

Opinion **Workplace diversity**

The Google affair bares Silicon Valley's trust deficit

Tech sector behaviour must live up to its powerful role in the economy and society

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Just one-fifth of Google's engineering team are female

Margaret Heffernan AUGUST 9, 2017

While many industries struggle with diversity, it would be hard to find one that has progressed as slowly as the otherwise fast-moving world of technology.

A few months ago, I was talking to a venture capitalist from a leading [Silicon Valley](#) company. I asked how concerned he was that the Valley now came across as pale, male and somewhat stale. He was complacent. As far as pale was concerned, he told me Google was “virtually an Indian company”. Male bias? That was not the Valley’s fault; women just would not knuckle down and get engineering degrees. When I pointed out that I had run software companies without being able to write a line of code, he shrugged and turned back to fine-tuning his PowerPoint slides. The implication that Silicon Valley might in any way be getting stale did not seem a problem.

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I thought of this nonchalance as the furore broke over Google employee [James Damore](#), whose long email rant against diversity programmes got him fired. The engineer railed against unconscious bias training (mandatory for promotion) and many other policies and processes that he found oppressive, in a rambling, confused mash-up of outdated science and entitlement. His discomfort with what he called Google’s “monoculture” failed to recognise that all organisations articulate values which, should you not

share them, may militate against your success or sense of belonging. This cultural fit prevails as strongly at Oxfam as at the White House. What can be said at home or in a personal blog post is very different from [what employees can say](#) in company time on company servers to company employees. Google’s offices might look like home, or even a playground, but they still constitute a workplace.

Moreover, Mr Damore’s outburst backfired, drawing attention not to his grievance but to his employer’s grievous lack of diversity. The company’s leadership is 75 per cent male. A mere 20 per cent of its engineering team — where most of the clout resides — are female. In an ongoing lawsuit, the Department of Labor claimed that “[compensation disparities](#)” are systemic across its workforce.

And yet Google is one of the more progressive leaders in an industry that is becoming notorious. This year, Uber — one of the most highly valued private companies in Silicon Valley — lost 20 of its employees, a board member, and [its chief executive officer](#) after numerous scandals involving bullying, sexual harassment and even interference in investigation of a [rape](#) by a driver in India. In the computer games industry, the [Gamergate](#) campaign publicly targeted women with harassment, bullying and threats of rape.

Around the world, the tech industry has failed to prove itself an open, exciting place for women to work, to be taken seriously and to advance. When I ran software companies in the nineties and noughties, I knew just two female CEOs and have met only two more since. In my first CEO position, I was originally paid [half the salary](#) of my male peers.

Podcast

So when Eric Schmidt, chairman of Google’s parent company Alphabet, claims that its “principles of freedom of expression, diversity, inclusiveness and science-based thinking” are typical of the industry, his nostalgia is getting the better of him. Those inaugural virtues were discernible at the genesis of the web; they are hard to discern today. The temptation of huge financial gains, and a quasi-religious faith in the hyper-capitalism of Ayn Rand, has brought in a new, macho generation with no time for any principle beyond self-interest.

A frat boy culture of bullying and exclusivity is accompanied by aggressive attempts to avoid tax. The sector is secretive in its attempts to hoard and capitalise on the [private data of its customers](#). It balks at legitimate government attempts at accountability and restraint. The share structure of companies like Facebook and Snapchat make it obvious that shareholders carry no more sway than citizens. And it shows little [concern](#) for the displacement and social costs that are a byproduct of the disruptions that bring its wealth.

All this calls into question the legitimacy of the industry and its new role as one of the most powerful movers in the global economy, and in wider society. For tech to achieve its growing ambitions in all areas of public and private life — from your groceries to your finance and healthcare — it will need trust.

When commentators routinely compare Silicon Valley today with the arrogance, isolation and destructive might of Wall Street before the [crash 10 years ago](#) this week, it is time to start thinking about reputation — and what might ensue when the glamorous superficial allure of these tech giants wears off.

The writer is author of [Wilful Blindness](#)