

New platform launched to encourage tech companies to hire Black talent

JOSH O'KANE > TECHNOLOGY REPORTER

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Lekan Olawoye, the CEO and Founder of the Black Professionals In Tech Network, on July 29 2020.
FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The Black Professionals in Tech Network is launching a new platform for recruitment, events and networking to encourage companies to hire Black talent.

The Toronto-based organization will reveal its global platform, called obsidi.com, at a digital event Tuesday morning. It will function like a social network, with news and social

feeds, and allow for workers to upload personal details and résumés – which can both help them connect with prospective employers and to build networks with others. While the network has long bridged these kinds of connections, often over the collaboration platform Slack, the organization hopes to centralize this work through obsidi.com.

“Our business has always been clear: that betting on Black is a good way to be,” Lekan Olawoye, BPTN’s founder, said in an interview. “Companies now get an opportunity to actually build networks, find people, hire people, get to know the community, and put their brand in front of the community.”

The network has inked partnerships with many large companies such as Toronto-Dominion Bank, Royal Bank of Canada and Microsoft since Mr. Olawoye, a former executive with the MaRS Discovery District entrepreneurship centre, founded it in 2018. Its membership has now surpassed 50,000 Black workers, largely across Canada and the United States – up from just 20,000 a year ago.

Hundreds of BPTN’s members have already signed up for obsidi.com. Mr. Olawoye has bold plans for its growth, aiming for 150,000 members by the end of 2022, and a million over the next two to three years. Black workers can sign up for free, while companies hoping to recruit or network with them will need to pay to use the service.

The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minn., prompted many Canadian companies to say they would address systemic racism, including in hiring, after years of inaction.

In many cases, that inaction only continued. One initiative, called BlackNorth, founded by Bay Street entrepreneur Wes Hall that year, saw 209 companies pledge to hire more Black people and to promote more Black staff into senior positions. But a Globe and Mail investigation last July found that a substantial number of Canadian corporate heavyweights that had signed the pledge did neither of those things.

BPTN developed obsidi.com to hold companies to account on those kinds of promises. Various studies have found somewhere between 70 and 85 per cent of jobs are filled through networking, and BPTN points to one analysis from the past decade that found that few white people, who have long controlled power in the business world, have many Black friends or professional connections. So BPTN has designed obsidi.com to bridge this network gap – to be a platform to include more Black people in decision-makers’ networks.

“There are enough skilled Black professionals – but if you’re not connected with them, and networked with them, you’re not going to hire them, because we hire from our networks,” Mr. Olawoye said.

Last February, BPTN announced a \$4.5-million program with RBC’s Future Launch that proposed to help more than 1,000 young Black business and tech professionals find work with Canadian companies. To date, the organization said, it has helped 315 people get hired, ahead of the annual benchmarks it set for its target.

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