

# COOQUAL

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# Being Black in the United Kingdom

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# Introduction

By the start of 2022, race and racism had become a prominent topic of discussion in the United Kingdom (UK), from mainstream news media to Buckingham Palace. Many prominent employers also made commitments to focus on race: Business in the Community's Race at Work Charter has more than quadrupled its number of signatories since 2019.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, representation of Black leadership in business remains extremely low. The Green Park Business Leaders Index 2021 revealed there were zero Black chairs, CEOs, or CFOs in the Financial Times Stock Exchange 100—the first time this number has dropped to zero since analyses began in 2014.<sup>2</sup> A recent report found troubling numbers for Black employees who have experienced or witnessed racist harassment at work—both from managers (29%) and colleagues (37%).<sup>3</sup> Not only do Black employees in the UK continue to suffer from the effects of systemic racism, but there also remains reluctance to acknowledge its existence.<sup>4</sup>

In this study, we employed rigorous qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the experiences of Black professionals in the UK and how they differ along lines of gender, heritage, and other layered identities.

We find that although Black employees face barriers to their career and ongoing prejudice, many of their colleagues still don't acknowledge it. We also show what's at stake for companies that ignore systemic racism: Black professionals in our sample say they intend to stay at their companies for less time than their White colleagues—and this is linked to perceptions that their company is less fair.

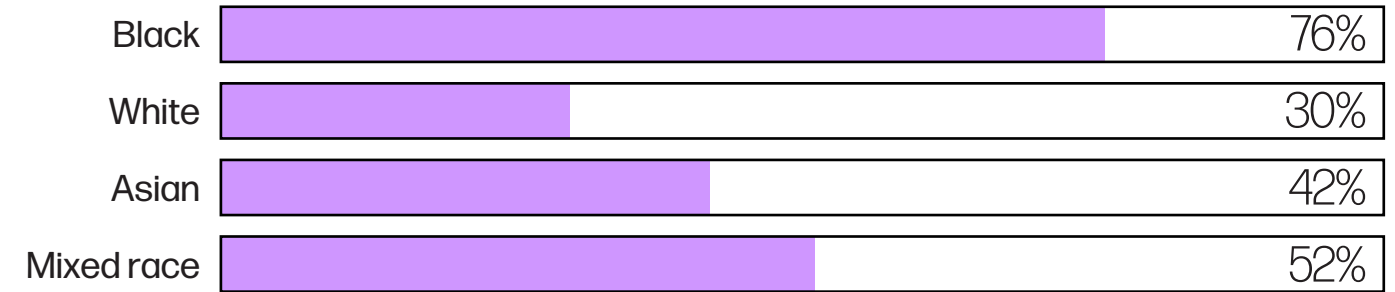
To retain Black talent, companies must take transparent action to address systemic racism, with accountability at all levels. In addition to documenting the problem, this report provides solutions to drive change.

**More than half** of Black women (52%) intend to stay at their company for two years or less.

# The cost of inequity in the workplace

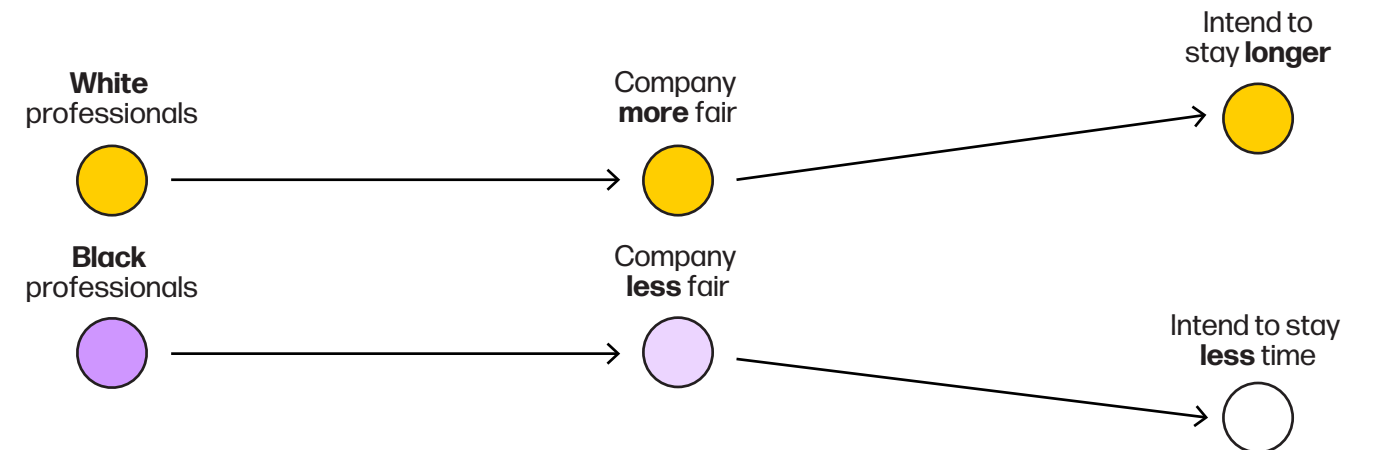
Black professionals are highly motivated in their careers—they report greater ambition than any other racial group we surveyed. However, Black professionals also face more obstacles to their career advancement, a reality that many of their White colleagues fail to see.

## Professionals who feel Black employees have to work harder to advance



Another troubling finding in our data: 46% of Black professionals—and an astounding 52% of Black women—say they plan to stay at their current company for two years or less, compared to 34% of White professionals. They're also 81% more likely than White professionals to say a host of their company's talent processes (e.g., hiring, performance evaluations, promotions) are "not at all" or only "slightly" fair. A statistical mediation analysis reveals that this gap in perceptions of fairness helps explain, in part, Black professionals' intentions to stay at their company for less time than their White counterparts intend to.

## Statistical model showing how Black professionals' experiences diverge from White professionals'



# Daily experiences of racism

Black professionals face a host of daily microaggressions that can have negative effects on their physical, psychological, and emotional well-being.<sup>5</sup> These microaggressions can also have a negative macro-level impact on career opportunities and outcomes as well.

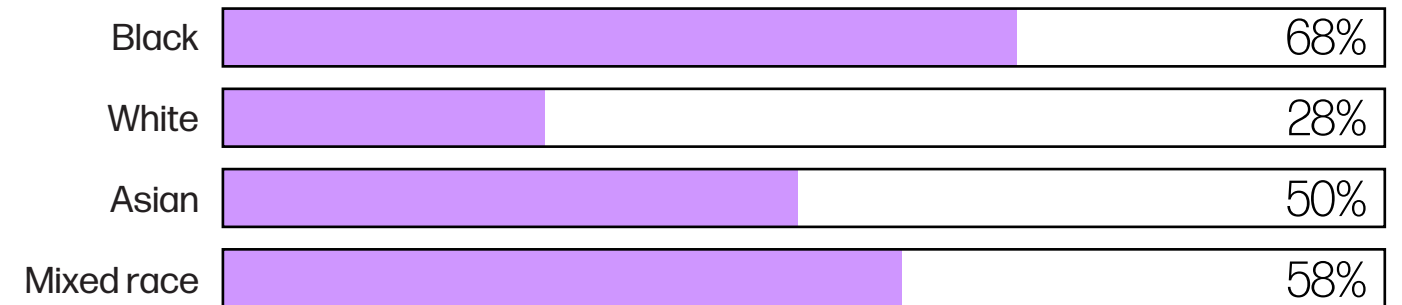
Black professionals experience these **13 microaggressions** more frequently than White and Asian professionals do:



# Prejudice

Black professionals are more likely than their White and Asian peers to face racial prejudice at work, we find. More than two in three Black professionals have experienced racial prejudice at their current or former companies, significantly more than the proportion of White and Asian professionals who say the same.

Professionals who have experienced racial prejudice at work



## “Fitting in” at work

Not only do many Black professionals deal with racism, microaggressions, and prejudice, many also expend additional energy in an effort to be accepted by colleagues. To do so, we heard, they change aspects of themselves to fit in—from their hairstyles, hobbies, and media consumption to how much alcohol they drink. They’re significantly more likely to change something about themselves to fit in at work than White colleagues.

The odds of Black professionals changing something about themselves to fit in at work are **60% higher** than for White professionals.

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“From the highest level, people want to ignore, understate, and justify structural, formal racism. They want to ignore the impact of colonization and slavery and racism in the UK.”

- Black female executive

“At a certain point, I decided it’s impossible for a Black person to succeed in the UK, so I went abroad. I’m not welcome in the UK. That’s cool; I’ll go somewhere else.”

- Black Gen X woman

“You show me a Black person that hasn’t experienced a microaggression in the workplace, and I’ll show you a Black person that just doesn’t know what a microaggression is.”

- Black queer woman

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“I’ve been ‘fitting in’ my whole life. I’ve had to shape myself my whole life. And it’s not something that I do; it’s just part of my existence in the world that I live in.”

- Black African man

“[DE&I] was a hot topic after what happened with George Floyd. Very senior people wanted to be involved. Those people have ebbed away. Once again, [Black issues] are moving into box-ticking territory. We need to call it out: ‘You need to be true to the mission that you said you’re on and stay with it.’”

- Black Millennial woman

# Layered identities

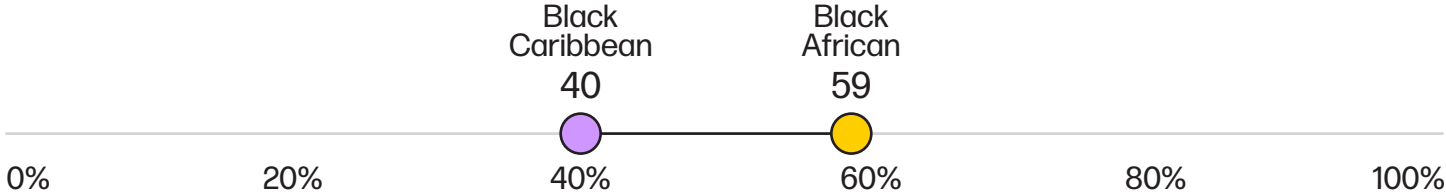
Black identity in the UK is far from monolithic. Black professionals have nuanced experiences based on gender, heritage, religion, social class background, and more. For example, we find that few Black Muslim professionals feel they can confide in coworkers, and less than one in three say they socialize with coworkers outside of the workplace.

Among Black professionals of African heritage, we find that they are often dubbed “perpetual foreigners” at work. In interviews and focus groups, many Black African professionals told us they face negative stereotypes, such as claims from their colleagues that African countries have standard educational systems, or comments about their names being too difficult to pronounce.

Meanwhile, Black professionals of Caribbean heritage experience different kinds of “othering” than those of African heritage. Many of the Black Caribbean professionals we spoke to were the first in their families to enter the professional, corporate workspace. In our survey data, they are more likely than Black African professionals to see their company’s processes as less fair.

In our full report, we explore these and other layered identities, as well as a series of profiles on individuals’ unique stories to illustrate their differing experiences.

Professionals who feel they can be themselves at work



## Black African professionals experience these microaggressions *more* frequently than Black Caribbean professionals do:

- Colleagues assume I was not born in the UK
- Colleagues suggest I use a nickname because they find my name hard to pronounce
- Colleagues assume I am not familiar with certain aspects of UK culture
- Colleagues assume I am from a disadvantaged background
- Colleagues mispronounce my name

# Audit, Awaken, and Act

What should companies do to address the systemic racism that Black professionals face? We have developed a framework to inform meaningful action.

## AUDIT

Companies need to understand the current state of Black professionals’ experiences and what inequities exist in the way Black professionals are treated, hired, evaluated, promoted, and compensated.

- Consider focusing not merely on the number of Black employees hired, but on the number of Black professionals by leadership level and whether they are as likely to be promoted as their peers.
- Audit employee experiences to uncover which microaggressions are prevalent in which parts of the organization and how they may be having a macro-level impact.
- Review human resources policies and processes for racial inequities and accountability—are leaders held accountable on targets and goals related to DE&I?
- Take an intersectional approach. What company-wide policies disproportionately impact Black professionals who also identify as lower-income, women, LGBTQ, or members of other historically marginalized groups?

## AWAKEN

Leaders and employees alike need to have open discussions and educate themselves about the barriers Black professionals face.

- Consult DE&I experts and expert facilitators in leading conversations about race and racism in the workplace.
- Be clear on your objectives: for whom are we having this conversation? Is this a conversation meant to educate White employees or as a healing space for Black employees?
- End conversations with a call to action and follow through with meaningful change.
- Understand that conversations about race may be retraumatizing for Black individuals. Some may not wish to participate. Avoid tokenizing those who do.
- Acknowledge that your employees have varying levels of racial literacy—and need independent resources for their learning.



## ACT

Organizations must build solutions that specifically target dismantling barriers for Black employees and establish accountability at all levels.

- **Avoid short-lived “peaks” of progress.** Turn courageous conversations into durable change. Although many employers facilitated conversations about race after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, employees are still waiting for genuine action.<sup>6</sup> Holding leaders accountable on meeting DE&I goals through compensation and performance evaluations could go a long way.
- **Drive Black executive representation through sponsorship.** Intentional sponsorship of individuals from underrepresented groups is a crucial tool to diversify leadership. Furthermore, our research shows that those with sponsors (or senior leader advocates) are more likely to be satisfied with their advancement.<sup>7</sup>
- **Craft programs for Black professionals.** Employers should not shy away from developing leadership programs specifically for Black professionals. When positioned as opportunities for visibility (rather than remedial programs to “fit in”), these commitments can provide Black professionals with the networks they need to progress.
- **Do away with “fitting in.”** Each employee comes into the workplace with a unique confluence of identities. Companies should broaden the types of leaders they have when making promotion and hiring decisions rather than looking for leaders who look and sound like current leaders.
- **Enhance networking for Black professionals.** By partnering with other organizations that are also committed to DE&I, companies can help Black employees connect to other Black industry leaders, potential mentors, and Black employee resource group members.

Now is the time to take our knowledge about inequity for Black professionals in the UK and turn it into a transformational action plan. Awareness is an important step, but unfair workplaces won't fix themselves—we need to audit talent processes and policies, drive company-wide awakening to the reality of racism, and act in a way that holds leaders and colleagues accountable.

## Endnotes

1. *The Race at Work Charter: One Year On 2019* (London, UK: Business in the Community, October 29, 2019), 1-28, <https://www.bitc.org.uk/report/the-race-at-work-charter-one-year-on-2019/>; “Race at Work Charter Signatories,” Business in the Community, March 22, 2022, <https://www.bitc.org.uk/race-at-work-charter-signatories/>.
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## Methodology

The research consists of a survey; literature review; virtual focus groups; *Insights In-Depth*<sup>®</sup> sessions (a proprietary web-based tool used to conduct voice-facilitated virtual focus groups); and one-on-one interviews.

Through our qualitative methods, we reached more than 120 experts and Black professionals who are based in the UK or who have expertise on race in the UK. We utilized a four-phased qualitative data analysis strategy which consisted of pre-coding, open-coding, axial-coding, and selective-coding. Using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) NVivo, we generated matrix code analyses to identify pertinent themes and quotes from our dataset.

Our quantitative data was derived from a survey conducted online in March and April 2022 among 1,035 respondents (385 Black professionals, 404 White professionals, 108 Asian professionals, 107 mixed-race professionals, and 31 professionals of other racial groups), who were at least 21 years old and currently employed full time in professional occupations in the UK, with at least a bachelor's degree. Data was weighted by gender and race based on available population data. The base used for statistical testing was the effective base. Unless otherwise stated, all reported differences between groups are statistically significant at the .05 level.

The survey was conducted by ORB International under the auspices of Coqual, a nonprofit research organization. ORB International was responsible for the data collection, while Coqual conducted the analysis. In the charts, percentages may not always add up to 100 because of computer rounding or the acceptance of multiple responses from respondents.

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**Coqual CEO**  
**Lanaya Irvin**

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**Research Lead**  
**Julia Taylor Kennedy**  
Executive Vice President

---

**Project Team**  
**Anthea Chan**  
Senior Research Associate

**Emily Gawlak**  
Senior Writer

**Kelly Hoffman, PhD**  
Vice President of Research

**Angela Qian**  
Senior Project Manager of Research

**Faye Steele**  
Research Associate

**Sy Stokes, PhD**  
Vice President of Research

**Emilia Yu**  
Research Manager

---

**External Team**  
**Efun Coker**  
Consultant and Facilitator

**Jess Kuronen**  
Design and Data Visualization

**Jill Merriman**  
Copyeditor

**Shannon O'Toole**  
External Writer

**Bethany Thompson**  
Facilitator

---

**Advisors**  
**Sophie Chandauka, MBE**  
Chair and Executive Founder, The Black  
British Business Awards; Head of Race  
Equity Group, the 30% Club

**Sir Trevor Phillips**  
Chairman of the Board, Green Park

**Nicola Rollock**  
Professor of Social Policy & Race, King's  
College London

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Michael C. Hyter

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