

RLJ Cos. chairman starts jobs Web site for minorities

By Danielle Douglas, Published: February 5

Entrepreneur Robert L. Johnson, chairman of RLJ Cos. in Bethesda, is starting a job search engine aimed at tackling the high rates of unemployment among minorities as well as the growing wealth divide.

The Web site, known as OppsPlace.com, will offer job listings and contracting opportunities as well as allow a place for job seekers to post their resumes and minority-owned firms to tout their capabilities. It is scheduled to go live on Feb. 13, with listings from 39 companies, including FedEx, Toyota and Capital One Financial.



Jeffrey MacMillan/Capital Business - Robert Johnson, chairman and founder of RLJ Development, in his Bethesda office.

Participating employers pay a listing fee of between \$20,000 and \$30,000 based on usage, while applicants can upload their information free of charge.

Arlington-based Symplicity, an information-technology firm and co-owner of OppsPlace, will power the online platform. The site plans to provide career advice as well as financial literacy and wealth-building strategies.

“Corporate America should view diversity... as a business imperative, no less important than financial performance, succession planning and shareholder relations,” said Johnson, during a press conference at the National Press Club announcing the Web site last week. “Minorities are quickly becoming the largest employee pool and consumer base in the United States.”

Yet, he noted, “minorities are often left out of the deal flow of opportunity, and as a result, are underrepresented in doing business with and at management levels in corporate America.”

Minorities have suffered higher rates of job loss and wealth erosion in the wake of the recession. Nationally, the unemployment rate among blacks stood at 15.8 percent, and among Hispanics at 11 percent in December, compared to 8.5 percent overall, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Meanwhile, Pew Research Center reported that the collapse of housing prices disproportionately affected the net worth of black and Hispanic households between 2005 and 2009. As a result, the median net worth of a white family is now 20 times that of a black family and 18 times that of a Hispanic family.

“It’s not ... that minorities don’t have a strong work ethic, it’s not that [they] are uneducated ... nor is it that [they] are not committed to saving and building sustainable wealth,” Johnson said. Minorities “can succeed at the highest levels of economic competition if they are given the opportunity.”

To that end, Johnson also is calling on companies to voluntarily adopt his “RLJ Rule,” and interview at least two qualified minority candidates or vendors for available managerial positions or contracts.

“[This] is not to suggest quotas,” said Johnson, who modeled the rule after the National Football League’s Rooney Rule for considering minorities for coaching positions. “The rule simply calls for a commitment to give minorities a chance. I’m counting on the fact that when companies see talent, they are going to embrace it.”

Countless firms have established diversity initiatives to attract and retain minorities, an effort Johnson says can be enhanced by pledging to consider such applicants.

“There isn’t as much substance behind many diversity efforts. The strategy, implementation, level of commitment at the top just isn’t often there,” said Melanie Harrington, chief executive of Vibrant Pittsburgh, a workforce development firm that is partnering with OppsPlace. “One thing we liked about [OppsPlace] is it’s pushing connections as opposed to just having resumes sit on the site.”

http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/capitalbusiness/rlj-cos-chairman-starts-jobs-web-site-for-minorities/2012/02/01/gIQAZ879rQ_story.html