

Local corporations invest in minority networking

By Deborah M. Todd / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

While the economic recovery has taken the nation's overall unemployment rate from double digits at the height of the recession to 8.3 percent in February, it may as well be 2008 all over again for Hispanics facing 10.7 percent unemployment and African-Americans facing 14.1 percent.

Robert L. Johnson, founder of Black Entertainment Television and chairman of Bethesda, Md.-based investment network RLJ Companies, said he has heard the story of minority underemployment in America his entire life, and the time to turn the page is long overdue.

"If we can't tolerate an 8.3 unemployment for the general population, how in the world can we tolerate a 16, 17 percent unemployment rate for minority Americans?" he said during a speech at Downtown's August Wilson Center for the Performing Arts on Wednesday.

"Minority Americans -- African-Americans and Hispanics -- if you look at the demographic growth, will become the largest population group in this country. Whether it's in the next 20 years or the next 30 years, that will inexorably happen.

"Now how do we expect to be competitive against a growing vast middle class that's emerging in India, sub-Saharan Africa, throughout southeast Asia and the world, if a huge part of our talent is sitting on the sidelines unproductive? To me, that is a corporate and a social and a political imperative," he said.

Mr. Johnson joined members of Vibrant Pittsburgh, a Downtown-based organization dedicated to attracting diverse talent to the region, to announce a partnership with OppsPlace.com, a minority jobs networking site that he launched in February.

OppsPlace -- which Mr. Johnson described as a combination of job search site Monster and professional networking site LinkedIn -- is designed primarily to connect minority job seekers with companies seeking to diversify their workforces.

Melanie Harrington, CEO of Vibrant Pittsburgh, said the site serves the dual function of helping the region's businesses attract minority candidates and spreading word to minorities across the nation about opportunities in the area.

"The Pittsburgh region's above-average economic performance and the thousands of available jobs across a spectrum of industries position it as a place of opportunity for natives and newcomers," she said. "Yet a critical challenge remains: Minority job seekers and businesses aren't immediately connecting with the opportunities here. One of our goals is to position Pittsburgh as a place to live, work and thrive."

To highlight that effort, BNY Mellon, Education Management Corp., FedEx Ground, Giant Eagle, Highmark, PNC Financial Services Group, PPG Industries, UPMC and U.S. Steel have all signed on as local charter members.

Each organization already has expressed the desire to attract minority candidates, but membership with OppsPlace gives them an opening to implement Mr. Johnson's version of the NFL's Rooney Rule into their best practices.

Much like the Rooney Rule, a policy proposed by Steelers president Dan Rooney that requires teams to interview at least one minority candidate for senior football operations positions, Mr. Johnson's "RLJ Rule" encourages companies to establish practices of interviewing minority candidates or vendors for high-ranking positions or lucrative contracts.

Mr. Johnson said giving a minority candidate the opportunity to compete could benefit a company in ways it did not anticipate. Without someone taking a chance to invest \$500,000 in his own dreams, he said, there would have been no Black Entertainment Television or business empire today.

"I will say this without equivocation: I'm not the smartest kid on the block. I've had a lot of opportunities. If there were more opportunities like I had, there would be more Bob Johnsons," he said.

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First Published 2012-03-29 04:54:57

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