

THE VOICE

BUSINESS NEWS

Equinox - a chink of light in the gloom

As the country's first Black-led management consultancy celebrates its tenth anniversary, Mike Best looks at how Equinox is bucking the recession

For the majority of business men and women, a decade of success is well worth celebrating. But for Ade Sawyerr and Maxine James, the champagne will remain on ice for some time to come while they help sort out other people's business headaches.

"I don't think ten years in business is a cause for celebration," said a modest Ade. "It is more of a period of reflection so that we can correct past mistakes and chart a successful path to the end of the century and beyond."

Equinox was established as the first Black-led management consultancy in 1983. It was launched by three partners and their main aim was to give Black business in the inner city a boost. Ade, 42 and married with one child, has held a number of senior positions with internationally recognised



BUSINESS EXCELLENCE: Ade Sawyerr and Maxine James.

companies. He also worked as a systems analyst with IBM in Ghana, from where he hails, before coming to Britain to further his studies.

In 1982 he graduated with a Masters degree in business administration (MBA) after carrying out pioneer research evaluating the impact of Black business on the economy.

"It was then that I realised there was a business opportuni-

ty in the market place for a consultancy which could provide training and a variety of other services to prospective Black-led organisations in the commercial and voluntary sector," he explained.

Equinox's first three partners set out to demonstrate that Black people can succeed in business if they are guided in the right direction and given the patient 'hand-hold-

ing' that is required to overcome teething problems.

A decade later, the company has gone from strength to strength, providing training for over 1,000 organisations at an average rate of 90 clients a year.

In addition, Equinox gives advice to 200 business people nationwide on a retainer basis, with a similar service for a further 20 voluntary and community-based groups.

"There were fewer Black businesses and community groups when we started," Ade points out.

"But the boom of the Thatcherite era encouraged many people to set up in business, while the former Greater London Council provided funding for many Black community groups."

For 35-year-old Maxine James the last ten years have been challenging as she helped nurture the creation of several small businesses.

She went into Equinox with a wealth of experience in the

administrative field. Like Ade, she is a business graduate, but with special emphasis on economic development and management skills.

In 1985 Maxine was awarded a bursary by the Commission for Racial Equality to study the growth of minority-owned companies in the United States.

Priority

She believes that racism is still rife within the business sector: "Black people are already fighting discrimination in education and in employment, but I believe that more resources should be devoted to overcoming discrimination in enterprise development.

Ade explains the meaning behind the company's name: "On the one hand, Equinox symbolises the ushering in of Spring, a period when the hours of light are the same as that of the day.

"On the other hand, the 'X' in Equinox represents the tal-

ented tenth which WEB Du Bois, the great pan-Africanist, referred to when he talked about the pioneering role that professionals from minorities should shoulder.

But despite its inspirational name, Equinox faces problems like any other concern and it is its ability to respond to changes in the market place that will ultimately decide its failure or survival.

"There is a need to reassess our role in the Black community and to look at other issues that are now priority, because of the changing needs of the community," Ade added.

One of Ade and Maxine's major concerns is the unwillingness of Black professionals to set up on their own. This is an opportunity missed as they both believe that companies which are set up by well educated professionals have a better chance of succeeding.

And they passionately believe that education should be at the top of every Black person's agenda.