Changing the women in tech narrative from the grassroots up

By Lara Du Plessis   12 May 2022

Entering uncharted waters can be a daunting experience, especially in a male-dominated industry like tech - but it's never too late for a woman to enter the space. Like any career path, there is no cookie-cutter method for breaking into this ever-changing industry. But, there are some lessons from women in the tech field that are worth keeping in mind.?So, let's look at it from the foundation up.

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Schooling foundation

One of the main reasons why tech remains such a male-dominated industry is because boys and girls are engrained from a young age with what types of careers they should follow based on their gender. Conversations with teenagers usually involve gendered career paths that lead to STEM careers being viewed as less feminine.

According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2021, "in Cloud Computing, women make up 14% of the workforce, in engineering 20%, and in data and AI 32%."

Sovtech product manager Kaira Day says, "STEM-related subjects can open many prospective doors for any student. I wish I had known and understood the opportunities sooner." This is a common sentiment from many women in tech, that change is needed from a foundational level at schools and universities.

Another common misconception is if you don't take computer science, IT, or mathematics at school, you can't pursue a tech career. This is completely misconstrued. Yes, certain tech fields of study do have subject requirements e.g. data science or information systems – but these degrees aren't the only stepping stone into this sector. The diversity of the tech industry is a major benefit in this sense – its requirements are very different from the traditional professions like medicine or engineering.

With a focus on narrative and tech companies themselves making a concerted effort to get young women into the industry, we will definitely see changes. Local fintech players Fundrr and Yoco have been seeing the value in encouraging women to be part of the conversation by offering workshops on getting started in the industry.

Entering the tech space

Tech companies are not just looking for coding boffins, but also for other key players such as business developers, marketing specialists and customer service managers. Ultimately, if you love what you do, are eager to keep learning, and are up for a challenge you will be a great fit for a tech company. "Breaking into tech requires knowing people who help you through the door. Be brave in building your network. Connect with people you find interesting, ask for referrals, and go to events like Heavy Chef. Speak to everyone you meet and let them know what you want. Make tenacity your defining attitude till you get where you want to go," according to Sarah Rice, chief people officer at Skynamo.

LinkedIn is a good starting point – connect with people who work and lead tech companies you may be interested in. According to LinkedIn's Gender Bias report, women are less likely to have a strong network and are 26% less likely to ask for referrals, making the "gender network gap" even bigger. Don't be afraid to send a message to someone at a tech company even if they aren't advertising any positions.

Drive the change

Until gender-pay gaps and gendered career roles are removed, women are going to have to pull up their own seats at the table. The tech space leans itself towards an open and transparent environment, so even when you feel uncomfortable as one of the only females in the room, stand up and call out gender bias when you see it. Change doesn't happen overnight, and there are plenty of leaders who are keen to nurture women into leaders.

As the famous children's rights activist, Marian Wright Edleman, once said "You can't be what you can't see". The same can be said about women in tech, young girls need to have role models and mentors to look up to in the tech industry so that they can be encouraged to follow the same path.

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Leaders shouldn't merely hire more women into tech firms to be "diverse" and then keep them at lower grade roles where they don't have any decision-making powers. Only 22% of executives are women within the top 40 South African companies. The bottom line is that a more diverse team empowered to make inclusive decisions has a greater ROI, better communication, and products which are created to be more inclusive. Christopher Ball, co-founder of Finch Technologies,

strongly believes that "investing in female leaders in your business, is investing in better outcomes."

Funding is a core aspect of any tech company, yet the percentage of VC funding that goes to women-led start-ups compared to male-led start-ups is alarming. According to The Big Deal, in 2021 0,95% of funding raised went to women-run start-ups in Africa. The big "guys" need to focus on changing this and work with women-led start-ups to cultivate success.

This sector has already seen such impressive change over the last decade, but it still has a long way to go before tech tables are more gender-equal. It's going to take involvement from schools, universities, tech companies, and leaders before we can see this change in action.

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