

Robert Johnson talks Black unemployment

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Robert L. Johnson, a successful businessman and entrepreneur, is probably best known as the founder of Black Entertainment Television (BET). He became the nation's first Black billionaire when he sold the network to Viacom in 2000. Since then Mr. Johnson has launched several business and philanthropic ventures and is currently chairman of the RLJ Companies, which focuses on investments in real estate, sports, entertainment, asset management, private equity deals and additional business dealings.



In 2011 Mr. Johnson introduced the "RLJ Rule" as a strategy to help address Black unemployment. The voluntary program would urge U.S. companies to interview a minimum of two Black candidates for every job opening at the vice president level or above. The rule would also encourage companies to interview at least two qualified Black companies for service and supply contracts.

Mr. Johnson has been vocal about the disproportionately high unemployment rate of Blacks in the U.S. and also released a statement in June addressing the U.S. Supreme Court decisions on voting rights and Affirmative Action.

Final Call staff writer Starla Muhammad contacted the offices of Mr. Johnson seeking responses to questions about the RLJ Rule and Black unemployment. Below are the emailed responses from Mr. Johnson.

The Final Call (FCN): What if businesses in corporate America don't adopt the RLJ Rule? What is the next step in terms of an action plan? Have any companies put the RLJ Rule into effect where it is a part of their company policy?

Robert L. Johnson (RLJ): The purpose of this voluntary rule is not to suggest quotas or require companies to hire any individual or minority. The RLJ Rule would make certain that minorities are fairly and fully considered before any job opening or vendor opportunity is filled. To date, the RLJ Rule has been endorsed by the Congressional Black Caucus, the National Urban League, the NAACP, the U.S. Black Chamber, Inc., the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race & Justice at Harvard Law School, as well as several companies, including Comcast and DuPont.

FCN: What if companies agree to adopt the rule as far as interviewing qualified "minority candidates" but they (specifically Black candidates) still don't get hired?

RLJ: Many companies have made a strong commitment to diversity over the years, yet minorities still lack access to business opportunities. As a result, the income gap has increased tenfold, and the wealth gap between White Americans and African Americans over the last 20 years has increased from \$20,000 to \$90,000. Black

unemployment remains double that of White Americans. I am not a proponent of government intrusion in the marketplace, but I am a firm believer in creative and voluntary business solutions to help solve socioeconomic problems. In order to reverse these alarming trends, corporate America must view diversity as a business imperative, no less important than financial performance, succession planning and shareholder relations. I believe that if we are able to do this, we can make a difference in bringing about real solutions and effective change to minority unemployment.

FCN: If appeals to Pres. Obama, Corporate America and Congress does not change the racial inequality that still persists in this country, what does that signify in terms of how Black people as a whole are viewed in this country? What does that mean for Black folks?

RLJ: The history of this country is replete with the positive things that can happen when you give minorities an opportunity. Unfortunately, it is also replete with the hard facts that if minorities are denied an equal opportunity a gap in their socio- and economic well-being will emerge, and that is exactly what is happening in the U.S. today and will continue to happen if a solution is not found.

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