

Reema Khrais: In early 2018, Ifeoma Ozoma was on a work trip when she got a notification on her phone. It was an email from a recruiter at Pinterest who was reaching out about a job...

Reema: And you remember your first thought when you saw that?

Ifeoma: Uh? Okay...I think that's exactly what I thought. "Uh, Okay."

Reema: Why like that...?

Ifeoma: Cuz because I was working at Facebook and I had worked at Google. Uh, I mean they're...and...I...hmm. I don't know how to say this and not sound dismissive. But like working in tech, those are the companies that people want to work up to.

<<music cue>>

Reema Khrais: And Ifeoma had *started* at those big companies, which have way more resources than Pinterest. Really, she was at the top of her game...she was living in Silicon Valley and was working at Facebook....on their international public policy team -- which she absolutely loved. She had no reason to leave...

Ifeoma: But but I will always entertain a conversation.

Reema Khrais: So Ifeoma got on the phone with the recruiter...who made a pretty compelling case...She'd basically get to build Pinterest's global public policy from the ground up.... since initially it'd just be her and one other person on the team.

Ifeoma: That's huge coming from...at Facebook. There were over ehh...probably 300. But 300 to 500 hundred people on the global public policy team. At Google, same thing

Reema Khrais: And she says they told her she'd essentially be a partner to her manager and share leadership responsibilities. Ifeoma was intrigued, she went through with the interview and started salary negotiations

Ifeoma: And I remember saying, like, I know you guys don't have as much as Facebook does, but I just want to make sure like, I'm going to negotiate until I hit the very top of whatever is possible for this role. So understand that.

<<music hard end>>

Reema Khrais: She wanted her salary to reflect not only her experience, but the contacts she was bringing. She eventually accepted the job. And even though the final offer wasn't exactly what she wanted...they told her...

Ifeoma: : This is the best that we can do for this role. Not this is the best we can do for you, as an individual. And that's important because of then what transpired over the next almost two years...

<<theme posts>>

Reema Khrais: I'm Reema Khrais and welcome to This Is Uncomfortable, a show from Marketplace about life and how money messes with it. So, the tech industry is notoriously dominated by white and Asian men...and even though for years it's promised to hire more diverse candidates and be more inclusive, not a lot has changed.

This week, we've got the story of one black woman's experience in tech and her fight for better pay...plus, why it is so hard for black workers in tech to get ahead

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Ifeoma was pumped to start working at Pinterest...

Ifeoma: I was excited. Excited about the possibility, excited about being in a role where even though it was less resourced, I would be able to manage so much.

Reema Khrais: And within her first month there...

Ifeoma: I helped the company create the first misinformation specific content policy in the industry, among our peers

Reema Khrais: Basically...this policy is to help prevent the spread of misleading and false health information...it was a pretty big deal and it earned Pinterest a lot of good press.

Ifeoma: I mean, I really just hit the ground running.

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Reema Khrais: She was working what felt like 24/7...she acted as a spokesperson for their health misinformation campaign. She worked with government officials on privacy and copyright concerns. She was glued to her phone, travelling constantly. And even though it was tiring, she was proud of her work.

Ifeoma: Incredibly so.

Reema Khrais: And so at what point? At what point did things go south?

Ifeoma: *sigh* South, I mean I raised concerns to my manager in September of 2018.

Reema Khrais: It was two months after she had started working. She was at her desk, scrolling through the company's internal employee website, she was looking for tax information, when instead she came across the company's organizational chart. She found her job role...

Ifeoma: And I remember seeing it and seeing what the level was and being like, hmm, that that does not sound right?

Reema Khrais: Employees are assigned to different levels, which determines their pay. On this chart, Ifeoma discovered she was slotted at a pretty low level...she was at the second to last rung. She immediately reached out to her manager...

Ifeoma: I emailed him and asked what was up with my level? Like there must be a corresponding chart? And he sent it to me and when I read the description for my level, it's very junior, like incredibly junior, in fact.

Reema Khrais: Meanwhile, her manager, who's a white man, was on the highest level -- even though Ifeoma says they were doing similar work. She says the difference in the pay packages is huge...especially because of the stock options

Ifeoma: The difference between the level that I was brought in at and the level that I should have been brought in at, is the difference in value between going on vacation and buying a house.

Reema Khrais: Ifeoma was confused, but she figured she'd just clear it up with her manager.

Ifeoma: I thought, well, this is going to be a really easy sell because it's not my word, I can pull from what reporters have written about my work. And I can pull from what you have written about my work, and what the CEO has said about the work. And then we're just gonna have a conversation about the timeline for fixing it.

Reema Khrais: Right

Ifeoma: And then that is what sparked a year and a half of pure hell.

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Reema Khrais: Ifeoma brought it up with her manager at her performance review...and while she got a kinda standard performance-related raise, there was no change to her level. She was told that's the best they could do.

Ifeoma: It was dismissive at every turn--but I just, I wanted to still do a good job.

Reema Khrais: Over the next several months she kept pushing for a promotion, and meanwhile she was leading the company's largest press cycle, she was flying to D.C. to meet with congressional offices, she independently represented Pinterest at summits with British officials, and she was leading the company's response to a federal investigation. It was a lot.

Ifeoma: Most of the work that you do in public policy is preventing bad things from happening. Rarely do you get to do the kind of proactive work that I was leading.

Reema Khrais: But every day, when Ifeoma would walk into work, she'd think...

Ifeoma: Just like what am I doing? But I felt at a certain point that not only were they disrespecting me, but I was disrespecting myself in staying there and continuing to fight for something that wasn't going to happen. And that was when I made the decision to hire outside counsel.

Reema Khrais: Coming up after the break...Ifeoma reaches her breaking point...

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Reema Khrais:: That's a pretty badass move to get an outside lawyer. I would like--I would feel nervous to do that.

Ifeoma: Um, yeah, I mean, I've never been I mean the--our mom raised us not to be scared of anyone.

Reema Khrais: She says growing up...her parents, who are Nigerian immigrants, always stressed the importance of persistence and hard work...

Ifeoma: I wasn't taught that things would be easy. In fact, I was taught that they would be hard and they would be hard, unfortunately, because of who I am. Like, no matter how smart you are, you present as who you are, a black woman. And so people are going to underestimate you, but you're going to show them through virtue of your hard work that you are smarter and better than they ever thought you were.

Reema Khrais: Her attorney advocated for her to get slotted at a higher level and receive back pay...but Ifeoma says the company's response went something like this

Ifeoma: Well, actually for the level that you're talking about, you don't have the years of experience for it. This is--that was brand new.

Reema Khrais: That didn't make sense to Ifeoma...because the chart, which I've looked at... doesn't take into account years of experience.

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Reema Khrais: To Ifeoma, her pay is a stark reminder of the wage gap in America -- and how stats show that black women, in particular, are paid roughly 60 cents for every dollar a white man earns.

Still, she knows people may hear her story and think of reasons for why her company refused to adjust her pay...

Ifeoma: Oh, maybe she wasn't qualified enough. Maybe she wasn't doing a good job. And so it was important to me when I shared my story, and now as I continue to share it, to point out not because I think that credentials save anyone from racism. I know that as a black woman, but I went to Yale, I worked at Google, I worked at Facebook. I was doing all of this work that landed us on the front pages of you-name-the-newspaper. I got incredible performance reviews. And this was still what happened to me.

Reema Khrais: Ifeoma eventually filed a complaint with California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing, but the company still didn't change her level. So about a month ago...after being at Pinterest for almost two years...

IO2 31:11 I decided to leave.

<BEAT>

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Ifeoma: I was tired and it was taking a toll on me physically through sleep and like not eating properly, and uh emotionally, just I couldn't focus on the things that I wanted to focus on.

Reema Khrais: And it wasn't just Ifeoma who quit. At the time, she was working on a three-person public policy team with her manager and another black woman. That woman left the same day and she also claims she wasn't paid fairly.

A few days after they quit, George Floyd died after a white Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for 8 minutes...and all these companies from Amazon and Target to Sephora and McDonalds, came out with statements to show solidarity with Black Lives Matter. Including, Pinterest.

Reema Khrais: Ifeoma remembers being at home, sitting in her kitchen...

Ifeoma: And a friend sent me a text saying you won't believe this shit. I see the like blacked out Pinterest logo. And I was like, oh lord, here we go.

Reema Khrais: Pinterest shared a pretty standard, corporate post, supporting BLM. It said the company is going to elevate racial justice content on their platform and donate to advocacy groups.

Ifeoma: The thing that I focused on in it was that they believe that black employees matter, and seeing that sentence, just I was seeing red, as I was seeing the sentence because it--How could you say that, when, a few days before was the last day of the two third, the black two thirds of your public policy team? And not that our roles were more important than anyone else's, but they were visible enough that maybe if you're going to be hypocritical you wait a while?

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Reema Khrais: And it's not just Ifeoma who feels frustrated by this corporate activism. A lot of big brands are being accused of hypocrisy - of publicly aligning themselves with BLM while at the same time not treating their black employees fairly. In the last several weeks, black employees in practically every industry -- retail, journalism, tech -- are sharing their anecdotes of pay inequity, of dealing with racism and microaggressions in their workplace.

Reema Khrais: And so Ifeoma decided to share her experiences too...she got on Twitter...and posted a long thread about...everything..and it went viral. But...

Ifeoma: I have not heard from a single person in leadership at that company

Reema Khrais: Meanwhile, Pinterest's CEO Ben Silbermann wrote an internal memo that got leaked. He told employees "what I've learned over the past few weeks is that parts of our culture are broken. Truthfully, I didn't understand just how much work we have to do. That's not an excuse, that's a failure in leadership"...he goes on to say "It's been devastating to hear the stories of Black employees who feel like they don't belong at Pinterest."

Reema Khrais: Then, he outlines an action plan -- how the company is going to improve its representation and work on its understanding of systemic racism.

<<music fades>>

Reema Khrais: When you saw that internal memo leaked... uh, the letter, what did you make of it?

Ifeoma: It's propaganda. I do public affairs. I know I work with politicians. I know exactly the way you do something like this. You think about what a politician who has been embarrassed on the record would do in this moment. It--This is the playbook

Reema Khrais: What would an adequate response sound like?

Ifeoma: They need to make things right for me, and for anyone else who has left under these circumstances, we need to be made whole financially.

Reema Khrais: Earlier this week, Pinterest announced that it's going to conduct an independent review of its culture and practices when it comes to pay and how the company deals with complaints of discrimination.

Reema Khrais: We also reached out to Pinterest about Ifeoma's situation and a spokesperson told us...the company never wants anyone to feel the way Ifeoma did while working at Pinterest and..."We're committed to immediately taking the actions that we've outlined to our employees, and we're actively pursuing this work."

<<music cue>>

Reema Khrais: So, this story is obviously just one person's experience at one tech company...but Ifeoma felt like as a black woman in a largely white industry, it was a struggle to be heard...And the reality is tech has been plagued with inclusion problems for a long time now...

Nitasha Tiku: My name's Nitasha Tiku, I'm a tech culture writer for the Washington post.

Reema Khrais: I recently called up Nitasha, a reporter who's written about tech's diversity problem. She says for the last few weeks...she's been in touch with Black tech employees who've been skeptical of their companies' statements of support with Black Lives Matter and their promises of change...

Nitasha: You know, I think that the reason that the employees were willing to talk to me, which was, you know, at kind of personal risk to themselves is because they acutely feel like this moment, unless pressure is put on these companies consistently.

Nitasha: Um, it could just end up being a branding opportunity for them and attention could very easily switch to, you know, back to just coronavirus or the next, you know, the next topic, the election, um, you know, they've been through this before. Uh, companies have professed that, you know, this is an urg--uh diversity is an urgent issue um, at other times in the past. So they are trying to make sure that this time it ends up differently and the next time, you know, they're not the only black person in the room.

Reema Khrais: Okay, so I know that for a long time tech companies were really reluctant to share numbers around diversity and their breakdown of the workforce. And then that changed back in 2014. Can you tell us what happened and and what it revealed?

Nitasha: So a number of news organizations, some local ones in California and also CNN, had tried to persuade tech companies to release this data that they have to give to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission every year. That looks at the, you know, if you're a company with more than 100 employees that looks at the demographic breakdown of your of your workforce. And companies like Google and others, they fought them. They tried to argue that releasing that data would infringe on their trade secrets. But I think, you know, there was a confluence of pressure, and that pressure led to tech companies, you know, kind of getting the transparency points by putting that information out there on our websites. And then, you know, once Google did it and Facebook and Twitter, then it became, you know, sort of the expected gesture for tech companies to do.

Reema Khrais: Okay, it, well, then what did it show once they revealed the numbers?

Nitasha: Yeah, the numbers were really bad, and that's, you know, why they wanted to hide the data. Take Facebook, for example, in its first diversity report, there were 2% black people in all of Facebook, 2% Black people in senior leadership. Now, if you look at Facebook in 2019, there are only 3.8% of black people in all of Facebook and 3.1% in senior leadership. Now, tech companies mention, and I think very fairly, that they've also in that time period grown a lot. So...

Reema Khrais: Sure.

Nitasha: The fact that the percentage change, you know, may not look significant doesn't mean that they've not made serious progress and prioritize this in their hiring goals.

Reema Khrais: Yeah. Well, still, so why is it so hard for black people and people of color to get ahead in tech or even really to get their foot in the door?

Nitasha: I think that, you know, this has really become obviously it's a moment of reckoning for all of corporate America, you know, to actually confront racism in the workplace. But I think for the tech industry, which has made this a talking point of theirs for the past six years, it's also an opportunity to look at the way that they approach diversity, and the way that maybe that has prevented change, for example, often the focus is on the building a pipeline of talent. And that kind of defers, you know, the responsibility, you know, to making sure that, you know, organizations that help girls in STEM, you know, have a little bit of funding.

Nitasha: And they're not looking around to kind of diversify their networks. It's almost as though they don't know or believe that talented, underrepresented minorities exist now.

Reema Khrais: Right, so it sounds like, for a long time now tech has been focused on the pipeline and not necessarily widening their own networks and giving more support and access to people of color, who are already qualified?

Nitasha: Exactly. Exactly. There was also a focus on unconscious bias. You know, this again, was like corporate America wide, but in the tech industry, you know, it really allowed hiring managers, you know, well intentioned people to discuss the issue without confronting racism itself in a way. You know, even the terms diversity, unconscious bias. It's sort of, you know, like, those euphemisms have proven to be

particularly dangerous, I think. Um, in in just kind of like skirting the issue, even as you're setting up trainings and stuff and...

Reema Khrais: Like, it's an easy way to check the boxes, but not necessarily do the hard work.

Nitasha: Exactly. And the same thing with the diversity reports, you know, the focus became on looking at the reports and the sense of transparency. When, you know, we don't really know how much are you investing in the actual cost of hiring executives who are focused on diversity and inclusion? On reaching out to different schools than your usual Stanford, MIT, Carnegie Mellon, etc?

Reema Khrais: So what do you think it'll take for black employees and people of color within these tech companies to feel like their employers are taking their grievances seriously?

Nitasha: You know, one signal that they're looking for, that companies are taking this seriously, is a real change in the makeup of senior leadership. Um and you know, at the core of that, that's like a willingness to relinquish some power and give some real power to, you know, not the usual cohort of people. I think investing heavily in you know, not only donating to social justice causes, but reaching out to black potential tech workers who are already out there in the market.

Nitasha: I think, you know, like confronting racism, not just, you know, unconscious bias. I think having those difficult conversations, and treating it like they would any other company priority.

Reema Khrais: Cause the truth is if a company doesn't treat inclusion and equity as a priority, then no matter how many black or brown employees it brings in the door, it won't be long before they look for the exit...

Alright that's all for this week's show...as always, if you want to reach out, you can hit us up at uncomfortable@marketplace.org.

Reema Khrais: And if you want to sign up for our newsletter, which I don't know why you wouldn't want to...you can sign up at marketplace.org/comfort.

This is Uncomfortable is, me, Reema Khrais, Megan Detrie, Hayley Hershman, Peter Balonon-Rosen and Daisy Palacios.

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And our theme music is by Wonderly.

Alright, I will catch y'all soon.