



# MIND THE GAP: CAREER PROGRESSION FOR BLACK MARKETING PROFESSIONALS

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# INTRODUCTION

In the UK, the gap of Black marketing professionals progressing upwards from mid-level to senior level positions is stark. Whilst Black representation in the industry is 3% (equivalent to that in the general UK population) this drops to 1% in C-suite positions ([All In Report 2021](#)).

This represents a problem for the industry that requires its own specific attention. A lack of Black marketing professionals occupying decision-making roles impacts the industry's ability to move forwards and be pushed by diverse perspectives. It also leads to retention and recruitment challenges that come with having fewer role models for junior and mid-level Black talent in the industry looking to thrive.

But what are the barriers and potential solutions for addressing this problem specific to the creative and marketing industry? In this report we delve deeper into the problems facing poor retention and promotion levels of Black mid-level talent into senior positions. By understanding the experiences of those who remain in industry, who has left, and who is considering re-entering, this report looks to cultivate a map connecting points of tension to identify how employers can better support mid-level Black marketers into the senior roles of the future.

ONLY 1% OF  
C-SUITE  
POSITIONS ARE  
HELD BY BLACK  
MARKETING  
EXECS

*(All In Report, 2021)*



# METHODOLOGY

We spoke to 25 Black marketing professionals across 5 cities: London, Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol and Leicester to get regional perspectives on the issues at hand and what changes talent wanted to see in the industry to support Black talent progression.

We also spoke with 5 non-Black C-suite professionals to cross-reference the perceived barriers and solutions discussed.

Our research combined qualitative focus groups and ethnographic interviews in the UK to dig deeper into the subject matter.

Conducted by researchers at Pocc, the sample of respondents were vetted from an initial survey that went out to Pocc's UK network of 700+ creative professionals of colour.

Within this report we summarise our key recommendations for agencies, businesses and employers to support and improve the pipeline of Black marketing professionals into senior positions and encourage retainment of talent for the long term.



# DEFINITIONS

In the context of careers, our participants' definition of '**progress**' varied. They acknowledge progression as multifaceted and to include:

- Reaching new heights professionally
- Learning and improving oneself professionally
- Up-skilling
- Being trusted with your abilities to take on more responsibility
- To move up the career ladder
- To be promoted upwards
- Exposure to and growth of experiences and learning
- Moving across industry to increase experience
- Expanding networks and opportunities

For the purposes of this report, our definition of '**marketing professional**' is inclusive of anyone who occupies roles within advertising, marketing, PR and brands, including strategy, design, creative and new business roles within the industry.

# The Great Resignation: Why Black Talent is Leaving the Industry

# THE CHALLENGES OF RETAINING BLACK TALENT VARIES ACROSS CAREER LEVELS

## JUNIOR GROUPS

Junior respondents were mostly distrusting around any industry attempts to include them, so much so that they are opting to stay away from the industry's routes. There's opportunity to rebuild trust and show junior talent the importance of getting industry experience directly from the industry.

"My last placement just made me feel like I don't really want to be in the company. For the most part the industry isn't exciting and I'm not burning to get back into it." **Black, Male 25-34, London, Visual Artist, Illustrator Creative - Junior**

## MID-LEVEL GROUPS

Mid level respondents knew what they required to progress: mentoring, sponsorship, support and as much investment and trust instilled within them. If they don't get the support they need, they'll look to leave the company or industry all together.

"You see the same people who are failing up and you're faced with do I move to another organisation who is going to appreciate my talent." **Black American, Female, 35-44, London, Content Producer - Mid**

## SENIOR GROUPS

Senior respondents require backing from the company to make the changes they wish to see, and a working environment which enables them to be who they are and work on what they're interested in.

"We are doing two jobs (trying to change the industry, and work) whereas a white person is just focused on the account or client they are working with." **Black, Male 44-54, London, Planning Partner - Senior**

# WORKPLACE PERCEPTIONS OF BLACKNESS INHIBIT BELONGING AND PROGRESSION OF BLACK TALENT

Negative perceptions of Blackness in the workplace manifest in different scenarios: from inappropriate colleague commentary on hairstyles and cultural traditions, to the unspoken burden Black talent carry to call out covert racism in the office. From lack of peer trust in Black talent ability to deliver, to an expectation that Black talent will educate non-Black colleagues on their own racism and micro-agressions.

Pair this with lack of supporting structures at HR and management levels to deal with issues regarding culture, race and racism, Black talent are being asked to thrive and progress in a workplace environment where the negative experiences are fast outweighing the positives.

"Bring your full self to work" is a flawed concept when Black talent are either having to hide parts of themselves in order to be perceived as more 'professional', or choosing to leave the industry all together to pursue a more inclusive and peaceful work environment.

*"It's kind of like be Black but not too black, hairstyle, exuberance [are] perceived to come across as aggression. The food that we eat in the lunch break. Everything that comes with being a Black person has to be dealt with a degree of caution. If the white standard is here [gestures], the closer you are to that standard, the closer you are to acceptance. It almost neutralises everything else." Black African, Male, 45-54, London, Social media marketing analyst- Senior*

*"I've had to have a career break already, and I'm 25. I was away for five months. Can you imagine how pissed off you have to be in a corporate job to leave and work in a salon?" Black, Female, 25-34, London, Account Director - Mid*

*"I've had comments like, 'Oh, you're very well spoken' or 'You're very intelligent'. To me I was shocked. I don't really see it as that... I just speak. But why is it a surprise rather than just 'oh, that's just who she is'?" Mixed, 25-34, London, Marketing Manager- Senior*

*"People make assumptions of you before they've even met you and you have constantly got to promote yourself for longer and harder to get traction." Black Caribbean, Female, 45-54, London, Brand Strategist - C-Suite*

# A RIGID WORKPLACE MONOCULTURE FORCES BLACK PROFESSIONALS TO ASSIMILATE TO PROGRESS INTO SENIOR POSITIONS

*“Every agency I've worked at has paraded this amazing culture, and yet there's such a rigid structure around things that doesn't allow you to really express who you are, which is a shame.” Black Caribbean/Black British Caribbean, 25-34, Female, London, PR Agency Owner - Senior*

*“A lot of people in advertising don't have to change their culture, Black people have to assimilate. Socially you feel you're at odds with yourself. Nobody at work wants to wear a mask all day.” Black, Male 25-34, London, Visual Artist, Illustrator - Mid*

*“I was ready with like strategies and methods to kind of duck and dive and weave and do the things that I thought that I needed to do in order to get to where I thought that I wanted to be.” Black, Female, 34-45, CEO - Senior*

*“The real barrier that holds us back is [the perception] that Black people are not meant to lead. The idea of a Black person leading is so beyond what they can envision” Black, Male 44-54, London, Planning Partner - Senior*

Assimilation was attributed to Black talent's success in navigating workplace environments and landing promotions within the industry.

Participants spoke to a rigid workplace culture where micro-aggressions, coded feedback sessions and frequently being passed up for promotion persist. In addition, agencies and businesses hiding their rigid workplace cultures under the veil of externally-promoted 'inclusive cultures' presents a perception vs reality mismatch when Black talent apply for a role and then exist within the role for an extended period of time.

There is an expectation for Black talent to conform to workplace cultures with little effort made by the workplace to create a welcoming exchange in return.

# BLACK PROFESSIONALS ARE EXITING THE INDUSTRY TO RE-ENTER AS A QUICKER PIPELINE TO PROGRESS INTO SENIOR POSITIONS

Participants spoke to a broken workplace recruitment pipeline, with companies choosing to hire externally rather than nurturing talent internally into new roles.

Whilst this is a problem which affects all talent progression prospects, it must be recognised that this is an additional barrier to progression on an already significant list of reasons for Black talent to leave the company, and therefore requires specific attention.

The current pipeline doesn't provide enough security for employed Black talent to be promoted internally, which causes many to seek new roles, in some cases leave to re-enter at a higher level.

Alongside this, other reasons for Black talent leaving the industry include: getting training and new qualifications; processing their experiences through therapy and other means; moving across into other industries or roles; or setting up their own shop.

*"The higher you go up, the longer they stay. Nobody is leaving the C-Suite. There's a lot of Black people who leave and form their own organisation, because they don't want to play in the boys club. This is the frustration a lot of Black people are facing. You get to a point where you have enough tools and resources and it'll make more sense to start your own thing. It's honestly just exhaustion, being tired of being tired."* **Black African, Female, 25-34, London Problem Solver - Mid**

*"I've been told by HR about leaving and coming back. I don't want to, it's not that easy to do that. How does this help retain staff of colour, how does this help your numbers?"* **Black American, Female, 35-44, London, Content Producer - Mid**

*"For my previous two roles I left because they hired above me. Even in my current role, I had to fight for it. There was a reluctance to train me."* **Black Female, 25-34, London, Head of Marketing - Senior**

*"I had to move to a company to be able to get a higher position. So yeah, that was obviously the biggest barrier. I felt like at my last workplace, that would have not been possible."* **Black, Female, 25-34, London, Media Owner - Senior**

# 4 Ways To Support Black Talent Retention and Progression

# 1. UNDERSTAND YOUR EMPLOYEES DEFINITION OF PROGRESSION AND GROWTH

Progress and growth looks different for everybody, and its definition varies depending on the individual's personal and professional goals.

For some Black marketing professionals, progress looks like a direct promotion. For others it is access to opportunities and networks. For some it's learning and training to future proof their skillsets.

By understanding what progress and growth means for your employees, tailor what you can offer to support them in their personal career journey to be fulfilled and set them up to succeed in their roles.

Ensure complete clarity on the journey to reaching their goals in terms of timings and expectations and be open to their definition of progress changing over time. Scheduling regular 1-1 career conversations and establishing a system for creating opportunities and tracking success are crucial to ensuring you stay on target and both sides are fulfilling their goals.

*"I see it (progression) as moving sideways expanding your network as well as making your way up the ladder." Black, Female, London, 25-34, Market Research Manager - Mid*

*"I want to keep progressing. And I don't really know how so I'm just going to keeping moving around to try new things" Black Caribbean, Male, 25-34, London, Client Services - Mid*

*"I feel like from junior to mid level, a lot of time you're there to soak up and be a sponge. Then from mid-senior you should take your learnings. A lot of the time I've found in agencies, there's a lot of broken trust and avenues that are constantly cut off to me. You kind of end up stagnating and not going to senior levels. My mate always says, he judges a place by what he can actually change, and if he can't change a certain amount of things there he leaves." Black Caribbean, Male, 35-44, London, Design Director - Senior*

*"For me, progression is freedom to be myself. To be trusted with my skills and challenged with care and intention and not to be caught out. I think it's the chance for my ambition to be matched, moving up the ladder with that added support." Black African, Male, 25-34, Senior, London, Digital Lead - Senior*

## 2. COMMUNICATE CLEARER, TRANSPARENT INTERNAL PROMOTION PRACTICES

Black mid-level professionals feel they are kept in endless review loops and their promotion is delayed whilst others are occupying the roles.

Many participants spoke to "playing the game" to get ahead, which seldom ensures progression for all talent and suits only some personality types. If a senior role is open, are you interviewing internally first before looking externally? Are you being proactive in training your employees for progressing upwards?

Having clearer structures of what progression looks like at each stage of your company structure, a clear roadmap for your talent and greater transparency around promotion and hiring criteria is important. Equally important is recognising when talent has delivered on this criteria, and not creating additional hoops to jump through once these have been defined.

Timelines and processes need to be clearly defined to talent and reaffirmed on a regular basis to ensure employees and employers are aware of what the progression pipeline looks like for them. Your internal hiring teams need to be well versed in eliminating bias and tokenism from your internal hiring practices.

***"It's always delayed promotions or shared promotions. Co-leads never work, one person has to fall back and it's been me because it's been political. Or it's "we'll wait another year, and the budget". They're just waiting for you out."***

***Black American, Female, 35-44, London, Marketing Manager - Senior***

***"Once you get hired you can only get promoted after three years but within that you need to negotiate your own salary. But it is down to you to fight your own case."*** ***White and Caribbean, Male, 25-34, Manchester, Principal CX Consultant - Mid***

***"Maybe you need to get rid of the hiring practises they have, you can't make a job out of nowhere but you can if you want to. If it risks losing a valuable member of staff then break the rules. It boggles my mind that they see it's a massive struggle to retain Black members of staff but we're not going to do anything about it."*** ***Black American, Female, 35-44, London, Mid, Content Producer***

***"The problem with career paths is it's not fair. People think you get to a certain point and you will progress, there's only so many rooms at certain levels. The problem I have is the system looks like they're doing something without doing something."*** ***White, Male, 45-54, London, Head of Planning - C-Suite***

# 3. NURTURE YOUR TALENT THROUGH TRAINING, SPONSORSHIP AND MENTORSHIP

A lot of emphasis is placed on mentoring as a means of progression for Black talent, but it's important to recognise the role that both mentorship and sponsorship should play in Black talent progression.

As [Forbes](#) defines, "*promotion is the core purpose of sponsorship [...] sponsors actively endorse their sponsored party and work to elevate that person's status within an organization.*" Whereas "mentors act as a mirror, enabling individuals to see themselves more clearly.... Instead of concentrating solely on career advancement, mentors offer advice and guidance along the way".

Leverage your connections, networks and influence to level up Black talent through mentorship and sponsorship. Invest in your talent through training and qualifications to secure the skills needed to move up into senior positions.

If a position isn't open yet, instil the confidence that you have a plan to help them secure that next role by developing a joint action plan, and more confidence still by helping them to successfully execute that plan.

*"Sponsorship is key, network is key, in terms of having a network of people that would sponsor you."* [Black, Male 44-54, London, Planning Partner-Senior](#)

*"Mentoring is important but there can be an over emphasis on it especially with regards to the career and business progression of Black women. It can also sometimes be part of the infantilisation of Black women in professional spaces."*

[Black Caribbean/Black British Caribbean, Female, London, PR Agency Owner - Senior](#)

*"I think when you get to mid to senior level, it's so, so important to have almost like a mentor figure for you within the agency or the space that you're working in, because that's the time when you've got a lot of responsibility that you probably have never experienced before."* [Black Caribbean/Black British Caribbean, Female, London, PR Agency Owner - Senior](#)

*"It's a case of how do I get there and also am I able to navigate that space? You need peers, key stakeholders on your side who believe in you, not just one person."* [Male, 25-34, Manchester, Principal CX Consultant - Mid](#)

## 4. BUILD A PIPELINE WHICH SUPPORTS BLACK TALENT AT EVERY LEVEL

The general consensus from conversations with Black talent is that marketing agencies and companies aren't working smart or hard enough to make their workplaces an inclusive place for Black talent.

This is disrupting the career pathways of mid-level marketers, whilst also placing a lot of trust in a company's professional reputation or one off salary bonuses in keeping Black talent happy in a single position for the long term.

The focus must move to understanding the industry's multiple touch-points for progression, to positively impact the career journeys of Black talent across all career stages: from junior level to senior level. Personalising the pipeline to serve the varying needs of Black talent.

Finally, whilst agencies and companies are promoting diverse and progressive cultures to encourage Black talent through the door, without structural changes and implementation of new standards within the workplace, retention of Black talent will continue to remain a challenge for the industry.

“Don't just be willing to host diversity, be willing to adapt to it.”

**Black Female, London, 25-34, Social Media Manager-Mid**

# Resources For Employers

# FURTHER RESOURCES TO SUPPORT

Fearless Futures facilitates transformative equity and inclusion learning experiences, in-person and online, as well as partner with clients through consultancy in service of designing equitable ecosystems for people and products

<https://www.fearlessfutures.org/>

Media For All (MEFA) exists to close the representation gap in media and advertising with a focus on the recruitment of diverse talent, the retention of diverse talent, and the career development of their members

<https://www.mediaforall.org.uk/>

SocialFixt aims to fix the employment gap for black talent in the creative industry with a hub where members can collaborate on projects, employers can find talent, and talent can find desirable roles.

<https://www.socialfixt.org/>

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