



BET Founder: NFL Rule Would Reduce Minority Unemployment

--BET founder Johnson calls for corporations to follow NFL's "Rooney rule."

--Johnson said interviewing minority candidates for top posts would lead reduce unemployment among blacks, Latinos.

--NFL's human resources head says rule can be effectively applied outside of football.

**By Eric Morath
Of DOW JONES NEWSWIRES**

WASHINGTON -(Dow Jones)- Black Entertainment Television founder Robert L. Johnson on Wednesday called for fellow corporate leaders to embrace a version of the National Football League's "Rooney rule," a mandate to consider minority candidates for top positions.

If companies followed a similar rule when hiring executives, and thus set off a ripple effect of more minority hiring at lower levels, minority unemployment would decrease and place less burden on government aid programs, he said.

Johnson asked that corporations voluntarily agree to interview at least two minority candidates for a vice president post or higher and consider minority firms when awarding contracts.

"Diversity and inclusion policies without a commitment to interview minority candidates, as the NFL realized, does not work," Johnson said at the National Press Club. "Minorities are often left out of the deal flow of opportunity, and as a result, minorities are underrepresented in doing business with and employment at management levels in corporate America."

The NFL's Rooney rule mandates that teams interview at least one minority candidate for a head coach or general manager position. The rule, named after the Rooney family that owns the Pittsburgh Steelers, has been widely credited with expanding the ranks of minority coaches in the league. Six of the NFL's 32 teams employ a minority head coach, up from two when the rule was enacted in 2003.

Johnson, currently chairman of the RLJ Companies, a firm that holds investments in hotels, auto dealerships and the Charlotte Bobcats basketball team, said U.S. companies can learn a lesson from football.

The unemployment rate for certain racial minorities was significantly higher than the 8.5% reported for the U.S. in December. The unemployment rate for black Americans was 15.8%, the rate for Latinos was 11.0%, according the Labor Department.

By comparison, unemployment among white Americans was less than the national average at 7.5%. The government is set to release its latest snapshot of the labor market on Friday.

If companies committed to interviewing minority candidates, more would land top-level positions. In turn, they'd advocate for minority hiring at lower levels, Johnson said.

"It's a ripple effect," he said. Johnson is not seeking legislation to codify the rule nor is he requiring companies follow the rule to do business with him, rather he's encouraging corporate leaders to voluntarily adopt it.

Johnson also announced Wednesday that he's launching a web site, Oppsplace.com, that would serve to connect minority jobseekers and minority- owned small businesses with such large corporations as FedEx Corp. ([FDX](#)), Capital One Financial Corp. ([COF](#)) and McDonald's Corp. ([MCD](#))

The higher rate of unemployment among blacks and Latinos is partially a reflection of a lack of educational opportunities in urban centers, said Jeff Strohl, director of research at the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

The unemployment rate for high school dropouts was 13.8% in December, while only 4.1% for those with a college degree.

With less education on average, "minority groups and women tended to trend into lesser-paying jobs with less career stability," Strohl said.

Strohl said he was unsure if requiring interviewing of minority candidates would have much effect on unemployment rates.

"Some companies would go through motions, but likely already have candidates in mind," he said.

Johnson disagreed with that idea, saying that "when companies see talent they'll embrace it."

In the NFL, the Rooney rule provides minority candidates with experience and exposure to landing a high-profile position, making the candidate better prepared for future opportunities, even if they don't land the current job, said NFL Chief Human Resources Officer Robert Gulliver.

"Rooney rule is a point of pride for the league," he said. The NFL, however, doesn't impose the rule for lower posts, such as assistant coaches or junior front office personnel.

Gulliver said his former employer, Wachovia Bank, had a process in place to ensure minority candidates were considered for senior positions.

"When I arrived here, I realized that Wachovia essentially had the Rooney rule in place," he said. "It can be effectively used outside of football."

-By Eric Morath, Dow Jones Newswires; 202 862 9279; eric.morath@dowjones.com

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