

The Washington Post

BET founder offers plan to cut racial disparity in hiring

By Michael A. Fletcher, Published: December 17



(Nicholas Kamm/AFP/Getty Images) - Robert L. Johnson, founder of Black Entertainment Television (BET) arrives at a red carpet event hosted by Google and the Hollywood Reporter, on the eve of the annual White House Correspondents' Association dinner in Washington on April 27, 2012.

Backed by leading civil rights leaders, prominent African-American businessman Robert L. Johnson Monday renewed his call for President Obama to address the gaping employment gap that has long separated black and white workers.

Johnson, the billionaire chairman of the RLJ Companies and founder of Black Entertainment Television, said the disparity could be narrowed if Obama encouraged U.S. corporations to voluntarily embrace a plan to interview at least two qualified minority candidates for every job at the vice president level or above. He said companies should also interview two minority-owned firms for vendor supply and other contracts.

“We are never going to close this gap unless there is a conscious commitment to do so,” Johnson said in an interview.

He said the idea is patterned after the National Football League’s Rooney Rule, which requires teams to interview minority candidates seeking head-coaching or general manager jobs before making hiring decisions.

Johnson said he broached the idea with Obama and about a dozen black business leaders in December last year at a White House meeting. At the time, Johnson said, Obama said he liked the idea and would pursue it with his jobs council, a panel of corporate leaders that advises the president on job creation.

Johnson said he held follow-up meetings with White House staff but eventually the effort “fizzled out.”

Johnson, whose idea has been endorsed by the National Urban League, the Congressional Black Caucus and the U.S. Black Chamber Inc. said he decided to issue a public statement pushing the idea after reading a Washington Post [article](#) about the racial unemployment gap.

The article noted that for at least four decades blacks have a jobless rate that is roughly double that of whites — a disparity that persists across education levels and occupations. Blacks with with at least a bachelor’s degree, for example, had a jobless rate of 7.1 percent in 2011, compared to 3.9 percent for whites with similar educational credentials. The overall black jobless rate is 13.2 percent, while the white rate is 6.8 percent.

Scholars note that although discrimination is the major factor hampering black job seekers, they also suffer from having fewer social networks with the power to land them in jobs.

“Hiring in this country is still a friend of a friend kind of thing,” Johnson said. He added that putting more blacks in hiring positions could reshape that pattern.

Asked to respond to Johnson’s remarks, Kevin S. Lewis, a White House spokesman, said in a statement: “President Obama is deeply committed to growing our economy from the middle out by ensuring a strong, secure, and thriving middle-class and ensuring that everyone has a fair shot, a fair shake and plays by the same set of rules.”

Johnson said he was reluctant to put pressure on Obama to embrace an “African-American-centric” policy prescription. The president, he said, seems to believe that an improvement in the economy would address the problem. But, Johnson said, black joblessness needs to be tackled head-on.

Even as the nation has poured billions of money into education, which has resulted in the number of black college graduates tripling over the past 25 years, “it is not moving the needle” on unemployment, Johnson said.