Janice Bryant Howroyd was born in Tarboro, North Carolina, in 1952, the fourth of eleven children. She grew up during legal segregation, when Black children attended separate schools with fewer resources. Her parents did not allow the condition of the school to determine the depth of their children's education. When textbooks left out Black accomplishments, Janice's parents had her research the missing history, write it down and place those pages inside the books for the students who came after her.

That practice taught her something larger than the facts she was researching. An existing system could be incomplete, unfair or poorly designed, but she did not have to accept it as finished. She could locate what was missing and add value. That is essentially what she later did in the employment industry.

Howroyd helped integrate her local high school. Entering a previously white school did not mean that racism disappeared when she walked through the door. She had to learn in an environment where some people did not believe she belonged. That experience sharpened her ability to read people, remain composed and protect her sense of identity while operating inside institutions that were not created with her in mind.

She attended North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, one of the country's most important historically Black universities. Her education gave her a foundation, but her business did not grow from a perfect plan developed in a classroom. It grew after she moved across the country, accepted an opportunity and paid attention to the problems businesses were struggling to solve.

In 1976, Howroyd moved to Los Angeles to visit her sister. She reportedly arrived with approximately $1,500. Her brother-in-law, Tom Noonan, worked at *Billboard* magazine and brought her in as a temporary secretary. While working there, she met executives, entertainers and business professionals. More importantly, she watched how companies found workers and how easily the wrong employee could disrupt an office.

Employers constantly needed capable people, sometimes immediately. Workers had skills but did not always know which companies needed them. Howroyd recognized that a business could earn money by becoming the trusted connection between those two sides.

She started ACT·1 in 1978 from a small office in the front of a Beverly Hills rug shop. Different accounts divide her early money slightly differently, but the basic truth is that she began with very little capital, including a loan from her mother. She had a telephone, basic office equipment, contacts and the willingness to call businesses directly.

Her first client was connected to the professional network she had developed through *Billboard*. That matters because businesses rarely begin with money alone. Trust, experience and relationships can operate like capital. A contact willing to hire a new company gives that company revenue, proof and a reference for approaching the next customer.

ACT·1 began as an employment agency. When an employer needed a receptionist, assistant or other worker, Howroyd searched for a person who fit the job. The employer paid her company for solving the hiring problem. If the position was temporary, ACT·1 could employ the worker and bill the client at a higher rate than the wage paid to that worker. The difference helped cover payroll taxes, insurance, recruiting costs, administration and profit.

For example, imagine that a business urgently needs an office worker but does not have time to review applications and conduct dozens of interviews. The staffing company locates and screens candidates, confirms their experience and sends someone who can start quickly. The client pays extra because the staffing company has removed time, uncertainty and administrative work.

That sounds simple, but doing it well requires constant discipline. If the agency sends unreliable people, clients stop calling. If it mistreats workers, good candidates go elsewhere. If it pays employees late, calculates payroll incorrectly or ignores employment laws, the business can collapse. Howroyd's real product was not a stack of résumés. It was confidence that the person arriving for work had been properly matched to the assignment.

She studied both sides of every placement. Employers cared about skill, dependability, speed and cost. Workers cared about pay, opportunity, dignity and the possibility of building a career. A successful staffing company cannot permanently serve one side by abusing the other. It must keep enough employers and qualified workers inside the system for the network to remain useful.

Howroyd also understood the importance of presentation. She taught workers that technical ability might get them considered, but communication, preparation and professional behavior affected whether they stayed employed. At the same time, she encouraged companies to look beyond familiar backgrounds and consider people whose talent could be missed by traditional hiring practices.

Race and gender shaped the difficulty of building her company. Howroyd entered corporate offices as a Black woman asking managers to trust her with an important part of their operations. Some people underestimated the size of her company, questioned her authority or assumed she was an employee rather than the owner. She could not control every prejudice, but she could build records, systems and results that made the company harder to dismiss.

Her leadership philosophy is often described as keeping the "human" inside human resources. That does not mean operating a business through feelings alone. It means remembering that hiring decisions affect rent, food, families, confidence and future opportunities. A worker is a person, not merely a labor unit being moved into an empty position.

As ACT·1 expanded, it became the ActOne Group, an umbrella organization containing different workforce and business-service companies. AppleOne became one of its best-known staffing operations. Other divisions developed services in healthcare staffing, technical recruitment, government contracting, background screening, payroll, vendor management and corporate workforce programs.

This expansion followed a smart pattern. Once ActOne helped a company locate workers, it learned about other problems the company faced. The client might also need background checks, payroll administration, technology workers, healthcare employees or a system for managing several staffing suppliers. Instead of sending that client elsewhere, ActOne built or acquired additional services.

The company therefore moved from filling individual jobs to managing entire pieces of the employment process. That shift created larger and more dependable contracts. Placing one receptionist produces one transaction. Managing thousands of workers, suppliers, records and payments for a major corporation can create a long-term business relationship.

Procurement became another important part of ActOne's work. Procurement is simply the process through which a company purchases goods and services. Large corporations may use hundreds of outside vendors. Someone must approve those vendors, track spending, confirm compliance, process payments and make sure the company is receiving what it purchased. ActOne developed technology and services to help manage that complicated system.

Technology allowed Howroyd's company to grow without handling every task by hand. Databases could store worker information, track applications, manage assignments and help clients examine their labor costs. As ActOne expanded internationally, its systems had to function across different languages, laws, currencies and employment customs.

Today, ActOne describes itself as operating in dozens of countries with tens of thousands of clients and thousands of employees. Because it is privately owned, its detailed finances are not as open as those of a company traded on the stock market. ActOne says the broader enterprise has reached multibillion-dollar scale, while outside estimates have sometimes reported annual revenue closer to $1 billion. Those statements may measure different years or different parts of the organization. ActOne Group

A critical distinction needs to be made: company revenue, company value and personal net worth are not the same thing. Revenue is the money a company receives from customers before paying wages and other expenses. Company value is an estimate of what the business itself could be worth. Personal net worth is the value of what an individual owns after subtracting debts.

Howroyd is often called the first Black woman to build a billion-dollar company. That refers mainly to the scale of ActOne's business, not necessarily to one billion dollars sitting in her personal account. Forbes has estimated her family's wealth below the billionaire line in some recent rankings. Her exact wealth is difficult to confirm because ActOne is private. The accurate achievement is already enormous: she built and retained ownership of one of the largest Black woman-owned workforce companies in the world. Forbes

Remaining private gave Howroyd something many founders lose: control. A public company sells shares on the stock market and must answer to outside shareholders. A founder who repeatedly raises money may also surrender larger pieces of the business. Howroyd expanded without allowing the original company to be swallowed by investors or a major corporation.

Ownership is where the long-term wealth came from. A salaried executive may earn excellent money, but the company belongs to shareholders. Howroyd owned the system producing the revenue. As the company expanded, the value of her ownership expanded with it.

Her husband, Bernard Howroyd, has been part of the family business, and the company's private structure has allowed the family to build generational wealth. This does not mean every relative receives a position without earning it. A family business still needs qualified leadership, financial controls and a clear succession plan, or family relationships can destroy what the founder built.

Howroyd has also written books about employment and leadership, including *The Art of Work* and *Acting Up*. Her teaching emphasizes self-knowledge, preparation, adaptability and protecting one's values while pursuing success. She argues that people should not completely separate who they are from how they work.

President Barack Obama appointed her to the President's Board of Advisors on Historically Black Colleges and Universities. She has served with business, educational and civic organizations and supported programs involving HBCUs, women and entrepreneurship. Her philanthropy has included major gifts to North Carolina A&T and the University of Southern California.

Her gift to USC was especially significant because it placed a Black woman entrepreneur's name and resources inside an institution where people with her background had historically been excluded. Philanthropy at that level does more than pay for one student's tuition. It can support programs, faculty, research and opportunities that continue after the original donation is spent.

Howroyd's company does not have the cultural visibility of BET, Madea or Def Jam because workforce management happens mostly behind the scenes. There is no hit song or movie premiere showing the public what ActOne does. Yet nearly every large organization depends on hiring, payroll, contractors, records and outside suppliers. She built wealth around necessary work that companies must continue doing even when it is not glamorous.

Her strength was recognizing that the worker and employer were not the only parts of employment. Between them stood recruiting, interviews, screening, scheduling, contracts, payroll, benefits, compliance, technology and vendor management. Every difficult step represented a business opportunity if she could perform it more reliably than the client.

She also understood that service businesses grow through reputation. A product can sometimes sell because it looks exciting on a shelf. Staffing requires companies to trust another organization with people, money and sensitive information. That trust must be rebuilt every time a worker is placed, a payment is processed or a deadline is met.

Her beginning with $1,500 is inspiring, but it should not be turned into the false lesson that money is unnecessary. ActOne needed cash to pay employees, purchase technology, open offices and expand. The deeper lesson is that she began by selling a service before trying to own everything required for a global corporation. Customer revenue helped finance the growth.

She did not begin by announcing that she would create a multibillion-dollar international enterprise. She began by solving a specific problem for one client. Then she built a repeatable process, hired people, added services, entered new markets and retained ownership. The size came from repeating useful work with structure.

Janice Bryant Howroyd’s importance reaches beyond being “the first Black woman” attached to a financial milestone. Firsts matter because they reveal where access was previously blocked, but her business deserves to be understood on its own machinery. She learned how companies use people, how workers search for opportunity and how information connects the two.

She built her fortune in the space between “We need somebody” and “I need a job.” Most people saw that space as paperwork. Janice Bryant Howroyd saw an industry.