WOMEN IN TECH: GETTING IN AND MOVING UP

An interview with Dr. Zoe Young

CONTEXT

INTERVIEW

IT'S NO SECRET THAT THERE IS A GENDER DIVERSITY PROBLEM IN THE TECH SECTOR.

Women occupy just 17% of tech jobs and fewer than one in ten of these women are in leadership positions. Women make up only 20% of tech founders and only 4% of software engineers (Tech UK). In the IT sector only one in five are female, and of those who are working in the industry, they are paid – on average – 15% less than men (BCS study).

The statistics speak for themselves. There is a huge disparity between the number of men and women in technology-related jobs. And this, quite frankly, is putting women off starting a career in tech or returning after a break.

SO WHY IS IT IMPORTANT THAT WE REDRESS THE IMBALANCE?

It's simple. Women have a key role to play in filling the current skills gap in the IT and tech sector. If we can get this right, not only will it bring significant benefits to the industry but also to the wider economy.

So, how do we get more women into tech and help them move up into leadership roles?

We put this very question, and a selection of others, to a subject matter expert. Zoe Young is an organisational sociologist, writer and consultant who researches gender, work and organisation with a particular focus on women in leadership and management.

Zoe has written a book 'Women's Work: how mothers manage flexible working in careers and family life'. Women's Work is a deep-dive into what needs to change about work to support flexibility, equality, and work-life balance for all.

WHY IS THERE A GENDER IMBALANCE, PARTICULARLY AT THE TOP OF ORGANISATIONS?

75%

OF WOMEN SAID THEY HAD AMBITIONS TO GO ONWARDS BUT ABOUT THE SAME PROPORTION QUESTIONED WHETHER THEY WOULD ACTUALLY GET THERE

There are lots of things that contribute to this.

Firstly, jobs weren't created with women in mind. Historically men worked outside of the home, women worked inside the home, although women's work was not usually paid. Boys and men were socialised to be workers and earners, and girls and women to be carers.

Things have changed a lot and now young women and young men enter the professions at about the same rate, there is parity at the beginning of careers but this changes around mid to senior management levels, which coincides with the age and life stage when people start and grow their families.

It is at this point where you see women's careers slowing down and the 'motherhood penalty' kick in, meaning women spend longer stuck at the same grade than men do, and they are rewarded differently (even in the same field).

The gender pay gap is at an average of 18% across large organisations in the UK and can vary greatly in different industries, airlines for example have fewer female pilots, and retailers have fewer men than women on the shop-floor. The dominance of either sex at either end of the hierarchy contributes to a gender pay gap.
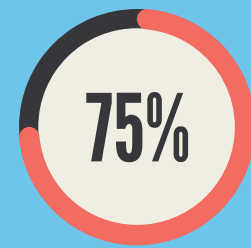
The gender pay gap tells you there is a structural inequality. There are more women in lower paid roles than men and the solution to closing the gender pay gap, in part, is getting more women into higher level jobs.

It is not quite as simple as that though. Women are judged differently on their competencies and abilities and there is a lot of bias (unconscious or otherwise) about what women are capable of. Women are often assumed not to be ambitious; and a lack of women in the top jobs is explained by women's own lack of confidence or ambition to get there. I don't support that idea, and neither does research.

A survey of 25,000 UK workers by PWC found that 75% of women said they had ambitions to go onwards but about the same proportion questioned whether they would actually get there. Unfortunately they are not wrong to question it, as there is a history of disadvantage for women in the workplace.

DOES THE GENDER IMBALANCE STEM FROM OUR EARLY YEARS? IS IT THE CASE OF 'NATURE VS NURTURE'?

The 'nature vs nurture' debate is relevant, in so much as what you believe determines what solutions you will be willing to support.

If leaders and managers in tech industries believe women don't make 'natural' coders or engineers or designers then pretty much any initiative designed to change the gender balance that you put in front of them will fail to win their support.

So one of the most important jobs for all of us to do is to challenge and to change the harmful stereotypes that lock girls and women out of technology.Traditionally girls have not been steered towards STEM subjects at school. There are now lots of initiatives i.e. Girls Who Code, Code First: Girls, Girls into STEM, WISE campaign, to name just a few, to encourage young girls into these areas, and I'd love to see more.
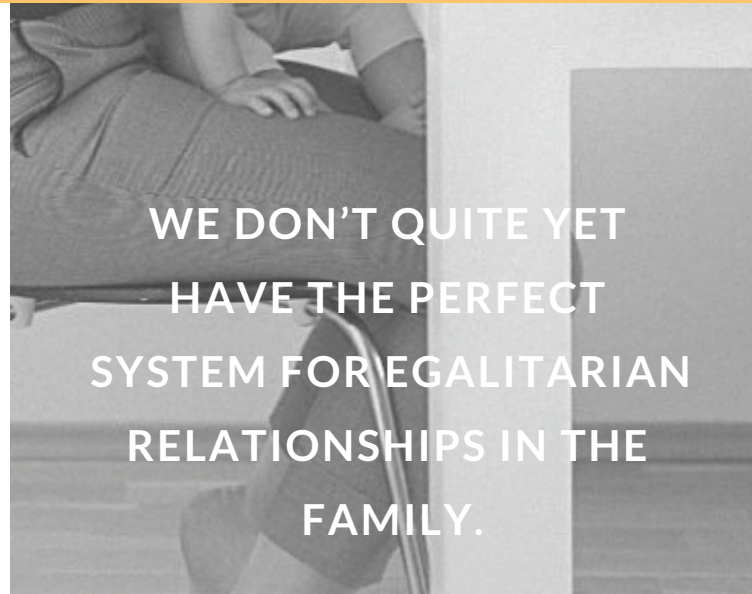
There are associations we make with job roles, for example; engineers, police officers, nurses, astronauts, surgeons – do you think of a man or a woman in those jobs? These assumptions kick in early, in pre-school if not before. There is a lot of work needed to change perceptions and understandings about what girls and boys can be and do in life.

Because of history, because of socialisation, because of stereotypes, women face many structural and cultural barriers to starting and advancing in their careers.

For organisations to recruit and retain talent in the workplace they must recognise these barriers in the first place, and then remove them.

starting at a young age is important.

WHY DO MORE WOMEN THAN MEN TAKE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CHILDCARE?

Whilst much has changed in terms of women and men entering education and starting careers, what hasn't changed over the years is the expectation that women will take on the responsibility of care in society, including family childcare.

The dominant model of working parents in this country is now two breadwinners, with women (in partnerships with men) often being the ones to reduce their hours to accommodate childcare.

There is now a policy infrastructure which is more supportive of shared parental leave, although the paternity leave is not rewarded in the same way as maternity leave.

Currently, there is not a great incentive for men to take time out to provide care for young children, and it's not as easy for men to request adjustments to the way they work as women.

WHAT HASN'T CHANGED OVER THE YEARS IS THE EXPECTATION THAT WOMEN WILL TAKE ON THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CARE IN SOCIETY

WE DON'T QUITE YET HAVE THE PERFECT SYSTEM FOR EGALITARIAN RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FAMILY.

That's not to say it's easy for women in any job to request flexibility, but there is a normative understanding that women do the caring and they will have these responsibilities so will need some adjustments. We don't have this understanding of men and caring.

If organisations really want to retain more women, they need to make sure that it is just as possible for fathers and mothers to take time out for caring and to adjust their jobs to something flexible.

SO HOW DO WE GET WOMEN INTO TECH IN THE FIRST PLACE?

Extra focus and new initiatives are needed because our understanding of 'who does what jobs' in tech has evolved. We need to challenge the stereotypes and create role models to inspire girls and women. You can't be what you can't see.

We need to create more opportunities for girls to try tech, at different ages, in a non-competitive or judgemental environment. There needs to be group initiatives for girls, with opportunities to try tech without the added attention and pressure of being the only girl in the room.

The Girl Guiding Association now has badges in digital design, science, aviation, and using technology for communication. These are important developments in how we bring up girls and how we build their confidence to enter predominantly male orientated sectors.

WE NEED TO CREATE MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR GIRLS TO TRY TECH, AT DIFFERENT AGES, IN A NON-COMPETITIVE OR JUDGEMENTAL ENVIRONMENT.

Bringing experienced women into organisations at different levels requires a similarly dedicated focus.

Organisations and recruiters need to accept that many women candidates, particularly women who have children, will have a different career path which has brought them to that point.

Women's career paths are more varied and more complex than the linearly upward traditionally male pattern. Women careers often involve periods of time out for care and changes in jobs to secure part-time and flexible work arrangements, typically taking a hit on salary.

The salary a woman earned in her last job should not be read as reflecting her potential for the next one. Recruiters must recognise the totality of each career path and the candidate's potential, and not the salary they previously had.

AND HOW CAN WE HELP WOMEN MOVE UP THE LADDER?

Initiatives like 'returnships' and 'returners programmes' appeal to women because they offer the opportunity to return to the employment market on a short-term assignment. The candidate receives mentoring and technical upskilling, and often at the end there is a good chance of a permanent position available.

These initiatives help bring people in, who have the talent and experience but have faced structural barriers that have kept them out or knocked them off track previously.

It remains a challenge to access a job higher up the pay scale on a part-time or flexible work arrangement.

Recruiters and organisations need to open up to potential of 'job-sharing' in more senior roles – co-leadership of a function, joint-management of team for example. Job-sharing can and does work in senior management and professional jobs, and it offers the opportunity for two people to work part-time and combine their talents to make a big impact in a leadership role. The main issue to overcome is the assumed cost associated with this arrangement.

ORGANISATIONS NEED TO BETTER TRANSLATE THE 'YES WE CAN MAKE IT WORK' TO THE ACTUAL DESIGN OF THE JOB, ENSURING IT FITS WITH THE STRUCTURE OF THE BUSINESS, THE PROMOTION AND REWARDS SCHEME AND SO ON.

Organisations need to look beyond the business unit cost and see it as an investment into their talent pipeline. Job sharing can provide role models which is a huge talent draw, you also get good engagement and productivity from flexible workers.

If employers would use the line 'happy to talk flexible working' in their job ads like the CIPD recommends, this would certainly encourage more women candidates and remove the barriers and take away the uncomfortable discussions from the start of the process for many women.

If there is greater openness over flexibility it would diversify the candidate pool and result in a much more diverse workforce.

Sophistication, skill and capability are required in HR and within the recruiter community to get the flexibility arrangement at the offer stage.

A more strategic view is needed of the benefits of offering flexibility for a particular role for the right candidate rather than the cost, because the size of the collective prize is far greater.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Zoe for generously sharing her time and expertise.

This paper was made possible thanks to Zoe's support and her incredible knowledge of the subject.

Dr. Zoe Young is an organisational sociologist, writer and consultant. She researches gender, work and organisation with a particular focus on women in leadership and management. Zoe founded the HR insight and design consultancy Half the Sky. Half the Sky helps build diverse and inclusive organisations.

Half the Sky combines the big thinkers on workplace culture and managing diversity, with leading HR and organisational development practitioners, to help open minds, understand cultures, and design HR policies, services and management practices that are inclusive and rewarding for all.

WOMEN'S WORK
HOW MOTHERS MANAGE FLEXIBLE WORKING IN CAREERS
AND FAMILY LIFE

This book is the first to go inside women's work and family lives in a year of working flexibly. It explores contemporary motherhood, work-life balance, emotional work in families, couples and housework, maternity transitions, interactions with employers, work design and workplace cultures, and employment policies.
Available to buy now from Bristol University Press.