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How can firms shatter the glass ceiling when it comes to achieving gender parity?

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The proportion of women in tech remains staggeringly low



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In the professional world, we've taken some laudable steps on the path to gender parity — but there's still an awful lot of work to be done. This is true especially in the technology sector; a realm in which women remain woefully underrepresented with recruitment structures skewed heavily towards their male counterparts.

The proportion of women in tech remains staggeringly low. A recent study found females to make up just 16 percent of IT professionals, a figure that has scarcely risen over the last ten years. This cannot be explained away by a dearth of youthful, academic talent: when it comes to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics subjects (STEM), research indicates that boys and girls study in equal numbers, with the latter typically achieving higher grades.

The problem isn't one of pipeline potential; it's about entrenched employment inequality and workplace discrimination. It's in the offices and interview rooms that gender bias manifests — and there it must be rooted out. I believe this can be done, but only if companies commit to some significant changes.

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1) Introduce blind CVs

The recruitment process is riddled with gender discrimination — that's a depressing thing to say in 2021, but it's a reality we can't ignore.

Much of this bias is unconscious, a consequence of deep-seated societal prejudices that seep into the professional sphere, contaminating company

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cultures and tainting how new talent is taken on.



Studies bear this out. Women are on average 30 percent less likely to be contacted for a job interview than men with comparable qualifications and experience, a recent piece of research suggests. Even the science profession — known for its unsentimental objectivity — is plagued by discrimination, Yale researchers have found.

When women are selected for a role, they're often offered a smaller salary than male colleagues. That's the conclusion reached by tech industry recruitment site Hired, whose most recent report on wage inequality suggests the gender pay gap widened 3 percent between 2019 and 2020.

The answer? Blind CVs. If a hiring manager can't tell an applicant's gender, they can't be prejudiced — unconsciously or otherwise — against them. Indeed, with anonymity preventing female candidates from falling at the first hurdle, research suggests they're up to 46 percent more likely to be hired.



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2) Set gender targets

It's heartening when a tech company commits itself to gender parity — but without concrete, measurable goals, they're unlikely ever to get there.

That's why employers should spell out clear, incremental gender inclusivity targets. Measures to reach these targets can take a number of shapes: robust onboarding processes, reverse mentoring, external coaching, assessments that unlock sponsorship programs for high-performers to accelerate to senior leadership positions.

However, these alone are not enough. Organizations must assign a certain proportion of C-suite and top-tier executive roles to women. Additionally, they should set quarterly and annual success targets pegged not only to financial performance, but gender parity progress as well.

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3) Bridge the wage gap

As touched on before, there's evidence — corroborated elsewhere — that the gender pay gap is widening in Silicon Valley.

This is deeply concerning for the tech sector. As it is, men in the industry earn some 61 percent more than female counterparts for performing the same job, while two-thirds of the time women are offered a lower salary than male candidates when a firm is recruiting for an identical role. On both counts, this imbalance is greater when the individual involved is a woman of color or comes from an ethnic minority background.

This, again, is a reflection of deep-seated prejudice that can only be solved with sweeping action. That's why tech firms must commit themselves to pay parity irrespective of gender, adopting checks and balances that ensure a policy of equal remuneration for equal work is adhered to.

Fail at this, and a company's brightest and best female talent will be prohibited from reaching their fullest potential, which is bad news for all involved.

4) Eliminate the 'motherhood penalty'

There's clear evidence of professional prejudice against working mothers — women are passed up for job progression and prevented from exploring other opportunities. This is called the 'motherhood penalty'.

On average, women lose 4 percent of hourly earnings when they start a family; a significant amount when taken as a proposition of lifetime earnings. Men experience quite the opposite treatment when they become fathers, enjoying an average pay rise of 6 percent after welcoming their first child.

To address this imbalance, employers must make clear to female staff that their performance will be judged on performance, not on their working schedules. Doing so will open the door to more flexible working options, letting women advance their careers without jeopardizing family commitments.

Likewise, the stigma around shared parental leave must be addressed, normalizing a man's role as equal caregiver when tending to a newborn. With more equitable paternity policies, female staff will be better enabled to pursue senior leadership roles.

5) Address gender bias head on

If problems of gender prejudice are discussed only in hushed tones and behind closed doors, they can never truly be put right.

That's why firms must address bias head on and with gusto. Company-wide training programs and workshops that shine a light on gender discrimination are a good place to start with this. Similarly, employers should promote their gender equality policies, making clear their progressive approach to recruitment, pay, C-suite targets, and the motherhood penalty.

Now's the time

There's not a moment to lose in the fight for gender equality in the workplace. Fairness between the sexes isn't only a matter of social justice — it's about good financial sense. With women in leading roles, reports indicate that companies perform ten times better. As we build back better from the pandemic, now's the time to shatter the glass ceiling once and for all.

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