

For Black Professional Men, It's Who You Are, Not Who You Know

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President Obama last week announced a new public-private initiative aimed at giving young minority men better opportunities — as long as they “work hard” and “take responsibility.”

Indeed, those qualities tend to be more critical to the success of African American men than they are for other groups, who appear better able to leverage social and professional contacts to get ahead. Studies have shown that social capital — defined as one’s professional network — is a big factor in career advancement. But those studies focused largely on Caucasians.

As a recent study shows, networking seems to be less of a factor in Black men’s career accomplishments than are education and motivation.

A few years ago, a pair of researchers at the University of Georgia set out to examine the factors that helped college-educated African American men succeed in their careers. C. Douglas Johnson, then a UGA graduate student and now a management professor at Georgia Gwinnett College, and psychology professor Lillian Eby surveyed 247 African American men who were alumni of an international fraternity that focused on leadership development and community service. They asked the participants about their socioeconomic background, educational attainment, salary, job promotions, and managerial status.

Importantly, the men were asked about professional contacts (mentors, bosses) who had helped their careers.

The participants were also asked questions designed to measure their personal ambition, career motivation, conscientiousness, and perceptions about their performance.

In examining the results, Johnson and Eby found that the men who had achieved the most success — as measured by compensation, number of promotions, and managerial level — were older and had higher levels of experience, training, work tenure, geographic mobility, motivation, and self-rated achievement.

But most social capital indicators — such as support from managers, memberships in professional associations and civic clubs, and degrees from prestigious institutions — had little to do with those measures of success.

The researchers surmise that, compared to Caucasians, these African American men had less access to mentors and sponsors with sufficient power and influence to help them with their careers. People are naturally drawn to others who are similar to themselves, they note, but African Americans remain underrepresented in the high-level positions.

“If African American men are picking mentors who are like them, then they’re more likely to be networking with people who have less power and influence within an organization,” Eby said when the study was released, “which may be why mentoring is not predicting career success for them.”

The results showed the error in assuming that the factors that help Caucasians and other minorities succeed professionally will yield the same career benefits for African Americans, Johnson and Eby wrote.

“For African American males,” they wrote in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, “it seems that who you know and what you’re made of may not have the same impact on career success as it does for the dominant culture.”