

DISRUPT BIAS!  
CREATING TECH WORKPLACES  
THAT WORK FOR EVERYONE

**A Summary Report**

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## INTRODUCTION

Silicon Valley is one of the most demographically diverse regions in the country, and yet the employment data from the region's technology companies reflect an industry that is predominantly white, Asian and male.<sup>1</sup> According to a recent Forbes article, "...gender and racial bias is so ubiquitous in the tech sector it is causing many talented employees to leave."<sup>2</sup> In response to increased public scrutiny, concerns raised by Washington lawmakers and pressure from prominent civil rights activists, such as Reverend Jesse Jackson, some companies have released their employment diversity data, issued positive statements about the importance of a diverse workforce and launched initiatives to create more inclusive workplaces.

These companies acknowledge they are grappling with a serious diversity problem. Some are now asking for help: How can well-intentioned employers identify biases toward underrepresented employees? What can companies do to mitigate the effects of bias? How can organizations ensure all employees feel valued and included? In one of the most competitive business sectors on the planet, answers to these questions can mean the difference for an employee's advancement as well as an organization's success.

## DISRUPT BIAS EVENT

To address these questions, the Kapor Center for Social Impact and Silicon Valley Community Foundation co-sponsored Disrupt Bias!, a one-day event to equip companies to better recruit and retain underrepresented talent.<sup>3</sup> The event took place September 9, 2015, at Google's Mountain View, California, campus. More than 115 people participated, including leading researchers from top universities, tech leaders and diversity officers from start-up and large, established companies alike.

Unlike other discussions, which have framed the lack of diversity within the tech sector as a pipeline problem, Disrupt Bias engaged participants in a powerful, data-driven discussion on the "hidden biases" in workplace practices and policies that can lead to unfair treatment of underrepresented employees.

Each of the three major segments began with TED-talk-style presentations from one or two workplace bias experts representing top research institutions, such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business, University of California at Berkeley and Stanford University. The talks were followed by a moderated panel discussion that included the researchers as well as tech executives and diversity officers responsible for leading inclusion efforts in their companies. The panel discussions created rare opportunities for researchers and everyday practitioners to compare experience, theory and academic findings. A complete agenda with key topics and a list of presenters are included in this summary report in the Appendix.

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1 Marcus, Bonnie. (2015, August 12). *The Lack of Diversity in Tech is a Cultural Problem*. Retrieved from URL <http://www.forbes.com/sites/bonniemarcus/2015/08/12>.

2 Marcus, Bonnie. *The Lack of Diversity in Tech is a Cultural Problem*

3 The Disrupt Bias! convening used the term "underrepresented" to describe employees who identify with groups historically underrepresented in the tech sector, including women, Latinos and African Americans.

## KEY THEMES

### Meritocracies Fail Underrepresented Tech Workers

Many leading tech companies believe that they operate as meritocracies, basing employee advancement on ability and accomplishments. However, meritocracies can still have hidden biases, unconscious preferences that affect world views and perception. Hidden or inherent biases mean that organizations may fail to reward workers equally, disfavoring employees who are women or from ethnic groups traditionally underrepresented in the tech sector, including African Americans and Latinos.

MIT Professor Emilio Castilla presented findings that underscore this problem. His research showed that when all variables except gender or ethnicity are controlled for, similarly performing employees who are women and people of color are evaluated less favorably than their peers. In [one study examining gender disparities](#), employees were asked to distribute bonuses to their colleagues. When participants were told that the company was merit-driven, women received smaller bonuses than their male coworkers. In settings where participants were not told to consider merit but rather value to the company, no gender bias was observed in awarding bonuses. The difference between the two scenarios suggests there is an implicit bias against women that assumes they are less deserving of bonus recognition when the bonus is framed around perceived merit.

In another example, government immigration workers were asked to evaluate labor certification requests from applicants who had the exact same qualifications, except for their country of origin. Labor certification is a critical step of the work authorization system for most employment-based green cards. The study showed that requests from applicants from certain parts of the world, including Asia and Canada, were consistently certified more frequently than requests from applicants with similar skills and background experiences from other regions, including South America and Africa.

In one model with direct implications for the tech industry, Professor Castilla limited his examination to requests from computer software engineers. There, he found that Latin American immigrants are more than 25 percent less likely to receive the requisite certification than their Canadian counterparts. This practice highlights a bias against Latin American and African applicants, even when all other characteristics of an applicant are controlled for, including education, work experience and skills.

University of Pennsylvania Wharton School of Business Professor Laura Huang also presented research showing the harmful effects of bias in the start-up sector. In [one study](#), when presented with an identical proposal or pitch, venture capital investors were found to be more likely to fund the idea when it was presented by a man rather than a woman. When the study controlled for all variables except ethnicity, pitches made by minority entrepreneurs were rejected more often than the same pitch and idea delivered by a white man.

Furthermore, despite appearing organizationally flat, start-ups not only have the same biases as larger, more established tech companies, they can be more isolating for people of color and women because they have even fewer available opportunities for social contact, resources and mentorship.

## **Promoting Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace**

An important part of the Disrupt Bias! event was to demonstrate how and in what ways bias can occur, as well as to highlight practical strategies companies can implement to make their workplaces more diverse and inclusive. These five strategies are outlined below.

### **Strategy 1 – Anticipate and Mitigate Hidden Bias**

[Research](#) offered by Professor Huang included suggestions about how to mitigate bias through **preemption** and **pivoting**. This research posited that bias awareness can be a strength. An employee or job applicant who can anticipate bias can also **preempt**, or mitigate, its disadvantages by directly confronting underlying assumptions. The same can be argued for companies and recruiters, because awareness creates an opportunity to put organizational policies and practices in place before biases make a material difference for employees.

As an example, Professor Huang described how she recently attempted to avert assumptions about her own appearance as a young Asian woman. At the beginning of a research interview with a venture capitalist, she began by outlining her education and research accomplishments. These efforts were intended to preempt assumptions that her gender might create about her qualifications. She also detailed her previous work experience to indicate her age. By offering information to contradict anticipated assumptions, Professor Huang believes she preempted her interviewee's potential hidden biases.

Professor Huang also used this interaction to illustrate the strategy of pivoting, which occurs when attention is shifted from an individual's perceived weaknesses to strengths and commonalities. In this instance, Professor Huang noticed while waiting in the venture capitalist's office that he was a Yankees fan.

A passionate Yankees fan herself, she immediately pivoted the conversation to their mutual interest in the Yankees, and within moments of their meeting, established a shared connection.

### **Strategy 2 – Assess the Physical Work Environment for Exclusionary Cues**

Stanford Professor Greg Walton introduced another tactic tech companies can use to mitigate biases: **controlling for identity threat**. Identity threat occurs when choices about a workplace's physical environment such as office décor or layout implicitly suggest that the identity of certain employees or a group of employees is devalued. Identity threats are particularly harmful because the perception of being under- or unvalued can become self-fulfilling. Workplace cues that cause feelings of being unvalued can prompt an employee to withdraw socially, missing opportunities for peer relationships, social inclusion and resource sharing, all of which contribute to professional success.

Without access to those resources, the employee may fail to meet the employer's expectations, thereby leading to his or her resignation or dismissal.

Professor Walton discussed [one study](#) conducted by colleagues that measured how male and female computer science students felt about belonging in their academic major, using rooms with different decor cues. In one scenario, the room included items that researchers had documented to signal masculine gender cues, including Star Trek posters and video games. In a second scenario, the room included items that had been found to have no gender cues. The study found that women scored lower in measuring their feelings of belonging in an environment with masculine cues than in the same room that included gender-neutral objects.

Professor Walton concluded by suggesting that companies can diminish identity threat's effects by evaluating choices made in the physical work environment and whether those choices send messages of bias or inclusion.

### **Strategy 3 – Create opportunities for mentorship, peer and ally support**

Leaders can also create opportunities in the workplace to celebrate role models and success stories of women and other underrepresented individuals. University of Massachusetts, Amherst Professor Nilanjana Dasgupta observed the benefits of this approach in her [research](#) examining how female students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields felt about their career goals in different environments. Her work showed that female students who viewed stories about other successful women in technical fields felt significantly more confident than students who did not view the stories.

The same research looked at role models, finding that female students were likely to do better in a calculus class if the professor was a woman. Professor Dasgupta believes that although her research focused on gender, the same approach can be applied to providing support for students and professionals from other underrepresented groups.

Providing mentorship is another strategy to offset hidden bias. In [another study](#), Professor Dasgupta found that female engineering students were more successful in their studies and had higher feelings of belonging when they had the support of a woman mentor than with no mentor or a male mentor.

Mentorship offered by coworkers who are outside of the same gender or ethnic group can also offset bias effects because it can build an employee's network and feelings of inclusion. Moreover, in many cases tech workplaces are so homogenous that the mentorship opportunities can only come from allies, individuals who themselves are not members of a minority group but support and advocate for including underrepresented workers.

Several practitioners shared that in their workplaces, employee resource groups are especially useful tools in creating peer-to-peer support as well as support from allies. Employee resource groups are groups of employees who join based on a shared interest or life experience. To be most successful, the employee groups must be organic and allow people to opt-in and self-select. The usefulness of employee groups was especially well illustrated by one employer who noted that the size of her company's Women and Engineering Employee Group exceeded the actual number of female engineers in the company. This example demonstrated that many male allies also identified with the employee group's goal of inclusion and support.

#### **Strategy 4 - Appeal to the Bottom Line**

Presenters also discussed how diversity officers can influence their company's leaders to embrace inclusive workplaces, including by appealing to an organization's bottom line. In fact, the financial benefits of attracting and retaining top talent may be among the most influential reasons to advance greater inclusion and diversity within the workplace. One company's representative explained that if her organization wanted to increase its market share, it had to identify untapped consumers, usually from untraditional markets. To reach these individuals, the company had to hire employees similar in background and experience as their new consumers. This example shows how attracting more diverse talent within the company was linked to new customers and greater profitability.

There are other reasons that creating more inclusive workplaces matters to a company's bottom line. According to Freada Kapor Klein of the Level Playing Field Institute, people of color, regardless of gender, were 3.5 times more likely than their white male counterparts to leave technology jobs due to perceived unfairness within the workplace.<sup>4</sup> The costs of employee turnover to an organization are high. These include costs associated with recruitment, interviewing, hiring, onboarding, reduced productivity and lost opportunities costs, among others.<sup>5</sup> In fact, one source estimates that the cost of replacing a mid-level employee is 150 percent of that employee's annual salary; the percentage rises to 400 percent for a high-level or highly specialized employee.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it is in the organization's best financial interest to retain employees who are women and people of color by making them feel valued, included and treated fairly.

#### **Strategy 5 - Engage All Levels of Leadership**

Event participants agreed that diversity officers must secure buy-in from the company's C-suite and also ensure application of these principles from middle management. Researchers and practitioners agreed that for an organization to embrace any initiative, it must be championed at the highest levels of leadership. But these efforts will be irrelevant if not applied at the direct supervisor level, because that is where employees are most likely to engage with management.

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4 Kapor Klein, F. (2014, December 18). "Diversity" Isn't Just Gender; "Women" Aren't Just White. Retrieved from URL [http://www.mercurynews.com/opinion/ci\\_27168994/freada-kapor-klein-tech-leaders-must-address-their](http://www.mercurynews.com/opinion/ci_27168994/freada-kapor-klein-tech-leaders-must-address-their)

5 Luecke, Richard. Harvard business essentials: manager's toolkit: the 13 skills managers need to succeed. Harvard Business Press, 2004.

6 Borysenko, K. (2015, April 22). What Was Management Thinking? The High Cost of Employee Turnover. Retrieved from URL <http://www.eremedia.com/tlnt>.

As one company executive explained, most of her time was spent working with mid-level managers because they are often the gate-keepers to raises, promotions and recruitment. Furthermore, they are the most influential factor in an individual employee's experience and decision to remain at an organization.

## **CONCLUSION**

The tech sector is built on disrupting other industries, from cell phones to fire alarms. As Emmett Carson, CEO and president of Silicon Valley Community Foundation, noted, "But when it comes to disrupting cultural traditions within tech companies, you can't move too quickly. We get uncomfortable talking about it. We talk around it. We say, 'with all deliberate speed, but not today.'" The Disrupt Bias event was intended to provide a forum for a candid and productive conversation on what the tech sector can do to promote more inclusive employment practices.

We hope the data and strategies discussed at the Disrupt Bias event and documented in this summary report will equip diversity officers with the tools they need to address hidden biases in their workplaces. Over time we hope more companies will do the same and engage in more inclusive employment practices. Silicon Valley's next big game-changing innovation does not need to be another new product, but rather a commitment on the part of all industry leaders to change how they recruit and retain more diverse talent.

## Appendix - DISRUPT BIAS AGENDA

Welcome from Freeda Kapor Klein of the Kapor Center, Emmett Carson of Silicon Valley Community Foundation and Nancy Lee of Google

What Can Hidden Bias Research Tell Us about the Causes and Fixes for Technology's Dismal Diversity Data?

### Research Presentations

Emilio Castilla, Sloan School, MIT

Laura Huang, University of Pennsylvania Wharton School of Business

### Panel

Researchers: Castilla, Huang

Practitioners: Dominique DeGuzman, Twilio; Lisa Lee, Pandora

Moderator: Damien Hooper-Campbell, Uber

It Takes a (Diverse) Village: The Importance of Inter- and Intra-group Mentoring on Workplace Performance, Engagement, and Well-Being

### Research Presentations

Nilanjana Dasgupta, University of Massachusetts, Amherst and Rudy Mendoza-Denton, University of California, Berkeley

### Panel

Researchers: Dasgupta, Mendoza-Denton

Practitioners: Rachel Williams, Yelp; Janet Van Huysse, Twitter

Moderator: Erica Wood, Silicon Valley Community Foundation



## Panel Self and Organizational Affirmations: What Tech Companies Can Do to Counteract Stereotype Threat

### Research Presentations

Greg Walton, Stanford University

### Panel

Researchers: Walton

Practitioners: Jennifer Arguello, Kapor Center; Julnar Rizk, Facebook

Moderator: Carolina Huaranca, Kapor Center

Update from Google

Closing



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