

African-Americans in Business: A Path Towards Empowerment

PREFACE

MSgt Johnny L. Green, USAF, assigned to the 694 Mission Support Squadron at Fort George G. Meade, Maryland, served as a participant in the Topical Research Intern Program at the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI) during the month of April 1997. He conducted the necessary research to prepare this report. The Institute thanks MSgt Greene for his contributions to the research efforts of DEOMI.

SCOPE

The Topical Research Intern Program provides the opportunity for Servicemembers and DoD civilian employees to work on diversity/equal opportunity projects while on a 30-day tour of duty at the Institute. During their tour, the interns use a variety of primary and secondary source materials to compile a review of data or research pertaining to an issue of importance to equal opportunity (EO) and equal employment opportunity (EEO) specialists, supervisors, and other leaders throughout the Services. The resulting publications (such as this one) are intended as resource and educational materials and do not represent official policy statements or endorsements by the DoD or any of its agencies. The publications are distributed to EO/EEO personnel and selected senior officials to aid them in their duties.

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INTRODUCTION

Each February, African-American History Month is celebrated to recognize African-Americans' heritage, struggles, achievements, and progress. This year's theme, "African-Americans in Business: The Path Towards Empowerment," leads us to consider the future of African-Americans in business and how business can contribute to African-American empowerment. To do that, we consider historical and contemporary facts and issues.

THE PAST

In certain parts of America, because of the history of slavery, the opportunities for African-Americans to establish a business were few, if any. Uneducated and reduced to positions as field hands or house laborers, they waited years before finding the opportunity and acquiring sufficient capital to advance.

In a two-year study published in *Children of the Dream, The Psychology of Black Success*, Audrey Edwards and Craig Polite write:

America's early black wealthy class were invariably entrepreneurs, and their enterprises were inevitably rooted in the delivery of vital services to the black community--the kind of services that the white community was either unable or unwilling to deliver to its black citizens. Early black fortunes, then, were built on such industries as insurance, undertaking, banking, media, and health and beauty. In a segregated society where the majority race would neither insure, bury, lend money, portray fairly in the press, nor market health and grooming products to its minority population, these needs were quickly filled by enterprising black businessmen and women. (5:18)

As time went on, numerous African-Americans began contributing in the business arena through creativity and sheer desire. African-Americans, such as Paul Cuffe, were actively involved in Black economic development in the late 18th century through the early 19th, despite the injustices of the period. Cuffe purchased six ships and transported several thousand Africans back to Africa. In addition, he was politically active and believed African-Americans should not pay taxes when they were not allowed to vote. He was the richest African-American of his time. (11:15)

As America began its transformation from days of inopportunity for Black Americans to days of possibilities, they began "testing the waters" of opportunity. They persisted, learning by being self-taught. According to Edwards and Polite:

Unlike the Vanderbilts and Rockefellers, Carnegies and Mellons whose fortunes coincided with the industrial revolution of the late nineteenth century, black wealth in America is largely a twentieth-century phenomenon. (5:17)

African-Americans (and other Americans as well) place particular importance upon those who have done things that seemed impossible. Pioneers of African-American business, such as the sampling listed below, dreamed about success, and despite the odds, achieved it. They accomplished what seemed impossible and the standards they established will have long-lasting influence.

Prior to 1900

- **James Forten, Sr.**, established the first major Black-owned sailmaking shop in 1798 in Philadelphia. He was a leader in the radical abolitionist movement and participated in the organization of the American Antislavery Society in 1833, while also supporting the women's suffrage and temperance movements. (14:7)

- In 1818, **Thomas Day**, from Milton, North Carolina, became the first widely recognized Black furniture maker in the deep south. His workshop, the Yellow Tavern, is a National Historical Landmark. (14:7)
- In 1831, **John Mashow** became the first African-American in the United States to establish a major shipbuilding firm. He was situated in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts, and remained active until shortly before the Civil War. (14:13)
- **William Leidesdorff** opened the first hotel in San Francisco in 1846, organized the first horse race, operated the first steamboat in 1847, and became the first African-American millionaire. He was an influential resident of California in the critical years surrounding the ceding of California to the United States in 1848. In April of that year, he became chair of the California board of education, and was instrumental in opening California's first public school. He was born in the Virgin Islands, the son of an African woman and a Danish man. Leidesdorff arrived in California in 1841 and became a Mexican citizen in 1846, allowing him to acquire vast land holdings. He was probably the first Black in the United States to hold a diplomatic post when he became a U.S. consul in 1845. (14:9)
- In 1855, **D. Watson Onley**, built the first steam saw and planing mill owned and operated entirely by Blacks, in Jacksonville, Florida. After the mill was destroyed by arson, Onley worked for Florida State Normal and Industrial College. He attended Howard University School of Dentistry and practiced dentistry in Washington, D.C. (14:7)
- In 1890, **Thomy Lafon** was among the earliest Black Americans to become wealthy. As a New Orleans real estate speculator and moneylender, his estate was valued at nearly half a million dollars. He was noted for philanthropy, and left most of his estate to charity. (14:10-11)
- In 1893, **Nancy Green** became the first "Aunt Jemima" and a living trademark that lasted for three decades. She was a former slave from Montgomery County, Kentucky. (14:1)

These pioneers laid foundations unthinkable in their time. Their legacy of business skill helped pave the way for others to follow.

1900s to the Present

- In 1903, **Maggie Lena Walker** became the first African-American woman bank president. She founded the Saint Luke Penny Savings Bank in Richmond, Virginia, which began as an insurance society. (14:3)
- **Madame C. J. Walker** is believed to be the first Black woman millionaire, a fact that is disputed by those who think it was **Annie Turnbo Malone**. Both of these women produced hair care products formulated especially for Black women and

were developing their businesses at the same time. Some claim that Walker worked as a salesperson for Malone products. By around 1910, both were very wealthy, but due to poor management, Malone's business began to run into difficulties after 1927. (14:8)

- **Frederick Douglass Patterson** was the first African-American car manufacturer. Between 1916 and 1919, Patterson built some 30 Greenfield-Patterson cars in Green-field, Ohio. (14:1)
- In 1932, **Asa T. Spaulding** became the first African-American actuary in the United States. He earned a degree in accounting *magna cum laude* from New York University in 1930 and an M.A. from the University of Michigan in 1932. Subsequently, he went to work for the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company of Durham, North Carolina. He became president of the company in 1959. (14:4-5)
- In 1938, **John H. Johnson** was the first Black named as one of the country's "Ten Outstanding Young Men" by the U.S. Junior Chamber of Commerce. As the founder and publisher of the first successful magazines devoted to Black topics, *Ebony* (1945) and *Jet* (1951), he received many awards for his success in publishing. In 1972, he was the first African-American to be awarded the prestigious Henry Johnson Fisher Award from the Magazine Publishers Association. (14:9-10)
- In 1957, **Cirilo A. McSween** represented New York Life Insurance Company, a major White-owned insurance company. He was the first African-American to hold this position, and the first African-American, for any company, to make a million dollars in sales in one year. He later sold a million dollars of insurance in one month, and became the first African-American to do so. (14:5)
- In 1959, in New York City, **Ruth J. Bowen** became the first Black woman to establish a successful booking and talent agency. She has represented Dinah Washington, Sammy Davis, Jr., Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, and other important artists. With an initial \$500 investment in 1959, her agency became the largest Black-owned agency in the world in 10 years. (14:9)
- In 1962, **Harvey Clarence Russell, Jr.**, became the first Black vice-president of a leading national corporation, Pepsico. In 1962 he became vice-president in charge of special markets; in 1965, vice-president in charge of planning; and, in 1969, vice-president of community affairs. (14:8)
- **Leon Howard Sullivan**, developed the first major Black-sponsored shopping center in 1968, Progress Plaza, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. A Baptist minister, he was very active in developing Black businesses and, in 1971, became the first African-American appointed to the board of General Motors. (14:11)

- **Clarence C. Finley** began to work for Charm-Tred-Monticello Company in 1942 as a file clerk. By 1970, he was the first Black division president of this major firm, a branch of Burlington Industries. (14:8)
- In 1970, **Thomas A. Wood** was appointed to the board of Chase Manhattan Bank, the first African-American on the board of a major bank not run by African-Americans. In 1969 he founded TAW International Leasing, a New York-based firm conducting business mainly in Africa. (14:3)
- Also in 1970, **Joseph L. Searles, III**, became the first African-American to secure a seat on the New York Stock Exchange. (14:12)
- In 1971, **James O. Plinton, Jr.**, became the first Black top executive of a major airline, Eastern Airlines. In 1935, he became a pilot instructor in the U.S. Army Air Corps, and in 1944 was the first African-American to complete the Air Corps' Central Instructors School. He joined Trans World Airlines in 1950, and in 1971 was appointed as Eastern Airlines vice-president for marketing affairs. (14:13)
- In 1975, **Wally "Famous" Amos** opened the first retail store selling only cookies run by a Black. He also worked at the William Morris Agency, where he went from mail clerk to clerk executive to vice-president, and finally became their first Black talent agent. Famous Amos Chocolate Chip Cookies grossed \$80 million a year in the early years, but by the early 1990s, financial problems caused the loss of both his company and the rights to the use of his name. His latest venture is the Uncle Noname Cookie Company. (14:11-12)
- In 1982, **Sybil Collins Mobley** became the first Black woman on the board of Sears, Roebuck & Company. With a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois, she taught in the business school of what is now Florida A & M University, where she became a dean in 1974. (14:12)
- In 1983, **Ben F. Branch** (1924-1987) became president of the nation's first Black-owned soft drink company, Dr. Branch Products, in Chicago, Illinois. He was also a musician and a civil rights activist, and he organized the world's only gospel orchestra, the SCLC-Operation Breadbox Orchestra. (14:12)
- In 1987, **Vander Brown, Jr.**, was the first African-American to head a division of Greyhound, Western Greyhound, one of only four regional divisions of Greyhound Lines. (14:14)
- In 1987, **Barbara J. Wilson** became the first African-American woman automobile dealer. That same year she received the Candace Award as Businesswoman of the Year. (14:2)
- In 1987, **Reginald F. Lewis** completed the first leveraged buyout of a Fortune 500 company by an African-American, food giant TLC Beatrice International

Holdings. This was, and still is, the largest corporation ever owned by an African-American. He developed a successful law firm during the 1970s, then entered the larger business world in 1984 when he purchased the floundering McCall's Pattern Company. The risky purchase paid off, and by the time he bid on Beatrice in 1987, he had sold McCall's for a \$70 million profit. (14:3-4)

- In 1993, **Pearline Motley** was the first African-American named American Business Woman of the Year by the American Business Women's Association. She was the manager of the Federal Women's Program of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service in Kansas City, Missouri. (14:9)

THE PRESENT

In the years before 1960, African-Americans had limited access to technology, capital, and most importantly, higher education. Therefore, it is easy to understand their lack of business acumen. But the later years of the 20th century brought increased interest in success in many ways. George Fraser, author of *Success Runs in Our Race*, explains,

The amazing thing is that in spite of the bombardment of these negative images of African Americans, millions of blacks of our generation have experienced great success. We have turned stumbling blocks into our stepping stones. And now it is time for us to seize control of our image and our economy and rehabilitate both. We can do this by better using our established "intellectual capital" to encourage excellence, economic empowerment, and self-help. (6:100)

Considering the circumstances, achievements by African-Americans in America have been impressive.

According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census newsletter,

Blacks continue to make gains in educational attainment. In 1995, 74 percent aged 25 and over were high school graduates, while 13 percent had a bachelor's degree, up from 51 percent and 8 percent, respectively, in 1980. (7)

This newsletter also states:

In 1992, minorities owned 2,149,184 businesses that took in \$210 billion in receipts. About 48 percent of the firms were services; especially prevalent were health, business, and personal services. However, despite their large numbers, service firms owned by minorities took in only 27 percent of total receipts, reflecting the relatively small size of these businesses. (13)

Despite the encouraging trends in African-American achievement, often the enthusiasm to own a business, complete an academic degree, etc., is cut short because of an initial failure. Dr. Edith M. Freeman, professor in the School of Social Welfare at the University of Kansas, discussed the failure of African-American business:

All individuals seek opportunities for empowerment as an inherent need. Black males who are subjected to many...risk factors...generally have few opportunities for feeling good about themselves or for reducing or eliminating these factors. [It is well known] that limited resources have a negative impact on self-image, dignity, and self-esteem.... (12: 198)

Every business cannot be a success, of course. Black businesses fail at a very high rate: 30 percent within 3 years, 75 percent within 5 years, and 80 percent within 10 years. (11:45) Economist Timothy Bates writes:

The evidence suggests that highly educated owners, irrespective of race, invest larger amounts of financial capital into their small businesses and are more likely to create larger scale, lasting firms than are their poorly educated peers, whose financial resources are less bountiful. Given that pattern, the weaker posture of black businesses is predictable.... Smaller financial investments by black owners at the point of business startup--less equity to begin with, as well as less access to debt--clearly lead to the creation of black businesses that are smaller and have lower chances of survival. (2:31-32)

Therefore, the educational level of a business owner is an important factor that impacts the viability of any business.

EDUCATION

Over the last 30 to 40 years, Historically/Predominantly Black Colleges and Universities (H/PBCUs) have flourished. Dr. J. Wilson Bowan, author of *America's Black Colleges, The Comprehensive Guide to Historically & Predominantly Black Colleges & Universities*, has said:

Black colleges shape the future of Black America. These Institutions were designed to meet the unique educational and social needs of the African-American.... The H/PBCUs are institutions that are committed. They provide a special environment at an important time in the life of the young adult. They give African-American youth a sense that they are in charge and that success is attainable. (3:4)

Education as to the needs of a society is important if that society is to create and sustain growth. Over 100 HBCUs have affected the business and professional future of many successful African-Americans. Graduates from HBCUs include:

- 50% of the nation's Black business executives
- 45% of the Black members of Congress
- 50% of Black elected officials
- 95% of the Black elected officials from the South
- 75% of Black Americans with Ph.D. degrees
- 80% of Black federal judges
- 75% of Black lawyers
- 85% of Black physicians
- 75% of Black military officers. (9)

Dr. Bowan reminds us of the importance of education to African-Americans' prosperity:

This must become the Age of Black College survival. Without Black colleges, Blacks never could have made the financial and economic strides evident today. However, our people are nevertheless floating on a rising tide of mediocrity, complacency and handwringing, lamenting the difficulties of making it against such Herculean odds. We must summon the Black colleges to help us succeed. Our freedom has been bought with sweat, blood, tears, determination, curiosity,

forbearance and hard work. The role of the Black college is to teach our children how to acknowledge our merits, cultivate them and succeed. (3:vii)

PROGRAMS

Among the government programs impacting the status of African-Americans (and other minorities) are empowerment zones, affirmative action, and Proposition 209.

EMPOWERMENT ZONES

In 1997, some government programs were established to assist minorities in business development. One of them was the implementation of empowerment zones. These zones receive additional funds and support from the government. Each received \$100 million in grants and the right to \$250 million in tax incentives for business. (15:57) Selected empowerment zones are in New York, Chicago, Baltimore, Atlanta, Detroit, and Philadelphia-Camden, New Jersey. An article in *Black Enterprises*, "Will You Be Better Off in Four More Years?" suggests:

Some neighborhoods, such as Harlem, have attracted a great deal of activity. Yet others have gotten off to a late start, with would-be applicants bogged down in paperwork and red tape. The zones offer tax advantages to businesses that open in urban areas and tax credits if they hire within the targeted neighborhood. (15:57)

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

As one of America's hottest topics, affirmative action gets negative and positive press. The first time the phrase "affirmative action" was used in a Presidential Executive Order was March 1961 when President John F. Kennedy ordered that federal contractors, "take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin."

As quoted in *Black Enterprise*, February 1997 issue, Dolores Cole of West Group Consulting and Training in Marino Valley, California, says, "Many people believe affirmative action means hiring unqualified people over those who are qualified. Nothing could be further from the truth...." The affirmative action programs essentially index how effective the equal opportunity laws are at overcoming discrimination. (1)

PROPOSITION 209

Proposition 209, also known as the California Civil Rights Initiative, reads:

The state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education or public contracting. (18:31)

Like affirmative action, Proposition 209 is also a "hot topic." Author Linda S. Greene, president of the Society of American Law Teachers, writes for the *Miami Herald* :

[The] adoption of California Proposition 209, which mandates the dismantling of affirmative efforts to include minorities and women in public employment, public contracts and public education, set in motion a segregation process that will...divide California--and perhaps the rest of the country--into two nations, one white and one minority. The measure, which bans "discrimination and preferences," is the most recent example of resistance to the proposition that all persons of both genders and all races should share in the privileges--education, employment, public contracts--the state affords. (8)

The ultimate impact of empowerment zones, affirmative action program revisions, and Proposition 209 remains to be seen. Regardless of one's views on these issues, they most certainly play a major role in African-American business in America.

THE FUTURE

Although recent business accomplish-ments have been numerous for African-American entrepreneurs, there is no guarantee this trend will continue into the future. *USA Today* (August 15, 1991) reports some disturbing facts:

- 40% of young Black men in big cities do not graduate from high school.
- There are more young African-American men under the control of the criminal justice system than there are African-American men of all ages enrolled in higher education.
- The unemployment rate for Black males is 12.2%, compared with 5.5% for Whites.
- Life expectancy for Black males is 65.2 years, for White males 72.2 years.
- Black men in inner-city neighborhoods are less likely to reach the age of 65 than men in Bangladesh, one of the poorest nations in the world
- Homicide is the leading cause of death for Black males ages 15 to 24. The homicide rate for Black men between the ages of 20 and 29 is six times higher than the rate for the rest of the population that age.
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death for young Black males. (16)

Despite these negative statistics, what is the future for African-Americans in business? If America's future is going to be bright, it must depend on all its people. According to William B. Johnston and Arnold H. Packer, authors of *Workforce 2000, Work and Workers for the 21st Century*,

For black men and Hispanics, the job market will be particularly difficult... In contrast to their rising share of the new entrants into the labor force, black men will hold a *declining* fraction of all jobs if they simply retain existing shares of various occupations. Black women, on the other hand, will hold a rising fraction of all jobs if they retain their current shares of each occupation, but this increase will be less than needed to offset their growing share of the workforce.

Similarly, although the economy will be creating more jobs in the categories traditionally held by middle-aged workers and women, the increases will not be enough to offset the increases in the labor force in these categories. (10:101-102)

Although the forecast indicates some opportunities, Johnston and Packer continue,

This rapid increase in the skills required for new jobs in the economy must be put in the context of the competence of the new workers entering the workforce. The evidence suggests that many millions of these new workers lack even the basic skills essential for employment. (10:102)

Clearly, education is one key to the future. A second key is entrepreneur-ship. These themes--education and entrepreneurship are intertwined and integral to any discussion of the future of Black business.

In the *Orlando Sentinel* of April 4, 1992, Oscar Suris reported on a national conference of Black business leaders.

Disappointed with the welfare system and frustrated by legal challenges to the set-aside programs, some blacks are embracing entrepreneurship as the best tool they have against economic inequities that have kept some of them from acquiring wealth. (17)

At this same conference, former U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, Jack Kemp, part of a national lineup of speakers, addressed the need for minorities, particularly Blacks, to build companies that will help the United States regain some of its ability to compete worldwide. He stated, "I think this is the most important civil rights movement in America today." (17)

However, in a study of African-American economic status, economist and author Timothy Bates says,

Social scientists have repeatedly questioned the viability of the overall black business community, and they have often attacked government loan assistance and procurement programs as wasteful and ineffective. A recurring theme is the notion that black-owned businesses are heavily concentrated in small-scale services and retailing, activities that hold little potential for growth. Most of these firms have no employees, annual sales below \$25,000, and very high failure rates. (2:10)

As businesses, especially African-American businesses, continue to fail, small retail and personal service operations will continue to be dominated by less educated owners. This lack of education results in less access to capital, profits, and growth. At the same time, the new group of Black-owned entrepreneurships such as manufacturing, finance, general contracting, and professional services, self-owned and operated, will develop increased capital and growth. Although there is no guarantee of the success of a business, chances are higher that the organizations owned by better educated individuals will be more prosperous and endure potential business failures. (2:10-11)

Many African-Americans are afraid to discontinue their present occupations and start their own businesses, as are others. Depending on the business, obtaining capital is a primary concern. It has only been in recent years that funds have been made available for African-American businesses. Only in the last thirty years have government guaranteed loans become available for prospective African-American entrepreneurs. These guarantees induced many banks to extend business loans, and this breakthrough spurred African-American enrollment in college's business programs. (2:21)

Although capital is mentioned as a primary concern, proper training and education are important as well. One of the fastest growing programs in colleges and universities today is entrepreneurship, and it has become evident that education, access to capital, and community are key ingredients to success.

Author John Baker Brown focuses on the recent increase in African-American entrepreneurs. He echoes the comment of Frederick Douglass: "We must not only be able to black boots, but to make them." (4)

Dr. Dennis P. Kimbro, director of the Center for Entrepreneurship, Clark Atlanta University (CAU), adds:

We want to show students that entrepreneurship is an option. We want them to know that it's okay to look out the window--okay to dream.... The center's long-term goal is to create a wealth-producing class of African Americans.

Included at this center will be publications and video presentations and a database on minority firms, small businesses, and economic organizations, and they will compile case studies of minority business successes and failures. (4:7)

The African-American community is experiencing a subtle but important change. Kimbro continues,

While the black community today has far too few entrepreneurs, those it does have are extraordinary.... Black folks are finally learning that capitalism is not a dirty word.... We're finally learning that we don't have to sell our souls to be capitalists. (4:7)

Entrepreneurs don't just happen. Self-employment involves hard work, long hours, and numerous headaches. There's no easy answer regarding what African-Americans can expect in the next few years. But opportunities do exist. The possibilities of empowerment zones and other small business incentive programs over the next few years should be of interest. (15:57)

African-American progress is apparent and support is available, so there are good signs for the future. However, there are always challenges. The primary challenge facing Blacks as entrepreneurs is access to capital, and this factor alone has kept many Blacks from becoming successful entrepreneurs.

Professional skills and education are also very important for entrepreneurial growth among African-Americans. They are, however, enrolling in college and earning degrees, and these numbers have increased at a higher rate than that of nonminorities. (2:23)

CONCLUSION

African-American business pioneers of the past have influenced many people of today. Many African-Americans now find the strength and courage to step out on their own,

armed with a greater emphasis on education, entrepreneur-ship, use of federal government programs, and an understanding of past accomplishments and failures.

African-Americans have known for many years that achieving fair and equal access into the business world has been difficult. But, in just a few years, many have taken monumental steps toward empowering themselves, making a difference. As a group, African-Americans possess the essential ingredients necessary to progress in business-- leadership, proven examples, and experience--and the confidence to take the task of total equality in America's business world into the 21st century.

In *Children of the Dream*, authors Audrey Edwards and Dr. Craig K. Polite say it well:

A critical lesson learned from the experience of successful blacks, these experts in the art of victory, is that the key to managing success and to personal power is in understanding that real success lies in who you become on the journey to achievement. The ability to not just overcome but to triumph in the face of obstacles, to make a way out of what appears to be no way, to wrest destiny from the seemingly arbitrary hands of fate, constitutes power that is transcendent, freedom that is supreme. (5:274)

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