

# As an innovator, it's good to be the odd one out

I've got plenty of experience being the odd one out in the room. I was an outsider when I moved to the UK at the age of eight, not understanding a word of English. I stood out at Cambridge University, where I was one of a handful of women studying mechanical engineering. I stand out now, as a female founder in the male-dominated tech sector. This might sound like a lonely journey, but once you learn how to use being the odd one out to your advantage, it can be a superpower.

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It's no secret that the worlds of tech and engineering are woefully lacking in gender diversity, meaning I've faced a number of barriers in my journey to starting a tech business. Like many female entrepreneurs, people will often underestimate my wealth of experience and my level of expertise. They might mistake my measured approach for an absence of skill, knowledge or confidence. They might even direct technical questions about our product to my male co-founder, when I'm the CTO with the deep expertise to respond with detail, confidence and clarity.

These barriers shouldn't exist, and I hope that in years to come female founders aren't facing the same challenges I've encountered. But the truth is,

learning to overcome obstacles has been instrumental in my success as a founder. I have been forced to stand on my own two feet, go through all the vulnerability of being wrong and draw on my academic and professional expertise to show people exactly why I'm in the room. I understand now – from years of being in the minority – that no one will back me if I don't back myself; and that all the risk of failing is worth it to get to where I want to be.

Moving to the UK at the age of eight was a transformative experience, teaching me to listen, learn, embrace my identity and not feel afraid of being different. My early experiences helped me develop a sense of self-confidence that I might never have possessed if I'd not been forced to adapt and prove myself. Rightly or wrongly, being the odd one out and being challenged builds resilient entrepreneurs.

But there's no doubt that – as a woman in tech or STEM – the nature of the challenge does need to change. As an innovator you want to stand out for your merit, but it's all too easy to feel like an outsider for the wrong reasons. A recent report from Tech Nation suggests that only 19% of the tech workforce are women. That's marginally better than in engineering, where women represent just 11% of the sector. The situation is even more dire for BAME entrepreneurs, who make up just 4% of people working in UK tech. But industry leaders and investors are waking up to the far-reaching benefits of diversity – and starting to listen to (and fund) the voices of marginalized groups. But it isn't enough yet. It's still the innovator's job to continue to fight to stand out for all the right reasons: because what we've created is too good not to stop and look.

It stands to reason that pushing myself out of my comfort zone and learning my worth has also been a big part of my entrepreneurial journey. I definitely still have to remind myself again and again that I've earned my seat at the table and I bring value even if I don't have all the answers right now. Being an outsider has made me evaluate my worth – perhaps more often than my male peers – but the benefit of this is that I've developed a strong ability for self reflection and have confidence in my strengths, whilst knowing my weaknesses.

Feeling like an outsider is not exclusive to me in the sectors I inhabit. I've encountered fellow female and BAME founders who've overcome similar challenges with grit and determination – and these individuals are my biggest source of inspiration. I'd love nothing more than if my entrepreneurial journey could help future underrepresented founders successfully navigate the tech startup industry.

Despite the challenges, I've been met with a huge amount of support on my journey, too. When I won Innovate UK's prestigious Women in Innovation award for Vitrue, my secondary school put a plaque on their wall to celebrate my

success and inspire current students. My friends, family and co-founder have also been beside me every step of the way, cheering me on and encouraging me to continue to push boundaries and stand by my ideas. I've now been shown a huge amount of respect – from both my inner circle and industry leaders – and I'm constantly learning and refining my skills as I work on Vitruvius's tech day in, day out.

The challenges I've overcome and the barriers I've faced have made me a better entrepreneur, and I'm now proud of being the odd one out. My advice to others in a similar position is to leverage your differences and view them as your greatest tools, until we live in a world where the only remarkable thing about having a female or minority founder is the thing they create. Use your unique perspectives to create solutions that others might never have seen.

As we work towards a society where diversity and inclusion is a given, the best we can do is remember that our difference is our superpower. Being challenged breeds ingenuity, creativity and true innovation, and it's up to us to start where we are if we want to change the world.

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