Black executives find disparity; underrepresented in high-tech industry

Black entrepreneurs and executives in the high-tech sector insist opportunities abound for well-educated and hard-working individuals, regardless of their skin color. Still, they are disappointed with the glaring under-representation of blacks in senior management positions in an industry that has become a primary force in a robust U.S. economy.

Explanations vary. There is some disagreement about whether blacks have less access to venture capital than others, but there is unanimity in the belief that too few black men and women are earning the science and engineering degrees necessary to thrive in the industry.

The technological revolution has no doubt done more good than harm for minorities, spurring job growth and opening the doors of prosperity to Web-savvy entrepreneurs.

But industry insiders say most major technology companies, even those that pay close attention to diversity, look more or less like the rest of Corporate America: the top ranks are, at best, speckled with diversity. Precise demographic data on executives in the high-tech field are not maintained. However, in all industries combined, 88 percent of managers are white; 6 percent African-American; 4 percent Hispanic; 3 percent Asian; and less than 1 percent Native American,

according to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Of the "The Top 50 Blacks in Corporate America" featured in the February issue of Black Enterprise magazine, only four work for high-tech companies.

"I can count on one hand, maybe two, the number of blacks who run publicly traded Internet companies," says Dwayne Walker, who was Microsoft Corp.'s general manager of sales and marketing, and director of Windows NT, before joining ShopNow.com in 1996 as its chief executive.

Walker says there were "maybe one or two" other high-ranking African-Americans at Microsoft during his seven-year tenure there. In fairness, he says, the disparity had little to do with barriers put up by the company. "At Microsoft, people have to have the skills to succeed in a highly charged environment. It was an environment where execution mattered more than anything. You could be a Martian and succeed at Microsoft."

Other African-American executives say, however, if outright racism was never a problem for them, the bar for advancement always seemed higher for minorities and women. Too many blacks lack the necessary training to enter the field in the first place, laments Al Zollar, the newly appointed president and CEO of software manufacturer Lotus

Development Corp. Of the 325,135 students who enrolled in U.S. graduate science and engineering programs in 1995, only 14 percent were minorities, and less than half of those were black, according to a 1998 National Science Foundation report. "Blacks and American Indians are concentrated in the social sciences, which are less likely to offer employment in business or industry," the report says.

NAACP backs act

Kweisi Mfume, President of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) urged Congress to pass the Digital Empowerment Act introduced by Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski (C., Md.,).

Mfume said, 'Senator Mikulski's legislation will help every child in America to cross the digital divide and increase access to technology. It will present opportunities for children and their parents to learn computer technology that is one of the keys to success in the 21st Century. The NAACP has worked with the White House and Congress on this issue and we're convinced that this bill will help remove the barriers to technology caused by income, race, ethnicity, geography or disability."
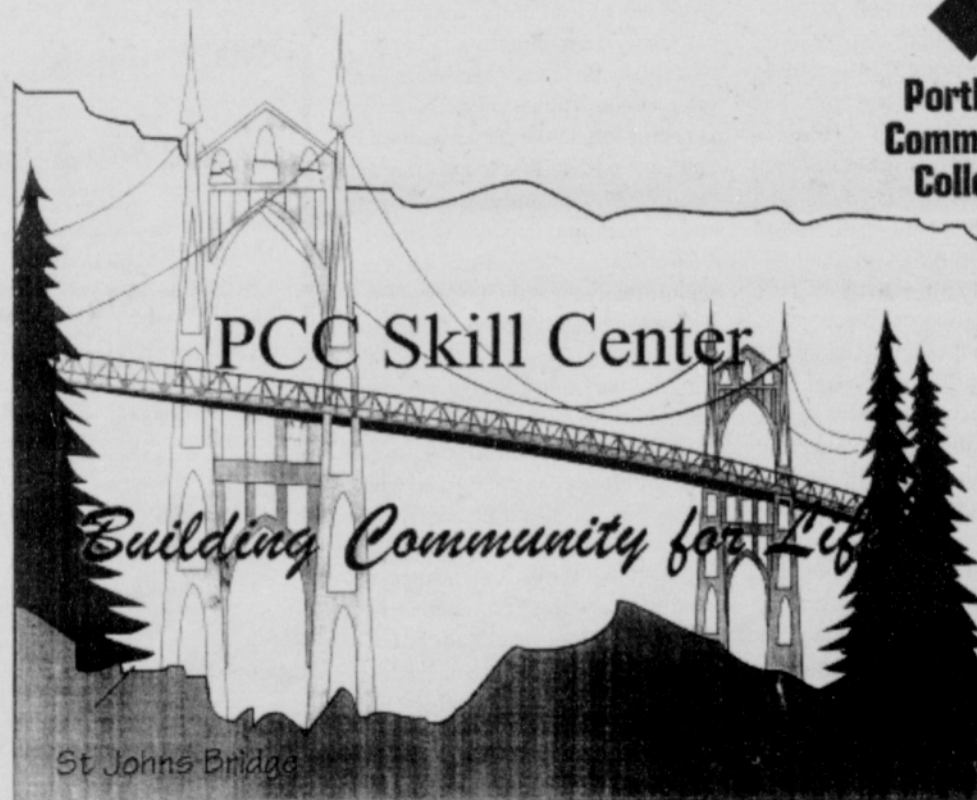
According to one study, 46 percent

of whites have computers in the home, but only 23 percent of African-Americans and 25 percent of Hispanics have computers in their homes. "Too many people who live in low income and rural communities are being left behind on the Internet super highway," said Mfume.

The Digital Empowerment Act will do the following:

· Create a one-stop for technology education at the Department of Education.

· Double resources for teacher training and school technology.

· Expand the E-Rate by making Head Start centers and structured after-school programs eligible for Internet and wiring discounts.

· Create an E Corps within the Americorps program – for volunteers to work in schools and community center.

· Create 1,000 new Community Technology Centers.