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Stacy Brown-Philpot of TaskRabbit on Being a Black Woman in Silicon Valley

The Detroit native studied at Penn and Stanford, worked for Goldman and Google, and now runs the gig economy pioneer that Ikea acquired in 2017.

By David Gelles

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Stacy Brown-Philpot, the chief executive of TaskRabbit, says her race often factors into the perception people have of her when they first meet. "No one thinks I'm a C.E.O.," she says. Matt Edge for The New York Times

Stacy Brown-Philpot didn't grow up aspiring to be the chief executive of a technology company. Instead, she wanted to be an accountant.

While interning at an accounting firm in the 1990s, Ms. Brown-Philpot — who was raised by her mother in Detroit — worked for a partner who happened to be African-American. “I was like, ‘OK, there’s a black person who is a partner at this firm. This is something that I can accomplish.’”

But as Ms. Brown-Philpot acquired more experience and education, her ambitions grew, too. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business in 1997, did a stint as an accountant at PricewaterhouseCoopers, then became an investment banker at Goldman Sachs in 1999.

She went back to college to get her graduate degree from Stanford University’s Graduate School of Business, then in 2003 joined Google, where Sheryl Sandberg became a mentor. At Google, Ms. Brown-Philpot assumed a series of leadership roles and founded the Black Googlers Network, an employee resource group.

After nine years at Google, she joined TaskRabbit — which lets people hire freelancers for odd jobs — as chief operating officer. She became chief executive in 2016, and last year, she sold the company to Ikea, the Swedish furniture giant.

This interview, which was condensed and edited for clarity, was conducted at TaskRabbit headquarters in San Francisco.

Tell me about your upbringing.

I grew up on the West Side of Detroit. My mom raised my brother and me by herself. We didn’t have a lot. My mother worked a job that didn’t pay a whole lot of money, so she had to make a lot of sacrifices. But she prioritized education. She would fall asleep helping us with our homework at night. She always taught us that no one can take your learning away from you. And with that, you can go anywhere and do anything.

So I focused on getting good grades. I wasn’t always a popular kid. I didn’t have the best clothes. But I was a smart kid. It’s cool to be smart in Silicon Valley. It’s not cool to be smart on the West Side of Detroit.

What was your first job?

I had a paper route with my brother. I would help him collect the money. I was like the C.F.O. of that operation, making sure we got paid.

And then you went to Penn.

I had no idea what an Ivy League school was. I was a fish out of water. My high school was 98 percent black. Penn was 6 percent black. So I had to find community. I had to figure out how was I going to succeed in this environment where most people don't look like me, and don't come from where I came from.

So where'd you find community?

There was a black college house. I didn't live there. I would just go over there and spend time just sitting around with people that, you know, ate collard greens and fried chicken, just like I did growing up. It just made it safer for me and more confident for me to walk into a classroom and know I knew the answers and speak up.

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— **Stacy Brown-Philpot**

What did you do after graduating from Penn?

I was going to be a partner in public accounting firm because I took accounting in high school. When I graduated, I got my C.P.A. license. I spent two years at PwC, and ultimately decided that I didn't want to be a partner at a public accounting firm.

Without disparaging all accounting firms, what did you see that made you realize that wasn't your path?

Look, I still have that degree. I still love accounting. I just wanted to do more. So I went to work at Goldman Sachs in investment banking. You can't graduate from Wharton and not spend any time in banking. In that process, I worked on a bunch of tech deals in 1999. There were all these users and eyeballs, and these companies are going public at higher valuations. So I got very fascinated with how come this industry is generating so much wealth — what is this entrepreneurship thing?

Once you got to Google, you started managing larger and larger teams.

Sheryl saw the potential for leadership, so pulled me into her group to run a 200-person team. I went from managing 14 to 200 people overnight. That was a big step up in not just how I led but how I talked to people, how I communicated. I went from managing direct reports to managing managers, and becoming more responsible as a leader. And then I went to India, and went from managing 200 people to 1,000 people.

Was going to India a difficult decision?

It threw a monkey wrench in my plan. My husband and I were thinking about starting a family at the time, and India would have delayed that decision. So I go home, and I tell my husband: “They asked me to go to India, but I’m not going to go. We’re thinking about starting a family.”

But I’d always wanted to live abroad. India was a really important market for Google at the time, and I knew they were going to take care of me. So we decided together, as a couple, to delay the decision to start a family so I could take this career opportunity.

So I went back to work and said, “Here are all the things I need to make this work for me.” And they were like, “Yes.” Then I went back and asked for some more, because they said yes too fast.

How was managing in India different than in the United States?

I had to adapt my style. Google, at least in the U.S., was very consensus driven. In India, it was a lot more directive. My style is to naturally be consensus-driven, so I had to immediately adapt.

After about a month in India, my assistant came to me and said: “Stacy, you’re going to be great here. Everyone loves you. But you have to start to tell people what to do.” And I was like, “I’m already telling people what to do. We’re having these meetings. We’re agreeing.” She’s like, “No. You have to actually tell people what to do.”

My Detroit upbringing taught me how to be directive. I had to defend myself from bullies. So I knew how to speak up. So I just had to go back to my roots.

You’re one of the few black executives in Silicon Valley. How has race shaped your professional experience?

I get discriminated against all the time. No one thinks I’m a C.E.O. I sit on a plane and tell somebody, “Well, I run this company.” They’re like, “What? You run a company?” And it’s like shocking. You could imagine someone else sitting in that seat where no one would be surprised.

Starting the Black Googler Network was sort of selfish in the beginning because there just weren’t enough black people at Google, and I just wanted to get more. We have a recruiting problem and a hiring problem. There is a whole community of people that we haven’t tried to hire, so let’s go try to hire them, and then we can all be happy.

Why did you leave Google?

I came back from India, and I was running the operations team of about 600 people globally. I'd been there for nine years. I had a corner office. And I was sitting there, floor-to-ceiling windows, two sides. My dog was there. I had a table. I had a couch, an assistant. And as I sat there, I realized I needed to move on and do something else. This is not it.

Why did you join TaskRabbit?

The mission of revolutionizing everyday work — I just fell in love with it. I mean, I grew up with people who were hardworking, whose jobs were taken away from them because the auto industry was decimated. And here's this platform that's creating everyday work for everyday people. What an opportunity. To me, this is going back to my roots in Detroit, which is how do I help people around me? How can I help a community of people do something more than they could otherwise accomplish on their own?

Why did you sell to Ikea?

A friend of mine gave me some advice, which was: "Now that you're the C.E.O. of this successful company, people are going to want to buy the company. Make a list of who you would talk to so you don't waste your time." So I did that, and Ikea was on the list. The values were aligned. Ikea seeks to eliminate poverty around the world. They create affordable products for people everywhere.

When we told our employees, everyone clapped because they were like, "Oh, thank god. We're actually selling to a company that we admire and we respect." That's when you know you've done the right thing. We took care of our investors, we took care of the team, and we're taking care of the company.

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