Why I've faced up to my failings on gender diversity – and other founders should too

It's virtually impossible to hire experienced female developers – or, that's what I'd let myself believe. Just as the tech industry needs to hang its head in shame with regard to its championing of gender diversity, I'm prepared to say I too have failed miserably – but I no longer buy the excuses we all allow ourselves.

As a non-technical founder, I should have taken greater ownership alongside my (male) cofounder and CTO. Technical founders and technical team leaders tend to live and die by their sprint reviews, so focus on people that can help streamline sprint tasks at the expense of other considerations. I could have provided the counter-balance – and so should other founders when speaking to their tech teams.

The honest truth is I didn't push hard enough in the search for highly qualified female developers: I took

the easy, convenient way out.

And by doing that, I made a rod for my own back – let me explain. Undoing gender homogeneity is much tougher than starting with a clear and open focus. By the time you're a few years down the line, a workplace culture and hiring process is ingrained. The people you bring in early on help to define you as a business. There is no Ctrl+Z key for this. Gender diversity is a day one requirement – not a nice to have you pursue once you've established yourself and have some customers on board.

As a result, we had to take a very hard look at ourselves and make significant changes to 'how we do stuff'. And while we've recognised our failings and started to address them, it remains a great source of embarrassment, even with recent additions. While I dearly love and value the people who are doing incredible things for us, I'm no longer going to be bound by excuses. It's not where we want or should be.

Recognising the inherent hiring bias

Within the tech ecosystem, startup founders are almost given a pass on diversity early on because there's an acceptance that it's an imperfect journey on which you have to continuously scrap, scrape and adapt at every turn to get somewhere.

As a challenger brand, product development, securing investment and addressing a need in the market come first and you get the best you can afford and who are willing to join the melee. But when we fail to take time, we fail to make time – and by that, I mean that we store up a bigger diversity problem for tomorrow and perpetuate what our peers before us got wrong.

Contrary to what I've heard far too often at industry events and in coworking spaces, there are very talented women out there who could fill your technical roles.

Ok, so the big tech brands are battling hard to recruit the best female students

in maths, IT and engineering as they compete to address what they stored up years before: but it doesn't mean you won't find a pool of strong candidates if you adopt the right approach.

HR and recruitment in my business – as it is with every startup – was the founders' domain. My cofounder is also our CTO so, with input from me too, made our first technical hires for the R&D team. While we had a sense of 'good' practice we certainly didn't apply 'best' practice'. And so our inherent bias cascaded down through the company as we grew.

To stem this flow, we needed to bring an expert on board. Our HR manager has proved a vital appointment, bringing to light often very subtle aspects of the hiring process that had brought us to our predicament.

Understanding where alienation starts

Without knowing it, we were _alienating female_ candidates. Consider this: you offer your staff a bonus if they can recommend someone amazing to join you. This, in turn, helps you avoid wasting money on recruitment. For a lean startup, it sounds great in theory, but it served to distinctly narrow our field of vision. Referrals from the already male tech team tended to be more people in their image; great candidates, but soon every spare desk was occupied by a carbon copy of our early recruits.

We absolutely insisted on Masters degrees from good institutions. And when you saw our pitch deck, the array of impressive qualifications on display gave the team a 'wow' factor, meaning investors felt comforted that products built by geniuses would be as robust and pioneering as we were promising.

For our team leaders, they saw a background or education similar to their own and, consciously or not, were drawn to them. Quite naturally, they found they shared interests and built rapport almost instantaneously, meaning the candidate pool never widened.

Even when we sought to address this, it became apparent to us that the interview process was skewed. We asked candidates to identify games from their raw code. The programme was often a game such as Mortal Kombat or Monopoly. This effectively disadvantaged candidates who were uninterested in gaming. While it wasn't direct gender discrimination, the focus on specific media was more likely to appeal to people like those we already had on board. Our HR manager gave us a vital 'outsider' perspective, constantly challenging us to review our practices.

The best people for the business, not for the role

Some may be reading this and thinking a *volte face* on recruitment practices leads to one thing: positive discrimination. Those people will believe the best, most qualified people for the business may now be overlooked and contend that such an approach is driven by political correctness, not commercial imperative. I disagree entirely. Yes, all businesses need highly skilled talent, but we're taking a longer-term view now.

There is far more to a person's contribution to a business than their productivity.

We may have an altered environment where workplace culture is no longer office culture, but whether employees are at home or not, they need to belong and identify with what you've created. And by the way, that's not to say where we've taken a more holistic view of the person we've sacrificed productivity.

As part of our diversity journey, we try to no longer take the stance of 'the best person for the job' but instead think about who the best person is for the overall business.

We're now dedicated to building a more gender-diverse business but are still grappling with some of the challenges it throws up. For example, our first female developers came into a company that had an established workplace culture skewed to one type of personality. Again, while not discriminating directly, socials such as paintballing appealed to certain characters and many activities centred around drinking. To be more inclusive for all, we've sought to add variety and to allow all employees to experience new things.

We are starting to see the impact of a slightly more diverse workforce already. We have to make hundreds of decisions every day that require all sorts of problem-solving to manage. Adding new, more diverse voices into that mix gives you an entirely new outlook and a change of energy in the business.

If we'd have just hired the same people, our approach would not have evolved. As CEO I've never felt so energised. The way staff interact, talk and bond has advanced our business, which is priceless.

We have not done nearly enough yet. We hope to see a more diverse workforce in every respect and want gender pay gap reporting to reflect the change too. Bluntly, I can't change the fact that the business was founded by two white men and what we've done so far does not warrant praise. But I can offer a strong view for those who still have their head in the sand: stop excusing yourself as it's harder to undo what you've got wrong and without greater diversity, your business will ultimately suffer.

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