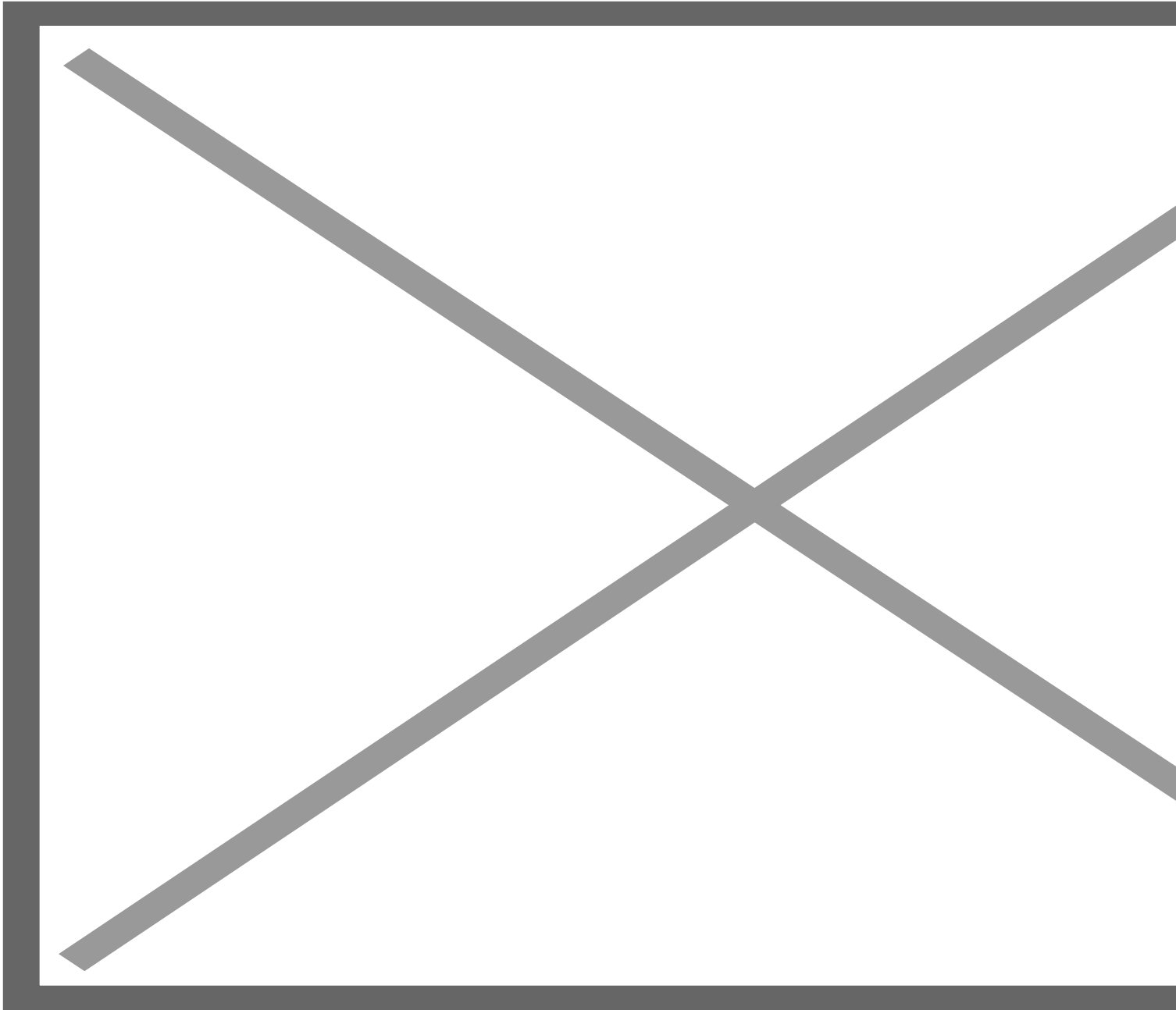


It's time to change the narrative

General Features



30 September 2021

Ashley Makoni shares her experiences on what it is like to be black in the world of taxation

What is Black History Month and why do we need it? Why have the CIOT and ATT become supporters of the Charter for Black Talent in Finance and the Professions? Although I don't feel at all qualified to provide answers to these crucial questions, for me personally, the answer is synonymous with the answer to the question that so many people think about: 'What is it like to be black?'

In my personal experience, being black has been a long journey of not knowing. Not knowing where I would be today if I had received the start in life that my peers did. It's not knowing basic information about how to access certain opportunities that my colleagues take for granted. It's not knowing if everyone understands the amount of pressure and the struggles I have to overcome just to be heard or to get my foot through the door – even today.

Each time an opportunity does present itself and I do not make it, I have to wonder if it is because I was truly not good enough or because I was not the right colour, did not have the right name, the right background, or the right accent. Even when I do succeed, I have to consider if I was given the opportunity because I truly deserved it or if it was simply to tick a box or fill a quota.

In a world where answers are not always available, being black for me will always be about making the most of every opportunity to change the narrative. For most of my career, I have been the only black person in a lot of rooms and have craved role models and mentors that looked like me and understood my struggles. Writing this article is a truly humbling experience for me as I realise that I may now be that role model that young people coming up in tax will look up to.

I acknowledge that some of the issues I have mentioned above are not unique to black people, but black people in my experience have had more than their fair share of struggles. Using Black History Month and the Charter to focus on the struggles of black people to my mind is a missed opportunity. Despite all I've been through in life, I can honestly say that being black is the one thing about me that I am most proud of.

I am proud to come from a continent that has some of world's most vibrant and amazing cultures and some of the most unique and intellectual people I know. The perspectives black people bring to the table, especially when it comes to resilience and enduring hardships are valuable skills to any organisation, especially considering the pandemic we're battling with.

The only reason why I am a Tax Director today is because there were a few people along the way who ignored the strange looking name on my CV, disregarded the fact that they were unfamiliar with any of the schools listed in the education section of my CV, and gave me the opportunity to join their teams.

Black History Month for me, besides obviously celebrating being black, is also about celebrating all those people around the country who are extending opportunities to people who would have otherwise been overlooked. Please continue this important work and remember that if what we are looking for is black people to join boards and other senior level positions in tax, then our success is going to be limited as there are only a few black people who will fit the criteria for these positions at present.

Our time might be better invested in reaching students before they decide on a career path and educate them about how rewarding a career in tax can be. I recently had the opportunity to mentor a Finance degree student at Greenwich University with ReachOut and was not surprised to find out that she did not know anything about tax advisers or the institute. I similarly studied Accounting and Finance and had no idea you could actually specialise in tax until after I had graduated.

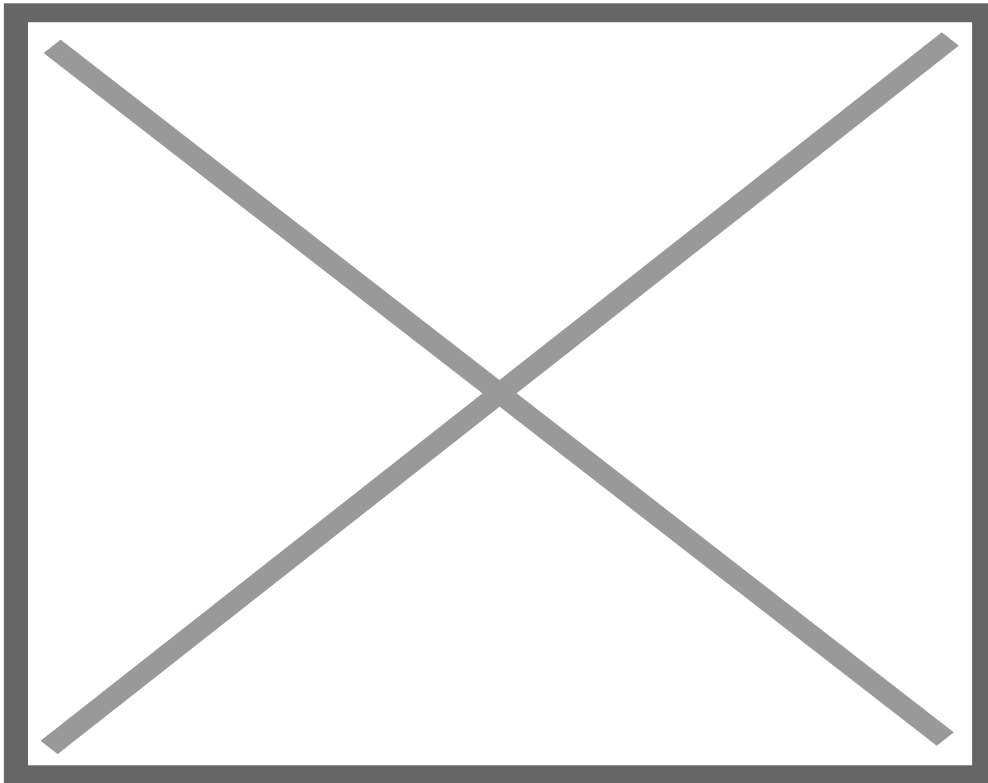
Educating our young people, not only about tax but also about the benefits of diversity, will make tax education a much easier task for us in the future; the more diverse our members are, the easier it will be to bring tax education to all members of the public.

The only reason why I am a Trustee of the CIOT today is because I responded to Jeremy Coker's invitation for more black people to volunteer and get involved in the October 2020 Tax Adviser which also included a few issues for Black History month. I would therefore like to extend my own invitation to black people in the profession. No one else can tell your story or understand what needs to change in our system like you can. Get involved and help be the change you want to see.

To every member of the institute, my message is we all have a part to play. May the Charter and Black History Month remind us of what we are working for – a world where black people will know that their voices matter, that their opinions are valued and that they are playing their match on a level playing field. Happy Black History Month!

Ashley Makoni started her career in tax working in international law firms and is now a Tax Director at Kroll, is a trustee of the CIOT and has recently joined the Professional Standards Committee.

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