Why Tech Needs to Stop Blaming the Pipeline for Its Lack of Diversity

Out-of-the-box thinking and innovation are prerequisites for success in Silicon Valley. Tech giants pride themselves on being problem solvers, and the infamous slogan “there’s an app for that” epitomizes the mentality that any inconvenience can be avoided with new technology. Unfortunately, the lack of diversity in tech is one code the industry has been slow to crack. But rather than admit defeat and change course internally, they’ve reassigned blame to an external factor: the STEM pipeline.

The “pipeline problem” is the theory there simply aren’t enough properly skilled members of underrepresented groups for hire — including women, people of color, veterans and members of the LGBTQ community. While organizations argue the talent pool is just too small, the real issue may be that the pipeline itself is leaky.

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Girls, for example, now make up about half of the enrollment in high-school science and math classes and are scoring almost identically to their male classmates on standardized tests. However, women make up only 29 percent of the science and engineering workforce in the United States. Furthermore, Blacks and Hispanics comprise just 1 percent of engineering leadership at Twitter, 2 percent at Google and 2 percent at Facebook.

Without participation and representation in leadership, many minority STEM workers are overlooked. They never receive the mentorship, sponsorship and guidance needed to advance their

careers.

While the leaky pipeline is a persistent challenge, tech leaders have a responsibility to not only recognize the importance of diversity in their workforce but also to champion the issue internally. At Hired, we've created a diverse and inclusive team through a three-pronged approach that easily can be replicated.

1. Continually evaluate where your talent is coming from and actively seek out diverse candidates.

Companies can't sit back and expect diverse talent to come knocking on their doors. At Hired, three of our five executives are women, including heads of finance, engineering and people operations. This is partially because we require at least one woman in the interview pool for every leadership role at the company.

We intentionally engage with communities such as Women Who Code, Grace Hopper and Lesbians Who Tech to build relationships with talent who might otherwise not be familiar with our company. While this approach may require more time and energy than waiting for diverse candidates' resumes to cross our desks, it's a critical component to achieve a more inclusive culture that values equality.

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2. Fully commit to diversity, equality and inclusion.

The voices and actions of tech leaders are powerful. They not only influence the behavior of their internal teams but also

can be replicated by other aspiring leaders. Ultimately, this sort of collective effort will elicit positive change throughout an industry. Making an authentic commitment to inclusion means more than making a public pledge.

C-level executives must advocate internally for benefits such as generous parental leave, considerations for same-sex couples who cannot have biological children and student-loan repayment programs. Offering meaningful benefits that also account for traditionally marginalized employees communicates an authentic commitment to diversity. It goes far beyond a few slides in an annual PowerPoint presentation.

Companies also should use inclusive language and format their job descriptions so underrepresented candidates don't opt out of applying and instead are attracted to the opportunities.

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3. Retain a diverse talent mix with employee advocacy programs.

Many of the leaks in the STEM pipeline are products of Silicon Valley's notorious white, male, clique culture. Companies should look for "culture adds" rather than "culture fits" that perpetuate the status quo. Ping-pong tournaments and happy hours with office mates might be of interest to some, but not all.

One way to foster a supportive environment: funding employee resource groups (ERGs) — employee-led groups formed on a voluntary basis around common interests and/or backgrounds. Groups can cluster around race, gender, age, sexual orientation, working parents, disability and military-service status.

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Diversity

None of these suggestions is a one-time fix. The state of a company’s diversity must be constantly evaluated on a regular basis. If a company’s performance disappointed its board members and investors quarter-over-quarter, those stakeholders would demand an explanation and a new strategy to turn things around. Every failing diversity initiative must be treated with the same level of urgency and scrutiny if the tech industry is to become more inclusive and diverse.

After all, if any problem can be solved with technology, the individuals behind this tech should be up for the challenge.

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