

PRCA

REEB

RACE & ETHNICITY
EQUITY BOARD



BEHIND THE MASK

*The invisible struggle
of global majority men
in UK PR and communications*





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With many thanks to



FOREWORD

by Emmanuel Ofosu-Appiah

Vice Chair of PRCA Race & Ethnicity Equity Board
(REEB)



It is fair to say that you can only aspire to be who you see ahead of you, so it has been a personal mission of mine to inspire other young Black men to come into the communications industry. Since the inception of REEB in July 2020, our purpose has been to ensure the PRCA – as well as the broader PR industry – adopts a best practice approach to ethnic and racial inclusion.

The public relations industry has given me so many vital life lessons and I have built my career over the last decade working with some of the best and most talented individuals in our profession. However, one area which has always been rather concerning was the lack of Black, Asian, and ethnically diverse men in senior communications roles.

As Vice Chair of REEB, I feel it is important that our wider industry and professionals get a clear picture of some of the challenges that face men of colour in our industry as well as hear from them on their successes and milestones.

We are an action orientated board and we believe this research is a vital snapshot that highlights the lived experiences of those in our industry who are sometimes overlooked.

As part of our research with Opinium we spoke with practitioners across all levels of seniority who were asked to take part in interviews reflecting on their experiences of working in PR. The discussions touched on a range of issues including organisational culture, career highlights, promotions and mobility, and salaries. We also reflected on areas where we feel as an industry there is more to be done.

This research opens the conversation and is a step in the right direction. We hope to continue to make progress and create a safe space to connect with more men in our industry and ultimately contribute to much needed change.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

ETHNICALLY DIVERSE MALES ARE A MINORITY IN PR AND COMMUNICATIONS

REEB exists to support ethnically diverse PR and communications colleagues. According to the PRCA UK Census 2023, 88.2% of PR and communications professionals classify themselves as White and the number of women working in the industry is 67.8%.

This signals the importance of this piece of work which aims to explore and provide an unfiltered account of the lived experience of a group of men from diverse backgrounds working in PR and communications.

We have conducted individual depth interviews with 6 PR and communications professionals from Black, Asian, and mixed heritage working in-house and agency side at various stages of their careers to develop recommendations which can be used to improve the industry. The names of all research participants and any identifiable information have been changed to protect their identity.

In this report, we use the terms global majority, ethnically diverse, and Black, Asian, and mixed heritage interchangeably to refer to the participants who took part in the research.

£21.86bn

Value of UK PR and
Communications industry¹

144,200

69,000 advertising and public
relations directors/75,200
public relations professionals²

1. 2023 Worth of Industry figure based on the 2021 value with 20% industry growth rate (from PRCA Benchmarking report 2021) and 9.12% inflation applied (2022 inflation applied).

2. ONS Annual Population Survey for 2021, combining figures for the following reporting categories: 1134 advertising and public relations directors and 2472 public relations professionals.

88%
PRACTITIONERS
CLASSIFY
AS WHITE

12%
NON-WHITE

4.2% Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups
2.3% Black African, Caribbean
1.6% Indian
1.6% Other ethnic group
0.7% Bangladeshi
0.7% Any other Asian
0.3% Pakistani
0.3% Chinese



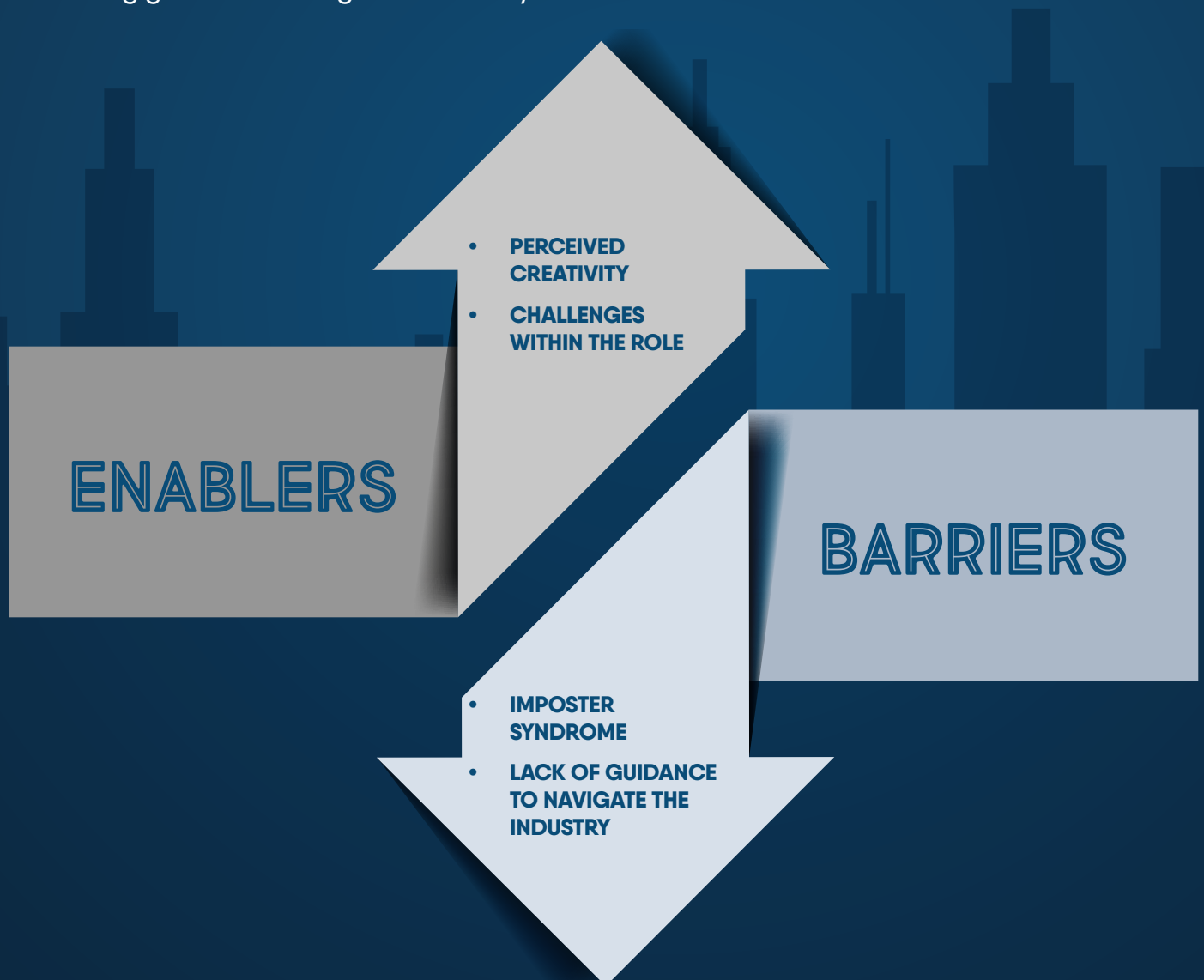
CAREER ENTRY

Exploring enablers and barriers for career entry of global majority men

KEY FINDINGS

ENABLERS to entering the world of PR and communications include the perceived creativity and challenges within the role.

BARRIERS include feeling 'like an Imposter' due to their ethnicity and lacking guidance to navigate the industry.



PR AND COMMUNICATIONS IS OFTEN SEEN AS A CAREER FOR LIFE WITH MULTIPLE CAREER PROSPECTS FOR ETHNICALLY DIVERSE MALES ENTERING THE INDUSTRY

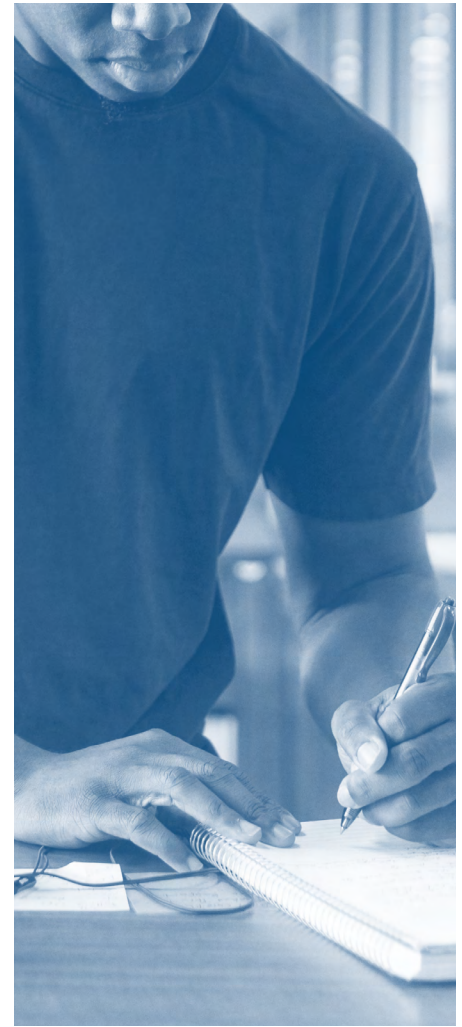
THE LONGEVITY OF THEIR CAREER

Participants recall a lack of exposure to roles in professional services, with some citing that their parents worked in manual roles or public services often holding roles for long periods.

Today racially diverse men are often drawn to the industry because it enables them to progress, continuously learn, rise to challenges, and keep growing.

You're not introduced to PR growing up, most of our parents are working class, work labour-intensive jobs or they were doing you know sort of medicine and engineering sort of work.

Abiola, Agency



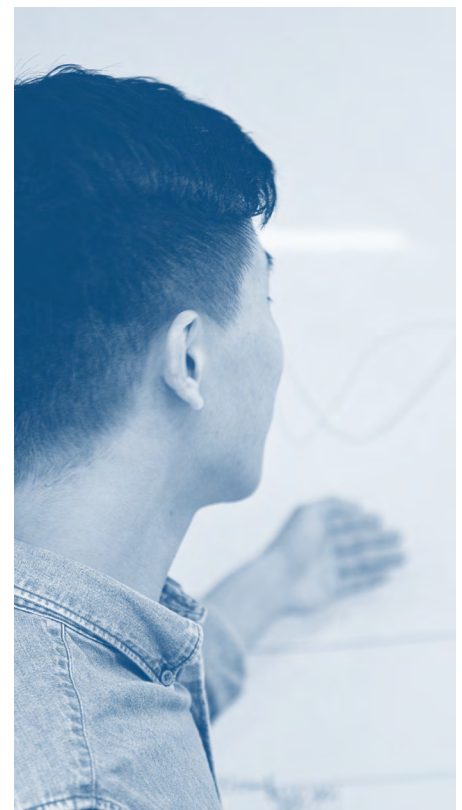
THE PROFESSIONAL ATMOSPHERE

Participants enjoy the professionalism of where they work, how seriously their work is taken, and the pride in what they produce.

It enables them to feel that they can work hard and identify pathways for progression. Many have acquired skills from informal and formal training. It also allows them to develop professional relationships, thereby boosting their skills and profiles.

I've nothing but admiration for the people that I've always worked with. We try and do really good work. We try and support our clients the best we can. I think there are a number of golden rules that we follow, which is around making sure that our client is protected no matter what. We're delivering a professional service.

Hasan, Agency



ADDITIONALLY, THE OPPORTUNITY TO CREATE IMPACT THROUGH THEIR WORK APPEALS TO MOST PARTICIPANTS

THE CREATIVITY AND CHALLENGE OF THE WORK

PR and communications is typically considered by participants when they research options after university. Historically, the PR and communications industry has not been perceived to be open to ethnically diverse candidates. However, participants who enjoy creative writing and the nuances of media are drawn to this industry as it allows them to utilise their skills and passion in this area.

Just hearing about the things they do, they have people that are media hungry and interested in current affairs, all of those things that really just fit in with my kind of skill set and what I wanted out of my day job.

Kojo, Agency



THE ABILITY TO INFLUENCE PUBLIC OPINION

Participants often enter the industry due to a love of or interest in media and current affairs and are intrigued by how the industry can influence public discourse and opinion. They are drawn to the potential of the impact of their work and enjoy the challenges and progression this might bring. This is noted across seniority levels.

I'd be able to influence the public, be able to connect with them. Really create, change, manage and measure impact and see how that's beneficial to minorities or different groups and working on those merits.

Chibueze, In-house



HOWEVER, A LACK OF RACIAL DIVERSITY CAN IMPACT THEIR ABILITY TO BRING THEIR FULL SELVES TO WORK OR ORGANISATIONS TO RETAIN TALENT

LACK OF DIVERSITY

Most participants recognise PR and communications is dominated by White middle-class people resulting in a hesitancy to enter specific organisations or the industry as a whole despite skills or interest alignment.

Some participants have felt that the industry is not for 'people like them' or welcoming to Black, Asian and mixed heritage individuals historically.

I had a bit of impostor syndrome because... everybody was White and middle class and I was the only Black guy and a lot of my colleagues at the time didn't really make an effort to speak to me or really get to know me.

Abiola, Agency



HESITATION TO BE TRUE SELF

As Black, Asian, Mixed men, most participants feel out of place in their organisations, particularly initially. This results in a hesitancy to be their true selves among their work colleagues due to the known cultural differences. This may begin with an inability to bond over weekend plans and build over time.

Long-term implications include feelings of low self-worth and difficulties progressing at work.

I'm a little bit too wooden, a little bit too cold, a little bit too serious, a little bit too bureaucratic. Is there any wonder why I'm a consummate professional, when being a consummate professional is the only way I've been able to survive.

Hasan, Agency



AND BLACK, ASIAN, AND MIXED HERITAGE MEN ARE OFTEN FACED WITH NAVIGATING THE CORPORATE WORLD WITHOUT FORMAL SUPPORT

ENTER CORPORATE WORLD AT GROUND ZERO

Most participants are from backgrounds where they did not have exposure to corporate or professional service roles within the familial unit.

Many have not had professional experience in a corporate space, whether through work experience, internships, or specifically in PR and communications. This often leads to feelings of inadequacy and hesitancy when completing tasks – textbook imposter syndrome – early on in their career.

...I've grown up abroad for quite some time so coming back to the UK information is not presented or available to me...it's not easy to learn about [career paths] or know who to approach, and also a mentor.

Chibueze, In-house



NO CONTACTS TO PAVE THE WAY

As participants are unlikely to have contacts within the industry (e.g. family and friends), they lack support in navigating the industry.

Progress can be slower, as they have no one to guide them on the potential opportunities within the sector, discuss overcoming challenges they experience at work, or sponsor them during review periods.

All in all, this limits the likelihood of their progression path being on par with their White colleagues.

I feel like me and our generation will probably be the first generation of ethnic minorities where we'll be able to tell our cousins, our brothers or sisters, nieces, nephews, etcetera about Comms.

Kojo, Agency





CASE STUDY

CHIBUEZE HAS FOUND IT CHALLENGING TO NAVIGATE THE INDUSTRY

Chibueze has recently entered the industry after studying PR & Marketing at University and is currently working in house. He expected that a role in PR and communications would enable him to make an impact, but is currently finding it challenging to understand the kinds of roles available for him to progress to.

Chibueze does not have a traditional or professional support system available to help him navigate these career decisions. Although he is open to the concept of having a mentor he is unsure how he would find one and believes the PRCA is well placed to support this initiative.

He defines work progression alongside being able to make an impact rather than titles so it is important to Chibueze to understand how this can be achieved. As a result, he has had conversations with his manager to enable him to expand his current role and take on more tasks.

I wanted to do more. So I tried to find avenues to implement more of my skills and advance my skills and the [organisation] was good for giving autonomy for people to like not feel pressured and to feel like they can find their footing but at the same time finding your footing and not knowing where to apply in with the amount right amount of pressure can be daunting because then you don't know how much effort you need to give in order to progress.

CASE STUDY

ELIJAH EMPHASISES HOW ENDURING ENABLED HIM TO FIND HIS PASSION

Elijah works at an agency and enjoys his work. When he began his career he was shy and timid on client calls and during internal meetings. He was particularly conscious of colleagues discriminating against him because of his accent. Additionally, he ensured that he always presented himself in a neat and tidy manner so that White peers did not disfavour him.

When he was uncertain about remaining in the industry early in his career, he opted to try different types of roles and organisational cultures which ultimately led to finding an area he wishes to pursue. However, there have been times when he has been overlooked for promotions in favour of White colleagues without a clear understanding of why and he has had to suppress his reactions for fear of losing his role altogether.

Nevertheless, over the years as he has gained experience, met senior stakeholders who were willing to invest in him, and championed his own good work he is now a more confident PR and communications professional.

If I am honest, I am very proud of how far I have come and this is mainly down to sheer determination and never giving up. Regardless of how many of my friends left the industry I chose to stick with the dream and be a better PR professional. I have worked at some of the largest and best consultancies in the world so I am thankful for the experience.



CURRENT CAREERS

*A deep dive into the workplace
experience for ethnically diverse men*

KEY FINDINGS

Each professional's career experience is unique, based on factors including their upbringing, their organisations' culture, and their direct management – a 'one-size-fits-all' solution is not suitable.

However, many have faced challenges progressing including lack of managerial and peer trust as well as opportunities to showcase their skills.

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE IS OFTEN REFLECTIVE OF THE MAJORITY, WITH ETHNICALLY DIVERSE MALES FEELING 'OTHERED'

Overall, PR and communications professionals feel that working environments are still reflective of White professionals, despite ongoing DE&I policies to be more inclusive.

Male professionals would like to see colleagues proactively seeking to understand them, including how their backgrounds and interests may differ. This may also include how people from different cultures communicate (e.g. more direct communication) which is important for working in teams and activities they are involved in outside of work to enable colleagues to build genuine relationships.

Senior stakeholders have an awareness but do not understand the seriousness of the issue at hand and there are lots of talented ethnic/Black men leaving the PR industry as a result.

Elijah, Agency

While a minority of organisations are reported to be championing change, this is often led by DE&I working groups. Some feel it is their responsibility to drive initiatives and advocate for change, not only for themselves but for future global majority colleagues.

So before our network, we never used to celebrate Black History Month. We never used to celebrate Diwali, and never used to celebrate Lunar New Year. The network also sent out MENA-wide Ramadan guidelines, about how managers should manage people from around the firm. So like I think that's one of the special things, again, about how we've been able to influence all those things at the firm and the MENA level as well.

Kojo, Agency

Workplace culture can lead to participants leaving roles, but senior professionals who have stayed in their organisations for longer periods are often either hesitant to re-enter the job market or are content with the non-financial benefits from their organisations. A minority of participants are apprehensive that prospective hiring teams are racist, so they opt not to apply for roles, thus limiting their own opportunities for progression.

DEFINING A 'WORKPLACE SELF' CAN HELP ETHNICALLY DIVERSE PROFESSIONALS ADAPT TO FIT EXPECTATIONS

Global majority males report that organisations – including the behaviour of colleagues and policies that have been put in place – do not take into account the culture of ethnically diverse staff, or 'difference' generally.

Most participants enter the industry with the expectation that they will not be in the majority due to their ethnicity and gender.

As a result, they are intentional about their behaviour and subconscious changes occur over time including:

- Codeswitching to adopt posher accents, ultimately this becomes easier to do the longer they work within the industry.
- Adapting their physical demeanour e.g. walking taller to encourage others to have confidence they can do their role or shrink to avoid being noticed.
- Altering their physical appearance e.g. having a 'neat' haircut.
- Clear boundaries between work and home, enabling them to hide parts of their personality that may show their background or heritage.
- Hardening their exterior shell, making it easier to ignore microaggressions which may be directed towards them, particularly from senior colleagues.

A minority highlight concerns that these subconscious changes may have a long-term negative psychological impact on how they view themselves.

However, some males believe they have to work against some of these stereotypes including assumptions that men that look like them are 'aggressive' or 'overconfident' while maintaining they have a hold on the tasks for their job. This may lead to overthinking what they say in interactions with colleagues.

I feel like 8 out of 10 diverse people would say they've experienced racism of some sort or a really, really big microaggression. And that's made them feel extremely uncomfortable. So I think that's obviously a massive issue.

Kwaku, Agency

You have to think about how you're being perceived. Am I being seen as the angry or aggressive Black person or all those kinds of racist stereotypes? There are things you always have to think about.

Kwaku, Agency

I feel like majorities do have more leeway to be more expressive.

Chibueze, In-house



DESPITE THIS, MANY PARTICIPANTS STILL DESIRE TO PROGRESS AND INFLUENCE THE INDUSTRY FOR OTHERS

Most PR and communications professionals that we spoke to were active in their internal DE&I committees and leveraged this to influence the wider organisation. They were invested in ensuring their organisation and the wider industry was improved for others who followed behind them not just themselves.

However, the road to vertical progression is often more difficult for ethnically diverse professionals compared to their White peers.

- Participants report their tasks being more critically assessed, including mistakes being held against them and over them compared to their White peers. This results in lower levels of trust when tasks are being assigned, impacting their ability to progress in the long term.
- Conversely they are not rewarded at the same rate as their White peers for the tasks they do (e.g. promotion and pay increase). Job satisfaction among ethnically diverse men is associated with being satisfied with their role – either title or scope.
- Ethnically diverse males report not having access to senior colleagues from a similar background to mentor them as they adapt to the industry or seek guidance on progression, which is critical to ensure retention and promotion.
- These challenges can result in some professionals deciding to leave an organisation or the industry as a whole. Others have found ways to expand their current roles through by incorporating additional tasks, without compensation.
- When considering new roles, a minority of participants are concerned with not having another minority or male on the selection committee and the impact of them being able to progress.

I think there's a lot of energy. We need to keep coming up with some good solutions, trying different things out. There's a role to make sure that the people who are currently working in comms feel included because it is about diversity and inclusion. On the diversity point, there is outreach with schools 100%, we've got to be doing that.

Hasan, Agency



GLOBAL MAJORITY MEN DO NOT EXPECT THEIR WELL-BEING NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED BY THEIR EMPLOYER

There is generally a good level of knowledge of organisational well-being initiatives offered in the workplace, including the gym, counselling and private healthcare services. Additionally, some organisations offer more generic support such as familial leave for extended family members and unlimited compassionate leave to enable professionals to support their family without worrying about work.

However, most professionals do not utilise the offer for counselling and well-being schemes as they feel that current well-being offers (e.g. counselling) are 'one-size-fits-all' and can blur the lines between their professional and private lives.

While the current offer is not viewed as being inherently racist, male professionals who contend with the challenges of working in a challenging environment have found alternatives to manage their work/life balance in environments that they trust e.g. going to the gym with male friends from a similar background.

There is an acknowledgement that culture may influence views on whether to fully utilise the well-being offer (e.g. confidence in expressing vulnerability and emotions) and these views are more prevalent among less seasoned professionals.

Because if my workplace wanted us to kind of sit around and talk about our problems, I really wouldn't want to do that...if I needed to talk, I would talk to my friends.

Kabir, Agency

Would it really benefit me? Let's say I welcome mental health. Does that really change how I feel about my career?... And me fixing the issues that I currently have? If not, I don't really see a point. I don't see the point in talking to a therapist for work...I feel like when things minorities face... underlining biases just always come up over time and time again.

Chibueze, In-house

It's changing, but I do think that sometimes, especially men, they can't solve these. Do I really want to expose myself... we're not trained to be vulnerable, especially from my background.

Kwaku, Agency



CASE STUDY

KOJO HAS SUCCEEDED WITH THE APPROPRIATE BUILDING BLOCKS

Kojo entered the industry after completing a training scheme which provided him with fundamental skills in working in the office, and the basics of the industry and which enabled him to build connections. This helped his application to his current role at an agency to stand apart from his peers.

Over the years he has benefited from supportive line managers who championed DE&I in their own lives, partnered with a mentor and dedicated time to learning and development to support his progression.

I've been extremely lucky with the team I've had and the leaders I've had around me and my kind of line manager.

His organisation has identified him as one of their future leaders, internationally, and sent him on a training course to prepare for the next stage of his career. These elements have given him the confidence to successfully complete his role.

However, he is also aware that everyone is not afforded the same pathway as he has seen first-hand, other colleagues who started the training programme alongside him but did not progress.

[At my workplace] They give you training on different types of comms. They give you interview training, they give you cover letter training, you get to visit different agencies and in-house places as well and speak to people and improve your networking so I think that massively helped with my confidence.





CASE STUDY

ABIOLA HAS FOUND IT CHALLENGING TO PROGRESS IN LINE WITH EXPECTATIONS

Abiola entered the industry after realising his love and skill in creative writing and wanting to make a career out of it. He initially thought about journalism. However, he started a career in the PR industry as he could utilise his skills and passion for writing in a business sense whilst getting paid a decent salary. He enjoys work for the everyday challenges of the role, the constant learning and the ability to progress in his career.

However, for Abiola, the industry has had its barriers: coming from a working-class background, the corporate world was completely new so everything he had to learn was from scratch, from email etiquette to how to speak at work.

I have previous colleagues who are middle-class English White people that are account directors now and we started at the same time... I think they just trust them more as they can relate to them more.

When starting his career, Abiola was also the only ethnically diverse individual in his workplace. Colleagues didn't attempt to get to know him and there was minimal trust in his work and ability. Progression has therefore been tricky, where despite being good at his role this has been slower than his White counterparts, which he feels is due to a lack of trust as he is from a different, unrelatable background.

I feel like if I'm going get to board level, I probably maybe have to work a bit longer than my White counterpart. There's still bias there.

Despite his experiences, Abiola is optimistic about the future of the industry, as there are now schemes to improve diversity and a culture of openness towards others.

FUTURE OF THE INDUSTRY

*Exploring expectations for the future
of the industry from global majority males*

**DECIDE WHERE TO WORK BASED ON THE CULTURE RATHER THAN
BEING LURED BY AN ATTRACTIVE SALARY – MONEY WILL FOLLOW.**



**BECOME A THOUGHT LEADER IN SOMETHING.
SOMEONE THAT PEOPLE COME TO FOR ADVICE
AND WHO THEY RESPECT.**

BE YOUR TRUE SELF AT WORK – SHOWCASING YOUR CULTURE.



**BE OPEN TO MEETING PEOPLE AND NETWORKING TO HELP BUILD
YOUR CAREER.**



ALTHOUGH SENIOR PROFESSIONALS RECOGNISE PROGRESS, THERE IS FURTHER TO GO



PARTICIPANTS SAID:

- Over the course of their career they recognise that organisations have become more ethnically diverse and they are less likely to be the only one who looks like them on their team.
- A minority feel that some aggressive measures need to be put in place e.g. 'Rooney rule' to help ensure that Black, Asian and mixed heritage professionals are included within the potential hiring pool, increasing the chances of them being considered.

ADVOCATES FOR:

Meaningful, equitable board representation.

- Visible, equitable representation among senior decision-makers.
- Revising and dismantling organisation-specific policies and practices that are proven to enable discrimination, especially around race. This must include recruitment, grievance procedures, performance reviews and performance improvement plans (PIPS).

PURSUING SOLE CONTRACTOR STATUS MOST LIKELY WAY FOR THEM TO PROGRESS



PARTICIPANTS SAID:

- PR and communications industry is susceptible to losing key talent and negatively impacting the diversity of the overall industry if there continues to be a lack of trust, opportunity, and recognition on par with White colleagues.
- Challenges with racism are recognised to extend beyond PR and communications, but systemic behaviours should be addressed.

ADVOCATES FOR:

Review ethnicity pay gaps and correct any disparities (with immediate effect).

- Create meaningful support groups that have access to senior leaders and decision makers and whose representatives are included in decisions that affect the organisation's culture and employees.
- Visible representation of Black and ethnic employees in succession planning.
- Visible representation of Black and ethnic employees on investment led leadership or specialised training programmes.
- Open and transparent communication around race failures to date and planned improvements.

SENIOR LEVEL DIVERSITY WILL HELP IMPROVE RETENTION



PARTICIPANTS SAID:

- Junior professionals require someone senior to look up to and believe they will advocate for them on systemic inclusion issues impacting ethnically diverse people.
- Increased diversity at all levels will enable White colleagues to feel comfortable working alongside ethnically diverse peers in the long term.

ADVOCATES FOR:

The [PRISM scheme](#) created by REEB and backed by PRCA.

- Visible, equitable representation among senior decision-makers.

ORGANISATIONS TO BE MORE CULTURALLY ADAPTIVE OF EMPLOYEES



PARTICIPANTS SAID:

- Professionals would like the organisational 'norms' to account for the different cultures and backgrounds of employees. This begins by taking a keen interest in their employees and senior stakeholders not relying on DE&I working groups to lead the charge.
- It is important that this is not tokenistic and goes beyond social movements (e.g. BLM) to create lasting impact in terms of recruitment and organisational operations.

ADVOCATES FOR:

A psychologically 'safe' environment for Black and ethnic employees to succeed unimpeded.

- Commit to and finance deep seated and long-term culture change and transformation that enables Black and ethnic employees to succeed unimpeded.

PRCA HAS A ROLE TO PLAY NOT JUST AGENCIES/IN-HOUSE TEAMS



PARTICIPANTS SAID:

- There is an expectation for the PRCA to bring professionals together (e.g. hosting events), discuss challenges and help navigate them so that everyone can benefit. This is important so that professionals learn from and meet others with shared experiences.
- Participants trust the PRCA to provide this support and recognise the network that they have access to across the industry.

ADVOCATES FOR:

Race and ethnic equity to be included in [PRCA ethics codes of practice](#) and the [communications management standard](#) in addition to any existing diversity policies.

- Impose sanctions when members breach race, ethnic, and equity standards.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Although we are in 2023 this report is still pioneering – it's the first time, we think, that the views of global majority males in PR and communications have been recorded and presented in this way – and the men who were interviewed are definitely pioneers. They have forged a career path largely without mentors, and they have lasted the course. Much of their success has come in spite of not always feeling that they truly belong: of operating from behind a mask. The examples cited of cultures and well-being initiatives that aren't fully inclusive or trusted as truly safe spaces indicate a gap in belonging that good intentions cannot bridge on their own.

There are many positive signs that this group of professionals act as role models to the next generation.

The PRCA REEB operates a mentoring scheme, PRISM, and is always looking for new mentors and mentees to match with each other. But it is the job of the whole organisation to tackle culture and behaviours.

An obvious question is whether senior stakeholders at the companies being talked about would recognise themselves in the testimonies in this report. Qualitative research like this is usually reported with the names of respondents changed. And is the norm. To build on these candid testimonies, there needs to be more open honest debate without industry leaders fearing exposure and retreating to unhelpful fragility. REEB are calling on industry leaders to partner with us as we move to the next level of research with a greater number of participants, more recorded lived experiences, and the opportunity to create meaningful data that will lead to long term industry change.



PRCA

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