

Google says it will focus diversity efforts on black, Hispanic women



James Damore, the Google engineer who penned an anti-diversity manifesto that has shaken Silicon Valley, is seeking 'legal remedies' after his firing. USA TODAY

(Photo: Tony Avelar, Bloomberg)

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SAN FRANCISCO – Google is pledging to focus diversity efforts on its least-represented demographic: black and Hispanic women.

The announcement comes as Google's annual diversity report shows that women of color significantly trail their male counterparts of the same ethnicity in the internet giant's workforce.

Executives, including Google CEO Sundar Pichai, plan to make women of color an "intentional focus" of the company's diversity efforts, Google's diversity chief Danielle Brown says.

The sharpest deficits in Silicon Valley are African-American and Hispanic women, [who make up 1 percent or fewer of workers](#). Women of color are represented across other industries at much higher rates consistent with their proportion of the overall U.S. population, suggesting the technology industry is having trouble reversing decades of hiring patterns.

Four years after it published its first diversity report, Google is still struggling to hire and retain underrepresented minorities despite repeated promises to make its workforce reflect the billions of people it serves around the globe.

Not only are blacks, Hispanics and Latinos being hired at lower rates, they are leaving at higher rates than other employees, according to the report released Thursday.

Out of the nearly 56,000 people Google employed in the U.S. in 2017, 544 were black women, up from 348 in 2016. During that same period, Google employed 799 black men, according to the most recent documents Google filed with the federal government. African Americans account for 2.5 percent of the U.S. workforce.

Hispanic women and Latinas numbered 945 in 2017, up from 566 in 2016. That's about half the number of Hispanic men and Latinos employed by Google in the U.S. during that time. Google says its employees are 3.6 percent Hispanic and Latino. Its U.S. workforce in 2017 was 53.1 percent white, 36.3 percent Asian and 30.9 percent female.

While efforts to bring aboard more black and Hispanic women have foundered, Google has made strides in hiring and retaining other women, and it reported gains in diversifying its leadership ranks, with the percentage of women leaders at Google reaching 25.5 percent, up 4.7 percentage points since 2014.

"We have seen gains for white and Asian women, so we know the work that we need to center on and focus on is around women of color," Brown said in an interview.

More: [Google employee activism on diversity, Pentagon contract is shaking up Internet giant](#)

More: [Google employees say the company's not doing enough to protect them from harassment, threats](#)

More: [Google's new diversity chief tasked with moving the needle](#)

Pressure has increased as Google faces a revolt from some employees who've criticized the company for failing to make diversity a priority and for failing to create a corporate

culture that represents and welcomes minorities and others from underrepresented groups.

Staffers, who [spoke publicly](#) on Google's shortcomings on diversity last week at parent company Alphabet's shareholder meeting, told USA TODAY that Google treats diversity and inclusion as an afterthought.

Software engineer Irene Knapp addressed the meeting on behalf of a small group of employees in support of a shareholder proposal linking executive compensation to diversity goals, which was voted down. Brown says Google has no current plans to tie compensation to progress in diversity.

"It's interesting to see Google increase transparency following advocacy by employees," said Joelle Emerson, founder and CEO of Paradigm, a strategy firm that consults with technology companies on diversity and inclusion. "Particularly in the tech sector, I've seen employee advocacy drive greater commitment even than external pressure."

"We have seen gains for white and Asian women so we know the work that we need to center on and focus on is around women of color," Google's diversity chief Danielle Brown said in an interview. (Photo: Google)

Brown, who joined a year ago, has had to weather a stormy period at Google.

She came aboard as Google was being sued by former staffers and investigated by the Labor Department for allegedly underpaying women and as it reeled from an internal memo by a former Google engineer arguing biological differences between men and women accounted for the deficit of women in technical and leadership roles.

James Damore, who was fired for advancing "harmful gender stereotypes," said he was responding to Google's unconscious bias training, which he claimed encouraged Google to hire for gender and race, not talent. He sued Google in January alleging the company discriminates against white men and conservatives.

His memo and subsequent lawsuit have stirred debate in Silicon Valley over efforts to address the significant shortfall of women and minorities. Nowhere is that debate more furious than [inside Google](#) itself.

On the one hand, a former YouTube employee is suing the company alleging it uses illegal quotas to recruit women and minorities. On the other, employees who volunteer on diversity initiatives say the company has not done enough to protect them from personal attacks and harassment campaigns by their co-workers, which began after the Damore memo leaked to the public.

Amid the turmoil, executives are making a fresh commitment to moving the needle on diversity and fixing the company's culture while stepping up their focus on women of color, according to Brown.

"Part of the problem I think is that not many companies have made that intentional focus on women of color. And so that is something in our new strategy that we have centered," Brown said.

"I wouldn't say it's a failure necessarily," Brown said of Google's previous efforts to recruit and retain women of color. "It's something we understand now that we need to tackle."