Diversity breeds success but r

Two months ago our kaleidoscope contributors assessed the digital skills gap, but the lack of diversity in employment is another issue that could slow economic healing post-pandemic, writes Greg Denholm.

Why not kill two birds with one stone? With plenty of ICT jobs to fill, now seems the perfect time to encourage people from all backgrounds to start their tech careers.

The benefits of a diverse workforce were explored in the McKinsey & Company's 2018 'Delivering through Diversity' report. It found that organisations in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 21 per cent more likely to excel in profitability and 27 per cent more likely to outperform in value creation.

Furthermore, companies in the top-quartile for ethnic/cultural diversity on executive teams were 33 per cent more likely to have industry-leading profitability.

However, the proportion of men and women being appointed directors of tech companies in the UK has remained flat since 2000, according to a 2020 Tech Nation report.

The same report showed that only 19 per cent of UK tech workers are women, 15 per cent are from BAME backgrounds and a BCS Consulting report adds that only 8 per cent have disabilities.

So, are channel players equipping their teams with the skills to hire from a more diverse pool of talent and are they aware of any unconscious bias affecting their decisions?

Responses from the ICT channel leaders we questioned on the issue indicate that while some industry players are helping redress the balance, there is still a lot of work to be done to develop workplaces that include people from all walks of life.

JOHNATHAN ZEMLIK
WAVENET

"The ICT Channel is a tale of two companies, and the most successful ones are embracing diversity and inclusion! Adopting the next generation of disruptive technology relies on different perspectives and companies actively seeking a diverse workforce. Companies that sign-post support to LGBTQ*, gender diversity, BAME, Neuro-diverse and Disability inclusion will be more agile, more empathetic and able to stay on the leading edge of technology. Yet, there are many companies that don't think about D&I, assuming they don't need it. Often their workforces are homogenous and stagnate, giving these companies a blind spot. Furthermore, as a decision-maker, checking which companies have solid CSR and inclusion credentials is something I always undertake when tendering for partners. Just like many of my end clients and prospects ask for those credentials in turn. If you're not thinking about it, you should start. If not, ambitious, inclusive and agile firms are coming for you!"

LORRIN WHITE
BAMBOO
TECHNOLOGY GROUP

"2020 delivered numerous opportunities to review and reset the diversity challenge in ICT, building on a growing awareness and momentum for change. The pandemic set us back and now old ground needs to be recovered. The gender diversity discussion seems to have fared well in the channel though. And, with tools like the free gender decoders for job ads, stats and advice aplenty there seems to be a demonstrable push towards change. Gender now feels a more familiar discussion, whereas race, religion, disability, and sexual orientation are still not, so there is much to do to tackle the recruitment challenge.
The fear around 'getting it wrong' in discussion is as rife as bias itself and so the channel needs to address 'how' to discuss and change, else I fear diversity becoming another monitored statistic. Discussion and action are essential for the ICT channel to fully commit."

KATHY QUASHIE
VODAFONE UK

"The channel has an opportunity to drive real change in how we add value for the customer by ensuring that the workforce is representative of the community we sell into, and that comes by using a diverse talent pool. Without this, we lack the future skills and the thinking needed to drive innovation. We need to start working outside the usual comfort zone to realise these opportunities, by changing how we recruit, while upskilling where needed. While there has been a good dialogue so far, there still isn't the progress needed to see visible action. Representation is pivotal and it starts from the top - we need to raise awareness and educate on how bias slows progress. This is a critical moment to energise people and create a new legacy by ensuring business policies are inclusive and have real impact."

CRISSI WILLIAMS
ITP

"We know there is a gender split in our industry. The WISE Campaign has some stats on how big this gap is: only 24 per cent of the STEM workforce are women. This has been a focus for us over the past few years, but particularly as we come out of the pandemic with unemployment rising. We can't sit back and accept these stats any longer, and it's not just the recruitment that's the challenge – it's attracting a more diverse workforce to the industry in the first place. We have re-examined everything from job titles to the wording in our recruitment ads. We realised that even certain job titles could put off potential candidates, and yet a few tweaks can attract an entirely different demographic. By understanding the barriers to entry, we aim to change the perception of the industry and demonstrate that it's open to all – regardless of gender or background."

more commitment is required

"Frankly, I'm tired and drained by people asking the same old question about whether enough is being done about diversity. If that question needs asking – then we already have our answer. I'm also frustrated that diversity is still a question – as opposed to inclusion, or equity, or justice. And that frustration boils over when I look at the headlines of the McKinsey report and I go "No sh*t, Sherlock!" That's genuinely not a criticism of the report – it's a frustration that such a basic and obvious conclusion still needs reporting. Anyone who knows me is aware of how close to my heart this issue is – so I'm afraid I am not going to present any suggestions or magic solutions… or talk about what we're doing to try and address the issue. However, if anybody does want to discuss it with me – they are welcome to get in touch."

ROB MUKHERJEE
EVERYCLOUD

"As business owners/leaders we need to trust in the team we have around us regardless of their gender, race, religion, sexual orientation or disability. There is certainly the effort by the industry to be diverse, however the biggest issue is quite often the lack of support from the government. Maternity support and encouragement to return to work is a major issue and until that is addressed there will always be a significantly low number of successful women in tech compared to men. From a recruitment perspective we do see a lot of older candidates bypassed and this is a concern as they do have a lot to offer, however, there have been huge efforts by the industry to be more inclusive and it will improve over time, but it certainly won't be an overnight fix."

DARROL STEVENS
NEOCI

"The channel is making progress but there is still some way to go before all backgrounds are represented. Organisations must ensure they're doing their bit to encourage those from differing backgrounds to apply and progress. This can be achieved through diversity acceleration programmes or apprenticeships, inclusive initiatives that provide an opportunity for everyone to forge a successful career. It's imperative to give a voice to underrepresented groups so there is greater transparency and education – critical aspects of addressing the imbalance. Networking groups and reverse mentoring can lead to new conversations and a renewed understanding about how the industry can evolve for all. Now is the time for individuals and brands to lead by example. Senior teams must have greater awareness of the challenges some face, while the industry's larger organisations must use their influence to create initiatives that fuel conversations and keep partners thinking about what they can do better."

ALEX TEMPEST
BT WHOLESALE

"Despite significant developments in recruitment processes, an increased awareness in conscious and unconscious bias, efforts to promote careers in STEM and widened access to educational opportunities, we still see a lack of diversity within our industry talent. By tapping into the potential of our society the industry is more innovative and better at serving its purpose. Organisations must be clear on the culture they want to create and have the right reasons for doing so to break down the barriers underrepresented communities face. Simply put, the brand organisations are selling must match the employee experience. Diversifying an organisation must be done from the heart of the company. A starting place would be to: broaden hiring decisions to encourage a diversity of individuals and views, avoid communications that can discourage BAME and LGBTQ+ candidates, be open and inclusive to new ways of thinking and hold all your people to account."

LISA HEWITT
VIRTUAL 1

"The channel could be more diverse. Some companies consider unconscious bias and the wording and placement of their job adverts. Most want to hire the best person for the job, but often feel that the pool they have been presented with is not diverse enough and are not sure how to influence this. They could pass on their knowledge by spearheading mentoring schemes. They could encourage student placements and graduate schemes. They could come up with initiatives to reach out to groups not previously engaged, with role models minority groups can identify with. Flexible working, re-training schemes and a more balanced childcare system may also help. A new model of remote/hybrid, flexible working may present an opportunity for parents to combine childcare with their working life and open doors to new prospects which didn't exist before with the rigid office hours."

CHERIE HOWLETT
JOLA

"Diverse teams are more likely to introduce new product innovations than homogeneous teams. To attract and retain diverse talent, we need an inclusive channel which requires commitment in many areas. Homophily is the tendency to associate with similar others. Recruiting similar people means a lack of cognitive diversity - differences in perspective, insights, and thinking styles. In terms of psychological safety, the confidence to be different, to speak up with ideas, or admit mistakes, creates trust and means people thrive. It's important to practice what we portray. Following George Floyd's murder businesses released statements but failed to focus on inclusion. Many websites feature Pride Month logos, but do they welcome the LGBTQ+ community? And, with the average representation of people with disabilities among employees at around 3.2 per cent, compared to 18 per cent in the wider population, we must all ask ourselves: what can we do differently?"

KATE WOOD
CULTURE EXPERT