Microsoft engineer complains that company is biased against white men

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Some Microsoft employees are criticizing the company’s efforts to increase hiring from under-represented demographics to make its staff more diverse, according to messages leaked to Quartz.

Threads started by an as-yet unnamed female program manager and posted on the internal Yammer message board in January and April assert that white and Asian men are being penalized or overlooked because of hiring practices that reward managers for hiring people outside of those groups. (Quartz hasn’t named the employee who is apparently identified in the messages.) Further, the employee questions the value of diversity at all: “Many women simply aren’t cut out for the corporate rat race, so to speak, and that’s not because of ‘the patriarchy,’ it’s because men and women aren’t identical.” She follows up that it is “established fact” that the “specific types of thought process and problem solving required for engineering of all kinds (software or otherwise) are simply less prevalent among women,” and that women simply aren’t interested in engineering jobs.

Established fact?

Of course, these claims seemingly ignore troves of evidence showing how bias seeps into hiring and the workplace. Research has shown merely having a male name produces a more positive assessment of a job application, having a male presenter produces more positive reactions to pitches, and that managers skew their judgement criteria so as to favor men. Software developers who don't happen to be white and male are paid less than white men, and women, unlike men, are viewed negatively when they attempt to negotiate higher pay.

Until the mid-to-late 1960s, programming was seen as a sensible career choice for smart women, offering greater prospects and opportunity than most other lines of work. It was regarded as clerical work—after all, it's just typing—and hence of no interest to men, who busied themselves with building the hardware. Indeed, programming was even pushed as something that was a particularly good fit for women: programming pioneer Grace Hopper once described software development as "just like planning a dinner. You have to plan ahead and schedule everything so that it's ready when you need it," concluding that "Women are 'naturals' at computer programming."

With men realizing that computing had the potential to be a lucrative field, barriers to women were erected, such as penalizing women that had taken fewer math classes, or prioritizing those who personality tests revealed to be uninterested in human interaction. This saw the percentage of female computer science undergrads drop from 37 percent in 1985 to 18 percent in 2011.

Even this phenomenon is not global: 27 percent of Bulgarian and Romanian IT specialists are women, with some arguing that this is a legacy of the communist era, when women and men alike were encouraged to be engineers. In India and Malaysia

around 50 percent of computer science undergraduates are women.

Moreover, there's some evidence that diverse teams perform better, as do groups that embrace "outsiders." Such results suggest that diversity for its own sake is something to strive for.

So the Microsoft employee's "established fact" that women are underrepresented in software engineering because they're just not interested seems to be anything but. Entrenched (if unconscious) sexism, systematic promotion of science, technology, and engineering as being "for boys," and workplaces in which women are routinely harassed, overlooked, and discredited with little or no recourse are far better attested to than any particular lack of interest.

A reckoning for the industry as a whole

The recent dissent at Microsoft brings to mind a similar memo that went viral within Google in 2017. That memo argued that there were relevant biological differences between men and women, and this is why relatively few women work at Google. The author of the memo, James Damore, was subsequently fired. He complained to the National Labor Relations Board and sued Google. Both the complaint with the NLRB and lawsuit have been subsequently dropped, with Damore seeking remedy through private arbitration instead. Though the NLRB complaint was dropped prior to a verdict being delivered, the NLRB nonetheless published a memo stating that Damore's firing was legal.

Microsoft, by contrast, is said to have taken little or no action in response to the message board postings. This inaction is itself drawing criticism, with one employee telling Quartz that "HR, Satya, all the leadership are sending

out emails that they want to have an inclusive culture, but they’re not willing to take any action other than talk about it.”

This complaint of inaction mirrors allegations made in another Yammer thread, in which female employees say that they’re routinely overlooked for promotion and that perpetrators of sexual harassment go unpunished by HR. This mirrors complaints made in a long-running lawsuit against the company. Plaintiffs in that suit claim that of 118 gender discrimination complaints filed between 2010 and 2016, only one was found by Microsoft HR to have any merit, and further, that even when the company’s internal investigations substantiated the claims of harassment, no action was taken in response.

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