

# Black Professionals Tell What It's Like To Work For Corporate America

By Loretta Manago  
Post Managing Editor  
Monday through Friday, from 9 to 5 the black community watches its brothers and sisters toting their briefcases, donning their business suits walk into the doors of corporate America.

There is a lot of pride in the black community as this scene is replayed day after day and for those who are not in the mainstream environment, the first thought is "Boy, do they have it made."

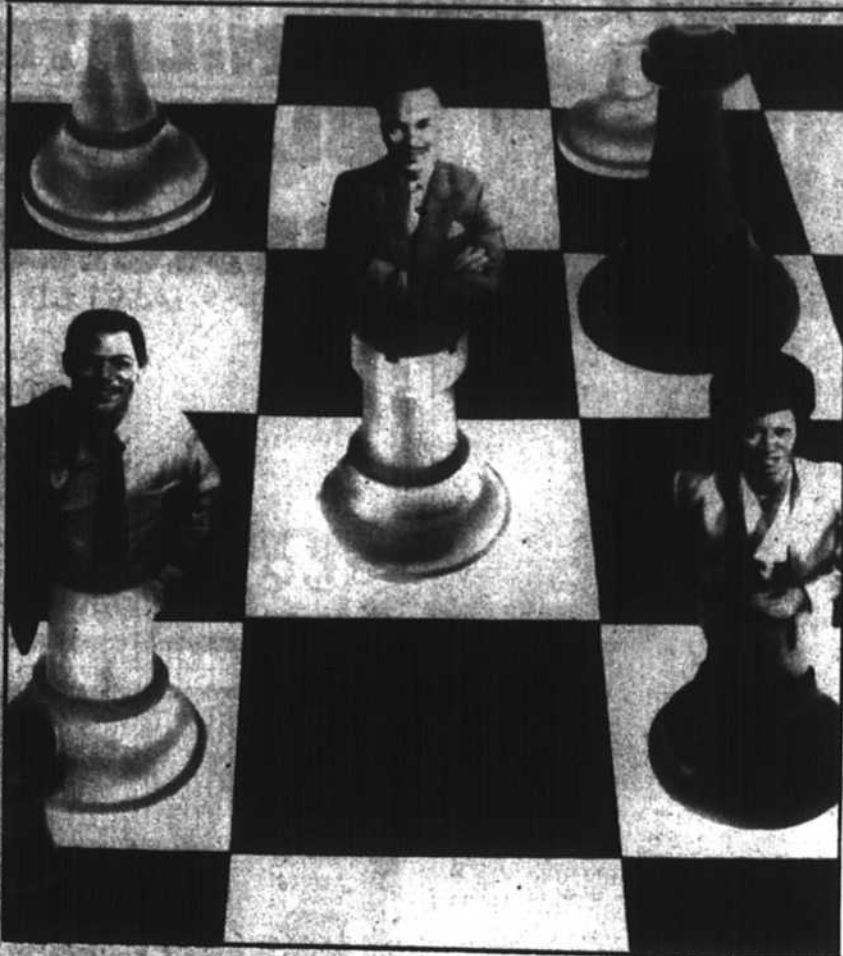
Lucrative salaries. A multiplicity of benefits. Working for companies with prestigious names like Duke Power, IBM, Xerox, or Wachovia. Those are just some of the advantages immediate seen.

But there's another side to that coin. And that side speaks of the precarious positions those same white collar, black professionals must deal with each day. Learning how to play the corporate games, coping with having a white co-worker being promoted over them or simply being placed in a visible position that holds no real power — those are just a few of the "challenges" that exist.

In talking with three blacks who work in the corporate structure a more complete picture was given. The first interviewee, a black male entered corporate America on the wings of Affirmative Action and has given 15 years of his talents to the white, male-dominated working environment. The other two interviewees, one of whom is a woman, have both worked in the system for approximately 10 years; the man has worked previously in banking before his present position in sales, an area he has now been in for five years. Their names and the names of their companies will not be identified. But what they have to say more than compensates for the information of names. For this article, they'll be called Bob, Alice and Ted.

"I was among the first blacks to enter my company," reminisced Bob. He has been with the same company for 15 years.

As he contrasts the difference in the atmosphere between now and then, Bob responded: "Back then the guidelines were definitely drawn. You knew your limitations and your expectations. You had to maintain, if others were to come after you. Your job had to be done, because internally and externally the eyes were on you. Today, although there's not a need to prove to yourself what you can do, there are still limitations to how far you can go."



For some blacks progressing in the corporate structure is similar to being treated as pieces in a chess game.

Like Bob, Alice has detected changes in the corporate structure since joining the system. "When I first started working I used to be very aware of the fact that I was the lone black among many whites. But now, I'm not real conscious of that anymore."

Ted asserted that his first position was a unique one when he began work 10 years ago. "I was the only black in management at the company. The working atmosphere was cordial, but I never felt comfortable in the social setting."

All three admitted that there are indeed problems being black and working for corporate America. Ted interjected his thoughts. "One thing I noticed is that a lot of blacks don't feel that they have to socialize. The attitude is if I do my job that's it. But that's not true. Socializing is part of the job. A lot of the times that's the only way a person gets promoted, because people normally promote those persons they get along with."

Throughout his work experience, Ted also noticed that many of the blacks working in corporate

America attended predominantly black universities. "That in itself is a paradox. After living in a black environment for four years, then you find yourself working in a predominantly white setting. It's a social setback."

For Alice, the main problem that exists is the conscious effort not to talk about black-white issues. "I think that if you talk about these things and put them out in the open then race becomes less of something to deal with and that makes it better. Personally, I know that the people who never talk about race are the ones I'm most uncomfortable around."

"In my mind, the problems come with promotions and salaries. Blacks, and others of different persuasions are given more dead-end jobs that don't allow us to be all we can be," cited Bob. "You see others who are no more competent than you being promoted while you're not and when you bring it to the attention of those in decision-making positions, they either look the other way or verbally pacify you. And believe it or not, blacks are not being compensated at the same

levels as whites. I heard of an incident where a black and a white employee went to the same school, the black received better grades, but when it came to salaries, the black was paid less."

Ted supports Bob's statement of blacks being placed in positions of little authority. "What I see is that blacks are usually found in personnel or public information positions. While I'm not knocking those positions, I just think there are not enough blacks in the financial end of the company. But even with that dilemma, I have to say it's our fault, because we allow ourselves to be put into those kinds of positions."

Despite the gradual changes that have occurred over the years, Bob, Ted, and Alice each felt that there is still that need for blacks to work harder in order to prove that they are just as good as their white counterparts.

Bob aptly summed that attitude for the three of them. "You always have to do more to be just 'as good as.' You have to do more just to stay even. Less is not acceptable if you're non-white. You've got to be the superstar and I see that as a challenge. Any black who gets to that point in his employment knows this and is ready to accept the challenge."

Still with the problems that exist there is a sense of satisfaction, although not complete with what each of these black professionals are doing.

"On the whole, I'm optimistic," stated Alice. "This job has given me the opportunity to travel, to be introduced to people, ideas and equipment that I would have otherwise never been exposed to."

What I've learned in this environment will help me deal when I open a business for myself or explore other opportunities. But as far as being satisfied, I don't know if I'll ever be satisfied. In what I've observed about blacks and upward mobility I see that the numbers (quantity of blacks hired) are there but the numbers don't follow in promotions, promotions."

Bob agrees. "We (blacks) enjoy what we do. But personally I'll never be satisfied. I don't think my rate of progress has been as it should be. In that area I don't think the iceberg has been tipped. If you show me a black who is satisfied then I would think that would be very unusual. Either his or her aim isn't high enough or he or she has been fortunate to get into an exceptional company."

The latter explanation describes Ted's situation. He does indeed describe his company as exceptional and cites that it is the number one company for blacks to work for.

"I'm satisfied at this company. Because I'm in a sales position I know that I'll progress directly by what I do. Not all companies are like that. I started with this company five years ago as a trainee, and now I'm a marketing executive. Here, you know what you have to do to get to the top and they're more interested in the personality of a person in contrast to his grade point average or resume."

But like Alice, he too is disturbed that the numbers of blacks hired don't follow the numbers of blacks who are advanced into management positions.

Knowing that the system is still flawed all agreed that affirmative

action should be kept. Alice remarked, "I think that there has been a 'line drawing' on the parts of whites as if they are saying 'from here on, things will be equal.' But I don't feel that we can draw the line yet, because there's still a lot of catching up to do."

"If for nothing more than keeping the focus on numbers, then affirmative action is still necessary. There are still too many companies who would not hire blacks if affirmative action did not exist. People would get lax. It is my personal feeling that if a community is 30 percent black, then its work force should be 30 percent black."

Taking affirmative action one step further, Bob suggests that perhaps this policy could be tied with performance evaluation. "If there is no affirmative action, it would become too easy to look the other way. Too often the excuse is I can't find. I believe you can find if you look and you're willing to reward accordingly."

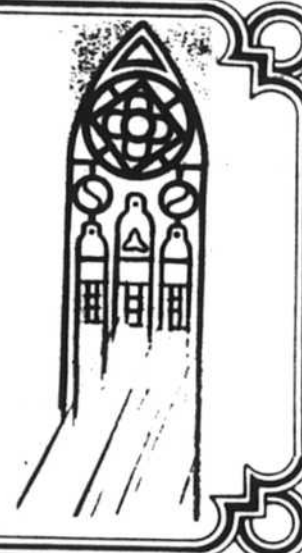
Where does a solution lie? According to Bob, "If you want to get where you want to be, you have to have your own, set your own standards and economic incentives. We can overcome through dialogue, through raising the consciousness of others. Then we can talk about solutions and if America is ever to be what the songs like 'America' project, then we have to realize that there are inequities that have to be faced."

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