Diversity

Congressional Black Caucus Looks To Improve Diversity at High-Tech Companies

U.S. companies should be committed to diversity and inclusion in hiring, and tech companies, which have some of the lowest diversity rankings among large employers, are no exception, Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) told Bloomberg BNA Dec. 3.

Lee, co-chair of the Congressional Black Caucus Diversity Task Force, said that she will continue to target "certain industries that have not been stepping up and have and have not been inclusive."

In May, the CBC launched TECH 2020 (33 HRR 1033, 9/28/15), an initiative aimed at engaging the tech sector in improving diversity in hiring, and achieving representation of African Americans at tech companies by 2020 that's equivalent to the average participation of African Americans in the broader workforce.

Congressional Black Caucus Chairman G. K. Butterfield (D-N.C) and Lee convened African-American technology and hiring organizations at a meeting on Capitol Hill Dec. 3 to consider diversity in hiring at tech companies.

Lee represents the East Bay of the San Francisco Bay area, adjacent to the Silicon Valley tech hub. Recently Lee and the CBC Diversity Task Force met with tech giants such as Google, Intel, SAP and the music streaming service Pandora to discuss strategies for improving workplace diversity.

Lack of Diversity in Tech Not Just a STEM Issue. Lee said that lackluster diversity at some of the country's top tech firms is not only tied to the STEM skills shortages. "Not all of these jobs are hi-tech jobs. We have jobs that are professional services, legal services, accounting and human resources specialists, so there are talented African-Americans and Latinos throughout the Bay Area and throughout the country who are qualified for these jobs right now," Lee said.

The panel discussed the need for tech companies to expand their networks used to identify talent. Often company referral programs can impede diversity, panelists said. "They have to use organizations and referral services they historically have not used," Lee explained.

Cameron Snaith, founder and CEO of Bleeker, a New York City-based talent company, told Bloomberg BNA in a Dec. 3 e-mail after the session that he believes that most leaders at tech companies want diversity. Snaith said the CBC's involvement can help tech companies create partnerships with organizations and institutions eager to assist in narrowing the diversity gap.

"They want diversity of thought, diversity of skill and diversity of background because they understand that true organizational innovation is driven by this diversity. The CBC can help these diversity-seeking tech businesses by continuing to advocate for companies that are committed to supporting their talent diversity initiatives," he said.

Kevin Antoine, legislative director for the American Association of Access Equity and Diversity, told Bloomberg BNA in a Dec. 3 e-mail that the CBC's involvement to improve diversity at tech companies signals a "direct hands-on involvement from lawmakers."

"This is a shift from the standard practice of many businesses that generally make marginal efforts to diversify their workplaces—unless under the threat of litigation or regulatory investigation. The CBC's involvement affords tech companies the opportunity to voluntarily take positive action to increase African-Americans in the tech workforce, from IT staff to the board of directors," Antoine said.

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A interview with Rep. Lee can be viewed at http://bcove.me/pkjpl8qp.