

The Discrimination of Black People in The Tech Industry

The technology (tech) industry is one of the fastest-growing industries of society today, but even with its benefits, it still has several issues regarding discrimination and diversity. More specifically, Black people have been underrepresented in the tech industry for decades and have had to face challenges such as unequal pay and limited progression opportunities. In a White and Asian-dominated industry, Black people are unable to make their way in without feeling like they do not belong. By exploring the history and present state of discrimination in the tech industry, as well as the experiences of Black people in the tech industry concerning race and tech, we can reveal the main problems the industry faces and attempt to fix them to create a more equal industry for all races.

Historically, it has been believed that White and Asian people are better able to learn the higher skills needed to obtain jobs within the tech industry. As a result of this belief, it is harder for Black people to have a chance to obtain these types of jobs because of the perception that Black people are unable to learn these skills. One factor that could have contributed to this perception is the disparity in educational attainment among Black, White, and Asian people. According to an article by Sonia Gatchair, a senior lecturer at the University of the West Indies, “African Americans, Hispanics, and others continue to lag behind Whites and Asians in the level of educational attainment, particularly in S&E studies despite making educational gains since the mid-1970s.”¹ This shows that Black people are making progress toward learning these skills to obtain science and engineering (S&E) jobs, but there is a level of attainment that is not being reached. Striking a balance between the need for technical skills and several decades' worth of

¹ Sonia Gatchair, “Race/Ethnicity and Education Effects on Employment in High Technology Industries and Occupations in the US, 1992–2002,” pp. 358.

discrimination against Black people is difficult, and it can be challenging to break the mold of prejudice even if they are highly qualified.²

In the 1980s, there was a push for the Black community to become more educated which has led to Black people being able to compete more for these tech roles in the industry. In the book, *Black Software: The Internet and Racial Justice, from the AfroNet to Black Lives Matter*, by Charlton McIlwain, he states that more black students “attended college. More graduates started careers at higher rungs on the professional ladder. [...] But there was a trade-off. The strong community ties [...] began to weaken, fragment, or disappear altogether.”³ This plays a role in the balance of Black people within the tech industry because of the potential association McIlwain made between success and losing that sense of community. With this association in the minds of potential Black employees, this could hinder their chances of wanting to pursue proper education, which leads to the lack of proper skills needed for jobs in the tech industry.

Another way that the tech industry historically made it difficult for Black people to enter was because of Silicon Valley and its drug use in the 1980s. Silicon Valley is an area in the Bay Area in California, which has played a pivotal role in the development and growth of the tech industry. It has attracted top talent, stimulated innovation, and provided a supportive ecosystem for startups and established companies for technological advancement. However, it originally was successful because of cocaine and its impact on the work environment. McIlwain discusses how “cocaine was designed to provide pleasure, stimulate entertainment, prolong mental acuity, and allow people to stay awake longer and work more hours in a day” which is a bizarre concept that leads down a slippery slope.⁴ Laws like the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984

² Gatchair, pp. 358

³ McIlwain, Charlton D. *Black Software: The Internet and Racial Justice, From The Afronet to Black Lives Matter*. pp. 79

⁴ *Black Software* pp. 150

(3CA) and the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 (ADAA), have disproportionately affected Black individuals more than White individuals — causing Black people to be arrested and punished for drug offenses despite similar rates of drug use. This results in discrimination against Black people because the same opportunities are not being granted to everyone and this has led to diversity issues throughout the US.

There have been some attempts to address diversity within the tech industry, which have had some impact but have not made a significant difference to the industry as a whole. For example, Amazon launched its Black Employee Network in August 2005 to support the development and advancement of Black employees within the company. However, the network did not have a strong enough foundation to have a real impact on Amazon, as there are still not many Black people in higher-level positions. According to Amazon's data from 2018-2020, of all their entry/mid-level corporate employees, around 5.8% are Black. For corporate/warehouse managers, around 8.7% are Black, and for senior managers and executives, around 2.4% are Black across the three years.⁵ Even when there are programs made specifically to advance Black employees in the company, the numbers do not show much change in the right direction.

In the modern day, there is still a lack of Black people in the tech industry, and even if there were efforts made to increase the number of Black employees, there is not enough effort to keep them at the company. In 2022, Zippia, a career platform like LinkedIn, compiled data from companies like Google, Facebook, and Microsoft based on their total high-tech workforce — split up by race. For Google, Facebook, and Microsoft, only 8.8%, 3.9%, and 4.9% of their total workforce are Black, respectively.⁶ Even if tech companies are trying to increase the number of

⁵ Long, Katherine Anne. “New Amazon Data Shows Black, Latino and Female Employees Are Underrepresented in Best-Paid Jobs.” The Seattle Times. The Seattle Times Company, April 14, 2021

⁶ Ariella, Sky. “25+ Telling Diversity in High Tech Statistics [2023]: Tech Demographics + Trends.” Zippia, November 7, 2022.

Black employees, it is still not enough to make an impact that could influence the whole tech industry to avoid having prejudices against the people they want to hire. However, with Google having the highest percentage of Black people in the company, it does show that efforts are being made, but just hiring Black people is not enough. Tech companies need to curate a working environment that helps develop and advance Black people within the company because, without that, they will leave and go somewhere else.

A reason why these percentages are low is because of a combination of hiring, recruiting, and promoting to the proper communities needed to increase them. Companies are purposely avoiding hiring from certain places because of a fear of lowering the bar of performance in the workplace. In 2015, Leslie Miley, a recently laid-off Black software engineer at Twitter at the time, interviewed with NPR to discuss his experience regarding how he pushed for more diversity, but gave up due to no progress. He was asked how he pushed for more diversity at Twitter and he talked about the hiring and recruiting process for Twitter by stating “There's a document at Twitter that lists the schools that Twitter wants to recruit from. [...] It listed Cal, Stanford, CMU, Waterloo, MIT, typical schools like that. Never listed any state schools. Never listed any HBCUs.”⁷ This demonstrates that Twitter was trying to avoid recruiting from universities that are more likely to have Black people, which proves that there was no effort being made to diversify their employees. If one of the biggest tech companies has hiring practices in place to target universities with fewer minorities, there is a higher chance that other big companies are doing the same thing.

Hiring practices are one way that companies discriminate against Black people, but a lack of opportunities for development and growth is another reason for this discrimination. Some

⁷ Bates, Karen Grigsby. “Q&A With the Black Twitter Engineer Who Left over Diversity Problems.” NPR. NPR, November 6, 2015.

studies review this type of common bias against Black people in tech and they are ways for Black people to be heard, without feeling the pressure that they could potentially lose their jobs over what they say about the company. In 2018, there was a report created by the Kapor Center for Social Impact called the *Tech Leavers Study Report*. They surveyed over 2,000 individuals who had left jobs in the tech industry, including those who cited discrimination as a reason for leaving. This study found that Black employees were more likely to experience unfair treatment before leaving their jobs than White employees.⁸ This unfair treatment includes exclusion from opportunities, bias in performance evaluations, and verbal or written abuse. This shows that companies can claim to be diverse by hiring Black people, but can still discriminate against them for other reasons. Just because the percentage of Black employees is high does not mean that they can advance in the company as easily as White or Asian employees.

Black people are discriminated against due to how the tech industry is systematically structured, and because of this, it creates hurdles that they have to overcome as well as a hostile work environment. As stated previously, hiring practices are a big way that companies undermine Black candidates for the jobs that they are pursuing. By creating standards that only a certain group of people can obtain, it makes it easier to exclude Black candidates who may not have had the same opportunities. However, there are other factors like company culture and industry “norms” that help a massive role in the discrimination of Black people.

Every company is different in terms of its culture and how they treat people, but overall, there is a lack of diversity and inclusion across the entire tech industry. For example, Basecamp, a web application development company, had an “employee movement to delete a years-old list

⁸ Scott, Allison, Freada Kapor Klein, and Uriridiakoghene Onovakpuri. Tech Leavers Study. Kapor Center for Social Impact, April 27, 2017, pp. 9.

of allegedly ‘funny’ customer names (primarily names belonging to racialized people).”⁹ This resulted in the CEO, Jason Fried, needing to respond and shut down the conversation about it, but the fact that this list was circulated throughout the company for years shows how dangerous company culture can be for their Black employees. If Basecamp were to hire Black employees and they hear about this list with racialized customer names, it makes it hard for them to want to stay with the company. Another example from Basecamp is that Fried stated about their new policy and how “the company was ‘done with’ societal and political discussions of any kind at work, claiming that it ‘saps our energy, and redirects our dialogue towards dark places’” and this was during the same week as the trial of Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd.¹⁰ No company should feel the need to censor their employees from talking about current political events, especially as it affects the Black community as a whole. These types of issues are not special to a certain amount of companies but are widespread throughout the industry, which starts to make their industry norms.

There are tech industry norms that contribute to discrimination against Black people, but there is one main concern that most of the norms branch off of, which is called tokenism. Tokenism is when companies hire black people to prove that they are diverse, but do not make any meaningful changes within the company to address diversity. Because there is no real effort to be more inclusive, it results in a fake impression of the company. For example, Ray Holgado, a former black employee of the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI), has been a victim of this type of behavior and has filed a racial discrimination complaint with the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing. He states in his complaint that “Despite its social justice rhetoric,

⁹ Govias, Chris. "The Easy Way Out: Other Industries Should Avoid Adopting The Latest Trend In Tech-Company Culture: Removing The Personal From The Workplace, And Thus Silencing Efforts To Tackle Injustice, Chris Govias Writes." The Globe and Mail, Mar 19, 2022.

¹⁰ Govias, The Easy Way Out

CZI is not a welcoming environment for Black employees. [...] Black employees who want to advance within the organization are shut down and labeled as too assertive or aggressive, while non-Black employees are favored and encouraged” which is a scary reality that people like Holgado have to face.¹¹ Holgado was brought into CZI with the belief that he was going to be treated better because of the persona that CZI displayed and ended up being treated unfairly. We are lucky to have this complaint written out in its entirety by Holgado to help push the truth out about the discrimination against Black people in the tech industry.

Even though there are tech industry norms that are detrimental to Black people within their positions, there are also some new norms being created with the development of AI. In the book, *Race After Technology*, by Ruha Benjamin, she talks about a new hiring platform called HireVue, which is an AI-powered program that analyzes recorded interviews of prospective employees with the goal of “reducing ‘unconscious bias and promoting diversity’ in the workplace.”¹² With this new technology emerging, we can now train AI to see if an employee is qualified enough based on what is classified as a good or bad response. There is a possibility that the way the training data is collected could be a determining factor for racial bias on the platform.

Based on who is manipulating the training data that the AI hiring platforms are using, it could lead to racial bias and discrimination. For example, Fritz-Gerald Duverglas and John Lervandal are two black undergraduate students majoring in Computer Science at Brandeis University and have both used HireVue to obtain jobs during the summer of 2022. They used HireVue for their first-round assessments, coding, and case study, respectively. Duverglas got a job as a software engineer intern and Lervandal got a job as a product manager intern. When

¹¹ Holgado, Ray. “Racial Discrimination at the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative.” Medium. Medium, November 10, 2020.

¹² Benjamin, Ruha. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. pp. 140

both were asked about their experiences using HireVue as a hiring platform, they were able to give insight into the possibility of racial bias within the platform. Duverglas and Lervandal both stated that there can be some racial bias within the algorithms that it uses, with Duverglas stating “It mainly depends on who is creating the algorithm and who deems certain behaviors as ‘correct’ or ‘well-fit for an employee.’”¹³ If one of the programmers of the algorithm had preconceptions about Black people, they could alter the algorithm to make it harder for them to get hired at their desired company. However, if the right people are training the algorithm, then it would have the ability to perform better than humans due to its lack of racial bias. Both students have not experienced any difficult time using HireVue, but there is still a choice that could be made between wanting AI or humans to hire you into their company.

Because of the way AI has caught the attention of the mainstream media, there is an argument that AI could be better at hiring employees than humans. Lervandal gave his response to this argument by stating that he would “rather AI make the final decision [on hiring me] solely based on my skill and if I was given a fair assessment to showcase them. Humans tend to make judgments just based on someone’s race and that can negatively affect a qualified candidate's outcome if the human simply doesn’t prefer that race.”¹⁴ Because humans have discriminatory beliefs that are deeply rooted for generations, it would be difficult to try and get a job if that person does not prefer your race. AI platforms, however, can level the playing field for all prospective employees by using data that is not racially biased.

Although there are systemic factors that help in the discrimination of Black people, there are also individual factors that affect Black people in the tech industry. Individual attitudes and biases among co-workers and supervisors can contribute to discrimination against Black people

¹³ Duverglas, Fritz-Gerald, personal correspondence, March 28th, 2023

¹⁴ Lervandal, John, personal correspondence, April 8th, 2023

in tech. For example, Mia King, a black woman who was previously a security operations assistant for Limitless Specialty Services LLC from May 2018 through February 2019, sued the company in September 2021 due to biases that her supervisor had on her. Limitless Specialty Services (LSS) is a company that operates through Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, and his family, so this affects the whole tech industry, even though LSS is not Facebook. Through King's employment at LSS, "King's supervisor regularly made comments intimating that she did not deserve the position she was hired for because she was Black" which creates a work environment that does not promote diversity.¹⁵ She is criticized because of her race, which can hurt her confidence and make her feel like an imposter within the company. Her supervisor has also allegedly stated that her natural hairstyle is "unprofessional" and said that she and other Black employees are "ghetto."¹⁶ This type of behavior is very discouraging and would make her and her Black employees feel unwanted and not appreciated, even though they were hired due to their qualifications.

When supervisors have this bias and choose to discriminate against other employees based on race, it can lead to missed opportunities for Black employees in tech companies. If we use the last example as a reference, with Mia King and her supervisor, suppose King wanted a promotion and she needed her supervisor's approval before getting the promotion. Due to their previous behaviors, they may be more likely to perceive Black employees as underperforming, even if this is not the case, causing King to miss out on promotions, pay raises, or other career opportunities. Because of the supervisor's bias, results in a situation where Black employees are unable to get the promotions they need to further their careers, which is unfortunate but is something that Black employees have to face in the tech industry.

¹⁵ Dremann, Sue. "Two Employees Sue Mark Zuckerberg and Companies for Discrimination, Sexual Harassment."

¹⁶ Dremann, "Two Employees Sue"

Systemic and individual factors for discrimination all stem from implicit bias which has been in the United States for centuries. Unconsciously, people make assumptions about others based on their race, gender, religion, and many other factors. These assumptions can lead to attitudes and stereotypes being made, which can result in the unfair treatment of Black employees. If people are not able to consciously see their own implicit biases, it can lead to a lack of diversity and inclusion within the company, causing a negative work environment for everyone. One way to learn about our implicit bias is through diversity and inclusion training and education, which companies have implemented, but is not an industry-wide initiative.

For example, Google made a program called “Unconscious Bias at Work” in 2015 to help employees recognize and address their unconscious biases. On their website about this program, it states that “unconscious bias can prevent individuals from making the most objective decisions. They can cause people to overlook great ideas, undermine individual potential, and create a less than ideal work experience for their colleagues” which is a good example of working towards a better working environment for all.¹⁷ Other companies in the tech industry are attempting to create these types of initiatives, but there needs to be a push for the whole industry to implement something like what Google has. There is a necessity to understand our implicit biases because this can ensure that the workforce properly reflects diversity and inclusion, which leads to better products, services, and overall outcomes for the company.

Overall, we explored how discrimination in the tech industry has been from the past to the present by analyzing data from different periods. We also took a look at how Black people are discriminated against, both systemically and individually, by discussing hiring practices, company culture, and how individuals treat one another in the workplace. There is still a need to promote diversity and inclusion, not only by hiring more Black people but by also allowing them

¹⁷ “Re:Work - Unbiasing.” Google, October 29, 2015.

to grow and advance with the company. With more time and a willingness to change how the industry is structured, we can make it a place that welcomes everyone — regardless of their race.

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