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Tech Economy Still Bypassing Women

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The recent gaffe by Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella illustrates the blind spots within an organization that can subtly undermine inclusion of women. When speaking at a women-in-computing conference last week, he indicated that women don't need to ask for pay raises; instead they should trust the system to pay them what they are worth. In reacting to instant criticism, he said he was repeating what he has been told early in his career and had no idea it would be bad advice for women. "It was a humbling and learning experience. Any advice that advocates passivity in the face of bias is wrong," he later stated. Though Microsoft has a good record of paying male and female employees equally, the problem is the vast gender gap in their workforce.

The statistics are disconcerting: The workforce at virtually all of the big tech companies – Google, Microsoft, Facebook, and Twitter – is still only about 30% female. Surely these companies know and understand what multiple studies have shown: when large corporations have a diverse workforce, leadership, and board members, it is more profitable. One would think the companies would be actively recruiting females, and working to build female support within the company. If they are, then one wonders if their efforts are misguided, or intended mostly as window dressing. The numbers speak for themselves.

It is important to ask these questions, and to dig below the surface of statistics. Females need to see successful role models at all levels of the tech industry, and the pipeline that feeds into it. This includes having female teachers in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and math). It includes recruiting and supporting females to choose STEM majors in college. It includes supporting non-profits like Women in Computing, Women in Technology, and Girls Who Code for career support and outreach to girls. The adage “You can’t BE it if you can’t SEE it” is especially true for women in a male-dominated environment.

In addition to recruiting and hiring females for STEM-related positions, tech companies like Google and Facebook can increase their proportions in other positions as well, such as salespeople, human resources departments, recruiters, researchers, marketing, event organizers, support personnel of all kinds, and even board members. Considering the fact that women graduate from college at higher rates than men, it should not pose a problem to find qualified females. In addition, having an active supplier diversity program that contracts with women-owned companies is another way to bring women into the tech economy.

This topic is important and urgent. In economic terms, women are missing out on some of the biggest financial wins on an ongoing basis. I don’t begrudge the huge success and the big money being made, quite the contrary, I am all for entrepreneurship and capitalism. A rising tide floats all boats, right? Except for those not in a boat. For this reason, we must work to ensure that more women are aboard, partaking in this most lucrative sector because a stable, economically empowered female population is the foundation of a stable, economically secure country. Not just because it looks or sounds good to be socially responsible, but because it is better for these companies, and better for families, communities, and by extension, the country.