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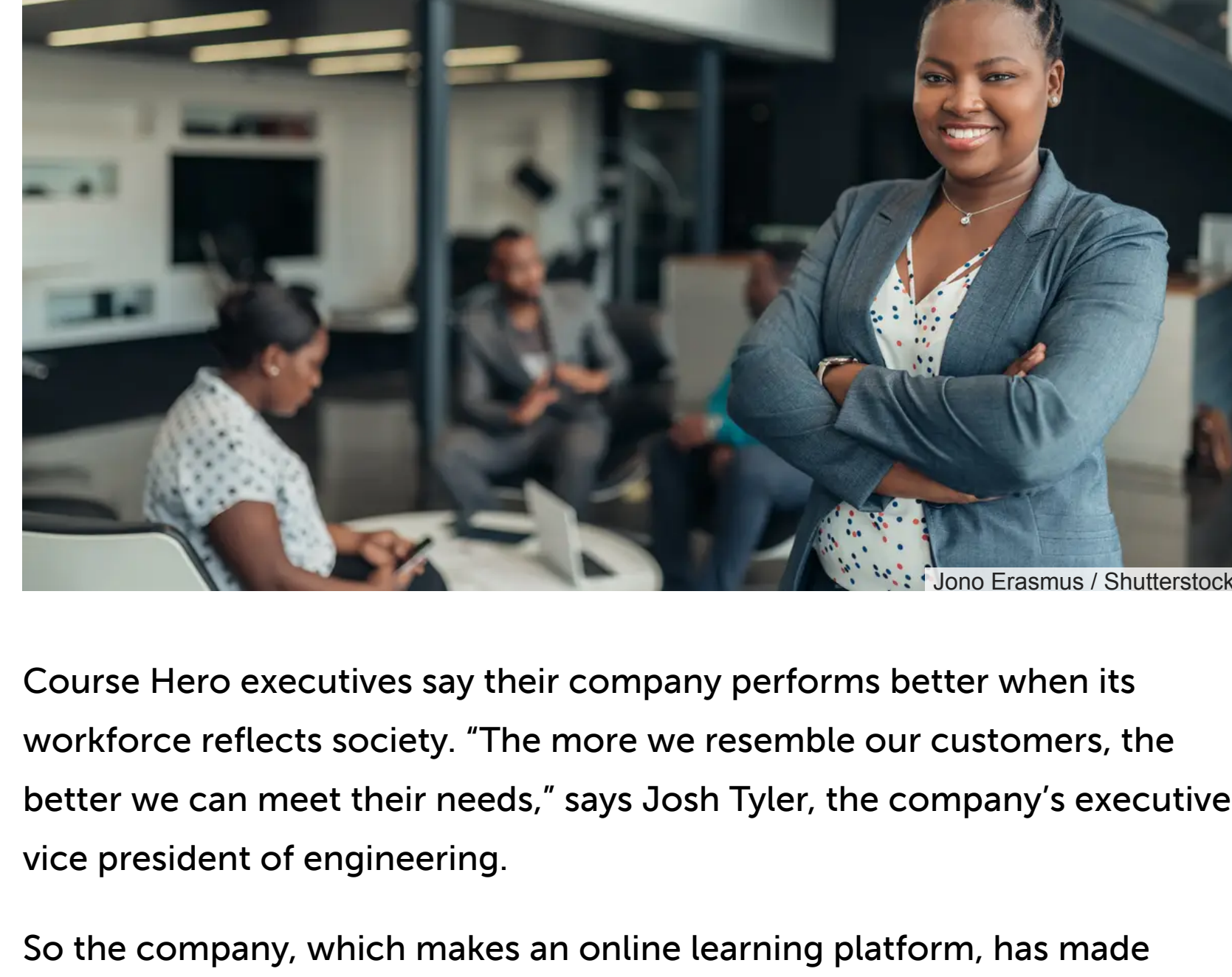
FEATURE

Diversity in IT: To hire Black tech pros, partnerships are key

Employers looking to diversify their IT workforce have found success partnering with Black-oriented professional groups and educational organizations that seek to create diversity in tech.



By Mary K. Pratt
Contributing writer, Computerworld | FEB 17, 2022 3:00 AM PST



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Course Hero executives say their company performs better when its workforce reflects society. "The more we resemble our customers, the better we can meet their needs," says Josh Tyler, the company's executive vice president of engineering.

So the company, which makes an online learning platform, has made diversity a strategic priority. In 2019, as Course Hero started to see accelerated growth and a related spike in hiring needs, it evaluated its culture, adjusting programs to ensure the workplace environment was equitable and inclusive, a place where workers from various backgrounds feel they belong and know they can succeed.

It tweaked its interview and candidate evaluation processes to make sure they were "consistent, fair, bias-free, and accurate," Tyler says. The company leveraged an augmented writing platform by [Textio](#) to identify any biases in job descriptions and then updated them so they would appeal to a full spectrum of candidates. It developed rubrics to systematize interviews and remove subjectivity.

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And it broadened recruitment efforts and formed new partnerships, including one with [CodePath](#), a nonprofit training program that aims to increase diversity in tech.

Those efforts proved effective: The company doubled the percentage of underrepresented groups in its new hires in just one year, going from 21% in 2020 to 41% in 2021.

Course Hero's record, however, is far from the norm, as the technology profession remains predominately white with an underrepresentation of Black workers. [Research from the career site Zippia](#), for example, found that 69.4% of all computer programmers in the US are white, 15.2% are Asian, 8.1% are Hispanic or Latino, and 4.6% are Black or African American.

Looking more broadly at technology careers, an April 2021 [Pew Research Center report](#) stated that Black workers make up 11% of the US workforce but hold only 7% of computing jobs and only 5% of engineering jobs.

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This information is not news: neither is the presence of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs in the corporate world. Yet after years of discussion about the low representation of Black workers in the profession, as well as the underrepresentation of women and other minorities, the numbers haven't moved to any significant degree.

That isn't surprising, according to DEI researchers and advocates. They note that the factors that contribute to underrepresentation — from inequitable access to quality science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) classes in grade school to biases in hiring practices — persist.

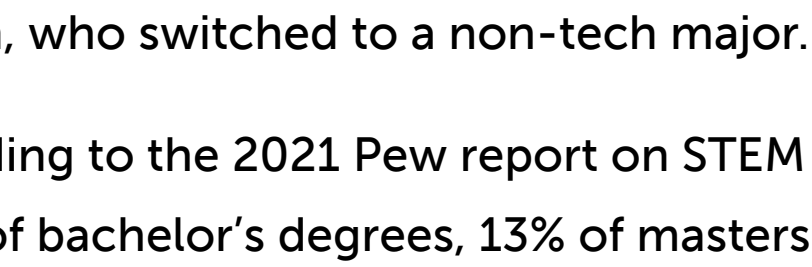
However, they say, many organizations and enterprise executives have committed themselves to changing those dynamics. They're reshaping workforce programs and addressing systemic issues, in part through partnerships with outside organizations, to successfully diversify their own tech teams and build a more diverse pipeline of tech talent. And their success stories can provide guidance for other companies that want a more balanced IT workforce, but don't know where to begin.

"The goal," says CodePath co-founder and CEO Michael Ellison, "is to make tech reflect the makeup of the general population."

Building solutions from experience

Ellison, who launched his first nonprofit while in college and later became a tech entrepreneur, started CodePath, in part, because he understood the challenges that keep minorities out of IT.

After growing up in a low-income, single-parent household, Ellison first majored in computer science — and found himself in classes with students whose more affluent backgrounds had allowed them greater access to programming courses throughout their teens.



CodePath
Michael Ellison, co-founder and CEO, CodePath

"I felt like I didn't belong," says Ellison, who switched to a non-tech major. His experience is not unusual. According to the 2021 Pew report on STEM jobs, Black students earned only 9% of bachelor's degrees, 13% of masters' degrees, and 7% of all research doctorates in computer science fields during the 2017–2018 school year.

CodePath now addresses such inequities. The San Francisco-based nonprofit provides supplemental tech classes and curriculum at more than 70 two- and four-year colleges serving underrepresented populations. Its programs connect students with companies such as Course Hero, and it holds virtual career fairs, where employers are required to interview every candidate CodePath presents to them to help ensure equal access to opportunities.

"A lot of companies are interested in diversity, but don't know what they need to do. They have to diversify their selection process," Ellison says.

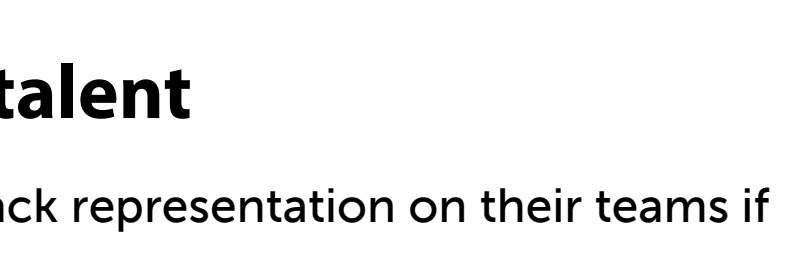
CodePath has had success on that front: 85% of the Black and Hispanic/Latino students it has taught are now working in tech as software engineers.

Roadblocks to diversity in tech

Ellison's story illustrates the confluence of factors that DEI advocates say has created an underrepresentation of Black technology pros. They point out longstanding economic, educational, and social disparities that limit early access to quality STEM programs and that later stymie entrance into and advancement within the tech profession.

Emmanuel Matthews, group technical program manager at Course Hero, cites the birdcage metaphor that's often used to illustrate systemic racism (and sexism): each individual roadblock, or bar, may not be significant alone, but they create a nearly impenetrable barrier when lined up together.

"It's not solely a technical problem; it's a social problem, it's an access problem, it's a career navigation problem," says Michael Collins, vice president of [Jobs for the Future \(JFF\)](#), a national nonprofit dedicated to driving transformation in the American workforce and education systems. "It's about who gets opportunity, who gets exposed to the skills, who has access to broadband."



Michael Collins, vice president, JFF

In August 2021 JFF announced a [\\$500,000 partnership with Comcast NBCUniversal](#) to support research aimed at identifying practices and policies that can lead to the advancement of Black learners and workers in technology and digital fields. Collins, who heads up the initiative, says one of the goals is to create a framework for improving education and career outcomes for Black learners and workers.

Tapping the pipeline of talent

DEI advocates say CIOs can boost Black representation on their teams if they go beyond their typical recruiting habits.

"We hear companies say, 'We can't find minority talent.' But the diversity is there, it's about where you're looking," says Holly Rachel, co-founder of R+W Data Consulting, co-organizer of the [Nashville chapter of the Blacks in Technology Foundation](#) (BIT-Nashville), and co-founder of the nonprofit training program [LocalTek](#).

LocalTek, also based in Nashville, recruits local workers from diverse communities and trains them on in-demand skills. It combines boot camps and coursework with mentoring and apprenticeship-type engagements to train and upskill individuals based on what partner companies need.

"We're literally saying that in the time we're with them, we'll give you what you need. We can make a unicorn out of an individual," says Lena Winfree, also a co-founder of LocalTek, R + W Data Consulting, and BIT-Nashville.

LocalTek launched a pilot program in early 2022. The initiative, sponsored by HCA Healthcare and Dell Technologies, is providing 22 employees from area medical institutions with a free 12-week training course in healthcare analytics provided by LocalTek and Nashville Software School in partnership with Next Generation Healthcare Analytics and BIT-Nashville.

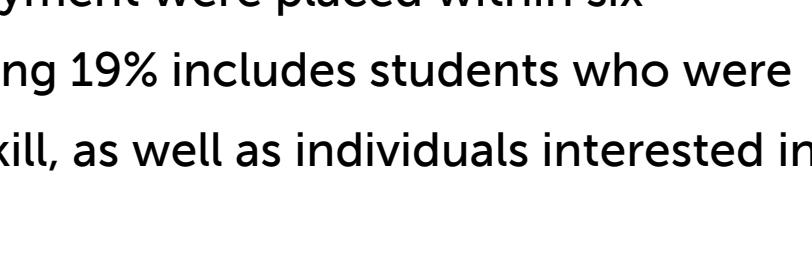
Nashville-area DEI advocates as well as CIOs and others in the tech community see such programs as critical to addressing the need for employers to broaden their recruiting reach and the need for all to bolster a more diverse talent pipeline.

"Companies complain that there's not diverse candidates, because the supply is not conducive for getting minorities through the pipeline," says Charles Apigian, executive director of the Data Collaborative at Belmont University near Nashville. "We need to do a better job of creating a pipeline that all are part of."

Small programs can make a difference

Like Course Hero, Shipt has prioritized efforts to grow the diversity of its tech workforce. "There's important work to do to increase diversity and inclusivity in the tech industry, and we believe that building diverse and inclusive teams takes intention and action," says Shipt CTO Mike Calvo.

The Birmingham, Ala.-based company, which operates an app-based shopping and delivery service in cities throughout the US, has formed partnerships and connections with various diversity-oriented organizations, including [BLK Men in Tech](#), [Black Women Talk Tech](#), and [Black Tech Takeover](#). Shipt uses these partnerships as recruiting resources but also contributes to their missions by offering workforce development opportunities through them.



Shipt
Mike Calvo, CTO, Shipt

Then there's its partnership with [Pivot Technology School](#), founded by Quawn Clark and Joshua Mundy in 2019 to work with companies to bring more diversity to tech. The Nashville-based school offers 20-week boot camps in cybersecurity, data analytics, and software development for individual students, and it works with companies seeking to diversify their tech shops through custom training programs.

"We saw a niche in the marketplace," Mundy says, adding that tech careers represent a pathway to prosperity for minorities who continue to lag behind in national income.

Pivot Tech School is open to all, although it draws mostly Black trainees through its partnerships and community connections. It has trained about 350 students, 90% of whom are Black. Some 81% of the individuals who graduated and actively sought employment were placed within six months. (Clark notes that the remaining 19% includes students who were already employed but wanted to upskill, as well as individuals interested in starting their own businesses.)

The pair also recently launched Pivot Tech Solutions, a managed service provider, to create opportunities for graduates to gain the hands-on experience that builds resumes — and upward career trajectories.

Shipt partnered with Pivot Tech School in July 2021, when it sponsored 32 students for a 20-week remote training program in back-end software development and data analytics. Nineteen of the students were Shipt employees who wanted to move out of their current nontechnical positions into IT jobs; the other 13 were from the Birmingham community and similarly wanted to transition into a technical career.

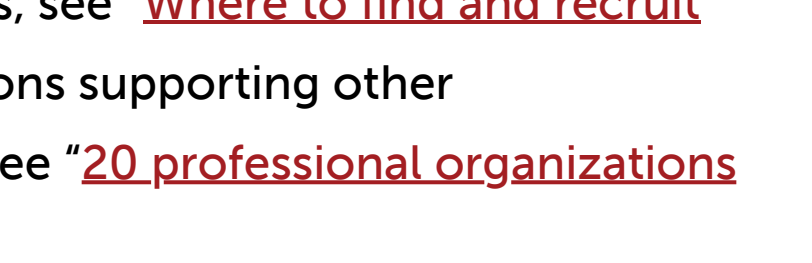
Pivot extended job offers to the 26 students who graduated from the program, with 25 of them accepting and now working at Shipt as either associate engineers or data analysts. Of those 25, 13 are women, and 10 are from underrepresented populations.

Inspired by the success of that first cohort, Shipt plans to work with the school to train another group later in 2022. "We need a diverse team with diverse experiences and an inclusive culture that fosters diversity of thought and approach to build the very best solutions and innovations that will matter most to all those we serve," says Calvo.

Recruiting for potential, not proficiency

Motorola Solutions is another company that has made diversity, equity, and inclusion a priority, says Chief Diversity Officer Tinisha Agramonte. Its numbers support that assertion: According to the company's [2020 Corporate Responsibility Report](#), the most recent one available, 36% of new hires in the United States were people of color in 2020, up from 32% the prior year.

Agramonte credits the vendor's improved DEI record to the multi-pronged, sustained initiatives the company has taken. Those efforts include an internship program that has been revamped to ensure inclusivity.



Tinisha Stewart, Chief Diversity Officer, Motorola Solutions

As Agramonte explains, corporate internship programs have traditionally awarded spots to students who are already highly proficient in needed skills. That policy favors those who have had access to opportunities such as STEM camps, Advanced Placement high school classes, and robotics clubs, while shutting out many talented lower-income and first-generation college students (and thus a higher percentage of Black students).

To counteract that, Agramonte says, Motorola Solutions in 2021 decided to recruit for potential instead of proficiency. The move yielded immediate results. Motorola Solutions' intern cohort from the University of Illinois Research Park went from less than 10% to more than 30% underrepresented students in just one year.

The company also created more and enhanced existing partnerships with various organizations, such as [historically black colleges and universities](#) (HBCUs) and the [National Society of Black Engineers](#), to help reach a fuller spectrum of students and workers. It has also added more programming to those partnerships, using events such as panel discussions to engage more people and to pass along career-building information.

"These programs are a great way to build a diverse pipeline of talent for current and future technology-based roles while establishing new relationships with university organizations," says company CIO Samir Dahiya.

Read next:

- For a list of Black-oriented professional organizations and other places to find Black tech workers, see ["Where to find and recruit Black tech pros."](#) (For organizations supporting other underrepresented groups in IT, see ["20 professional organizations focused on diversity in tech."](#))
- For advice from leaders in the Black tech community on attracting and Black tech talent and creating an equitable workplace, see ["How to hire and retain Black tech pros — for real."](#)

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