

Nurturing female talent in technology is critical

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Gender imbalance isn't just another challenge that companies need to overcome, it's arguably the greatest threat facing the global tech sector today. This is something we're seeing across many regions, including sub-Saharan Africa.



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To start, the tech sector is facing a talent shortage problem: there aren't enough professionals in the existing technology pipeline to fill the positions that are expected to open in the next decade. In fact, Korn Ferry estimates that by 2030, the global tech workforce will be short 4.3 million employees. Achieving greater gender diversity in the sector can help close this huge gap, tapping into the half of the population that has so far been left behind.

The technology sector also thrives on innovation, which is driven by diverse thinking. As such, leaving those who identify as female on the sidelines is quantifiably hurting businesses and economies.

Technology companies can achieve great gains by embracing diversity, which is defined as having a broad variety of genders, ethnicities, abilities and sexual orientations on the same team, as well as different backgrounds, experiences and views. It's the intersectional nature of these characteristics that encompass an individual's whole self. True inclusivity means considering all aspects of an individual's identity and embracing them.

Where are the women and girls?

Globally, female representation gets lost at every stage of the talent pipeline, from early education and grade school, to higher education and entry-level positions, to management and leadership.

Women and girls are leaving the talent pipeline, often before they have the chance to excel. And if companies are going to keep them in the tech ecosystem, they need to embrace diversity and inclusion. This does not just mean welcoming a wider variety of individuals into the workforce - it means changing the workplace culture from the ground up so that these individuals know they're seen, heard and valued.

The good news is that progress towards gender parity is being made.

According to the Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum, sub-Saharan Africa is a little behind East Asia and the Pacific Region, having closed 68% of the gender gap in comparison to the latter's 68.5% closure.

While Africa still falls far behind the leader in this regard, Western Europe (76.7%), sub-Saharan Africa is one of the most improved regions with regards to the speed it is closing its gap. The region, along with Latin America, showed the best improvement over the past year, whereas other regions were progressing at a far slower rate.

As for how countries in the region are faring, according to McKinsey, South Africa isn't doing too badly, coming in at third, behind Namibia in first place, and Rwanda, in second. Globally, these top three African countries rank 9th, 12th, and 17th. South Africa is followed by Burundi and then Zambia and Zimbabwe, taking fourth, fifth and sixth place respectively from a regional perspective.

Right at the bottom of the ranking is the Democratic Republic of the Congo. At 34th regionally, and a dismal 149th globally, it shows that there is still much room for progress in sub-Saharan Africa.

For all countries in the region, neither their regional nor global ranking justifies resting on its laurels. The McKinsey study found that Africa could add \$316 billion or 10% to GDP in the period to 2025 if each country makes advances in women's equality to match the country in the region that has achieved the most progress towards parity. Today, however, this "best-in-region" scenario seems a distant possibility. At the current rate of progress, Africa could take more than 140 years to achieve gender parity.

So how can companies cultivate inclusion, create change and transform the tech sector's greatest threat into its greatest opportunity? The answer is ensuring that women and girls stay engaged with the technology ecosystem across their entire education and career journey.

At Dell Technologies, we've set ambitious measurement targets for gender representation, pledging that by 2030, 50% of our global workforce and 40% of our global people leaders will be women.

Also by 2030, our goal is that 95% of employees will receive training on crucial topics such as unconscious biases, harassment, microaggressions and privilege. Beyond our own internal workforce, we're aiming to ensure that within the next decade, 50% of the beneficiaries of our philanthropic programming are women, girls and underrepresented groups.

We need to create new opportunities in STEM education

Around the world, girls are exceeding boys on two fronts: they're getting better grades in high school and, for the most part, they're entering higher education in greater numbers. A study conducted by the University of Stellenbosch found that for every 100 females there are only 85 males in matric.

Furthermore, relative to their male counterparts, it noted that in South Africa there are 27% more females who qualified for university, 34% more who enroll in university, 56% more who complete any undergraduate qualification and 66% more who attain a bachelor's degree.

However, science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) is still an outlier to this trend, largely because of cultural biases and social expectations that associate these disciplines with men. Emerging technology fields, like cloud computing and data and AI, are by an overwhelming margin, occupied by men in South Africa.

According to the World Economic Forum, cloud computing professional participation in South Africa is 86% male and only 14% female. Data and AI is only a little better – 72% of occupations in that field are male, as compared with 28% female. Engineering shares the same dismal ratio as cloud computing, with female representation at a small 14%.

To help address this issue, companies are in a position to be drivers of change. The Reboot Representation Tech Coalition has outlined several critical building blocks for success in empowering women and girls in STEM. We need to offer on-ramps for beginners and help them build confidence, cultivate a community of supportive peers and ensure family members and teachers are encouraging progress.

It's also crucial to ensure access to technology and computing experiences, and create continuity between them. By guaranteeing these opportunities, companies can nurture the top talent that will keep them growing for years to come. Experts and advocates at Reboot Representation also encourage businesses to collaborate with partners and invest in nonprofits to provide these support systems.

When it comes to delivering digital skills for the future workforce, for instance, companies like Dell Technologies are rising to the challenge.

Since 2014, the company has donated more than \$70 million to non-profits working to inspire individuals to learn, gain real skills, and pursue careers in STEM. Our Solar-Powered Learning Labs are modular classrooms made from shipping containers, fully equipped with photovoltaic panels and energy efficient workspaces - and they've brought technology education to more than 17,000 students in underserved areas in South Africa, Nigeria, Morocco, Kenya, Mexico and Colombia.

Initiatives such Digital Futures also show the power and efficacy of getting young people - especially girls - involved in conversations about tech early, while STEMAspire provides mentoring and support for women studying STEM subjects in university to support their transition from school to careers in technology after graduation.

It's time to eliminate biases in recruitment and retention

As women and minorities continue to enter the workforce, they're facing a number of barriers driven by unconscious bias. Businesses that hire for "team fit," for instance, may think they're building a cohesive company culture, but in fact they're only making themselves less innovative and more homogenous.

From exclusionary language in job postings to culturally prescribed notions of what "male" and "female" positions entail, unconscious bias works in subtle ways - and it carries a heavy price tag. The Kapor Center calculated that turnover due to unfair and unequal treatment costs businesses \$16 billion per year in employee replacement costs.

For South Africa, the critical skills shortage is of primary concern. Augmenting this, is the fact that the saving grace for the country's unemployment situation is greater participation in the digital age.

Furthermore, it has been noted that eight out of ten scarce-skills occupations are STEM related with demand for technical skills and innovation capacity slated to escalate with the rise of the digital economy driven by rapid advances in the Fourth Industrial Revolution technology. And yet, only 13% of graduates of the critical STEM fields are women, according to the Global Gender Gap report.

Exclusionary workplaces and male driven cultures are not the only culprits of repelling female talent. A global Women in Technology survey by ISACA highlighted three other barriers that women have to overcome in the industry: a lack of female mentors (48%), a lack of female role models in the field (42%) and limited networking opportunities (27%).

All genders need to be stakeholders in these initiatives. Global non-profit Catalyst implemented Men Advocating Real Change (MARC) to empower male leaders and managers to be champions of diversity and inclusion in their organisations, and developed a range of programs dedicated to making individuals aware of exclusionary practices, unconscious biases and privilege in an honest and judgement-free setting.

At Dell Technologies, we've adapted this framework as Many Advocating Real Change - our foundational learning program for fostering inclusion.

The value of setting up mentors, sponsors and role models

Providing high-potential candidates with a clear path to leadership and having diverse representation among a company's senior ranks paves the way for others to follow.

We are seeing this in local initiatives, such as Women in Tech, in which women executives making strides in managing technology companies, as well as South African female entrepreneurs succeeding on a global stage, help inspire other women to follow in their footsteps.

What kinds of initiatives can companies put in place? At Dell Technologies, we've implemented several. Our Managing Success Now program is focused on helping high-performing mid-career women attain their professional goals. Taking it a step further, Leading Women @ Dell is designed specifically to grant women the tools, skills and connections they need to reach the C-Suite.

Organisations can invest in mentorship and create programs that give women opportunities to work with coaches and gain new skills.

That is the aim of Dell Technologies in South Africa's Women Entrepreneur Network. Through it, female entrepreneurs across the globe are connected with networks, sources of capital, knowledge and technology through social media, via Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn.

As well, the Dell Women's Entrepreneur Network summit brings together 200 of the most inspiring female entrepreneurs, international media and Dell executives for two days of collaboration, thought leadership and networking. The event has grown into a thriving international network with hundreds of women business owners who connect throughout the year to share their knowledge and support their peers in accelerating business growth.

While mentorship is great, sponsorship is proving to be a game changer, as it introduces women to networks of advocates who will champion their career advancement and actively nominate them for new opportunities. Some of the largest gaps in the talent pipeline are at the senior leadership level, which is why initiatives such as the Diversity Leadership Accelerator Program (DLAP) at Dell Technologies are designed to provide direct sponsorship support to high-performing women.

Empower women to not only be leaders, but founders

The career journey for female tech talent comes full circle when women become entrepreneurs and start their own tech businesses. This is why we need to combat entrenched biases and barriers that exist in the funding and venture capital ecosystem. Female VCs are often likelier to extend opportunities to female entrepreneurs, not because they're playing favorites, but because time and time again, women have proven to be a good investment.

According to research by the Kauffman Foundation, private technology companies led by women are more capital-efficient, achieving 35% higher return on investment and, when venture-backed, 12% higher revenue than startups run by men.

But in this region, the investment made in African companies doesn't reflect that. As pointed out by a recent article from Nedbank, in Africa, less than 5% of all VC funding went to businesses with female founders last year. The article further notes that in the tech investment space, just three of the 46 leading tech startups that were funded with more than \$1m in Africa last year had women on their founding teams.

According to Nedbank, research shows that females in startup founding teams are often more experienced and educated than their male counterparts. Furthermore, typically higher empathy levels of female founders mean that they tend to establish businesses with stronger social and developmental mandates, which are vital components for success in emerging economies.

You can strengthen diversity and inclusion in your local and regional tech sector by being selective about where you direct your funds. Since 2012, Dell Technologies has spent more than \$3 billion annually with women and minority-owned suppliers and small businesses.

The Dell Women's Entrepreneurship Network (DWEN) maintains an index of global cities to assess gender equity in the startup and VC environment, including Johannesburg and Nairobi. Encouragingly, the index found that Africa, along with the Middle East, had shown the greatest regional improvement in the technology pillar between 2017 and 2019 for the presence of high-performance women entrepreneurs. This eludes to the hope that change is afoot, with a real potential for more women leaders in technology to be fostered locally.

Companies can drive this change by setting concrete goals around diversity and inclusion. They can also create an internal culture that builds understanding around unconscious biases and overcomes gender stereotypes. Leaders need to be held accountable for achieving the targets they set, and any progress or lack thereof needs to be publicly shared.

As we look to build a talent pipeline that will last us until 2030 and beyond, organisations and investors truly hold the balance of power in determining whether we'll be successful - and it all comes down to diversity and inclusion.

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