



The Deloitte On Cloud Podcast

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Title: Diversity, equity, and inclusion: A key component of a stronger cloud community

Description: Diversity, equity, and inclusion aren't just words; they're a key component of success for nearly any endeavor, cloud computing included. In this podcast, David Linthicum talks with Deloitte's Josh Walker, co-founder of Black Orlando Tech, about his efforts to bring diversity to the tech workforce. They also discuss ways companies can change their culture to hire more minorities by creating a culturally diverse, friendly workspace and ensuring that minorities feel more welcome.

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David Linthicum:

Welcome back to the On Cloud podcast. Today on the show, I am joined by Josh Walker, an honorably discharged Army veteran turned AWS-certified developer. That's a common story these days, Josh. So, tell us about your journey.

Josh Walker

Yeah, so right out of high school I—at 17, I went into the military to the Army and from there, I was part of one of the special ops groups, and was actually a parachutist. So, I always joke that my worst day professionally, isn't me jumping out of a perfectly good airplane. So, coming out of that, I actually went to college for entertainment-related things as far as I was an audio engineer for a few years, and then also, I have a Master's in business with an entertainment focus. So, I really got into tech through kind of through osmosis and curiosity as I met a great gentleman within the community and let him know I was interested in in technology. And went to my first Java script meet-up at the time, and kind of been smitten and then kind of the rest is history as I got into cloud years later after that.

David Linthicum

So, what really steered you to cloud was the fact that you were just kind of following the crowd, or was this something that was an innate desire in yourself?

Josh Walker

I always say that I was kind of smitten by AWS, so when I was looking at the next, part of my career, I was actually going to go into data science, and one of the startup leads that I knew because I was working with a lot of startups at the time within the Orlando tech scene, said, "Have you ran any workloads within Amazon Web Services?" And at the time, I had only heard about it once. Went back home, did some research, and kind of got really excited about the technology there, and then went on to learn not only AWS, Google Cloud, Azure as well, yeah, I really just through curiosity and kind of going with the flow, and going where what felt right, and cloud was kind of something that just came natural to me.

David Linthicum

Yeah, one of the things we're going to talk about today, which I think is a tremendously important topic is really diversity, equity, and inclusion—the ability to apply that to different career focuses, and certainly focused into cloud. So, how did you get involved in kind of understanding where this is going, and being someone who is an expert, or an advisor in this particular space?

Josh Walker

Yes so how I got into DEI really was through necessity. So, I always joke, when I was kind of getting my stripes within the Orland tech scene, I was going to five or six events per week, so I became human spam at that point.

David Linthicum

[laughter]

Josh Walker

So, talking to a lot of the other black technicians, I would see the same folks every time so, they said, "Hey, we want to get together, and we want to see how we can help make an impact in that area." And what happened from us meeting at a small coffee shop was us coming up with our local group, Black Orlando Tech, which is it's an all-inclusive group as far as all walks of life come to the events every month, but focusing on getting more minorities into tech. And our goal is to get 10,000 new minorities into tech by 2025, and we're trending pretty aggressively towards that goal, and have gotten a lot of backing from the city.

And even us, as a firm, have done some stuff with Black Orlando Tech, as I'm a lead for Step Up Florida, which is kind of a branch off from Step Up Georgia, which is kind of an in-kind nonprofit initiative that we do at the firm where we help nonprofits with various strategy and stuff to help them with their cause, so yeah. I got into it just by—just having kind of a heart for the people, and realizing that you need to be the change that you want to see.

David Linthicum

Yeah, absolutely. So, what are some of the newer trends in in DEI that you're seeing today, things that we weren't discussing five years ago or ten years ago that seems to be more of a productive focus these days?

Josh Walker

Yeah, I think the biggest thing has been really the addition to the E, because I know, David, you've been in the industry a long time, and been a great advocate for—for a lot of great things including DEI, but before it was just D and I and then really putting the emphasis on the equity piece and making sure that our environments are equitable as well, so that every—all basically everybody's life is better when equity is spread across, not just diversity and inclusion. So...

David Linthicum

Yeah, diverse organizations are always the strongest organizations, I've found in leading organizations for the last 30 years. So, what about cloud computing specifically? Are there things occurring in that particular industry that are unique to cloud computing, or is it just simply DEI as related to all technology disciplines?

Josh Walker

I think for cloud, it's—we have a unique opportunity because unlike a lot of traditional computer science kind of facets or workstreams, like cloud computing, if you're—get certifications and you have some good portfolio pieces you can get an "in" to the industry whether it's with a startup, or there's a lot of great programs. I know Deloitte has some of those as well as far as helping with entry level. So, I think, with DEI, where we're able to diversify quicker within cloud is that we're able to kind of get practitioners from—from newer places where it doesn't all have to be sourced from universities, and things of that nature, although we get a lot of great candidates and a lot of great practitioners from traditional university, as well.

David Linthicum

Yeah, one of the things that I've been an advocate of is the fact that people come from all kinds of career paths. And sometimes they come through a college/university, sometimes they don't but my hiring, and working with people over the years, it really has no bearing upon their success.

Josh Walker

Yes.

David Linthicum

It's really your ability to stand up and do the job, and really the person I'm looking for is the autodidact, people who are self-learning learners or continuous learners, so they have a passion for doing it. So, in other words, they have a just kind of an affinity for technology. It gets them excited. You kind of see it in their eyes, and the ability to kind of spot those folks and getting them into the business. So, let's kind of walk through the—the process here, and so, say we have a group of minorities who are looking to get into the tech field, how would they engage with your organization, other organizations, things like that? What path would you recommend that they take if you meet someone at a cocktail party or something?

Josh Walker

Great question. So, for Black Orlando Tech specifically, we have our tech cohorts that are eight weeks long. I'm now on the board, so I'm not an instructor anymore, but I was—I instructed a few different classes, but the idea is that they would basically go from zero to entry-level cloud role, so, in my first cohort, we had and it's—it's smaller group sizes usually, which is really helpful.

So, I believe there was 15 people in my first group, and they came from the political space. They came from traditional dev. They came from food service, all types of areas and they, we, went from learning first, what a VPC and AWS is all the way to them installing software, all the way to them doing some automation towards the end of the program, and then helping them with their initial entry level resume, and then putting it all together, so that basically having no fluff.

Everything that they create is something that I believe based on being in the field that would garner someone saying, "I want to talk to this person and have them on my team," or at least see if they're a good fit for our team. So, my—my clear recommendation really for everyone, David, is usually I'm instructing them to go—there's a lot of great courses on—on—on YouTube for free. So, that's a good place to start, and then from there I—I've done some videos myself as well on YouTube on just like some entry level projects that folks can do on the various cloud platforms. So, it's usually just a mix of usually getting some associate-level certs, if we're talking AWS, and then some real-world projects that you can speak to and—and step through when it comes to getting an interview.

David Linthicum

So, I'm seeing organizations and companies spending an increasing amount on—on DEI projects, which is good but in looking at metrics around return on the value the question is are we getting the return on the value from that? Are we having the desired impact that we're looking for? And if not, what can we do from either spending more money, or improving the process, or externalizing some things to leaderships and decisionmakers that weren't before, and to become more effective as being an organization that promotes DEI?

Josh Walker

I think the most effective thing I've seen in this space just DEI in general, is really arming your practitioners or your technicians or the folks within your company to help be a part of—of solving it and making it a more of a community issue versus one steering community trying to solve for everyone.

So, I, whether it's us doing a lot of external events, which I've been a part of as far as recruitment, or just really just being in the marketplace, as far as where communities live and thrive, as far as the tech community I think that's the easiest way where I've gotten a lot of attention from diverse practitioners that are really great that wouldn't have even thought to apply to Deloitte or just having that face time I think is—just approaching it from a human level versus trying to make some algorithm that's going to solve this equity issue.

David Linthicum

Yeah, I've been working with organizations for the last 30 years. So, I've seen this evolve over time, and the ability to promote diversity within organizations, and you know what—kind of a fundamental lesson that I've been told, and I've been instructed is how organizations can improve in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in their own ranks, in their own culture—is to promote a culture of friendliness to everybody, and your ability to reach out your hand and help people, and your ability to communicate with, people you may not want—you may not typically reach out to, and I—I think that's something that needs to change as far as the cultures moving forward in all areas.

Josh Walker

100 percent.

David Linthicum

Your ability yeah. And so, when you talk to people, when they tell me the reason why they didn't want to move to a particular company or even move to a particular career field, they didn't view the participants in that career field or that company as being friendly to them and accepting to them. And they just kind of read between the lines, and they moved on and—and worked for somebody else. And I would say, "Well, that's an asset that that company just blew." In other words, they don't have access to an asset that probably could have taken the company to the next level as a key innovator. And the reason is because they weren't as friendly in the ability to reach out as they should have been. Am I off?

Josh Walker

No, I agree. I think another thing that we promote really well at the firm is this is the first time, the first company I've been a part of where I feel like I've been able to be my authentic self. I think that's something when I'm coaching a lot of the folks internally and externally, just making sure that they aren't wearing a mask to work, and I think you get your best work when you don't feel like you're pretending to be something just to kind of fit into that culture.

So, I think that's been a big boost I've seen where I've been a part of a lot of events within the firm and externally where I feel like the—the word professionalism, is kind of ambiguous, where I think we're—we're kind of getting more of a broad stroke there where that's going to mean different things to different people, and being able to just really be your authentic self to do your best work. So...

David Linthicum

Yeah, it's an important cultural change. I think it's occurring now in—in bits and bytes, but I think there's a lot of way to go, and the reality is that you're talking about something that's—that's fairly free. When you change a culture even though there's some training involved and certainly cultural changes have to occur across the board, the reality is it's about changing the values that people have in their own behaviors in how they deal with other folks, and how they deal with other people, other colleagues, I think that really kind of goes a long way.

So, what could we do to promote some cultural changes, worldwide in technology in general, that would be—let's kind of focus on that, stay here in terms of what these organizations need to do to change their culture to be more open for DEI and—and even though they're spending a lot of money on it, it becomes more effective because the cultural changes are able to adopt around the money changes—the changes that the leadership is pushing?

Josh Walker

I think for what I've seen is, just really kind of approaching it at the macro level, so we have a lot of different affinity groups, so there's groups for the black practitioners. There's groups for the Latin practitioners. There's a group for members of the LGBTQ community. And I think also having those broader events where you're talking about those hard issues and making those safe spaces. I think the main thing is especially with corporate culture within any company, I think a lot of folks, as long as they can start to break down those walls of, "These aren't just people I work with," because I know for us, we work on some of the biggest projects in the world, and will continue to do so, so being able to not be so guarded and be comfortable around who you're working with goes a long way with shifting the culture. So, I think my call to action is just willfully creating those safe spaces and catering to those groups that are smaller in number internally, so that everyone feels like they have a safe space to thrive.

David Linthicum

Yeah, and in doing so, you're increasing the value of the business, because you're leveraging a resource that you may not have leveraged before, in a way allowing them to be productive and take your organization to the next level. It was always a fundamental kind of disconnect for me back in the early days when moving in this direction. Well, this is where the resources are. Leverage them for who they are and what they are, and you're right. If people are going to be—can be their genuine self, they—they can provide their own value.

If they're running around trying to conform to some sort of a culture, which may not be as friendly as they'd like to them, then that's going to be an uphill battle, and I think the organizations are changing slowly. The cultures are changing slowly, but I do think we need to hit the accelerator on this, and the reason I think technology can lead the way is because we're at a point right now where we can't find anybody.

Josh Walker

Mm-hm. 100 percent.

David Linthicum

The technology scarcity out there is daunting. And so, people are—their cloud projects are being hindered, and their progression to digital transformations are being hindered because they can't find the right talent. Well, go to the source of the talent. Recruit the people that you're looking for. Give away training. And you'll really kind of create an external culture so people understand that you're going to provide them with a glide path to get into a career that you and I know is fun and fantastic that hopefully people enjoy it.

David Linthicum

We care how your ability to learn. We care about your ability to be a talented person on the job. You know, that's all we care about, and it's going to be a level playing field, so let's continue to work together and move things forward. Is that too much to ask?

Josh Walker

I don't think so. I think some of the best engineers I've ever met have come from different backgrounds. And I think those unique backgrounds solve unique problems, and us being able to have all these different perspectives based on different life experiences makes it so that we could continue to innovate. So, I agree with you, David, that we need to be also more diverse and open-minded on where we find our practitioners.

David Linthicum

Yeah, it's going to keep us in business. I mean people always look at this as a political topic. Not a political topic, because we're trying to survive, and the only way you can progress with technology is to have enough key, talented people who can push that ball forward. And you can't eliminate anybody from that, and you need to promote everybody no matter where they came from, no matter who they are, and that's going to be important, and that's going to be the key to any success to any institution moving forward. So, what can tech leaders do to improve DEI today? What are not doing that we should be doing?

Josh Walker

I think taking that, just a brief pause of making sure that when you're staffing your teams that you're not just having a bias of selecting the people that you've always selected. I think any time we're looking to staff on any of our new teams, I always have that at the top of mind. And also, if it's not your team, being comfortable enough, to kind of challenge the status quo. So, I think the main thing is just mindfulness, just thinking about, "Did I hire an archetype that is directly in line with my only with what are my values, and am I hindering my progress, project, and honestly, revenue, by kind of picking the same people every time?"

David Linthicum

Yeah, even the resume search algorithms I'm seeing out there need to be changed. You know, going after the same candidates that went to the same schools, and have the same degrees, that's not going to get you who you're looking for. It's going to probably going to get some good people, but the reality is qualifications and certainly where they went to school, all those sorts of things really kind of tell only a part of the story, and you have to look at the essence of what somebody is. That's why the billionaires you see who are around, they never finished college, and they went off on their own entrepreneurial bent and the reality is they had an engine that was unto themselves. It wasn't defined specifically to the resumes. If you looked at their resumes, you wouldn't hire them.

David Linthicum

We're picking successful people, or potentially successful people, I think, ultimately with the wrong metrics, and this goes to everything. This goes to your ability to open your mind, in terms of letting everybody and anybody come in and be looked at in terms of their qualifications and talking to everybody and anybody about their ability to do the job. And at the end of the day, that's all you need. So, where can we find out more information about DEI specifically to cloud, and DEI in general?

Josh Walker

Yeah, I think for just selfish, your organization Black Orlando Tech does a lot in that area externally to the firm, but the firm Deloitte as a whole, if you just go on the Deloitte website, we have a ton of resources on diversity as well. I think those are my main go-tos. There's a lot of stuff on the market as well for—for DEI, but I think honestly the approach to DEI is going to really be dependent on what company you are, kind of what you know—who you can get involved. I think really my main source of inspiration is really just getting the folks internally, involved wherever you're at. And, there's a lot of people outside of the firm that I've worked with that have started their DEI practice from scratch. So, just kind of a call to action if it's something that doesn't exist at your company, it's definitely something that you can start on your own and get folks involved.

David Linthicum

So, reach out if you're looking for guidance and looking for help, because these organizations are around like Black Orlando Tech and—and reach out to anybody who can help you because let me tell you this is one of the issues out there that we have to get right, and moving forward, we have to make progression which is beyond some of the money that's being spent now, and really kind of change the attitudes in terms of how you take this thing to the next level, and how you can be truly fair.

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