

You've Created a Robust Diversity Initiative. But is it working for your Black Employees?

Change Company Culture to be more Inclusive & Equitable to Black Colleagues

By Sherri Holmes

Over the last 18 months many companies have pledged to do more for their Black employees. Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) were formed, HR departments re-evaluated hiring policies and implemented new practices like blind resume screening, and co-workers pledged to do better. The problem, however, is that though well-intentioned, often the “cure” that many organizations came up with didn't factor in why there is

an issue in the first place. The root cause of the “disease” and how it manifests differently for Black people versus other underrepresented groups was not fully examined. Most people in America (not just white people) don't really know or understand the plight of Black Americans. Some, quite frankly, don't care to know, especially not at work.

How Black people *really* feel at work

One key part in fully including a group into a culture is attempting to understand their experience. We've done it as a country to one degree or another with some ethnic groups. Both Irish and Italian Americans were not fully accepted when they first arrived on our shores. However, today most of us are familiar with their stories and empathize with the struggles they endured to become accepted.

Until recently, no one really thought to ask Black folks how they were faring at work. Most were silently suffering and experiencing a slow decline in their mental and physical health. Processing these feelings have been even more heightened due to remote work during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Many Black people, particularly women, say working from home has allowed them to see how it feels to experience work in the absence of toxic microaggressions. In Venessa Wong's BuzzFeed article [*These People Of Color Are Anxious About Racist Microaggressions When They Return To The Office*](#), she quotes Linnea, a Black woman, who states she *“no longer had to endure white managers at her office discounting her ideas only to praise them when they were repeated by white colleagues. She didn't have to*

see white people give their dirty dishes to the catering and janitorial staff, who were usually people of color, without saying a word or otherwise acknowledging their presence. She no longer felt labeled as “that loud, angry, Black woman” and no longer had to deal with “painful and traumatic reminders that I do not necessarily belong here, and these institutions and these workplaces weren't built for people like myself”.

This is the sentiment of many Black employees. Working from home was a respite.

According to [Coqual's report on Being Black in Corporate America](#), 65 % of Black workers are very ambitious in their careers versus 53% of white workers, yet 1 in 5 Black professionals feel that someone like them would never make it to a top executive level in their company. Only 3% of white workers feel the same. A Black survey taker in the report opines, *“There are not many senior leaders that look like me. So how am I going to get to that level, how is there a path for me?”* Others see a disparity in how white people are groomed to explore career goals versus Black people. As one Black Gen X woman in management notes in Coqual's report,

“If I were to say to my supervisor, ‘I don’t know what I want to do, but I want to change my job,’ that’s like saying you don’t have it together. But I have White counterparts who say that all the time, and people move mountains to create positions for them.”

Black workers are not receiving the same level of mentorship, sponsorship and allyship from executives and company leaders. Often Black employees are held at

a different standard when it comes to promotions. The bar is constantly moving, and no clear parameters have been established for advancement.

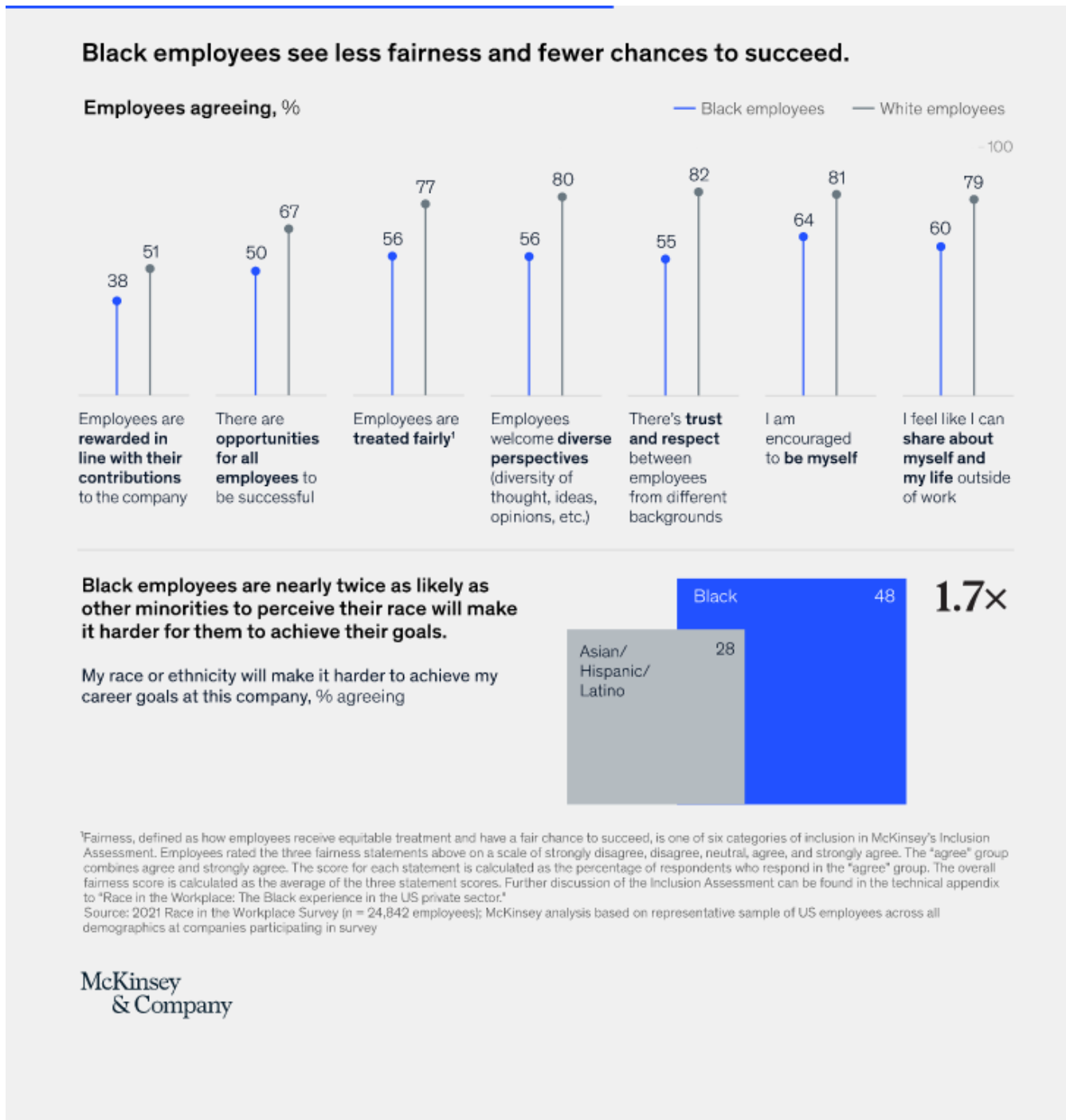


Figure 1 - Screen capture from <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/the-black-experience-at-work-in-charts>

They are more likely than any other group to encounter racial prejudice at work...

The majority of Black professionals have experienced racial prejudice at work. Unsurprisingly, this cohort is nearly four times as likely to encounter prejudice as White professionals are (58% vs. 15%)—but we also find a marked difference when we compare Black to Latinx (41%) and Asian (38%) professionals. In our sample, Black professionals working in the West and Midwest are even more likely, which could be due to lower Black population levels in those regions.⁵ Without as much exposure to Black people, colleagues have fewer opportunities to correct for stereotypes they've picked up.

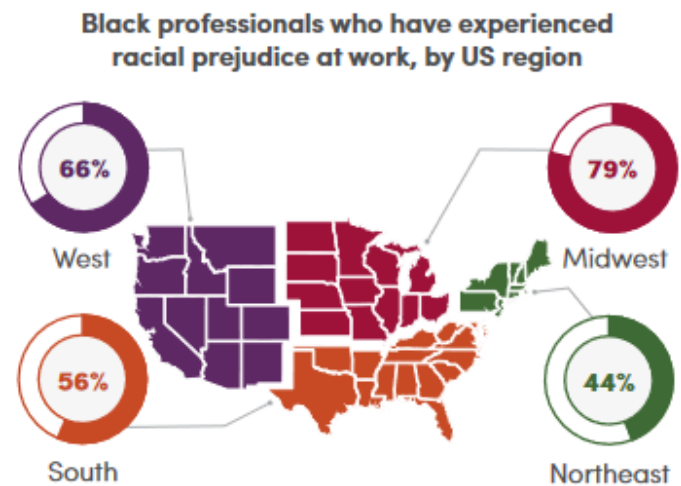


Figure 2 Screen capture from <https://coqual.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CoqualBeingBlackinCorporateAmerica090720-1.pdf>

One person I interviewed stated she felt “like a woman waiting for an engagement ring...when are you going to make the commitment to promote me?”

Studies have shown that diversity initiatives often wind up becoming an exercise in corporate good will without any meaningful change, particularly for Black people. Most HR professionals focus on programs that promote not only racial diversity, but diversity for all underrepresented groups, including white women. Black people now find themselves lumped into the “People of Color” group which doesn’t accurately identify the unique needs of Black employees. American workers of African descent value inclusivity and transparency more than anything else. Another woman I spoke to, Nicole, noted ***“I just want to be able to come up with an idea, have my colleagues evaluate it seriously, and if good, implement it. Instead, I get blank stares and puzzled looks. I’m usually five steps ahead of the people I present to, but because they assume I’m five steps***

behind them, they don’t even try to understand my proposals.” Instead of being included as a valued member of the team, she was othered. Even those with seniority, like myself, experience disparate treatment. When my team moved to an open office plan, I noticed a change. Every time I left my desk for even a short time, my boss wanted to know where I was. Sometimes she’d loudly ask my co-workers if they knew where I’d gone. If she saw me leaving, she wanted to know exactly when I’d be back. When the entire team was scheduled to go to a meeting, she singled me out publicly to inform me that there was a meeting I needed to get to. As a matter of fact, she began requiring me to give her a copy of all my meetings for the day. My white and Asian colleagues were never subjected to the same requirements or treatment.

Where did all this bias come from?

It's not surprising that there are many stories like Nicole's and Linnea's. There is a historical context regarding how Black labor is perceived in America. All of us are aware that Black people were enslaved in America during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. In 1860, cotton, a \$3 Billion crop in today's dollars, was planted and harvested primarily by enslaved people. This crop paved the way for America's future status as an economic powerhouse. Later, after Black people were freed, those that became incarcerated (usually as a result of [Black Codes](#)) were leased out by jails to corporations for free or substantially discounted rates. According to authors Opie and Roberts in [Do black lives really matter in the workplace? Restorative justice as a means to reclaim humanity](#), ***"Convict leasing, where states receive money for leasing out convicts for involuntary work assignments, was used to maximize economic gain particularly in the South, though the practice was also utilized in states such as Massachusetts, California and Oregon"***. This practice still exists today in the form of Prison labor. So, in other words, Black people have historically been viewed as a group of people whose labor is meant to be exploited. Money is made by companies, yet Black workers are grossly underpaid. One way to feel justified in this endeavor is to reduce the Black population into negative stereotypes.

Unconscious bias and the pursuit of whiteness

As I mentioned earlier, some "ethnic" whites were not accepted upon their arrival here. They were not even considered to be white. Their customs and facial features were

The Exploitation of Black Labor in America: A History

1860

Cotton, a \$3 Billion crop in today's dollars, was planted and harvested primarily by enslaved people.



1865

Black Codes - Enacted in 1865 and 1866, these laws were designed to replace the social controls of slavery that had been removed by the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment. These laws were all intended to secure a steady supply of cheap labor, and all continued to assume the inferiority of the freed slaves.



1865

Reconstruction - the period (1865-77) that followed the American Civil War and during which attempts were made to redress the inequities of slavery and its political, social, and economic legacy. Reconstruction did away with the black codes, but, after Reconstruction ended in 1877, many of their provisions were reenacted in the Jim Crow laws.



1877

Jim Crow Begins - most Blacks are employed in physical labor, sharecropping and as household servants at very low wages with long hours. **Convict leasing** is prevalent - There were vagrancy laws that declared a black person to be vagrant if unemployed and without permanent residence; a person so defined could be arrested, fined, and bound out for a term of labor if unable to pay the fine.



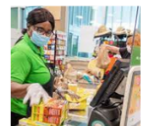
1964

Civil Rights Act of 1964 - Jim Crow ends but exploitative labor practices and workplace discrimination continues despite the new law.



2021

Black people are 14% of the working population but only 6% of Executives. Conversely, they represent 45% of low paying service jobs. 43% make less than \$30,000 per year. Their lives were put in jeopardy during the Covid-19 Pandemic in order keep other Americans fed and cared for.



mocked. They were accused of possessing animalistic characteristics and of having poor morals. However, over time they “became white” in American society’s eyes. As long as there were Black people at the bottom of the racial hierarchy of the United States, other groups had a shot at “whiteness”. Most people don’t realize they are biased in favor of whiteness or white norms. Think about the negative and positive stereotypes we’ve all heard about different groups. Blacks are perceived by other races as aggressive, lazy, loud, threatening, not leadership material, uneducated, poor, not intelligent. Asians, however, are viewed as intelligent, quiet, non-

threatening, hard-working, educated and compliant. These stereotypes paint Asians as “model minorities” and Blacks as “undesirable minorities”. Many people bring these beliefs into the workplace. The advent of the “model minority” coincides with the beginning of pushback on Affirmative Action in the 1980s and 1990s. Corporations started to move away from affirmative action as a corrective measure for the mistreatment of Black people and focused on diversity of all groups before true equity was reached for Black workers. As a result, Black employees rarely make it into management or senior leadership positions.

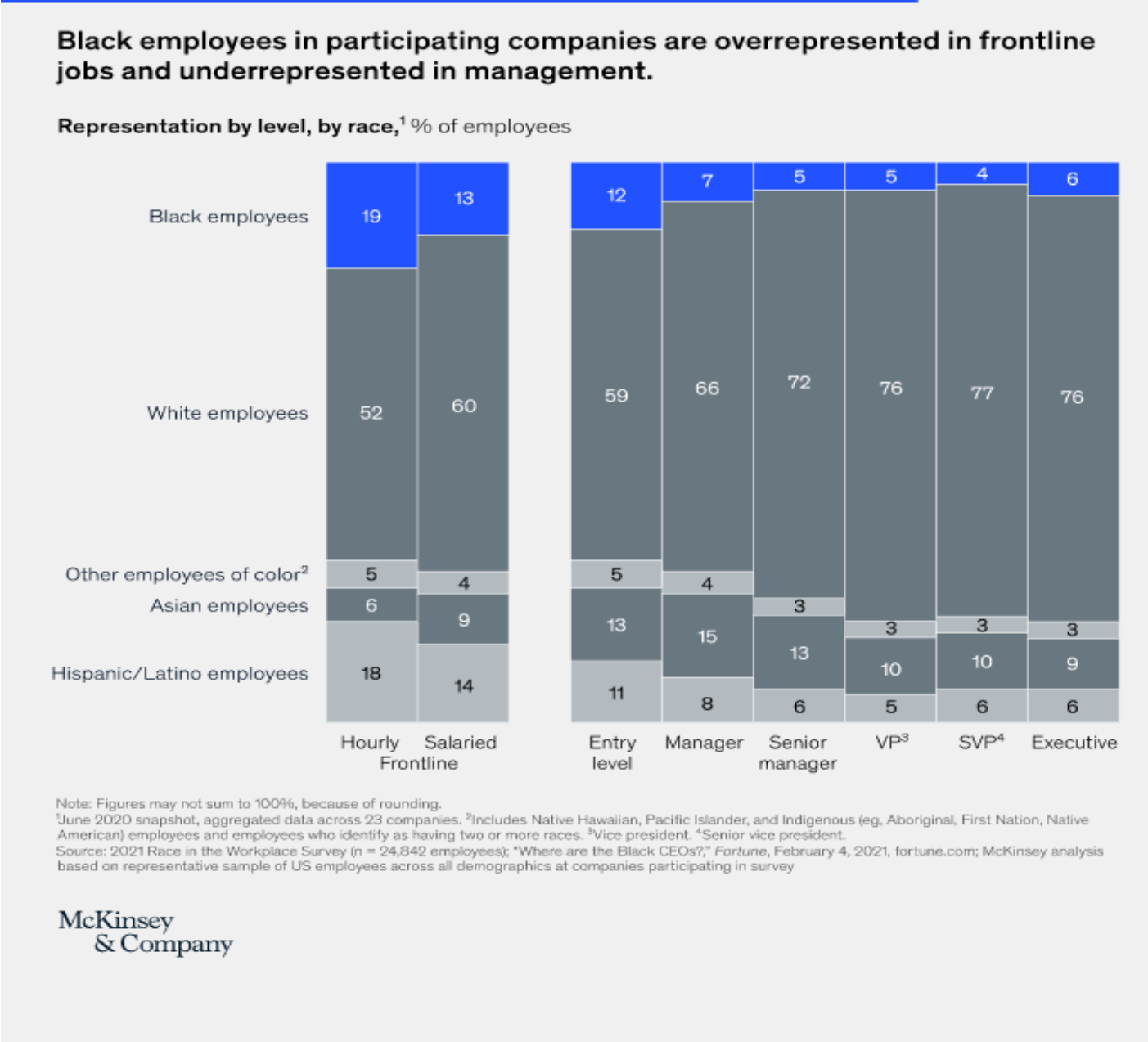


Figure 3Screen capture from <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/race-in-the-workplace-the-black-experience-in-the-us-private-sector>

The state of Black Employment

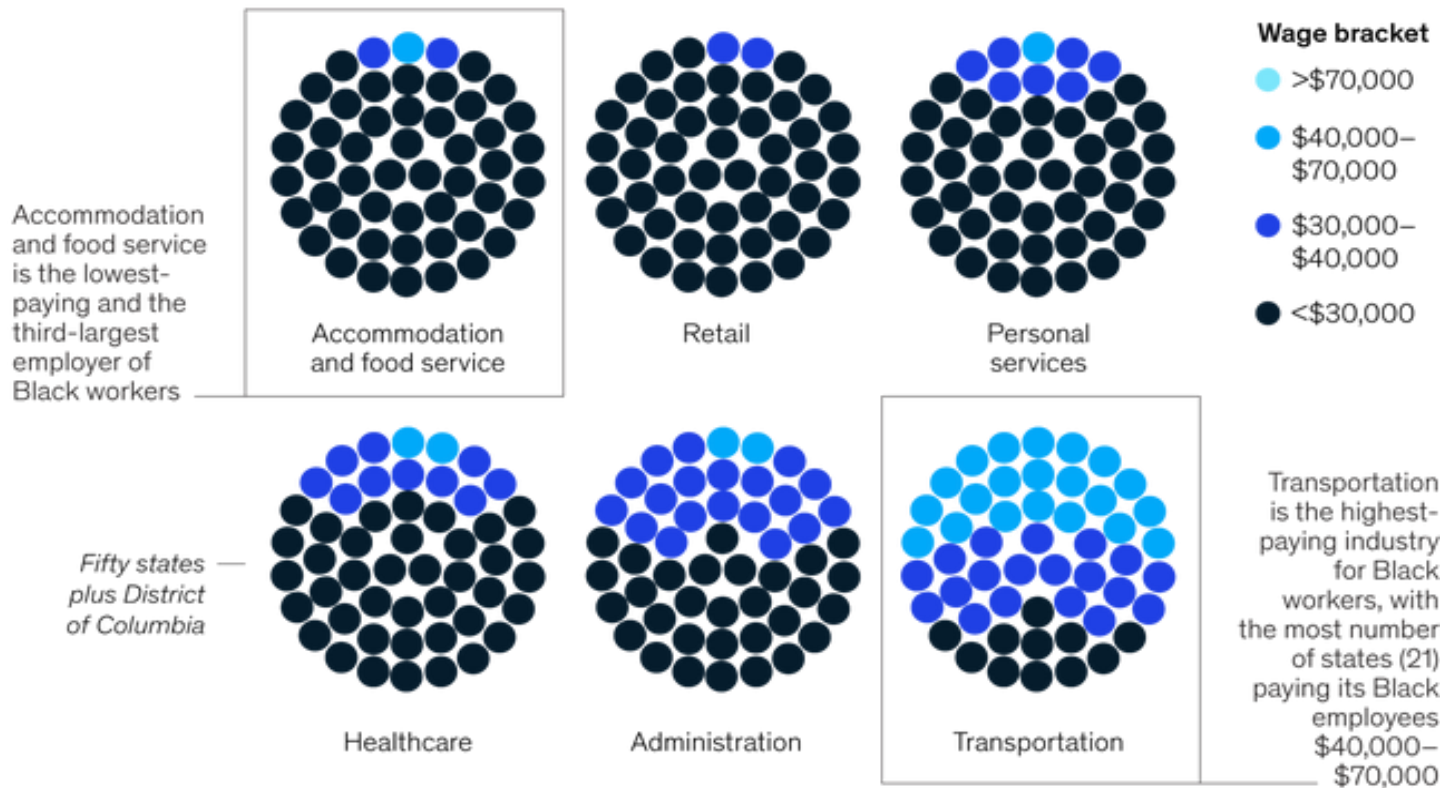
Currently, a large share (45%) of Black workers in the private-sector are employed in low paying service jobs in three sectors, [healthcare, retail, and accommodation and food service](#). 43% are making less than \$30,000 per year compared to 29% of the rest of the private sector, according to McKinsey & Company's report, "[Race in the workplace: The Black experience in the US private sector](#)". Black workers are overrepresented in low-wage industries and underrepresented in high growth, high wage industries where their employment levels are lower than their college graduation rates. The two

biggest reasons for this is there is no clear pathway for Black workers to advance from entry level jobs to managerial ones, which decreases the likelihood of getting to the executive level. The other is that about [60% of the Black labor force is concentrated in the South](#) in slow-growth regions. Today's hot new high-growth areas are in predominately white cities. So, where Black people live plays a large role in how they are employed. Many Black people aren't going to move to all-white cities for job opportunities. They don't want to be the only one; they'd be unhappy and probably feel unsafe.

Black workers are concentrated in lower-paying service industries.

Workers, by industry, by wage, number of states

Black



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment Statistics, 2019; Moody's Analytics

McKinsey
& Company

Figure 4 Screen Capture from <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/race-in-the-workplace-the-black-experience-in-the-us-private-sector>

So, what do we do? What are some solutions?

Implement policies that make Black employees want to stay

According to surveyed Black workers in Coqual's report, here are some actionable items that keep them satisfied at their places of work:

- Expect inclusive behavior from *all* employees
- Treat Black employees with respect
- All employees should be held accountable for harassment
- Mandate bias training
- Offer moderated conversations about race

- Provide transparency on how to get promotions
- Be intentional about promoting Black employees from
- Promote Black people into Senior leadership positions
- Offer sponsorship and mentorship from company leaders

- CEOs should be committed to D&I
- Establish a positive company reputation around D&I
- Provide funding to attend conferences for Black people
- Use diverse vendors

Do an Audit - make transformative changes

- Understand the current state of a company's Black workers through interviews, focus groups and surveys
- Reflect on how people may have "othered" Black workers
- Generate awareness and empathy: Practice acknowledging the validity of others' experiences
- Get educated through films, books, talks, etc.

Bring the work to them

Another McKinsey report, [“One Move Companies Can Take to Improve Diversity”](#) suggests that companies go to where Black workers live. Many Black people aren’t going to move to all-white cities for job opportunities where they may feel alienated. The article focuses on the idea of relocating hubs, factories and offices into cities with large Black populations. It gives an example of Microsoft establishing a hub in Douglas and Fulton Counties in Georgia, which are areas with high Black populations. According to the report,

“The impact that moves such as these have on the Black community can be significant. In almost every state, Black employees are underrepresented in jobs relative to their educational attainment”

If 200 companies were to do this one time, corporate America could site an additional 100,000 jobs in Black neighborhoods and create 50,000 more opportunities for Black workers.”

This is also a concrete example of how to help one of the issues facing Black workers – employment that commensurate with educational level, which would lead to representation in company leadership. Since the Covid-19 pandemic has brought about the emergence of remote work as an acceptable replacement for in-person work, a version of this proposal could be attainable for smaller companies. Consider recruiting from southern cities and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

Join a coalition of CEOs committed to implementing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion within the workplace

[CEO Action for Diversity & Inclusion](#) is a coalition of 2,000 CEOs who have signed a pledge to “cultivate environments where diverse experiences and perspectives are welcomed and where employees feel comfortable and encouraged to discuss diversity and inclusion”. There is a strong focus on unpacking unconscious bias as well as sharing successful D&I initiatives with each other. Many companies have implemented [actions](#) that address specific issues like hiring and promoting Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) folks into leadership positions.

Final Words

Of course, these suggestions are only a small foray into what is surely a very comprehensive lists of solutions on such a deep and complex subject. However, it is my sincerest hope that you will find some value in this article to help equitably leverage and keep the wonderful, but often overlooked, talent and ambition of Black workers.

For further study on this topic, consider the following:

[Building an Anti-Racist Workplace - TIME'S UP Foundation \(timesupfoundation.org\)](#)

<https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/diversity%20and%20inclusion/one%20move%20companies%20can%20take%20to%20improve%20diversity/one-move-companies-can-take-to-improve-diversity.pdf?shouldIndex=false>

<https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race>