they can go much further in their careers" than what they were initially hired for. That's a recipe for losing staff.

Stay engaged in the Black community. Once you've successfully recruited and hired Black people, keep up the engagement, Cotton, Jackson, and Romansky all advocate. If you stay engaged, your pipeline of Black talent will stay full and your staff of all races and identities will become natural at diversity and inclusion. There are several ways to do so:

- Continue to have your everyday technical staff of all backgrounds, not just HR and the diversity council, attend Black career fairs and professional events.
- Participate in tech education programs for Black youth in low-resource environments (such as [All Star Code](#), [Black Girls Code](#), and [YesWeCode](#), plus countless local groups like [San Diego Code School](#)).
- Provide a space in your offices for Black meetups and professional groups.
- Encourage your professional staff to be instructors at minority-heavy community colleges.
- Consider supporting and getting involved with organizations seeking to improve Black education, such as the [Thurgood Marshall College Fund](#) and the [United Negro College Fund](#).

How Black people can increase their presence in tech

Waiting for white-dominated employers to take real action hasn't worked well in tech. "We can't work at a snail's pace anymore. We just can't," Cotton says. So, even as organizations reach out to Black people, Cotton urges Black people to push for and support their own inclusion.

Black professionals often take on the cause of bringing more people like them into their industries, through education of school-aged children; creating community in college; and professional outreach, active recruitment, and mentoring on the job.

It's a lot of work — "Black employees need to work really hard to develop and attract and retain Black talent," Cotton says — but it's often the most effective way to increase diversity today. They know and are part of the community they seek to enable, and members of that community are more apt to take a job alongside someone like them than at a company where no one looks like them.

To identify companies that are truly diversifying, the US government requires most companies with 100 employees or more to file Equal Employment Opportunity reports, known as EEO-1s. There's no central database of these reports for job-seekers to explore the racial makeup of companies they are applying to, but large companies often post recent reports for public access (they're typically a year or two old). Searching the web for "EEO report" and the company name can usually find a recent report.

Black candidates can also steer themselves to locations where Black people are already employed or actively cultivated in tech, Cotton says — cities where Black people are in or near the majority of the population, have a solid presence in the business world, and are part of the power structures at all levels. While there is no standard list of such cities, Atlanta, Detroit, Memphis, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. are among those often cited. Such locations also allow for greater career growth, as there are multiple employers receptive to Black professionals.

Employers, don't get left behind

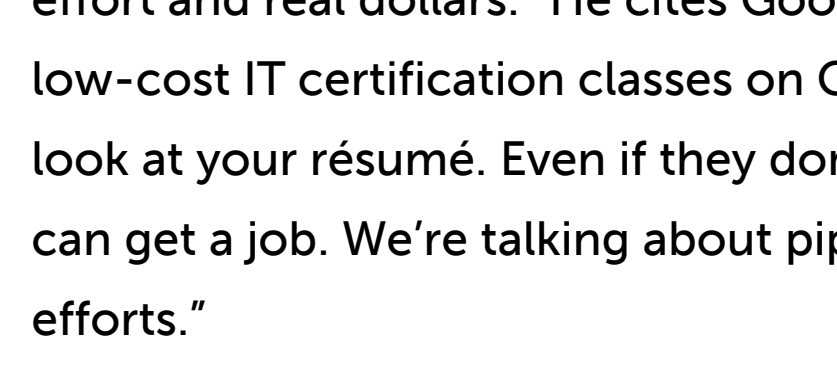
A hire is a mutual contract that for long-term success needs to work for the employer and employee alike. In the quest to hire and retain Black talent, the advantage goes to companies with ties to the Black community and prior success in establishing a good professional and cultural environment for Black employees.

Organizations that don't have those advantages, but want to increase their diversity, will compete for Black job candidates who see real opportunity in those companies that have created an environment where Black workers can thrive. That's why it is so important to reach out on a sustained basis and become part of the Black community.

Those nondiverse organizations also will compete with companies in regions with high Black representation in business, where the range of opportunities for Black people is often greater, and Black candidates don't have to be the pioneers for their community. As Cotton says, Black job seekers in her home state of California, where Black people are not well represented in management or other leadership, can look to cities like Atlanta and know they will fit in, plus have a lower cost of living than in California. For Cotton, it's a sad realization about the state where she was born, raised, and then returned to. Black residents in other white- and Asian-dominated tech centers like Seattle, Boston, and Austin, Texas, may also be tempted to relocate to cities with higher Black populations.

Still, she is guardedly optimistic that the rest of the country will finally do better. "People are starting to wake up and realizing that there needs to be a bigger change, a bigger effort for creating change for the Black community, in education, in the workplace, and in business."

Jackson also sees "very early stage" progress. "I do see some genuine effort and real dollars." He cites Google's efforts to market to minorities its low-cost IT certification classes on Coursera. "When you're done, they'll look at your résumé. Even if they don't end up working for Google, they can get a job. We're talking about pipelines for the future. They are making efforts."



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Jackson also notes that he's had great conversations with Best Buy, which is headquartered near Minneapolis, where he is based. But he says such efforts remain few and far between, with more attention made at most companies to marketing diversity intentions than actually delivering on them.

Another glimmer of hope that real change can happen: The shift to remote work caused by the pandemic also provides disruption in where staff can reside and in how work is done, providing an opportunity to reshape work policies in a way that increases diversity, says Gartner's Romansky. "This is a great time to disrupt these processes."

Now, businesses just need to follow through on increasing diversity by doing the actual work now and over the long term.

Editor's note: This story has been updated with information from Intuit about working with San Diego Code School and AnitaB.org on apprenticeships.

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Galen Gruman is executive editor for global content at IDG Foundry Co.'s enterprise sites.

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