

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Black talent is underrepresented in some of the fastest growing jobs in the country. According to a report from McKinsey, Black talent makes up 12% of the full U.S. workforce, but only 8% of the tech industry. Tech Equity Collective, a Google initiative, is on a mission to accelerate Black innovation and representation in tech. TEC has partnered with Career Karma, an app and web platform that connects career transitioners with coding and tech bootcamps, to launch a new career exploration app: Black Genius Academy.

Joining me to talk about the new venture are Rachelle Olden, head of Google's Tech Equity Collective, and a longtime friend of WorkingNation and Work in Progress podcast, Career Karma's co-founder and CEO, Ruben Harris. Rachelle, Ruben, thank you so much for joining me.

Rachelle Olden, Google Tech Equity Collective lead:

Thanks for having us.

Ruben Harris, Career Karma co-founder and CEO:

Thank you for having [inaudible].

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Before we jump into details about this new app, I want to talk a little bit about why Black talent is so underrepresented in such a growing and important industry. I'd love to hear both of your thoughts on that.

Ruben Harris, Career Karma co-founder and CEO:

My initial thought related to this, because I think there's a lot of reasons, and I love the stats that you said in the beginning, is that when you think about what we've been exposed to, I think that's going to show you why we are overrepresented in some industries and underrepresented in other industries.

And so I think when you think about the exposure gap, that's key, but also when you think about once you're exposed to certain paths, what kind of training that you have access to, that's also another key part of it. When you think about the training, of the 17 million Black workers in the United States, 65% of them developed their skills through alternative routes. And those alternative routes are often not these career paths that we are talking about in technology. And so, we want to do something to change that. So, that's my initial reaction.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Just to jump in, Career Karma has been doing this for a couple of years, and one of the things that I recall when we talked previously is mentoring, and that's that exposure to people who might not have exposure in their own social network.

Ruben Harris, Career Karma co-founder and CEO:

Yeah. To your point, even if you might have heard of a career path and you have been exposed to the right training, if you don't have access to someone that can guide you, or that has been through what

you've been through, a lot of times you don't move forward. And so having someone that can mentor you or guide you, that also has been through what you've been through, is a very powerful thing.

And yes, we've been doing that with Career Karma for a long time. And with BGA, we have also carried over some of those lessons and those learnings and taken it to a next level here with coaching and career guides as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And Rachele, what are your thoughts on the industry lack of representation?

Rachele Olden, Google Tech Equity Collective lead:

Ramona, I think that the challenge is multi. It's a multi-prong challenge. Yes, there is an exposure gap. What I like to think about the tech industry is that there are series of different exposure points to prepare someone to enter into tech, whether that is early childhood and you playing with Legos, so you learning how to build, whether that is being exposed to different outlets that are going to spark your imagination or curiosity, whether that's having STEM available in your school, whether that's having engineers who are in your community or in your family. It's a plethora of things.

There's also some industry challenges that are happening. I think we as an industry have to continue to think about, to think holistically, about talent and how we identify talent and how we bring talent in. And so I think that there are a number of challenges that we as an industry have faced that we are continuing to work on, right?

Where we identify talent, what schools are we going to, what communities are we going to, what organizations are we going to, how are we evaluating talent? Everybody is coming into the tech space with very different lived experiences and really placing value on those lived experiences.

Understanding education. There are different educational pathways that can bring people to tech and having a respect and understanding, and again, a value of those educational pathways is very important to help us have fair representation. But I think one thing about Tech Equity Collective, we say it's not just about representation, it's about innovation.

We want Black innovation to be in the tech ecosystem. So, that means bringing the ideas, bringing the lived experiences, bringing the ingenuity of the Black experience with you. I think sometimes people, they think that they have to check their culture or their lived experiences at the door, but cultural relevancy is so important to the architecture and design of products and services that we use every day.

And so I think that having value, showing the value of that is what's important. And I think that's going to ensure that we have innovation that is led by everybody across the globe.

Ruben Harris, Career Karma co-founder and CEO:

One other thing I forgot to mention is, in addition to everything that Rachele just said, is often when you do find out about these high-paying career paths and you do find out about the training and you do have the mentorship, it's still out of reach because it costs money or you don't have access to the right resources in order to get there, whether it's a scholarship or a grant or anything like that.

And so I think finances is another piece of things that is a big barrier. And even if you do have access to finances, you might have family obligations to deal with. You might be the head of household without even being a parent, so you might just have to take care of your siblings. There's a lot of things like that that tends to happen as people are trying to make it through these pathways.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Rachelle, tell me how the Tech Equity Collective works. What's your mission? What are your goals? And then we'll get into the Black Genius Academy app.

Rachelle Olden, Google Tech Equity Collective lead:

I want to start about how Tech Equity Collective became an initiative of Google. And so, it was following the murders of George Floyd where a group of Googlers came together that said that we as a company should be doing more. And so we really looked at where can we contribute.

And so in two areas, we looked at racial equity as well as economic empowerment. We specifically looked in the space of technical talent within the tech ecosystem. And so I think that there's... yes, there's a plethora of opportunities within tech, whether it's business development or strategy or marketing, but we did want to hyperfocus on that technical talent.

So, how do we double the number of Black engineers in this space? And so that is a part of our mission, that's our North Star, doubling the number of Black engineers by 2030, and that's most important to us.

One way we do that is we believe that we have to do this work with other industry partners, and so we want to partner with other companies, other companies that share products like ours. But we do believe that partnering with these companies is going to help expedite the solution that we're trying to get to.

We also believe in partnering with community organizations and other organizations that have already been instrumental in this work. So, we'd like to see ourselves not as the creators, but as the facilitators. We want to facilitate a space where industry partners and community organizations can come together to actually incubate new ideas, amplify each other's ideas or integrate in ideas, so that we can help build them.

In addition to that, TEC does have our own flagship programs, which one program is Tech Prep, which is a four-month career development coaching program where we really want to make sure that we are helping people with those who have acquired the hard skills, but to really land the soft skills as well. So, helping them understand their personal and professional roadmaps, really strengthening their technical and their behavioral interviewing skills, and really giving them the support and the encouragement they need so that they can enter into the tech ecosystem with positive and can-do mindsets.

And so we believe in creating those holistic career pathways. One of those things that we're also doing is Black Genius Academy. And then last, we want to make sure that we're continuing to demystify the tech ecosystem. A lot of people may think like, "Oh, is it for me? Can I do it?" And so we want to demystify that for so many people who have been underexposed to opportunities in tech. And in addition to that, we want to celebrate all of the amazing contributions that the Black community continues and has made to the tech ecosystem.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Ruben, I gave you the first word on the Black Genius Academy. Tell me what it is.

Ruben Harris, Career Karma co-founder and CEO:

We like to think big and start small. So, Black Genius Academy is a career exploration app that gives Black people resources and knowledge and access to people that help them identify, enroll and succeed in technical education programs. And so we actually have audio and video of leaders that have done it before, like those mentors that you mentioned earlier. And we give them guidance and coaching into

one of three career paths, which is cybersecurity, UX design, and software engineering, to understand what it looks like for them.

Going back to what I said around thinking big and starting small, Rachele gave you what the number is for the bigger goal. But starting today, we want to really focus on 5,000 Black people. And we want to make sure that all of them are served well, all of them are enrolling in the right training, and then they're hitting their desired goals, and we're using software to do that.

One of the last things that I'll mention is Rachele made a point to say that it's not just about Career Karma, Tech Equity Collective, and Google, it's about other organizations that are involved as well, because there's a lot of organizations, even your organization, that have the same mission, that have the same goal, but we're not really working together. Black Genius Academy is essentially the software that's the glue that brings it all together, so we're all collaborating.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So, Rachele, if somebody came to this app, tell me how it works. What do I find out? How do you help me?

Rachele Olden, Google Tech Equity Collective lead:

We consider everybody who is on Black Genius Academy as a learner. As a learner, you will sign up or register with us. And then once you do that, you'll have the opportunity to learn about three specific career pathways. That's where we're starting: with cybersecurity, UX design, as well as software engineering.

Once you choose a career pathway, you'll take a deeper dive and you'll start to hear from Black industry leaders in these spaces about their experience. But you'll learn more about what is it, for example, what does it mean to be a software engineer? What do software engineers do? How do software engineers spend their day? What is required and expected of a software engineer?

And so we really want to give people some of the guidance to help them understand that role. But then we also couple that with coaching. We do have real-life coaches that can help you answer questions when you're continuing to navigate your career.

A lot of the content is audio because we want to make sure that people can access this on the go. And so we want to make sure that it is accessible to everybody's different life structure. We will have live events where you can actually go on and hear a live event that's taking place with other industry leaders or other people who have gone to use the certificate program or Software Engineering Bootcamp, or who are currently working in the field.

Once people have learned more about their career pathway and they're eager to take the next step, which is getting the actual hard skill training that they need, they can pursue a certificate such as a certificate with Grow with Google for cybersecurity, or they can apply to receive a grant fund for a bootcamp. And so we work with App Academy as one of the bootcamps that we are aligned with.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Ruben, how does Career Karma fit into this? What is your connection to the mentoring, or... I use the word mentoring, but your connection to the coaching and the bootcamps?

Ruben Harris, Career Karma co-founder and CEO:

I mean, our connection is we created the software. The coaches come from us, the bootcamps were sourced by us, but also vetted by TEC and the Google team. There's another one, Hackbright is also involved here as well. And we made sure that the training programs that we work with had a history of outcomes for the learners.

A lot of people, this day and age, are questioning where they want to go to school because they want to make sure that if they do sign up for a training program, that it actually helps them achieve their desired goal financially. And so we want to make sure that everybody's able to do that because when you think about our people, the median wage for Black workers is about 30% lower than white workers. And half of Black workers are concentrated in healthcare, retail, and food service, but they don't necessarily have to break into technology companies.

Even within those industries like healthcare, there are technology roles that are there too. And so we help people not just get exposed to the roles and the talent that can give them that guidance, but also the facts that even if they wanted to just stay working in their specific industry sector, that they can still work in technology within those companies.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think that's a great point because almost everything we do now has a tech component to it, so you need to know how to use it in your life, in your work, and in your learning. Rachelle, what is the cost to someone who goes to Black Genius Academy?

Rachelle Olden, Google Tech Equity Collective lead:

\$0. I was going to say \$0.99, but I don't think what people think it's 99 cents either. We wanted to make sure that this resource was free to the community, but I use that word loosely because you are making an investment of time, you are making an investment of energy. And so we know that that's not a small investment.

So, while it may not be a monetary investment, we do ask learners to be committed to completing all of the modules within Black Genius Academy. We ask them to be committed to their careers and to themselves, and we ask them to use their imagination and curiosity.

There are a lot of Ask Black Genius Academy, but I do think that it will add value to the community and to the learners. And so while we do not ask for any dollars, and it is open to those who are eager about exploring a career in tech, we do ask for a high level of commitment.

Ruben Harris, Career Karma co-founder and CEO:

I was going to say that time, to Rachelle's point, is your most valuable resource, and it's also the best way to invest in yourself. So, even if you're picking a company to work for, a school to go to, you're making an investment with your time, an investment into yourself. And ideally, whatever investment that you're putting into yourself or into that education program, the return that you get is greater.

We help people think about how to evaluate time trade-offs and opportunity costs and other things that they can be doing versus where they want to go in the future. So, that's another piece where the coaching comes in.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And once somebody explores this career and they say they want to, "Hey, I love cybersecurity. That was pretty interesting." The next step, how do they go to that Google certificate, that Grow with Google certificate?

Ruben Harris, Career Karma co-founder and CEO:

Everybody has an action plan within the app that they're able to go to. As they get exposed to the different career paths and they see if they're interested in it, they can decide to enroll into a program if they want to.

Like Rachelle mentioned, these programs are free, and we do have Growth with Google certificates that are in there, and we'll be introducing other certificates there as well. But if they want to actually pursue their training further and sign up to a bootcamp, they are also eligible for grant opportunities to get fully funded in bootcamps as well. So, that's also something that they have access to.

But a lot of people, when they are thinking about a career path, they're not sure if they actually want to do it. We give them the opportunity to try it, to speak with people, to interact with people and test it to see if they like that. And if they like that educational exposure, then they can go further, and we'll provide support either with people or finances or other things.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And Rachelle, the idea that you're starting small, growing big, it seems that 5,000 is a lot to start with, but you're going for a million?

Rachelle Olden, Google Tech Equity Collective lead:

Yes, 5,000 is a lot to start with, but I am fairly confident that once people get Black Genius Academy into their hands, they'll see value in sharing it... for themselves, but also sharing it with their communities. And so it's really about... I'm thinking about my brothers and my sisters and my cousins and their friends who might really enjoy the experience of Black Genius Academy. But yeah, the goal is always to grow and to expand and to continue to build on what we've started. And so over time, people will see new updates to Black Genius Academy. Our target will continue to grow as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Why are you so passionate about this? What has impassioned you to partner together to create the Black Genius Academy?

Ruben Harris, Career Karma co-founder and CEO:

Such a good question. I think it's probably the most exciting time in history, to me. I think technology, it's almost like the new Enlightenment Period where I think technology has launched so many people online, whether they're working online or learning online, collaborating online. And anything that they're excited about, they can find an audience for it, whether it's for themselves to work, whether it's for themselves to play. And I think that if you want to participate in the economy, it's like exploring a new world. It's like a land grab.

And a lot of times when you are looking at a new world, it has to be explored by other people. When you're thinking about Black Genius Academy and people that have never been exposed to this new world, they're in the best position to be able to go where we've never gone before.

I'm very excited about that because I've done that on my own from a startup perspective. But then to get an organization as big as Google to collaborate on it and think deeply and meet often to really understand every single day on how we can help people and do better, it's a dream come true. And we want to help other people make their dreams a reality.

Rachelle Olden, Google Tech Equity Collective lead:

Plus one to everything that Ruben said, when I think about the partnership between Tech Equity Collective and Career Karma, I think it's really about seeing other entities, other organizations, other companies that are doing impactful work and finding ways, again, to incubate new ideas that integrate into that. And so I think that just seeing the success of Career Karma is important to us.

I think why I am so passionate about this work is that I really want to make sure that my community, the community that I love and feel so passionate about, has every tool and resource to challenge the status quo. And I think that technology is doing just that, and I want to make sure that we're not only the users and the consumers of technology, but we are also the architects and builders of technology.

And so that, for me, is very important because I do also think that technology will transform not only our community, but it will transform the world. I want to see our people do that and lead that.

In my last words, I would tell people to go to [BlackGeniusAcademy.com](https://BlackGeniusAcademy.com) to start with us. And then I would also encourage people to learn more about [TechEquityCollective.com](https://TechEquityCollective.com) and how they can partner with us, or how [TechEquityCollective.com](https://TechEquityCollective.com), how we can also support their journey to and through tech.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And we'll have both of those links and also a link to Career Karma in the article supporting this podcast. Rachelle, Ruben, thank you both so much for telling me about your new joint venture.

Ruben Harris, Career Karma co-founder and CEO:

Thank you so much.

Rachelle Olden, Google Tech Equity Collective lead:

Thank you, Ramona.

Ruben Harris, Career Karma co-founder and CEO:

This is special, this is amazing.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Rachelle Olden, head of Google's Tech Equity Collective, and Ruben Harris, Career Karma's co-founder and CEO. I'm Ramona Schindelheim. I'm the editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.