It’s time to change the narrative

General Features



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Ashley Makoni shares her experiences on what it is like to be black in the world of taxation

What is Black History Month and why do we need it? Why have the CIOT and ATT become supporters of the Charter for Black Talent in Finance and the Professions? Although I don’t feel at all qualified to provide answers to these crucial questions, for me personally, the answer is synonymous with the answer to the question that so many people think about: ‘What is it like to be black?’

In my personal experience, being black has been a long journey of not knowing. Not knowing where I would be today if I had received the start in life that my peers did.

It’s not knowing basic information about how to access certain opportunities that my colleagues take for granted. It’s not knowing if everyone understands the amount of pressure and the struggles I have to overcome just to be heard or to get my foot through the door – even today.

Each time an opportunity does present itself and I do not make it, I have to wonder if it is because I was truly not good enough or because I was not the right colour, did not have the right name, the right background, or the right accent. Even when I do succeed, I have to consider if I was given the opportunity because I truly deserved it or if it was simply to tick a box or fill a quota.

In a world where answers are not always available, being black for me will always be about making the most of every opportunity to change the narrative. For most of my career, I have been the only black person in a lot of rooms and have craved role models and mentors that looked like me and understood my struggles. Writing this article is a truly humbling experience for me as I realise that I may now be that role model that young people coming up in tax will look up to.

I acknowledge that some of the issues I have mentioned above are not unique to black people, but black people in my experience have had more than their fair share of struggles. Using Black History Month and the Charter to focus on the struggles of black people to my mind is a missed opportunity. Despite all I’ve been through in life, I can honestly say that being black is the one thing about me that I am most proud of.

I am proud to come from a continent that has some of world’s most vibrant and amazing cultures and some of the most unique and intellectual people I know. The perspectives black people bring to the table, especially when it comes to resilience and enduring hardships are valuable skills to any organisation, especially considering the pandemic we’re battling with.

The only reason why I am a Tax Director today is because there were a few people along the way who ignored the strange looking name on my CV, disregarded the fact that they were unfamiliar with any of the schools listed in the education section of my CV, and gave me the opportunity to join their teams.

Black History Month for me, besides obviously celebrating being black, is also about celebrating all those people around the country who are extending opportunities to people who would have otherwise been overlooked. Please continue this important

work and remember that if what we are looking for is black people to join boards and other senior level positions in tax, then our success is going to be limited as there are only a few black people who will fit the criteria for these positions at present.

Our time might be better invested in reaching students before they decide on a career path and educate them about how rewarding a career in tax can be. I recently had the opportunity to mentor a Finance degree student at Greenwich University with ReachOut and was not surprised to find out that she did not know anything about tax advisers or the institute. I similarly studied Accounting and Finance and had no idea you could actually specialise in tax until after I had graduated.

Educating our young people, not only about tax but also about the benefits of diversity, will make tax education a much easier task for us in the future; the more diverse our members are, the easier it will be to bring tax education to all members of the public.

The only reason why I am a Trustee of the CIOT today is because I responded to Jeremy Coker's invitation for more black people to volunteer and get involved in the October 2020 Tax Adviser which also included a few issues for Black History month. I would therefore like to extend my own invitation to black people in the profession. No one else can tell your story or understand what needs to change in our system like you can. Get involved and help be the change you want to see.

To every member of the institute, my message is we all have a part to play. May the Charter and Black History Month remind us of what we are working for – a world where black people will know that their voices matter, that their opinions are valued and that they are playing their match on a level playing field. Happy Black History Month!

Ashley Makoni started her career in tax working in international law firms and is now a Tax Director at Kroll, is a trustee of the CIOT and has recently joined the Professional Standards Committee.

Image

THE ONLY PERSON OF COLOUR IN THE ROOM



***Toyin Oyeneyin** is a Tax Product Specialist at Octopus Investments.*

My parents are part of the first generation Nigerian diaspora who moved to Edinburgh. As you can imagine, my name stood out growing up in Edinburgh! As did I, regularly being the only person of colour in the room. Now living in London, a city known for its diversity, I find that surprisingly, I am still often the only person of colour in the room in a professional environment. However, the landscape is changing for the better, as many businesses realise the qualitative and quantitative benefits of having a diverse workforce. Simply put, if you have different perspectives in a workforce, a business does better.

My mother is a medical doctor and my father is a professor of engineering. Having both worked professionally in the UK, they instilled into my siblings and me a notion that we would need to work twice as hard as our peers to progress. My parents arrived in the UK a long time ago and times have changed since then. However, their advice and counsel are very similar to that which many African diaspora parents still provide to their children to this day.

I have held onto those words of wisdom from my parents and applied them throughout my professional career, always giving 200% plus for the companies I work for. This working mindset has helped me consistently progress in my career but what was also key have been those who supported me. Those who did not let my colour affect how they engaged with me, those who made room for me, those who were integral to significant turning points in my career, and those who encouraged instead of discouraged me. To those people, thank you.

Image

BEING BLACK IN TAX



Delriene Smith is a Tax Consultant at Boss Money Moves

When I was asked to write about my experiences of issues that black people are facing within the profession, I had to take some time to think about it. The thing is that I have been doing this for some time; well over 30 years. Never, I hear you say, you don't look old enough (laughing). Well yes, I have, and the reality is that you somehow become desensitised to some of the challenges.

I started my career with the Inland Revenue (as it was called then) and I believe that at the time there was genuine opportunity to grow, learn and progress. But back then I did not see many people that looked like me in very senior roles. Whilst going through my training both at the Inland Revenue and when I did my tax exams, I remember thinking that I would like to do this so that as younger people start coming through, they would look at me and say, 'yeah, I can do this'.

For many years as I worked in tax, I hardly ever saw people that looked like me at all, and so it became the norm – so much so that I didn't even notice it any more. I remember inviting someone to join me at a work social event and it was only when they commented that there were no other black people that I actually noticed it, despite the fact that I had worked at that firm for several years. My reality was that there were not many black individuals in management roles or at partner level. I don't believe for one minute that there were no highly qualified, ambitious individuals that looked like me, and I guess one could only conclude that it's because people that looked like me were just not given the opportunity.

Historically, the accountancy profession has been predominantly white, male, middle class. Yeah, I said it. I recently had a conversation with a close friend (who is white) who runs his own accountancy practice. He recalled that on joining a new firm, one of the partners said to him how nice it was to have another double-barrelled in the firm.

I have had experiences with clients referring to my race as 'your lot' and 'darkies' in meetings, completely oblivious to how this might be received. I have had experiences of developing relationships by speaking to clients over the phone for many years, and when we arranged our first face to face meeting, you can see them visibly double take because they didn't expect to see a black person.

The thing about working in the profession, especially when you are the minority, is that there is an unwritten expectation that you have to perform at a higher level than your counterparts. You don't always have the luxury of just being yourself; like it or not, you are a representation. In very many cases, I was the first black person that a lot of my white counterparts came into close day to day contact with. You could tell this by the types of questions they asked about my hair and my skin. One colleague heard me speaking about holidays and sun lotion and asked, 'Do black people use sun lotion?' I explained that skin is skin and black people can get skin cancer too. They were genuinely amazed.

The thing about 'being black in practice' is that you will have situations where you question whether or not your unfair treatment is as a result of your race. I had a situation where my request for CPD was denied but it was offered to my white counterpart. Coincidence? Or not.

Anyway, we are now in 2021 and I am pleased to know that the ATT and CIOT have made the decision to raise awareness and explore the range of views and experiences that we face as black tax professionals. I have developed many relationships at senior levels within the ATT and CIOT, mainly as a result of my volunteering work. My experiences have always been refreshing and interacting with people like Ray McCann, Peter Rayney, Robert Jamieson, Andrew McKenzie-Smart and Emma Barklamb to name a few (oh boy, you should never name names in case you miss people) have made me feel like I count, and that I matter. They have interacted with me; Delriene.

We all know that the death of George Floyd has opened the way for many much needed conversations to be had that would otherwise never have taken place. We have had organisations look at their working practices to identify areas where they need to work on equality. Admittedly some organisations have done this as part of a tick box exercise but there are organisations like the ATT and CIOT that have been doing this for some time – and this is reflected in the membership and active volunteer profile. This is not a one-time exercise but is something that should be evolving all the time. One way to achieve this is to have open honest conversations with people that look like me.