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**Balance in Diversity: Increasing Women in the Workplace**

Megan McDonnell  
*Brigham Young University, msrediting@byu.edu*

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BALANCE IN DIVERSITY

INCREASING WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

By Megan McDonnell
Attraction is a two-way street. Although a company may want more women, especially in the tech industry or in positions of leadership, women may not want to work at that company. Recruiters can be conscious of their biases when hiring and recruiting, but in the end, people will want to go where they feel comfortable.

What is the big fuss about diversity and incorporating women more in business? Is it really worth it? Yes. Typically, the companies that perform the best are gender diverse. For example, companies with women acting in leadership roles on the board have a return on equity that is 36.4% higher than companies lacking strong female leadership. Diversity also leads to innovation by bringing people with different perspectives together. Diversity has also become an important deciding factor for millennials entering the workforce. Approximately 47% of millennials actively seek diversity and inclusion from prospective employers.

Beyond merely looking at the benefits of diversity, a company can learn how to create, present, and maintain a culture of gender diversity.

**CREATE A CULTURE OF GENDER DIVERSITY**

Diversity takes work. Often, in order to create a company with equal representation of men and women, a company needs to make a conscious decision to be more inclusive. In the book *Alice in Wonderland*, when Alice asks the Cheshire Cat which of two paths she should take, he responds by asking her where she wants to go. She says she doesn’t care much and he responds by saying, “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go.” Alice didn’t have a clear goal, so she didn’t know which path to take. It is very unlikely that a company will just accidentally happen upon a culture of diversity. With thousands upon thousands of years to deal with different understandings of men’s and women’s roles, it is just within these past few decades that gender equality in the workplace has been making significant improvements.

Today, larger companies tend to make a great effort to put women in positions of leadership, but smaller companies are still lacking in female representation. Starting to create a company that values diversity requires work and requires that company to go outside of its comfort zone when recruiting individuals. Instead of focusing on the one perfect candidate, an organization should aspire to find a wide variety of candidates. Often, finding a “perfect” candidate means finding someone like a successful employee in a company. Although this logic is sound, it will not increase diversity if diversity is not already in place. Increasing diversity in the workplace is about finding those different from the norm. Once gender diversity is ingrained into the culture of a company, then the organization can start reaping the benefits of such practices.

Diversity needs to be treated as a benefit, not an obstacle. When asked if female representation on company boards is important, 72% of women agreed, while only 56% of men agreed. Even beyond this, the remaining 23% of women were neutral while the men, 28% were neutral and 16% disagreed. Although most women believe in the importance of female representation, almost half of the men in this poll do not. For a company to create a culture that will appreciate and embrace gender diversity, support for these gender inclusive initiatives needs to increase. Most importantly, these initiatives need to start from the top.

**PRESENT A CULTURE OF GENDER DIVERSITY**

After creating a culture that values gender diversity, then comes the need to present this culture. Essentially, this is the time where companies can attract what they want. When an organization says that it can’t find enough qualified women for a job, one gentle reminder from the *Harvard Business Review* is that, “If you don’t catch a fish, you don’t blame the fish. You change your technique.”

People are drawn to those who are like them. So, whether this is consciously or unconsciously done, prospective qualified candidates may not want to work at a company where there is no one else like them.
Present well while recruiting. When writing job descriptions, avoid phrases with masculine connotations. Aggressive and narrow job descriptors deter women from applying to jobs. For example, “wrestles problems to the ground” alludes to more masculine fighting imagery, which is less appealing to women, while “collaboratively solves problems” can describe the job while still catering to both men and women. Further improvement to job descriptions to help more women apply can be done by reducing the number of job requirements. Women tend to apply when they meet all of the requirements, while men will apply even when they meet only 60% of them. If a job description tends to only bring in one type of candidate, consider rewording and shortening the description to be more inclusive and inviting to women.

In a study on information sessions for technology companies at a West Coast college, women tended to interact less during the presentation when the culture presented by the company didn’t have women well-represented. When company culture was highlighted with similar masculine or aggressive words that are used in bad job descriptions, participation of women went down. Presentations led by men with the women there to talk about work life balance or hand out free swag also led to disengagement of the women participants. In presentations with women there to talk about the technical aspects of the job, both men and women were more likely to stay and ask questions.

Maintain a Culture of Gender Diversity

Since people are drawn to those who are similar to them, presenting a culture that values gender diversity can lead to a cyclical effect in creating and maintaining equal numbers of men and women. In McKinsey’s Women in the Workplace report for 2019, the authors explain this by saying, “Done right, efforts to hire and promote more diverse candidates and create a strong culture reinforce each other. A more diverse workforce will naturally lead to a more inclusive culture. And when a company’s culture feels fair and inclusive, women and underrepresented groups are happier and more likely to thrive.”

Maintain a culture of gender diversity by increasing the number of women in leadership roles. Just like how potential candidates look at how a company presents itself, a company’s leaders can signal what a company values. A lack of diversity in leadership points to potential bias in promotion process or even the entire company.

Adding just one woman to the executive team can help improve the culture of a company. Currently, approximately one in five of a company’s top executives is a woman. One of the biggest challenges women face in order to eventually get into higher positions of leadership is the initial promotion to become a manager. In order to have a more balanced number of women and men on executive teams, women need to make it through the transition from beginning employee to manager. By increasing the number of women in lower level leadership positions, positions requiring experience at those higher levels will have a greater pool of diverse, qualified applicants.

Help women be prepared for positions of leadership by providing opportunities for women to mentor each other. Examples of mentoring can be creating a monthly lunch group for women or simply assigning a woman to act as a new hires guide for the first few months of being in a company. Not only is this a way for a company to attract women to its workforce, but it is also a great way to keep and qualify its employees.
CONCLUSION

Employees value fairness; there must be fairness in opportunities. Although we need greater diversity in company leadership, any changes made should be given time in order to find the right qualified candidate. The benefits of diversity wouldn’t be as effective if an organization chose individuals purely based on their surface-level attributes and ignored the competence of the candidate. Deciding and taking the steps to attain a greater level of diversity in a company isn’t about giving women a head start, it’s about changing the ways past policies and procedures have pushed qualified candidates to the side.

Start creating a culture of gender diversity by making the conscious effort to prioritize a balance of men and women in the workforce. Evaluate the signals your organization sends out throughout the recruiting process and change the signals to present a company that values diversity in its workplace. Lastly, continue to maintain a culture of gender diversity by placing women in positions of leadership and giving opportunities for mentorship.

NOTES


4 Matthews, “The Surprising Link.”

5 Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland (New York, NY: Dover Thrift, 1993).


7 Kumar, “Invested.”

8 Matthews, “The Surprising Link.”


12 Foss, “Top 3 ways.”

13 Cowan, “A Gender-Diversity ETF.”

14 Coury et al., “Women in the Workplace 2019.”

15 Coury et al.

16 Coury et al.

17 Kumar, “Invested.”

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