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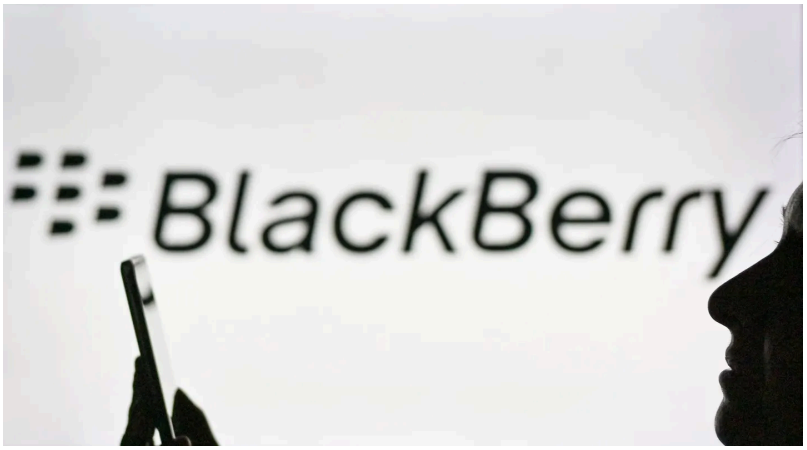
BlackBerry Investigated Its New CEO For Sexual Harassment, Lawsuit Claims

A former BlackBerry employee has sued the company and its CEO John J. Giamatteo in a California district court, alleging that after she rejected his advances, he threatened and retaliated against her. BlackBerry denied the allegations and is fighting the suit.

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BlackBerry famously decommissioned its iconic smartphones in 2022, amid a pivot to enterprise software. NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

Last December, BlackBerry ended its brief search for a new chief executive officer by appointing its cybersecurity president, John J. Giamatteo, to the role. Today, Giamatteo and the company were sued by a former executive at the company for what she alleges was a pattern of sexual harassment, gender discrimination and retaliation, which BlackBerry knew of before making him CEO, she claimed. She claims she was fired days before Giamatteo's ascension was announced.

The lawsuit against BlackBerry and Giamatteo was filed by a Jane Doe in the United States District Court for the Northern District of California. It details a series of sexual and workplace harassment complaints made about Giamatteo, and alleges that BlackBerry failed to meaningfully address them and then promoted Giamatteo to his new role. Doe's attorney Maria Bourn of Gomerman Bourn & Associates told

Forbes that it was filed anonymously due to potential unlawful retaliation.

"It feels like death by a thousand paper cuts," Doe told *Forbes* in an interview. "On an isolated basis, some of those things might not seem like a big issue. But when it's happening so regularly and deliberately, it is. It affected me, and it affects many women."

"BlackBerry is committed to maintaining a respectful and productive work environment free from discrimination and harassment," spokesperson Camilla Scassellati Sforzolini told *Forbes* in a statement on behalf of BlackBerry and Giamatteo. "To this end, we do not tolerate, condone, or ignore workplace discrimination or harassment or any unlawful behavior. We conducted an extensive investigation, which found no evidence of wrongdoing or violations of the Company code of conduct, and we are confident that the robustness of our process and its findings will be made evident in court. As such, BlackBerry and Mr. Giamatteo believe that these allegations are without merit and intend to vigorously defend against them in court." BlackBerry is scheduled to release its quarterly earnings today.

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truly a culture of misogyny."

Forbes spoke to three other women who previously worked alongside Giamatteo at BlackBerry who shared similar details concerning the now-CEO and gender discrimination. All of these women requested anonymity out of fear of retribution. All three claimed they had direct knowledge of several female executives whose roles were diminished during Giamatteo's tenure as a division president. Two of these sources claimed they had some of their responsibilities removed under Giamatteo's leadership, and one of them claimed her duties were given to male counterparts. They additionally corroborated Doe's account of an internal investigation that BlackBerry had launched while Giamatteo was being considered for the position of CEO, regarding alleged complaints of sexual harassment and discrimination that had been made about him. The company did not respond to these claims or address a detailed list of questions sent by *Forbes*.

"I felt like I had gone back to the 1980s in tech, where there was truly a culture of misogyny," one of these women told *Forbes*. "I thought: I started my career that way and now I'm ending my career that way."

Giamatteo, a Texas resident, joined BlackBerry in 2021 after nearly seven years at the security giant McAfee, where he was president and chief revenue officer in charge of sales and marketing. BlackBerry was attempting to rebrand as "the world's largest and most trusted AI-cybersecurity company" under the leadership of then-CEO, John Chen, and in 2022 famously decommissioned its iconic phones in a pivot to enterprise software. While overseeing BlackBerry's $500 million cybersecurity business unit, Giamatteo was given the responsibility of ushering in that new future.

According to the lawsuit, after joining, Giamatteo asked Doe, who had been working at BlackBerry for more than a decade, to begin reporting to him so that they could "travel together," providing no business reason for this change. Giamatteo subsequently invited Doe to what she believed was a work dinner, but turned out to be a "date," in which he attempted "to see what [she] would tolerate regarding Giamatteo's advances," the lawsuit continued. At one point, Doe alleged that he made comments about his daughters' ages and attire, and claimed he said that "when he is out with his daughters he gets dressed up, and people think 'he is a dirty old man' because it appears he is out on a date with them.'" The plaintiff is younger than Giamatteo and claimed she found his remarks disturbing.

Doe said she subsequently reported these comments to Chen, at which point Giamatteo warned her "that I needed to be nice to him," Doe told *Forbes*. After she rejected his advances, she claimed his behavior escalated to "excluding me from things and telling people that he was working on getting me out of the company, and then ultimately getting me out of the company." (Chen did not respond to a request for comment.)

BlackBerry has never publicly disclosed that Giamatteo was the subject of a sexual harassment review.

Announcing Giamatteo's CEO role last December, board member Mike Daniels praised his "deep industry experience and outstanding track record of inspiring teams and delivering operational excellence." Before retiring in October, Chen, a Silicon Valley veteran, had served as BlackBerry's CEO since 2013 and was succeeded by Interim CEO Richard Lynch.

According to the lawsuit, BlackBerry's board of directors became aware of sexual harassment claims made about Giamatteo, and in November retained law firm Morrison & Foerster to conduct

an internal investigation of Doe's complaint, as well as the cases of two other women who had allegedly experienced gender discrimination by Giamatteo. At the time, BlackBerry was vetting him for the job of CEO, and on a November 6 leadership call, Lynch had said the board had "run into a couple of process hiccups in appointing the person," the lawsuit alleged. Doe claimed that she met with the attorneys that same day, whereupon they revealed that they were investigating Giamatteo's conduct towards women, but informed Doe that she would not face retaliation for her testimony. She claimed that human resources did not appear to be involved in the process.

On December 4, however, Doe alleged that she was fired by Lynch, who presented her with a severance agreement that required her to release all claims against the company, including those of unlawful retaliation. She declined to sign. Lynch announced her departure to the company on December 10, and Giamatteo's new role was made public the next day.

Despite these alleged complaints, "Giamatteo was not only shielded from consequences but rewarded with a promotion to the highest position in the company," which set his total compensation at $700,000 with stock valued at $6 million, said Doe's attorney Bourn.

Two individuals familiar with Morrison & Foerster's inquiry into Giamatteo claimed to *Forbes* that it was perfunctory and that some of the women interviewed by the firm never received a follow up about the information they had provided nor the results of the investigation. BlackBerry has never publicly disclosed that Giamatteo was the subject of a sexual harassment review. Morrison & Foerster, which has represented companies like OpenAI and Google in litigation, had not responded to a request for comment at the time of publication.

"I think the board has some accountability in this too, because they allowed this to happen," said Doe.

BlackBerry, once an $80 billion technology pioneer whose virally popular "CrackBerry" predated even the iPhone, eventually lost the gadget war to competitors like Apple, Nokia and Microsoft, and in 2016 stopped manufacturing its iconic phones before cutting off support for the devices entirely. The 40-year-old company went from controlling nearly half of the U.S. smartphone market in 2010 to none of it.

Last year, Chen, who had a track record for rehabilitating dying tech firms, decided to prioritize BlackBerry's software offerings and announced that its cybersecurity and internet-of-things divisions would split into two separate business units, with a plan to take its IoT arm

public as a subsidiary. Previously, the company had struggled to grow its revenue and cited declines in its cybersecurity unit. Under Giamatteo, however, BlackBerry's plans to spin out its cybersecurity and IoT pillars have been scrapped.

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