CLOSING THE CHASM REPORT

2021-2022

Changing the workplace for Black Women

RATIONALE

We know about the experience of Black women in America, but what about Europe?

Since the murder of George Floyd and the onset of the pandemic, there has undoubtedly been increased focus on the lives of Black people within the workplace and especially on Black women. Due to the extensive research that has been done, the voice of American Black women has been assumed as the default experience.

Despite the presence of Black women in the workplace across Europe, the experience has never been brought together to reflect not just the negatives, but also the positives of their experiences in the workplace.

Companies are currently the most ready to tackle Diversity & Inclusion but are reluctant to take the next step to help Black women in their workforce. There hasn't been, up until now, a concise report focusing on the pan-European Black female experience.

Having an overall Diversity & Inclusion plan is a start, but over 70% of the respondents stated that despite their companies having made plans over the past 18 months, they were yet to see any solutions that addressed their problems.
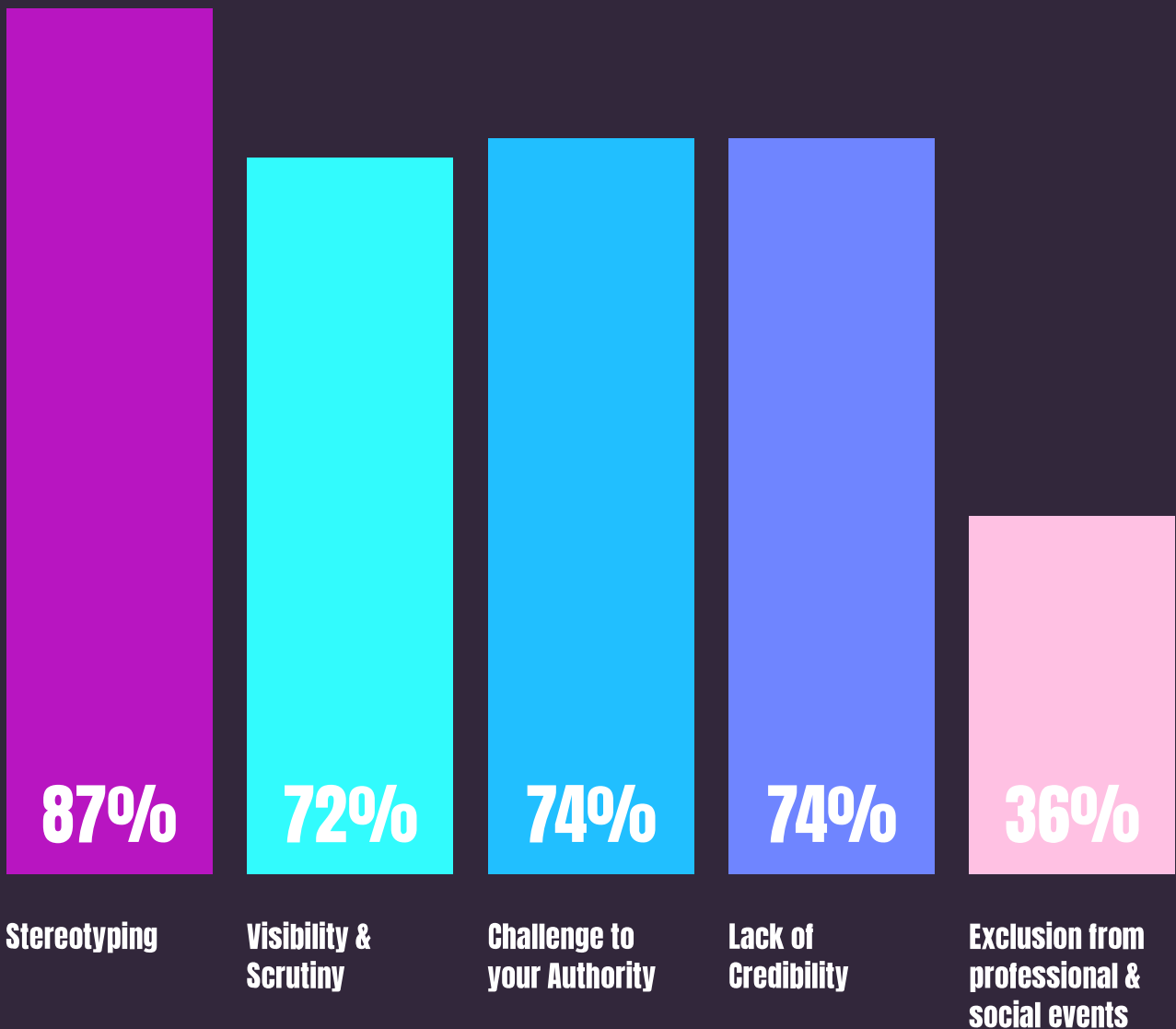
THE BLACK FEMALE CORPORATE EXPERIENCE IN EUROPE HAS BEEN IGNORED FOR TOO LONG

Companies that are committed to creating an inclusive environment, must double down on their focus and support of Black women in meaningful ways. Only by creating focused solutions will companies have a chance of achieving their gender equality and racial equity targets. This is integral to building a business that is future-proofed.

This report is designed to elevate the voices of Black women and show the reality of their experience in the workplace, but also to provide companies with not only DATA but also INSIGHTS to make sure the action they are taking is RELEVANT and not performative.

Challenges Black Women Face in the Workplace

87%	72%	74%	74%	36%
Stereotyping	Visibility & Scrutiny	Challenge to your Authority	Lack of Credibility	Exclusion from professional & social events

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The European female Black footprint has been ignored thus far and the insights that have been shared, have mainly been from the perspective of Black female Leadership.

We wanted to dig deeper and widen the spectrum in this report. It is not only to analyse how they feel, but also to learn WHAT happens to make them feel excluded or what they experience purely because of their race and gender.

To find out more, we created the Experience Chasm Survey, a deep dive survey containing 75 questions and we had 104 respondents across 7 European countries. We asked them questions that cover the whole worklife cycle, from the application process all the way through to promotion possibilities and exit.

There were some remarkable insights, that break down some of the stereotypes Black women encounter. Some of the highlights:

BLACK WOMEN ARE PROACTIVELY MANAGING THEIR CAREERS EVEN WHEN THEY RECEIVE LIMITED SUPPORT.

Black Women Invest in Themselves

These women are not relying on their companies to provide them with financing to get the extra qualifications they want. They are spending money and time in creating extra opportunities to bolster their CVs and increase their chances. And for the women who may not have had the money readily accessible they have found financing opportunities to make it happen.

Need More from Leaders and Management

There is a lot of conversation happening, but they clearly see that leaders and management do not understand that being Black woman presents unique barriers. They want leaders to educate themselves more, but also share their learnings, insights and action.

Still Hopeful that Things Will Improve

Despite the fact that there is still a lot that needs to be changed within the workplace, they are still hopeful that the workplace will change for the better and that they can still carve out a successful path. This is one of the main drivers behind their involvement in Diversity, Equity & Inclusion committees and initiatives. They want to be a part of the change they want to see.

RESEARCH

In conducting this research, we created specific questions in our survey to address the whole life cycle of work, not only from the perspective of their experience, but also with solutions-oriented questions.

The survey took around 30 minutes to complete, especially as we had several probing questions to move the conversation from problems to how the narrative and the future can be changed as an individual but also as companies.

We asked about the following topics:

- Applying for Jobs
- Starting A Job
  (The honeymoon period)
- Developing in the Company
- Employer Expectations
- Self-Investment
- Career Prospects/Potential Exit

We invited Black women across Europe to participate and from this open invitation 104 women took the time to complete the survey. We hope that this will be the start of changing the narrative for Black women in Europe and seeing big improvements in their daily working life.
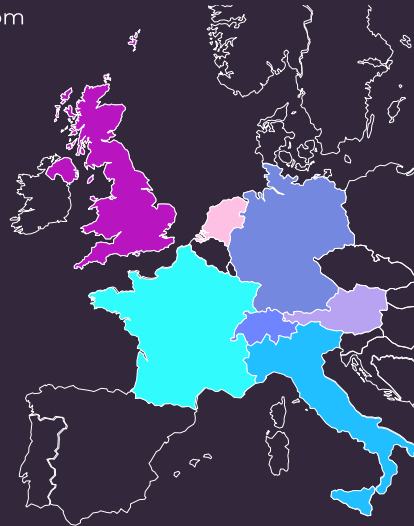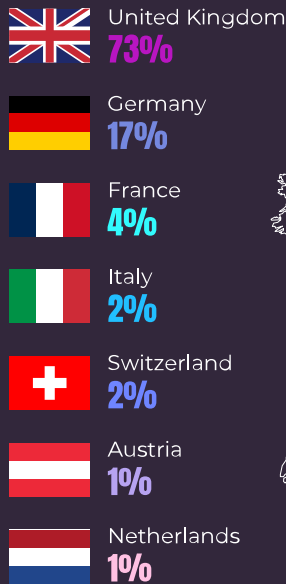
This is the first Closing the Chasm report based on data 2021, but by no means the last.
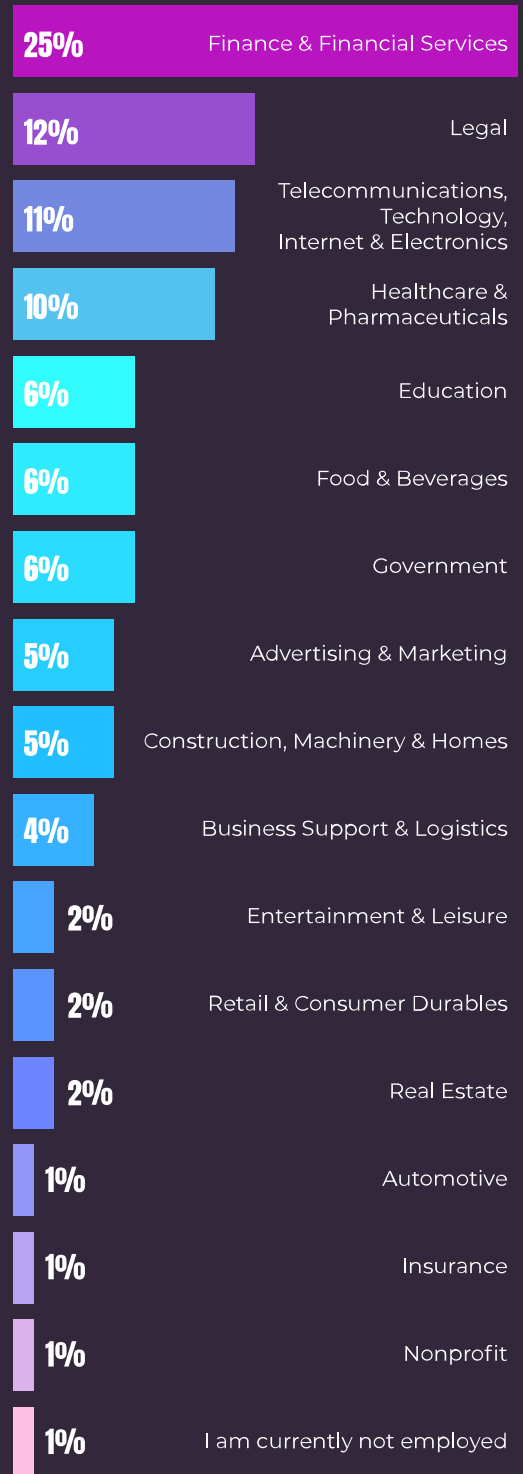
SURVEY IN NUMBERS

Location

United Kingdom
73%

Germany
17%

France
4%

Italy
2%

Switzerland
2%

Austria
1%

Netherlands
1%

Sector

25%	Finance & Financial Services
12%	Legal
11%	Telecommunications, Technology, Internet & Electronics
10%	Healthcare & Pharmaceuticals
6%	Education
6%	Food & Beverages
6%	Government
5%	Advertising & Marketing
5%	Construction, Machinery & Homes
4%	Business Support & Logistics
2%	Entertainment & Leisure
2%	Retail & Consumer Durables
2%	Real Estate
1%	Automotive
1%	Insurance
1%	Nonprofit
1%	I am currently not employed

Age

21-29	**13%**
30-39	**40%**
40-49	**30%**
50-59	**11%**
60+	**6%**

Seniority

4%
10%
13%
17%
57%

+ Owner/Exec/ C-Suite
+ Senior Management
+ Middle Management
+ Entry Level
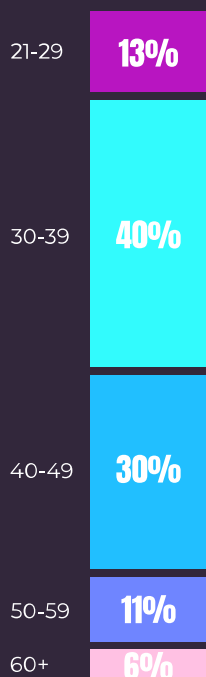+ Other
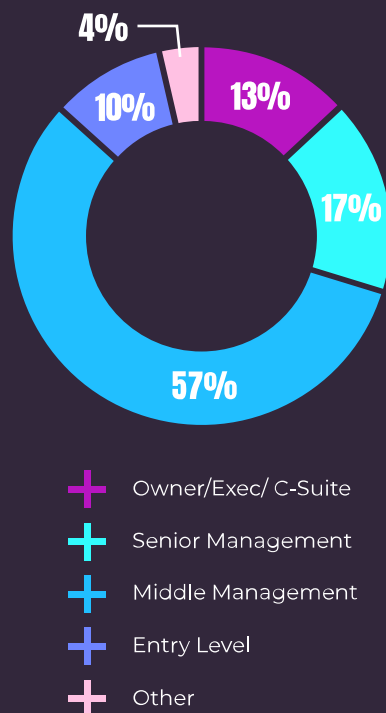
APPLYING FOR JOBS

When it comes to applying for jobs, Black women are no different to other groups of women, when it comes to be hesitant, as they are worried about not having the right experience or qualifications. 46% of the participants confirmed that this was the case.

What became more interesting however, was to see what the second most popular reason was. The stories and experiences of other Black women. 22% of women stated that this heavily influenced their decision-making.

This fact alone goes to show that companies who create a virtuous circle of investing in the success of Black women will also be able accelerate the growth of their Black female pipeline, through recommendations.

The combination of representation and a company's good reputation is one of the strongest motivations for the women to feel assured that the company could be a right fit them. Seeing other Black women succeed provided them with sufficient encouragement to be able to take the next step.

There was one very large thorn in the sides of these women, which often cast the company's culture into doubt. Many of the women faced inappropriate jokes and/or questions while going through the interview process, that In many cases derailed what could have been an altogether positive experience.

We asked the following:

What kind of questions have you been asked in interviews that were covertly racist/sexist?

The answers here will leave many shocked, but this is the truth of what happens. How stereotyping plays a role:

1. Do your children have the same father?
2. Wow, you have so many qualifications?
3. You'll look great on our team!
4. How do you respond when angry in a situation?
5. Can you do something with your hair (natural)?

A QUESTION FOR COMPANIES:

Is everyone who is interviewing provided with interview training?

As this line of questioning reveals more about the company and the culture.

Once the application and interview process is over, there are still further considerations to be made.

3 main factors held Black women back:

- Salary
- Lack of Black people and people of Colour
- Concerns that managers may not be good for them

Salary

When it came to salary, the issue wasn't about the discussion but rather the lack of discussion. The trend that we saw with the women is that, employers expectation was that they should take what was offered, even when they were lowballing them rather than being open to a negotiation process. This type of interaction felt highly indicative of the role they would also be expected to play and for many It meant walking away from the job.

Lack of Black people and people of Colour

Where are the others who looked similar to them? This point was a huge one, with many women already feeling exhausted from having to explain and justify their experiences while having to educate their existing colleagues, the prospect of having to start at the beginning of this process was too daunting and they were not willing to sacrifice themselves to do it again.

Concerns that managers may not be good for them

Does my manager know how to work with me? Do they understand what it means to be a Black woman and will they fight my corner? These were just two of the concerns that weighed heavily into the decision of accepting an offer.

NEW IN THE COMPANY

Starting in a new company is an exciting time for everyone, but also a very important one, especially when it comes to feeling a part of the team and as though you belong.

Black women due to how they have been treated, are hyper-aware of not being a cultural fit, which for many has led to bad experiences, which is why it was interesting to see that 63% of the women said that they not only felt welcomed by their team but that they felt a part of it.

There were two key pieces of information the led to this however. All the Black women pushed themselves out of their comfort zones to ensure the comfort of others. They felt the need to do more to create a smooth entry into new teams and to be accepted. The other dimension was that they were team leaders and while that presented its own challenges, it still helped in their sense of belonging.

The outcome may be good, but there is still a sacrifice that needs to be made by these women for it to work.

The burden is still on Black women to do the heavy lifting and make sure they assimilate, as opposed to there being natural acceptance. This is the one of the moments that the hiring managers can anticipate and craft smaller get-to-know-you coffees and meetups to focus on a smooth transition into the team.

On a broader level another positive insight is that while there doesn't seem to be any official onboarding processes, they confirmed that they are being introduced to senior members of staff, 63% of respondents confirmed not only this, but that their managers are also setting up some introductory meetings for them.

Yet despite all this good news, these introductions do not always materialise into further interactions and it has not prevented them from being overlooked in comparison to their white counterparts.

How are they specifically being overlooked?
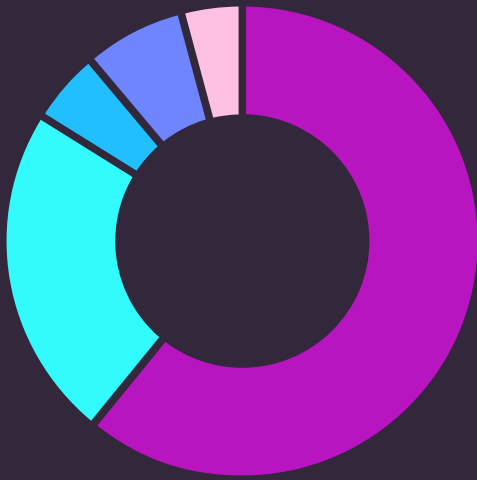
- **+** Being left off strategic meetings
- **+** Not included in social activities
- **+** Not receiving the same opportunities despite asking
- **+** Being given work no one else wants to do
- **+** Passed over promotion in favour of those who fit

There is an opportunity for managers to help reduce some of these issues by doing regular check-ins. 57% stated that outside of their yearly appraisal, their managers do not actively check on their progress and in many cases when they do, it is in relation to their job and not how they feel about the culture and environment.

A QUESTION FOR COMPANIES:

How active are you post-hiring to ensure that there are team members and wider company members to support the onboarding of your new hire?

DEVELOPING IN THE WORKPLACE & SELF-INVESTMENT

Irrespective of their experience in the workplace, one point is clear, over 80% confirmed that they have no clear career trajectory with the added frustration of seeing non-Black counterparts moving up the ranks with less experience.

This has meant that they are doing more to try and create more opportunities for themselves and this has be in two main ways.

- Networking
- Self-Investment

Networking

There is a clear understanding of the importance of having a strong in ternal network and they are actively connecting with colleagues across the company. They are also strategic in looking for fellow Black colleagues to seek advice on how they can better navigate the workplace. Networking is one of the most important factors for our participant.

Self-Investment

Many companies offer financing and or subsidies for job-relevant qualifications, but the processes are often very complicated and many of the women have to invest more time justifying WHY they want to do the qualification than being able to go through the approval process, that they often give up doing it with the support of their employer, but rather pay for their qualifications themselves and ensure that they maintain their freedom.

Digging deeper in both networking and self-investment there were clear issues that came up. Many of which have been further exacerbated by the pandemic.

When both processes and management style preclude Black women from progressing it sends a clear message that the company does not value their contribution. This means they begin to actively plan their exit.

89% of the women confirmed that they have and continue to plan their careers. They do not leave it to chance, the issue that the pandemic has presented is that they no longer feel the job market is a buoyant so they still tend to stay in jobs and cultures they do not enjoy because of the financial security it brings.

Another fallout from the pandemic is that it has lead to increased difficulty in networking. Some of the reasons are as follows:

— **Location**

— **Corruption from HR**

— **Lack of Belonging & Trust**

— **Unaware of a network**

— **Heavy Workload**

— **New Joiner**

COMPANY EXPECTATIONS

What do Black women expect from their employers?

1

Clear Pathways for growth

2

Mentorship

3

Accountability for race equity work

4

Inclusive culture

5

Honesty

6

Training

7

An open supportive environment

8

Representation

9

Equity - pay and treatment

10

New work mindset and flexible work hours

11

Integrity

12

Open and understanding culture

13

Respect

COMPANY EXPECTATIONS

Where are employers failing Black women?

1 Fair/Competitive compensation	**2** Walking the talk	**3** Driving race equity work from c-suite and throughout org
4 Tangible actions to recruit and retain diverse talent	**5** Lack of development	**6** Start the journey - listen and take action
7 Opportunities	**8** Inclusive onboarding	**9** Black representation on the exec board Transparency

MANAGEMENT & LEADERSHIP

George Floyd's murder triggered the posting of black squares on social media, statements of support and commitments to Black women, this still hasn't lead to meaningful action.

While some companies may have asked to learn more about the Black female experience and some have offered internal and external support, the most surprising fact is that almost over a third of the companies have done nothing.

With business going on as usual and Black women being more visible on websites and as the spokespeople for diversity and inclusion, the breach of trust is deepening.

The need for cohesion between external messaging and internal action is one of the key sticking points for Black women, whose value is undermined when their challenges are not taken seriously.

There is a 50/50 split of the women who believe in their companies commitment to anti-racism, but the largest gap, is the knowledge gap and that leaders and managers have not yet acknowledged the extent of the experience chasm and are then ill-equipped to find the right solutions.

Gender Equality is on the radar and high up the agenda, but gender equity is still trailing behind.

What would you like your leadership team to do, to show that they are serious about improving the lives of Black women in the workplace?

+ **Promote Black women who are in junior positions**

+ **Promote Black women**

+ **Enforce the values they preach**

+ **Race equity embedded in strategic EDI**

+ **Employ more Black women**

+ **Set targets and meet them**

+ **Ensuring equal pay between white and Black women**

+ **They need to put their money where their mouth is**

+ **Hire professionals to teach them how to be better**

+ **Firstly, to openly accept that there is problem - until that happens, it's difficult to trust that anything meaningful will result**

+ **To be braver as they address their lack of diversity**

TAKE ACTION:
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMPANIES

Interview process

1. Create an interview protocol including what types of questions are acceptable.
2. Create an interview feedback process for the candidates
3. Train HR & hiring managers on gender equity and what it means in the context of interviews.
4. Ask recent Black female hires, if they would be willing to give insight of their experience and where it could be improved. Thematise where the issues are and build a Black female specific process.

In the Workplace

1. Formalise the onboarding process.
2. Provide a networking partner. A senior member of staff who will be invited to all events, so that Black women are also informed.
3. Provide access to an external coach/career advisor to support Black women.
4. Have regular progress meetings that focus more on how they find the culture and not just the technical part of their job.
5. Create hybrid networking options.

Company Expectations:

1. Co-create dedicated initiatives for Black women, whether it is a Leadership Development Programme or a Personal Development Programme. Seniority shouldn't play a role.
2. Work with managers to forge clear career paths and milestones.
3. Train managers with Black women in their team to learn about the Black female experience.
4. Support Black women with their educational aspirations by improving the approval process.

CONCLUSION

Black women (84%) are still positive that the corporate world can still deliver what they need in order to carve out their own path and still be successful, but they are willing to take calculated risks and leave their jobs to be able to fulfil their potential.

While companies lean into Diversity and Inclusion and take broad stroke action, they are alienating one of their key groups.

Black Women.

The time is now to build Black women specific initiatives and to be clear on HOW they will be supported as they enter the company and progress through the ranks.

Clarity. Cohesion. Consistency.

Be clear in word and deed. Ensure that what is said externally is reflected internally and finally keep going.

The companies who will succeed are those who continually put the work, even when it gets difficult.

Black women have spoken and said what they want and need, so now the ball is in the court of the companies to meet them, as when they aren't being supported they take their careers in their own hands.

Part of the 'S' in ESG is how companies treat their employees. This report provides a roadmap as to achieve this for Black women.

This will ultimately determine if companies create either a vicious or virtuous cycle.

BENEFACTUM CONSULTING

Benefactum Consulting is a boutique management consultancy that focuses on driving gender equality. We partner with financial services companies who want to take their commitments to gender equality further, by taking action.

By focussing on Gender Equality and Racial Equity, companies can be successful in both the short and long-term at achieving their wider diversity goals and targets.

With the combination of impactful governance and creating a robust infrastructure, companies will not only successfully engage and retain female talent but will also build equitable foundations.

The Insight Hub

The Insight Hub is our innovation centre focussed on learning, knowledge and research. This robust arm was established to house our cutting edge intellectual property providing our clients with state-of-the-art analytics. We use our insights to help our clients future proof their business and build culture and governance for tomorrow.

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