Driving Digital Diversity: Understanding the perceived barriers to a career in technology

The corporate world has made some much needed, significant strides in diversity over recent years. Seven years ago, women occupied only 25% of leadership roles in FTSE 100 companies.

Temps de lecture : minute

23 July 2024

By 2021, this number had increased to nearly 33%. However, it seems that the technology sector in fact lags behind. According to <u>one report</u> only 29% of UK tech workers are women or non-binary, and an even smaller share, 25%, belong to ethnic minority groups. These figures drop further to 21% and 14%, respectively, for senior roles.

The UK's digital economy, recently ranked as Europe's most advanced, demands a tech sector with a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) posture to match. A stronger focus on DE&I could help address the skills gap that <u>costs the digital economy an estimated £63B annually</u>. It could also enable individual organisations to reach their full potential and outperform competitors through a diversity of thought. However, achieving greater DE&I is a complex and time-consuming process that requires substantial investment, careful planning, and a firm commitment from corporate leadership. Cultural change is often slow, unconscious bias is pervasive, and many hiring policies have remained unchanged for years.

The case for diversity is tried and tested

The moral and business case for improving DE&I in the workplace is well established.

Organisations should reflect the societies they serve, but it's not just about fairness. Diverse teams and businesses perform better because they bring a variety of perspectives and ideas. Nearly a decade ago, _McKinsey confirmed that companies with diverse teams outperform their peers financially_. Their study of 366 public companies found that those in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity were 35% more likely to have financial returns above their national industry medians, and those in the top quartile for gender diversity were 15% more likely to outperform.

In the tech sector, the need for diversity is even more critical. Despite a series of layoffs in 2022, the sector is growing rapidly, and companies are struggling to find enough talent to meet demand. According to one estimate, _93% of UK businesses report IT skills gaps_, with many citing the rapid pace of technological change as a critical driver. The most in-demand skills include AI (42%), IT support and troubleshooting (32%), and cybersecurity (30%).

The cybersecurity sector has a significant skills shortage, with a current shortfall of nearly four million skilled professionals globally. The UK alone needs an additional _73,000 IT security professionals._ Encouraging a more diverse set of candidates to pursue careers in tech and cybersecurity could help alleviate these skills challenges and drive up DE&I. However, significant obstacles remain.

The importance of education

Our recent 'Driving Digital Diversity' research looked at the perceived barriers to a tech career. It revealed two critical roadblocks preventing

more individuals from choosing a career in technology: education and stereotypes.

When asked about the biggest perceived barriers to pursuing a career in technology, respondents identified the following:

1. Needing a technology or IT-oriented degree (49%)
2. Lack of technology or IT education at primary and secondary school (42%)
3. Technology not being highlighted as an attractive or exciting career path at school (41%)
4. Financial cost of pursuing a technology or IT education (29%)
5. Lack of understanding about available opportunities (29%)

It is evident that respondents' formative years played a significant role in their decision not to pursue a tech career. Many claimed that technology was not promoted as an attractive or exciting subject at school, if it was offered at all. However, this is changing. In 2023, 17% more students chose to study A-level computing than the previous year, although the vast majority (85%) were male.

Many respondents also felt they needed an IT-oriented degree to pursue a tech career, despite many roles not requiring such qualifications. This misconception highlights the need for the tech industry to emphasise alternative routes and soft skills like critical thinking and problem-solving in job applications. More businesses now offer apprenticeships and upskilling opportunities through often full funded bootcamps such as _School of Code_, _Code First Girls_, _Coding Black Females_ and _Tech Returners_. Company-sponsored scholarships can also help make higher education more affordable.

Exploring the challenges facing minorities

The study also reveals how barriers differ for minority groups. For example, Asian women are more likely to highlight a lack of technology education at primary and secondary school as the top roadblock to a tech career (49%) compared to the overall respondents (42%). They are also more likely to cite a lack of understanding of available opportunities (33% vs. 29%), but are less likely to see money as a barrier (22% vs. 25%).

Female respondents with an annual household income of less than £50K cite a lack of understanding about available opportunities as a barrier (38% vs. 29%), but are less concerned about needing to live in a major city where tech businesses are located (20% vs. 28%). However, neurodivergent men state a lack of technology education at primary and secondary school as their top barrier (47% vs. 42%) and are more likely to view a lack of people from similar backgrounds in the IT sector as a barrier (29% vs. 19%).

Despite these challenges, many minority respondents expressed a willingness to switch careers to pursue a job in technology. This includes 90% of neurodivergent men and 73% of neurodivergent women, 81% of Asian men, and 86% of both black men and women.

Demonstrating that the tech sector has a significant opportunity to hire from this diverse talent pool if it can quickly address these perceived barriers.

A stronger digital economy

There is still much to do to tackle the root causes of the skills shortage and DE&I deficit in tech. Three-quarters (73%) of overall respondents in our study believed the IT industry could do more to encourage job applicants from different backgrounds, rising to 83% of tech respondents

and 90% of cybersecurity professionals. This challenge requires collaboration between the tech ecosystem, the education sector and government.

We need a more effective curriculum, a greater breadth of apprenticeships and scholarships, and opportunities for hands-on experience to motivate and encourage interest in tech. Creating a pipeline of diverse talent requires an inclusive environment that welcomes people from all walks of life, gender identities, races, ethnicities, religions, disabilities, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The tech industry must be a place for all.

The bottom line is that many perceived barriers to a career in tech, quite simply, do not exist. It's up to the industry to work with government and academia to dispel stereotypes, create excitement around the sector, and provide ample opportunities for interested individuals to get involved. Only by doing so can we build a more inclusive and prosperous digital economy.

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