Why Diverse Teams Matter

Two main cases can be made for diversity and inclusion of women and other underrepresented groups in information technology: the social justice case and the innovation case. The social justice case appeals to us with “it’s the right thing to do,” as a humanitarian call for fairness, equal representation, and opportunity, within both academia and industry. Its antecedents echo from civil rights and feminism, backed by decades of social progress and research. The innovation case is a more recent phenomenon, emerging from best practices and research that points to the competitive advantages of diverse work teams along dimensions of innovation, productivity, efficiency, and problem solving.

In both cases, the context for an all-hands-on-deck call to action is at once overwhelming and compelling. In higher education, in 2011 women earned 57 percent of all undergraduate degrees but only about 18 percent of degrees in computer sciences, which is the lowest for any STEM field. For women who also belong to one or more ethnically underrepresented categories (e.g., black, Hispanic, Native American), the number of degrees is even lower—2.5 percent Hispanic and only 1 percent black. Other tech giants followed Google’s example and also released their diversity data, sometimes to competitors, start-ups, and nonprofits. This represents a huge brain drain, not to mention billions of dollars in investment walking out the door, most often to competitors, start-ups, and nonprofits.

Unconscious Bias Goes to Work

What is the “secret sauce” to engaging and retaining more women and minorities in information technology? It starts with the social processes that inhibit diverse participation. By now, most of us are familiar with unconscious bias: implicit associations that everyone makes regarding gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, etc. These biases can unfairly disadvantage and disenfranchise people who are members of historically marginalized groups. Unconscious bias is part of our mental makeup and our culture. However, recognizing it and raising it to a conscious level allows us to address it, interrupt it, and mitigate its potential negative impacts.

Unconscious bias in the workplace manifests in institutional barriers that may include the following:

- Recruiting practices: biased sourcing of candidate pools; job ads that include biased language and messaging; biased ads that include biased language and messaging; biased...
résumé-review processes and interview strategies, including all-male interview committees

- **Retention factors:** unequal pay for equal work; environmental elements signaling that women and/or other minorities are not belong, including “geek-culture” décor and “br o-grammer” culture; lack of support for competing work and life responsibilities, including flex-time; biased annual performance review protocols and criteria that subtly favor men and reinforce the dominant culture

- **Advancement:** biased and/or hidden advancement processes and criteria that subtly favor majority group members over minorities; lack of effective majority sponsorship for women and minorities; lack of role models and peer-group members for women and minorities in positions of power (a self-reinforcing cycle)

In addition, unconscious bias can be represented by interpersonal barriers and challenges:

- **Micro-inequities and micro-aggressions:** subtle but cumulativa slight and exclusions that occur daily (“Dude, let’s talk about it over a beer”)

- **Stereotype threat:** the fear of reinforcing negative stereotypes associated with an identity category, resulting in behavior that can significantly affect performance, participation, and sense of belonging

- **Tokenism:** the expectation that someone represents and can speak for all others in a specific identity category, often resulting in women and minorities avoiding participation in “women’s groups” or diversity programs

- **Personality penalties:** being labeled as pushy, aggressive, orbossy for the same behaviors for which male or majority group counterparts are praised

**Solutions**

There is no single recipe for success in attracting and retaining diverse IT teams. Nevertheless, colleges and universities can lead the change, for both the professional sector and higher education. How?

First, educate top leaders and managers about the facts regarding women and other diverse people in information technology, training leaders to recognize and address unconscious bias in both its institutional and its interpersonal forms.

Second, recruit more diverse people. Hiring staff that embody a diverse and inclusive environment sends a strong message. Doing so requires a proactive recruiting strategy that follows from a top-leadership directive to seek out and hire a diverse staff and that does not in any way lower standards to accomplish this goal. A review of job ads for language that may include unconscious bias is also needed, as is sourcing to a wider range of potential candidates in order to change the traditional demographics of IT applicants.

Third, retain and advance diverse employees. As pointed out above, recruiting will do little good if retention is not achieved. And this means hanging the culture of an organization—from its policies and procedures down to the ways individuals interact—in order to remove the barriers that exclude diverse people and the benefits they bring. To enable this scale of change, the National Center for Women & Information Technology (NCWIT) has assembled an industry reform model for organizations to use. Its purpose is to frame a strategic approach to organizational change that promotes diversity and inclusion and to do so in a way that encourages customization to the specific needs of different groups. This framework emphasizes a holistic effort that bridges strategic and tactical action.

Finally, be accountable for change. Organizations must set targets, measure progress, and conduct and apply research for new ways of addressing these challenges. NCWIT is proud to be undertaking, in collaboration with Internet2, a new research project to gather and analyze gender diversity data from member organizations. This information will form a baseline framework on which the Internet2 community and individual member organizations can assess where they stand and then measure meaningful progress.

Casting diversity and inclusion as both a social justice case and an innovation case, dispelling the myth of “the best and the brightest,” shifting focus to building and supporting diverse teams in order to reap their demonstrated benefits for all people (majority and minority alike), and adopting a strategic change effort that is holistic, designing steps along a path of progress with clear and elevating goals: diversify; innovate; and celebrate the wealth and potential of our differences.

**Notes**


6. The NCWIT IT Industry Reform Model can be found in “Strategic Planning for Increasing Women’s Participation in the Computing Industry,” National Center for Women & Information Technology (NCWIT) Workbook, April 1, 2010.

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