



NEWS RELEASE
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THE RLJ COMPANIES LAUNCHES OPPSPLACE.COM A TARGETED WEBSITE THAT WILL AGGREGATE MINORITY PROFESSIONALS AND BUSINESS OWNERS SEEKING JOBS AND BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES WITH CORPORATE AMERICA

OppsPlace Provides a Much Needed Single Destination for Companies Looking to Hire Minorities and Qualified Minority Businesses for Vendor Supplier Opportunities

BETHESDA, MD//FEBRUARY 1, 2012// Robert L. Johnson, founder and chairman of The RLJ Companies, in collaboration with Ariel M. Friedler, president of Symplicity Corporation, the market leader in online career tools, today announced the launch of OppsPlace.com. OppsPlace provides companies with the best opportunity to find qualified, minority job seekers and minority businesses in one online destination. OppsPlace is free of charge for job seekers and minority firms and allows corporate human resources and procurement executives to easily access qualified job seekers and qualified minority businesses for openings to provide the best opportunities.

“I created OppsPlace for several reasons,” said Johnson. “First to reduce the disparity in unemployment for minority Americans and to increase access for vendor services and supplier contracts for minority businesses. Second, I also created OppsPlace to provide corporate America with a targeted destination to identify and interact with minorities for employment and business opportunities. With over 30 charter member companies who have joined OppsPlace, it clearly demonstrates their commitment to diversity and inclusion,” he added. “As more U.S. companies, large and small, become OppsPlace members, OppsPlace will help reduce unemployment for millions of minority Americans, will provide access to capital to thousands of minority businesses, and will help drive the economic recovery of this country by giving minority Americans a fair shot which they deserve to participate fully in the American Dream,” he concluded.

“Unique to OppsPlace is the profile builder which allows companies to focus on their diversity initiatives, mentorship programs, business match-making as well vendor/supplier opportunities,” said Ariel Friedler, president of Symplicity Corporation and co-founder of OppsPlace. “OppsPlace is not a destination to simply upload a standard resume, but it is a platform that allows job seekers and minority businesses to network with each other and interact with professionals at hiring companies,” he concluded.

“OppsPlace is much more than a jobs board,” said Kelli Richardson Lawson, president and COO of OppsPlace. “It is a diverse online network that aggregates rich content and resources in one destination and is dedicated to helping job seekers and minority business owners engage directly with key decision makers in corporate America,” she added. “It is the only place on the web that aggregates job seekers and minority businesses in the spirit of helping communities of color enhance their lives and financial well-being,” she concluded.

For many years, Johnson has been focused on creating opportunities for minorities and recently announced the **RLJ Rule** for public and private sector businesses. The RLJ Rule is an adaptation of the National Football League's (NFL) Rooney Rule, which requires the 32 teams, to interview at least one qualified minority candidate whenever a head coaching or general manager position become available. The RLJ Rule is designed to encourage companies to **voluntarily** establish a "best practices" policy of diversity and inclusion by identifying and interviewing minority candidates or vendors that are often overlooked under traditional hiring or procurement practices.

OppsPlace and the RLJ Rule are two solutions where Johnson believes businesses both large and small can take direct action to increase employment and business opportunities for minority Americans.

(more)

To date, more than 30 companies have joined OppsPlace as Charter Members:

Automatic Data Processing, Inc.	General Motors	Prudential Financial, Inc.
Aflac	Giant Eagle	State Farm®
Avery Dennison	HBO	State Street
BNY Mellon	KB Home	Strayer Education, Inc.
Capital One Financial Corporation	Kimberly-Clark	Textron
Colgate-Palmolive Company	Lowe's	Toyota
CSX	McDonald's®	Travelers
Dell	New York Life	United States Steel Corporation
Education Management Corporation (EDMC)	Northern Trust	UPMC
EMC	Penn Mutual	Vibrant Pittsburgh (VP)
FedEx Corporation	PNC Financial	Visa
	PPG Industries, Inc.	YUM! Brands

For more information, visit us online at www.oppsplace.com.

About The RLJ Companies: *The RLJ Companies, founded by Robert L. Johnson, is an innovative business network that provides strategic investments in a diverse portfolio of companies. The RLJ Companies seeks to target undiscovered or underserved markets then exercise solid management to achieve results. Within The RLJ Companies portfolio, Johnson owns or holds majority interests in businesses operating in banking, private equity, real estate, hospitality, automobile dealerships, entertainment, and video lottery terminal (VLT) gaming. The RLJ Companies is headquartered in Bethesda, MD, with affiliate operations in Charlotte, NC; Orlando, FL; Little Rock, AR; Los Angeles, CA; San Juan, PR; and Monrovia, Liberia. Prior to founding The RLJ Companies, Johnson was founder and chairman of Black Entertainment Television (BET). For more information visit www.rljcompanies.com.*

About OppsPlace: *OppsPlace, LLC created by Robert L. Johnson, founder and chairman of The RLJ Companies and Ariel Friedler, CEO of Symplicity Corporation, is the preeminent online network for minorities looking to build net worth. It is the only online community that aggregates rich content, minorities looking for jobs and minority businesses seeking to do business with U.S. corporations – all in a robust networking environment. OppsPlace provides U.S. companies with the best opportunity to find qualified, minority job seekers and minority businesses in one online destination. For more information visit www.oppsplace.com.*

About Symplicity Corporation: *A pioneer in higher education, government, and business systems, Symplicity is passionate about providing its clients with IT solutions; services and products that enable them to maximize productivity, increase their return on investment, and enhance their relationships with customers and constituents. Symplicity specializes in database driven, web-based applications, enterprise information systems architecture and development, network design and management, systems and software engineering, network integration and management, information security and enterprise systems management. For more information visit www.symplicity.com.*

**REMARKS BY ROBERT L. JOHNSON
NATIONAL PRESS CLUB *NEWSMAKERS*
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Introduction

Good morning and thank you for that kind introduction.

I appreciate the opportunity to be a part of the National Press Club's *Newsmakers* event to discuss an issue I have focused on since I founded Black Entertainment Television, in 1980.

That issue is: **How do we create more economic opportunity for minority Americans?**

Today, I want to talk to you about the two problems that **must** be confronted if we are to truly open the door for minority Americans to fully participate in the American economy.

The **first** is the historical gap in employment for minorities and the **second** is the lack of minority access to capital to start businesses. Instead of turning to the Federal government to take on these serious faults in our economic system, I am here to propose what I call a **“business solution” to these compelling socio-economic problems.**

But first, as you briefly heard in the introduction, I am what you would call a serial entrepreneur. Second to my obligation as a business man to create **value** for all of my stakeholders, is my concern about the economic future and financial well-being of minorities. The businesses I'm involved in were established with one of the goals being the empowerment of African Americans, who I know, by experience, have the intelligence, the entrepreneurial spirit, and determination to contribute to the wealth of this Nation. What has been missing to a very significant degree is the economic opportunity to do so. My life in business has been an example of what giving someone an opportunity or a fair chance can mean. Let me explain:

[*ad lib* - BET/The RLJ Companies:

- **Black Entertainment Television** – John Malone
- **RLJ Lodging Trust** - Tom Baltimore/Hilton
- **RLJ Equity Partners** – The Carlyle Group/David Rubenstein (Rufus Rivers/Daphne Dufresne)
- **RLJ Western Asset** (fixed income management company) – Chip Mason/Public Private Investment Partnership (PPIP)
- **RLJ McLarty Landers** – Thomas “Mack” McLarty (\$1.1B in sales)]

These are just examples of what has happened in my life. Imagine what could happen if more minorities were given the opportunities that I have had.

The Wealth Gap

As a businessman and entrepreneur, I know first-hand the challenges minorities face in today's economic environment. I'm particularly concerned about the dramatic increase in the income and wealth gap between African-Americans and white Americans.

Consider these startling statistics (*Pew Research*)

- Last 20 years - **wealth gap** has increased from \$20K to \$90K
- The **income gap** has increased tenfold between Blacks and whites
- African American **net worth** is \$11,800 compared with \$118,000 for whites
- Black unemployment **more than two times** that of the general population (17 percent)
- Nearly half of African Americans born to middle class families in 1968 **will not attain the wealth of their parents**

These numbers paint a disturbing reality and are a major impediment to minority Americans achieving the *American Dream*. I refer to these facts as an impending “wealth gap Tsunami” whose course, if not altered, will literally wipe out the already fragile financial standing of millions of African American households. It is time we reverse this pending disaster by taking immediate and specific action and that is why I am here today.

The rate for minority unemployment has historically been, for all of my life, always double that of white unemployment. Let me be clear, the reason for the gap in minority employment is *not* that minorities do not have a strong work ethic; it is *not* that minorities are uneducated and do not believe in education as a path to economic success; nor is it that minorities are not committed to saving and building sustainable wealth for their families.

To the contrary, I know that minority Americans believe in all of these things and can succeed at the highest levels of economic competition if they are given the opportunity to do so.

So, what should we in the business community do to address these issues? My answer is based on my belief that there can be and should be “**creative business solutions to the twin problems of minority under-employment and lack of access to capital.**” Many of my friends might say “Isn’t this the role of the Federal Government?” My response is: I am not a big proponent of government putting its hands on the economic scale to solve problems when a truly committed and creative business community can do it better.

That is why I am proposing two solutions where I believe businesses both large and small can take direct action to increase employment and business opportunities for minority Americans.

The **first** is what I call **The RLJ Rule** modeled after the National Football League’s *Rooney Rule*.

The Rooney Rule

In 2003, the National Football League (NFL) established the Rooney Rule, (named after Art Rooney, owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers and chair of the NFL’s diversity committee) which required the 32 teams, **under penalty of a fine**, to interview at least one qualified minority candidate whenever a head coaching or general manager position became available. The goal of the rule was to diversify the pool of qualified candidates.

Since the Rooney Rule was adopted, the League has gone from three minority head coaches to eight minority coaches and six general managers.

Teams led by African American coaches have competed in and won the Super Bowl; of the five minority general managers in place during the 2011 regular season, four are from playoff teams. This proves that these minority individuals can succeed at the highest level of NFL competition and they richly deserve those leadership positions.

THE RLJ RULE

I recently wrote an op-ed in *Agenda*, a *Financial Times* publication aimed at Fortune 500 boards of directors, that raised this question: *What if CEOs and corporate boards took a page from the NFL owners' playbook and adopted a **voluntary** version of the Rooney Rule, which I refer to as the **RLJ RULE**, as a way to level the playing field for minorities in corporate America.*

I'm calling it the **RLJ Rule**, not for pride of authorship, but as proof based on my own experience and success and for what opportunity can mean for other minority Americans if corporations embraced the "RLJ Rule philosophy and practice.

I am proposing that the true definition of corporate diversity and inclusion should include full implementation of and a commitment to the RLJ Rule.

Let me fully explain the RLJ Rule.

The two-pronged RLJ Rule suggests that companies (1) **voluntarily** implement a plan to interview a minimum of two qualified minority candidates for every job opening at the vice president level and above; and (2) interview at least two qualified minority-owned firms for vendor/supplier contracts before choosing a winner of a contract.

The purpose of this voluntary rule is not to suggest quotas or require companies to hire any individual or minority firm. The RLJ Rule, like the NFL rule, would make certain that minorities are fairly and fully interviewed.

Why is adopting the RLJ Rule important?

The justification for the RLJ Rule is that most minorities no matter how qualified or talented are often not considered when positions are being filled or contracts awarded. Diversity and inclusion policies without a commitment to interview minority candidates, as the NFL realized, **does not work**. In short, minorities are often left out of the deal flow of opportunity, and as a result, minorities are underrepresented in doing business with and employment at management levels in corporate America – and that is a fact!

For example, a recent *Wall Street Journal* article focused on corporations hiring chief diversity officers, a Philadelphia based law firm Schnader (SNAY-DER), Harrison Segal & Lewis created a chief diversity officer position after it recognized "it had a problem retaining minority talent before they reached top-level positions. Without any rigid structures in place, the firm's majority white male attorneys – were unconsciously choosing to partner with other white male colleagues on assignments." [SOURCE: *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 5, 2012 p.B10]

This is why the RLJ Rule **is so fundamental**. The RLJ rule creates an enhanced best practices policy for companies to adopt. The rule simply calls for a commitment to give minorities a chance to be interviewed and it is a chance we richly deserve.

Corporate America should view diversity, in the form of the RLJ Rule, as a business imperative, no less important than financial performance, succession planning and shareholder relations. Another reason being, demographic trends clearly indicate that minorities are quickly becoming the largest employee pool and consumer base in the United States. What this means for us in business, is that most of our workforce and customers will come from the minority population. Unless corporate America embraces this growing demographic with **true opportunity**, we cannot win in the global game of economic competition.

The second business solution is OppsPlace, an innovative web-based company I am launching with my partner **Ariel Friedler**, president and founder of Symplicity Corporation (I should point out we are *both* minority firms.) Ariel's business represents a diverse portfolio across higher education, talent management, sourcing, procurement and the Federal Government.

Symplicity is the leading provider of career services technology in the world and they power the Federal Government's procurement system (www.fedbizopps.gov) and providing Career Services Manager (CSM) a comprehensive web-based solution for over 1,000 colleges and higher learning institutions in the country.

I'd also like to introduce **Kelli Richardson Lawson** who will serve as President & COO of OppsPlace. Kelli has over 23 years experience in new business, marketing, consumer packaged goods and technology. She worked with me for many years at BET as head of marketing and communications and previously worked as an executive at Procter & Gamble and Dell.

As today marks the first day of *Black History Month*, I am pleased to announce that **OppsPlace will go live on February 13th**, and I am confident that we will make history!

What is OppsPlace?

OppsPlace is an Internet-based employment and opportunity site designed to aggregate minorities looking for jobs in the public/private sector and minority businesses seeking to do business with large U.S. corporations. Our vision for OppsPlace is to create a targeted online destination for minority professionals and minority companies and for corporations who want to reach them.

I believe it is critical that corporate America must do more to engage, at all levels, the minority community and I believe most of them want to do so. That's why we created OppsPlace to make it easier for them to fulfill their diversity and inclusion objectives, and meet their workforce needs and diversity supplier participation goals.

What will OppsPlace mean for the minority community? The site is **free of charge** for job seekers and minority firms and easily accessible to provide the best opportunities for success in online job searches, networking, procurement opportunities, and information focused on building long term financial wealth. Users will be able to create a powerful network of business and career contacts; find jobs and procurement opportunities that have been posted by major corporations; and, receive valuable insights from industry leaders about career, business, financial literacy, and wealth-building strategies.

Ariel and I are **personally and financially committed** to making OppsPlace a company that will help reduce unemployment for millions of minority Americans, provide an opportunity for minority businesses to gain access to companies large and small, and to help drive the economic recovery of this country by giving minority Americans a fair chance which they deserve.

To achieve this goal, we need the **full support** of corporate America. By joining and utilizing OppsPlace, corporations are making an affirmative statement that they are truly committed to increasing employment and business opportunities for minority Americans.

Conclusion

Members of the press, I believe that the **RLJ Rule**, as the new definition of corporate diversity and inclusion and **OppsPlace**, as the new business solution for outreach to minorities, when combined and aligned with corporate America will have a positive impact on the financial security of minority Americans and the economic future of this Nation as a whole. I am pleased to announce that the **RLJ Rule** has the **support** of the **Congressional Black Caucus, the National Urban League, the NAACP, and the U.S. Black Chamber of Commerce**, and many other organizations.

So let me close with an excerpt from President Obama's December 5th "economy speech" in Osawatomie, Kansas which is clearly consistent with the goals of the RLJ Rule. He stated in part:

"... In America we are greater together – when everyone engages in fair play and everybody gets a fair shot and everybody does their fair share Everyone in America gets a fair shot at success!"

Thank you and I'll take any questions you have at this time.

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