

Why upskilling is a fundamental part of closing the diversity and skills gap

Richard Townsend, CEO and cofounder of Circus Street, discusses why some of the key hurdles to creating more diverse teams can be overcome through training programs

The past few years has seen a monumental shift in how many organisations approach issues around diversity and inclusion (D&I). Namely, they recognise that it is both morally and commercially responsible to create workforces that are more representative and fair. However, identifying your problem and solving it are two very different challenges. Despite all the media attention, discussion and strategising, the tech industry is still a long way from having a truly level playing field.

Why should this be the case? If there's genuine willingness to change, shouldn't, given the tech industry's reputation for moving quickly, we already have seen significant improvement in D&I?

The two main reasons cited for a lack of diversity in tech are: the 'toxic bro culture' - which covers a multitude of sins from outright discrimination through to processes and systems that disadvantage people from underrepresented groups securing jobs or gaining promotions; and the funnel problem - there aren't enough people from diverse backgrounds studying relevant subjects to be able to pursue a career in tech.

Startups have made some progress in tackling cultural problems, however, when it comes to lack of qualified individuals, most founders lament the problem but feel they are powerless to find a solution. It is, they would argue, a systemic, societal issue that is up to governments to change. The reality is that there is a lot startups can do to tackle both the skills gap and D&I problems. A huge part of the solution is upskilling.

Upskilling and retraining programs are an incredibly powerful way for startups to increase the effectiveness, efficiency and innovation of their team. In fact, PwC recently calculated that a nationwide training program in areas such as digital skills and data could result in an additional 3.4% GDP growth and 200,000 new jobs in the UK alone. On a global basis the economic gain would be \$6.5T and 5.4 million new jobs.

People can be guilty of thinking of upskilling as simply learning a new trade. It's not just that - it's about giving people the tools, insights and mentality they need to develop a huge range of skills applicable to different circumstances. It's a continuous and nuanced process. We aren't, for example, talking about training legions of fully-fledged data scientists, we're saying that we need to give everybody basic data skills so they can apply this knowledge to their own professional circumstances. These individuals may go on to learn coding, marketing or IT skills that combine to make them a highly skilled worker in their field.

If we take one example - marketing technology. There are plenty of people from underrepresented groups already in the marketing industry - it is essentially representative of society at large. However, this diversity is not reflected in martech startups. The issue is that these marketing professionals are either not able to rise up through the ranks or are concentrated in less technical areas of the sector. In short, they have the industry knowledge and passion but they are apparently missing some key skills that these martech startups need. Currently, most martech startups pursue a strategy of committing their resources to hiring expensive fully baked technical marketers rather than seeking to grow their own through upskilling.

Practically speaking, every worker requires regular training to keep up with the rapid pace of technological change. So why draw an arbitrary line on the skills you require at the hiring process? Growing your own talent in a targeted way is much more efficient. Startups can continuously upskill existing team members with knowledge that is directly relevant to your business and they can then apply these learnings immediately. Training can be tailored to the aspirations and innate abilities of each individual. As an added bonus, training and development programs have been shown to vastly increase worker satisfaction and improve retention.

Training schemes also have a tendency to smash down preconceived notions

organisations have about their team. Many of the businesses we work with are surprised at the hidden talents of their workers and their aptitude and appetite for acquiring new expertise. It can also highlight how some workers have been pigeonholed into certain roles simply because of what managers *think* they want or because they feel they are unable to ask for more opportunities. This can go a long way to tackling the unconscious bias that is so harmful to diversity goals.

I am not saying that upskilling is a silver bullet to solving the entire D&I problem. Startups will still need fully fledged, highly skilled specialists from fields that, for the foreseeable future, will be dominated by white men. However, what is clear is that there is a big window of opportunity for a lot of other roles to be filled by either developing existing team members or committing to upskilling new recruits.

Ultimately, a well planned upskilling program can give everybody the chance to build their careers and become better at their jobs. Not only is it more cost-effective in the long term, it also ensures your startup can fish in a much larger talent pool.

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