How the tech industry can get DEI right

Greenwashing. Pinkwashing. Bluewashing. In the last few years, a whole new glossary of terms describing shallow displays of corporate virtue that aren't backed up by action has appeared in the business world. Dubious emissions reporting, a sudden zeal for queer allyship during Pride, soul-searching blog posts and promises of change – we've witnessed all this and more in response to growing public awareness and concern around social issues.

Even if sincere in the moment, the rhetoric often does not result in sustained action or results and _some of it has been cynical_. Either way, the result is widespread scepticism about public commitments to social justice and change.

To this new glossary of terms we can now add DEI washing, which describes how businesses tout their progressive credentials with respect to diversity, equity and inclusion without creating any meaningful change. Much of the increased visibility around DEI recently was spurred by the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in 2020 – an event which provoked widespread protests and increased awareness and public interest in addressing racism, as well as a pledge of _$50B towards racial equity work_ in business. But actual change since then has been slow and many companies have failed to act on their pledges.

The case of tech

Tech makes an interesting case study here. Though the lack of diversity in tech has been well documented, tech is in many ways perfectly positioned to lead the charge on DEI. Technology is inherently borderless and inclusive; it's one of the fastest growing areas of global business; and innovation – a term which refers to much more than digital technology – is a key concern. But the tech industry risks being seen as the latest DEI washing culprit.

The Spencer Stuart Board Index says that _15% of board members_ described themselves as having a minority ethnic background in 2022. Tech Nation reports that only _22% of tech directors_ are women. Across the tech sector, men's median _hourly pay was 16% higher_ than it was for women. The gender pay gap in tech, in other words, is 4.4% higher in the UK than the national average.

How startups can build effective DEI programmes

So what should tech startups do? Here are six key actions that startups at any stage in their journey can take.

1. Model the behaviour you want to see everywhere. Be the inclusive culture you want to build. That doesn't just mean showing vulnerability, working hard, communicating clearly, or staying humble. It also means calling out discrimination, in the form of jokes, comments, or inconsistent treatment of staff, whenever it arises. Inaction is tantamount to acceptance, and a big part of making DEI work well is having a zero-tolerance policy for what you don't want.
2. Set expectations in meetings and group interactions. Invite everyone to speak, and hold back on making a decision until everyone has had the opportunity to give their point of view. Though there is some value in having the most senior people speak first, it can encourage less senior people to parrot their views. So it can be hugely beneficial to invite the least senior people at a given meeting to offer their thoughts.
3. Consider language. That doesn't just concern what you say every day, but branding, job descriptions, and communication over messaging tools, such as Slack. Language can subtly (and not-so-subtly) entrench biases that relate to race, gender, sexuality, seniority and more. It's therefore really important to search for those neutral words that don't stereotype or separate people into categories.
4. Communicate your commitments regularly – internally and externally. This holds you to account by your team and by your stakeholders. It

reminds you and everyone else of what you stand for, and it encourages you to keep a high bar with respect to DEI even when you're distracted by other things. DEI washing is only a risk when your commitments are not backed up by action.

5. Scrutinise your recruitment practices. It goes without saying that hiring is a key part of boosting DEI in any business. That makes it especially important that the language used in job advertisements is inclusive, and that the process doesn't exclude those, such as neurodiverse candidates, who might not be comfortable with, or might not show their full potential in, the traditional interview. It also means trying non-traditional job boards and recruitment platforms, and actively inviting candidates from diverse backgrounds to apply. Blind CV reviews, which help to overcome unconscious bias, are also effective in boosting DEI.

6. Set targets and measure results. 'We measure what we treasure'. That means that with DEI, we should set intentions, articulate targets, and take measurements of our progress. Vague promises to 'move the needle' or 'become more diverse' are no good. What does 'move the needle' look like to you in concrete terms? How can you measure an increase in diversity? It's essential that startup leaders define precisely how they'll boost DEI and how they'll make sure they're on course. This is especially true with regard to measuring feelings of inclusion and belonging, and not simply demographic metrics.

Final thoughts

We should remember that what DEI aims to do is undo social injustices entrenched over a very long time as they manifest themselves in the business world. The changes we need to make will not happen overnight, and claims by some businesses that they're not seeing a 'return' on DEI investment fail to take this essential fact into account. But even if change won't happen immediately, it can happen quickly – far more quickly than we tend to think. The key is to make a determined, concerted, sustained effort. Your people will benefit, society will benefit – and your bottom line will, too.

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