

Activision Blizzard executive exits following sexism row

August 3 2021, by Rob Lever



Employees of the video game company, Activision Blizzard, hold a walkout and protest rally to denounce the company's response to a California Department of Fair Employment and Housing lawsuit and to call for changes in workplace conditions.

Activision Blizzard unveiled a management shakeup Tuesday following

employee protests and a California state lawsuit alleging the "Call of Duty" game maker enabled toxic workplace conditions and discriminated against women.

The head of the Blizzard Entertainment unit, J. Allen Brack, is leaving "to pursue new opportunities," the company said in a statement, and will be replaced by company veterans Jen Oneal and Mike Ybarra.

"With their many years of industry experience and deep commitment to integrity and inclusivity, I am certain Jen and Mike will lead Blizzard with care, compassion and a dedication to excellence," chief operating officer Daniel Alegre said.

The shakeup comes a week after workers walked out to protest sexism and harassment as a call went out online to boycott Activision games.

The company has launched what it promised would be a far-reaching review of its workplace practices after the state lawsuit alleging wide-ranging discrimination and harassment of female employees.

The lawsuit detailed inappropriate behavior, describing male employees who allegedly groped female co-workers and who would "talk openly about female bodies, and joke about rape."

Some employees and activists called the company's reaction to the case inadequate, leading to the July 28 protests.

A statement which organizers said was signed by 2,600 employees called for an end to mandatory arbitration in harassment cases, improvements in recruiting practices and creation of a diversity and equity task force.

Gaming culture?

The protests come amid growing complaints about treatment of women in the industry in recent years.

Activision has pledged to review both its workplace conditions and depiction of women in its popular games.

Tuesday's shakeup affects Blizzard, one of the three operating units of the California-based firm.

Oneal and Ybarra will be co-leaders of Blizzard and "share responsibility for development and operational accountability for the company," the statement said.

"Both are leaders of great character and integrity and are deeply committed to ensuring our workplace is the most inspired, welcoming environment for creative excellence and to upholding our highest game development standards."

The company repeated its pledge to improve conditions in a statement with its quarterly earnings report.

"We remain intensely focused on the well-being of our employees and we are committed to doing everything possible to ensure that our company has a welcoming, supportive and safe environment where all of our team members can thrive," chief executive Bobby Kotick said.

Activision noted that it had retained an outside law firm and would be adding staff as part of "swift action to ensure a safe and welcoming work environment for all employees."

The update noted that profits in the second quarter rose 51 percent from a year ago to \$876 million while revenues rose 19 percent to \$2.3 billion.

The company said it is drawing more users to its hit franchises such as "Call of Duty," "World of Warcraft" and "Candy Crush."

Last week, Kotick said the Santa Monica-based company "will continue to investigate each and every claim" of sexism at Activision "and will not hesitate to take decisive action."

Content from Activision's games criticized as sexist will also be removed following complaints from both staff and players, Kotick said, while "listening sessions" will be organized to allow staff to "speak out and share areas for improvement."

Similar allegations have been made against France-based video game giant Ubisoft as well as US-based Riot Games, maker of "League of Legends."

Ubisoft last year promised a "structural shift" to eliminate toxic behavior following allegations of sexual assault and harassment by managers at the game publisher whose portfolio includes "Assassin's Creed."

Earlier this year, Riot Games said an independent review found no evidence to support allegations of sexual misconduct by chief executive Nicolo Laurent.

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