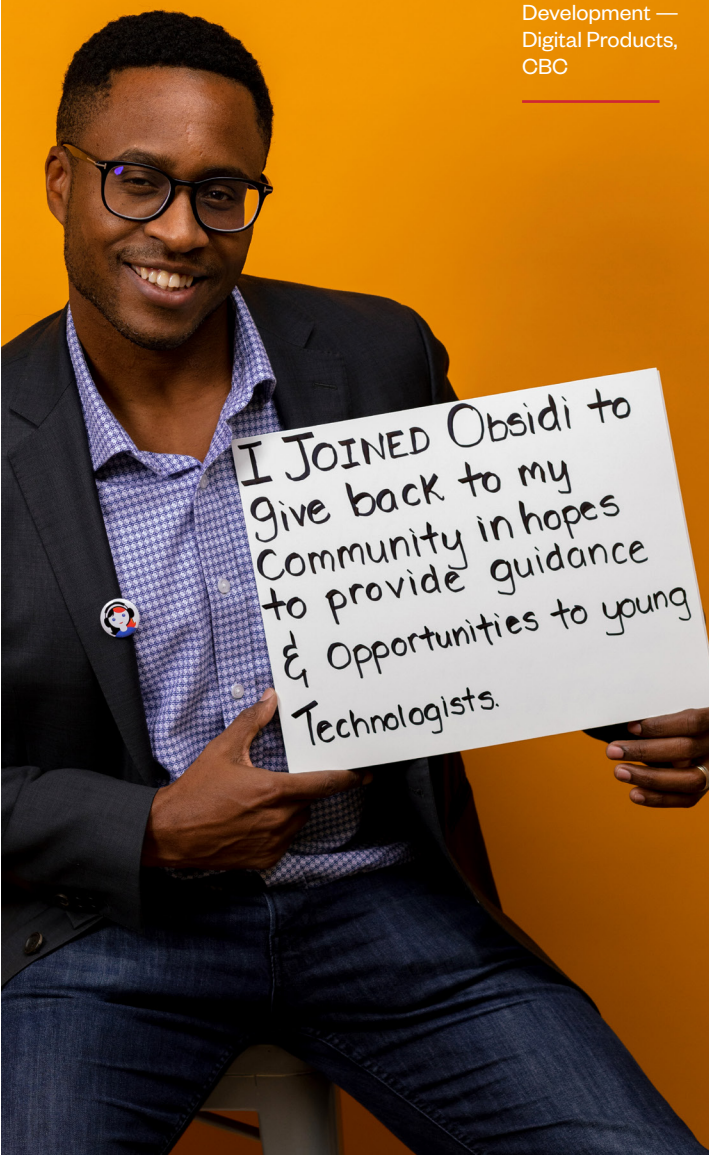
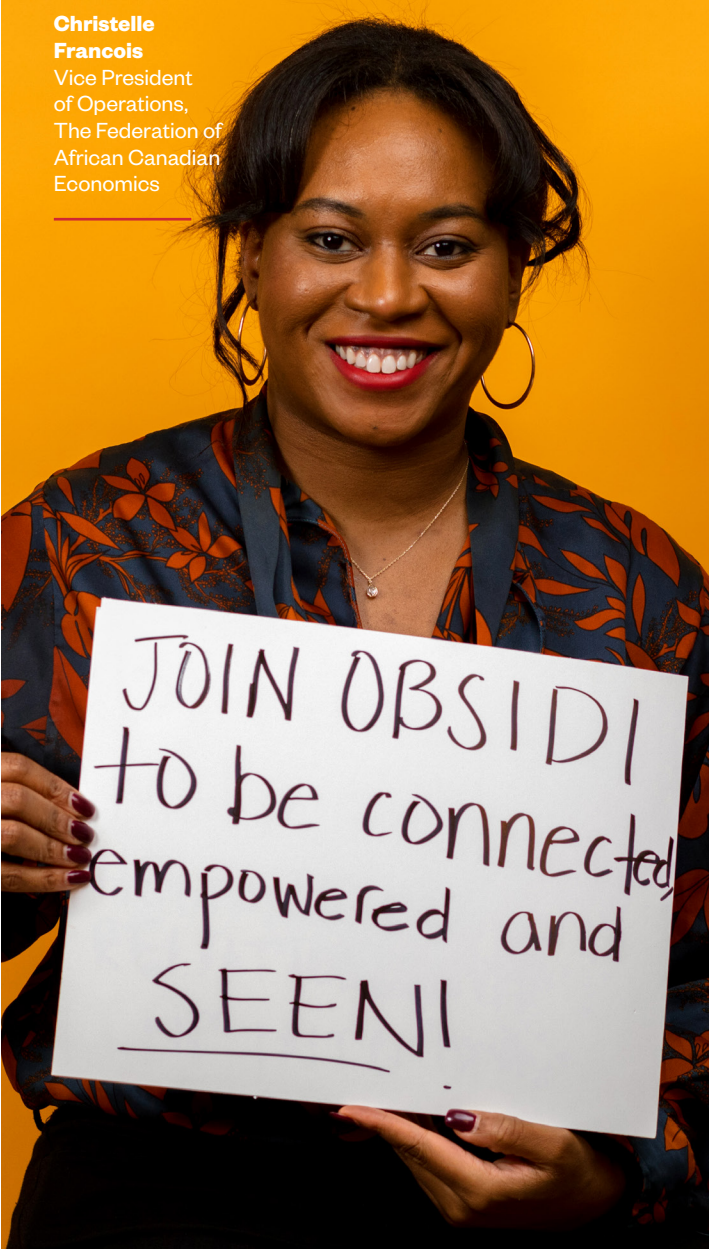


Astor Ingleton
Director of
Software
Development —
Digital Products,
CBC



Christelle Francois
Vice President
of Operations,
The Federation of
African Canadian
Economics



Gladstone Grant
National Director
of Solution Sales,
Microsoft



It's Who You Know — The Network Gap Among Black Tech Professionals

Highly educated, brilliantly talented, relentlessly motivated Black professionals continue to face invisible barriers to advancement in the tech industry. Is the root of the problem a network gap?

D.F. McCourt

Four years ago, Lekan Olawoye, then an executive at MaRS Discovery District, was giving a talk in Toronto to a large group of tech professionals at LinkedIn Canada. After his session was finished, he was approached by four young Black attendees. They wanted to know how Olawoye had made it to the executive level in the tech industry, where Black career growth is so often glacially slow. All four related stories of trying to move up, of wanting to make an impact, but seeing their counterparts from other communities continuously accelerate past them.

“It just broke my heart,” says Olawoye. “These were amazing young professionals, talented folks, and they were just getting stuck.”

Over-credentialed and undernetworked

Within a few months, Olawoye had organized another session back at LinkedIn, specifically addressing the power of networking and connection for Black tech professionals. The session sold out completely, generating a waitlist over 100 people long. Black Professionals in Tech Network (BPTN) was born. Today, with Olawoye as CEO, the network has grown to over 50,000 members across North America.

The tremendous appetite for an organization to fill this space speaks clearly to a substantial void in the collective conversation up to that point. In trying to address a lack of representation, Olawoye holds, the tech industry had been too focused on symptoms and not enough on the underlying cause.

“The symptom is that we don't have enough Black tech talent, or that we can't retain Black talent,” says Olawoye. “There are more opportunities for Black professionals now, and there are a lot of companies actively looking for and wanting to hire Black professionals, but they aren't finding them. That's a symptom. The real problem is a network gap.”

It's not a lack of people, but a lack of connections between them. There's a joke among People of Colour that a given White North American, the kind of person historically making hiring decisions in technology, is going to have exactly one Black friend. Today, social networking data has made clear just how much truth that jest holds, as well as its implications. “In technology, we hire people in our network,” says Olawoye. “We do business with people in our network. We fund people in our network. If your network isn't diverse, if it doesn't look like downtown Toronto or downtown Montreal, there's no way your company or your industry will ever be diverse.”

Business problem, tech solution, social outcome

Identifying the problem, of course, is only the first step to a solution. And when you have a problem as hairy as this one, it's hard to know where to step next. “You start to see

the layers of complexity to the network gap, for Black professionals, for White professionals, for everyone,” explains Olawoye. “These networks are built informally at different watering holes in industry, and if you aren't invited into those spaces, if you can't find them, how do you build your network? If we solve the network gap, we solve all the other things.”

There are more opportunities for Black professionals now, and there are a lot of companies actively looking for and wanting to hire Black professionals, but they aren't finding them. That's a symptom. The real problem is a network gap.

Harnessing some of the best minds in the tech sector, BPTN has come up with what Olawoye calls a “tech solution to a business problem with social outcomes.” That solution is **obsidi.com**, a platform that enables Black professionals to connect with other Black professionals, but also critically with companies and with other business communities at scale. For those making hiring decisions, it's a platform that turns that ‘one Black friend’ into a global network of Black professionals.

“We need to ensure that we're not siloing our networks, and this is where that happens,” says Olawoye. “**obsidi.com** is by Black people, but it's not just for Black people. It was created to solve the network gap for Black professionals, but the network gap exists because White professionals and other professionals aren't connected with the Black community. So if we create a space exclusive to Black people, we're not solving the problem. Instead, we've created a Black space, a house built by Black people, where everyone is welcome to come eat, sleep, and engage.”

“Like coming home”

It's an elegant outcome from an idea sparked at a LinkedIn session, to have seen so clearly through to how and why existing networking tools weren't meeting all the needs of the Black professional community. But **obsidi.com** isn't designed to replace the social networking tools people already use, but rather to augment them. “You should still be on your other platforms, where you can engage with the whole world,” says Olawoye. “But when you want to make a strategic connection or have a courageous conversation, you need to be on a neighbourhood scale. **obsidi.com** is like coming home. You come to **obsidi.com** and ask your tribe.”

For at the heart of the entire initiative is the idea that, despite all the practical concerns of industry, business connections are very human and very personal. We're tribal creatures after all. But our tribes are stories that we tell ourselves, and with the right tools we can rewrite them.

“When you sign up or sign in to **obsidi.com**, no matter who you are, you're helping shift the narrative of what professional networks look like,” says Olawoye. “And the moment you change the narrative, you change the world.” ■



Lekan Olawoye
Founder & CEO,
Black
Professionals in
Tech Network
(Obsidi by BPTN)



Come home to
obsidi.com.



This article was
sponsored
by the **Black
Professionals in
Tech Network**.

