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THE COST OF BLACK EXCELLENCE™ · SECTOR
REPORT SERIES

Technology

What the Excellence Tax™ Costs Black Professionals in Tech

74 participants · Software engineering, product, data, digital, engineering, cybersecurity, fintech, telecoms

4 countries · United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia

Phase One, 2025 · Natasha Williams, Founder · The Cost of Black Excellence™ Research Institute

Technology is the sector that built its identity around meritocracy. It is the industry that told the world it only cares about what you can build, not who you are or where you came from. For Black professionals working within it, that promise is one of the most precisely documented lies in this study.

This report documents what 74 Black technology professionals — software engineers, product managers, data scientists, developers, cybersecurity specialists, programme managers — told us about the real cost of working in a sector that claims to have solved bias by making it algorithmic.

What Is the Excellence Tax™?

The Excellence Tax™ is the mandatory, uncompensated burden of additional emotional labour, identity suppression, and personal cost that Black professionals pay simply to participate in predominantly white workplaces.

Organisations demand this labour and rarely acknowledge it, compensate for it, or take steps to reduce it. The word “tax” reflects reality precisely: payment is required simply for occupying professional space. Black professionals cannot opt out without forfeiting participation entirely.

THE TECHNOLOGY LENS

Technology has a specific cultural defence mechanism: meritocracy. The sector has convinced itself — and tried to convince the world — that code doesn’t know what colour you are, that performance metrics are objective, and that outcomes reflect capability rather than access. This belief system makes the Excellence Tax™ particularly difficult to name in tech environments, because the sector’s own mythology actively prevents it from being seen.

91.9% of Black tech professionals work harder than peers just to be seen as competent. Four Excellence Taxes define the tech experience:

TAX	HOW IT SHOWS UP IN TECHNOLOGY
Meritocracy Gaslighting	The sector’s belief in objective outcomes makes it the most resistant environment in which to name racial harm. When Black professionals raise discrimination, they are positioned as failing to understand a system that is, by definition, fair.
Invisible Labour Extraction	Black tech professionals describe achieving 100% in assessments while white peers at 70% are placed in leadership. They describe ideas taken and presented by others. Their competence is used as a reason to give them more — without the recognition, promotion, or pay that would follow for a white colleague.
Representation as Burden	Being the only Black person in an engineering team or product org means carrying the weight of collective representation alongside individual performance. Black tech professionals are

	not just doing their job. They are representing whether Black people belong in tech at all.
Layoff Vulnerability	Tech's history of using restructuring and "culture fit" assessments as mechanisms that systematically disadvantage Black professionals is named directly by participants. The performance review that follows you into a redundancy process. The pipeline that gets thinner every time the sector contracts.

The Numbers

74 Black technology professionals across the UK, US, Canada and Australia. These figures are consistent across software engineering, product, data, digital, and engineering disciplines.

91.9%

work harder than peers (always + often) — the highest alongside law, and 5.5 points above the overall average

71.6%

always work harder than colleagues just to be seen as competent — the second-highest “always” rate of any sector studied

89.2%

suppress aspects of their identity to succeed professionally in a sector that claims culture is neutral

87.8%

have experienced microaggressions, bias or discrimination at work (Frequently + Occasionally)

66.2%

report severe or significant health impacts directly attributed to their work environment — 3 points above the overall average

85.1%

have considered leaving a role to protect their mental or emotional wellbeing

25.7%

have already left a technology role specifically to protect their wellbeing

44.6%

do not feel psychologically safe expressing opinions or advocating for themselves at work

59.5%

rely on emotional suppression — “just getting on with it” — as a primary coping strategy, the highest such rate of any sector

59.5% cope through emotional suppression, the highest rate of any sector. In a sector that does not acknowledge the burden exists, the most common survival strategy is to internalise it entirely. This is not resilience. It is the direct consequence of working in an environment in which naming harm is framed as a failure to understand how meritocracy works.

Technology vs the Overall Study

How Black technology professionals compare to the overall research average of 1,037 participants across all sectors.

METRIC	TECHNOLOGY	OVERALL	DIFFERENCE
Work harder (always + often)	91.9%	86.4%	+5.5 pts above
Work harder "always" only	71.6%	60.7%	+10.9 pts above
Identity suppression	89.2%	86.8%	+2.4 pts above
Severe / significant health impact	66.2%	63.2%	+3.0 pts above
Already left a role	25.7%	23.1%	+2.6 pts above
No culturally sensitive support	45.9%	48.5%	Consistent with average

Technology exceeds the overall average on every primary burden measure. The sector that built its brand on objective outcomes produces worse conditions for Black professionals than most sectors studied.

THE SENIORITY FINDING

Mid-level and Senior/Manager carry the peak burden

Mid-level (78.9%) and Senior/Manager (76.0%) carry the highest “always” rates — the career band where most Black tech professionals spend the longest, and where the ceiling between Senior and Director is most clearly racialised.

CAREER LEVEL	WORK HARDER “ALWAYS”	HEALTH SEV + SIG
Entry level (n=5)	20.0%	60.0%
Mid-level (n=19)	78.9%	68.4%
Senior / Manager (n=25)	76.0%	64.0%
Director / Executive (n=12)	75.0%	58.3%
Self-employed (n=11)	63.6%	72.7%

What the Body Carries

66.2% of Black technology professionals report severe or significant health impacts from their work environment — 3 points above the overall average. In a sector that celebrates hustle culture, long hours, and high performance as virtues, the deterioration documented here is structural, not incidental.

SEVERITY	%	WHAT THIS MEANS
Severely impacted	20.3%	Health deterioration requiring medical attention
Significantly impacted	45.9%	Substantial effects on daily functioning and capacity
Somewhat impacted	24.3%	Noticeable effects on wellbeing
Minimally / not impacted	9.5%	

SYMPTOMS IN LAST 12 MONTHS

SYMPTOM	% REPORTING
Persistent fatigue or exhaustion	63.5%
Sleep disturbances / insomnia	59.5%
Burnout or emotional collapse	58.1%
Muscle pain or tightness	50.0%
Tension headaches or migraines	48.6%
Anxiety or panic attacks	45.9%
Depression or emotional numbness	41.9%
Digestive issues	40.5%

THE GENDER DIFFERENTIAL

GROUP	HEALTH SEV+SIG	SUPPRESS IDENTITY	WORK HARDER ALWAYS
Women (n=57, 77.0%)	70.2%	94.7%	77.2%
Men (n=17, 23.0%)	52.9%	70.6%	52.9%

Black women in tech carry a 94.7% identity suppression rate — the highest of any gender group in any sector in the study. In a sector where the cultural default is white and male, Black women navigate two simultaneous exclusions while building the products that reach billions of users.

“I am the only Black female developer in the tech team. I am constantly aware that my actions are being watched, my social skills and my technical ability. I have a lot of emotional stress, feeling that I must have a higher technical ability than those at the same level, even though I know I am there on merit.”

Mid-level · 35–44 · United Kingdom · Technology

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Voices from the Research

74 Black technology professionals documented what the Excellence Tax™ costs them inside the sector that insists it doesn't exist.

THE MERITOCRACY LIE

"Having taken a recent organisation-wide assessment, I achieved 100% and others were only in the 70s — and they are in leadership roles. After a recent organisational reshuffle, I was removed from my position without adequate justification. The Excellence Tax is real."

Senior/Manager · 45–54 · United States · Technology

"Over a 30-year career — having to be a workaholic, over-qualified both academically and experience-wise for every role, to be able to reach two-thirds of what my white or Asian peers do despite being way more equipped and qualified than they are at the same or higher levels."

Director/Executive · 45–54 · United Kingdom · Technology

INVISIBLE LABOUR

"The Excellence Tax shows up for me in the pressure to over-perform, over-explain, and constantly prove that I'm credible. It often means a sense of paranoia — thinking what I'm experiencing is all in my head. It also means suppressing parts of my identity to fit into spaces not built with me in mind."

Senior/Manager · 35–44 · United Kingdom · Technology

"No matter how hard I work, I never get the recognition, performance reviews, or salary to reflect any of it. Others who perform the least always seem to be awarded."

Senior/Manager · 45–54 · United States · Technology

BEING THE ONLY ONE

"I am the only Black person in my whole department. I often feel like an outcast, no one understands me, and I deal with constant microaggressions and have a huge workload that others don't. It's exhausting — and there's nowhere inside this organisation to put it."

Senior/Manager · 35–44 · United States · Technology

WHAT YOU WISH PEOPLE UNDERSTOOD

"It's a privilege to not have to think about how your identity is received every day. Black professionals often have to manage perception on top of doing the job. The "game" of fitting in affects progression, feedback, and belonging. The emotional cost is high — it drains focus and confidence."

Mid-level · 25–34 · United Kingdom · Technology

"There is diversity in our community — we are not one homogenous group. Microaggressions are real. We somehow carry and must represent all other Black professionals, so excellence is always required. This is another layer of unfair stress. The politics of Blackness — that we must always be conscious of this in every interaction."

Director/Executive · 55–64 · Canada · Technology

What Your Exit Interviews Miss

25.7% of Black technology professionals have already left a role to protect their wellbeing. In an industry that treats turnover as a feature rather than a problem — where “moving on to other opportunities” is the standard exit narrative — the genuine cause of departure is almost never recorded.



LEAVING CONSIDERATION DETAIL

RESPONSE	% OF TECHNOLOGY PARTICIPANTS
Already left	25.7%
A few times	24.3%
Frequently	20.3%
Yes (considered)	10.8%
Never	8.1%
No	6.8%
Once	4.1%

20.3% consider leaving frequently — the third-highest “frequently” rate of any sector. In a sector defined by rapid movement between roles, this signal is almost impossible to distinguish from ordinary career progression. That invisibility is itself a product of the meritocracy mythology.

“I have worked for myself for the last four years because I left a job that literally broke me. I was there for about eight months before the workplace abuse started. At one year in, one day I took leave — I couldn’t take it anymore.”

Self-employed · 35–44 · United States · Technology

What This Costs Technology Organisations

Technology companies have published diversity reports, set targets, launched inclusion programmes, and hired Chief Diversity Officers. The conditions documented in this report have persisted throughout. The sector absorbs the financial cost of the Excellence Tax™ while simultaneously claiming it has addressed the conditions producing it.

<h2>£61,140</h2> <p>estimated Excellence Tax™ cost per Black technology professional, per year — higher at senior levels given technology salary premiums</p>	<h2>£6.1M</h2> <p>annual cost floor for every 100 Black professionals employed across technology organisations</p>
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COST COMPONENT	WHAT DRIVES IT IN TECHNOLOGY	ANNUAL COST (100 STAFF)
Excess attrition (25.7% vs 13.3%)	Black technologists leaving after years of skill development — at salary levels where replacement costs are 150–200% of annual pay	£2,055,375+
Presenteeism (66.2% health impact)	Engineers, product managers, and data scientists working through burnout and insomnia in cognitively demanding roles where performance directly affects product quality	£913,000+
Invisible labour extraction	Black tech professionals carrying disproportionate workloads, representing diversity on top of core roles, and absorbing the cognitive cost of perpetual proof — without compensation	£250,000
Innovation suppression	89.2% suppressing identity in roles where authentic	£750,000

	perspective directly drives the quality of products reaching billions of diverse users	
Leadership pipeline collapse	The ceiling between Senior/Manager and Director that Black tech professionals consistently identify — where the “always work harder” rate is highest and advancement is most visibly obstructed	£500,000

Technology companies that publish annual diversity reports showing incremental pipeline improvements are measuring inputs. The Excellence Tax™ is a measure of conditions — and conditions have not changed at the pace those reports imply.

Three Requirements for Technology Organisations

Technology organisations have the analytical capability to measure anything they choose to measure. The absence of Excellence Tax™ data from their diversity dashboards is not a technical limitation. It is a choice.

01

Apply the same analytical rigour to the Excellence Tax™ that you apply to product metrics

Technology organisations run A/B tests, build dashboards, and optimise metrics at every level of their products. They do not apply that rigour to the conditions their Black employees navigate. Every technology organisation should commission Excellence Tax™ assessment using the validated COBE instrument disaggregated by team, function, and level with findings presented to leadership with the same accountability attached to engineering metrics. A sector that runs on data has no credible reason to avoid collecting this data.

02

Dismantle the meritocracy defence — it is the primary mechanism preventing change

The belief that tech outcomes are objective is the specific mechanism that makes the Excellence Tax™ invisible in this sector, prevents Black professionals from naming harm without being disbelieved, and allows organisations to publish diversity data without accountability for the conditions driving departure. Leadership must complete Excellence Tax™ literacy training that specifically addresses how meritocracy mythology operates as a barrier to seeing racial harm.

03

Make performance review, promotion, and layoff processes auditable for racial equity before the next restructure

Tech layoffs disproportionately affect Black professionals. Every technology organisation should audit the last three years of promotion, performance review, and redundancy decisions for racial disparity with external

independent review and results published to the board. Where disparities exist, they should be treated as organisational failures requiring structural remedy, not individual coaching programmes.

“It can be hard, knowing that some colleagues look at you and only see skin colour — that we may put on a brave face but knowing people see you as diversity hires and don’t respect the hard work it took to get to our positions. There are so many invisible traps placed to keep us in place and prevent us from climbing.”

Senior/Manager · 35–44 · United Kingdom · Technology

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

Natasha Williams

Natasha spent thirteen years as a Managing Director in the property sector, a sector where Black professionals remain severely underrepresented. She subsequently retrained as a trauma-informed coach, holds a Level 7 postgraduate Diploma in Business and Organisational Psychology, and founded The Cost of Black Excellence™ Research Institute to create the evidence base that organisations have consistently refused to collect themselves.

She delivers keynote presentations, executive briefings, and leadership sessions that translate this research into what organisations need to understand and act on. Phase Two of the research is underway, targeting 2,000 voices.

THREE WAYS TO TAKE THIS FURTHER

01

Book a Briefing

A 30-minute conversation to explore what the research means for your organisation and whether a keynote, executive briefing, or leadership session makes sense.

calendly.com/blackexcellenceresearch/meetings-with-natasha

02

Request the Full Report

The complete research report — 1,037 Voices — includes the full framework, all fifteen taxes, demographic analysis, all sector breakdowns, and organisational recommendations.

research@costofblackexcellence.com

03

Share With Leadership

If this report raises questions your senior leadership or board need to be asking, please pass it on. The research exists for the people with the power to act on it.

costofblackexcellence.com

The Excellence Tax™ operates in the gap between what organisations claim and what Black professionals experience.

This research closes that gap.

The Cost of Black Excellence™ Research Institute · Birmingham, United Kingdom

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