THE LACK OF WOMEN IN TECH:

Could a drive to bridge the gap become counter-productive?

THE LACK OF WOMEN IN TECH

Lack of women

A current hot-topic in the world of IT, is the lack of women within more tech-centred roles. Various studies have been done, and though most reveal an upward trend in the number of women entering the sector, progress has been shown to be slow. Keen to add more colour to the picture, Henderson Scott carried out some research of their own and the data retrieved provided some important, albeit unexpected, talking points.

Targets aren't working

When the respondents of the study were asked, "What percentage of your organisation's workforce is female?" the results yielded an average of 42.3%. At a glance, this looks like much cause for optimism, a giant stride towards the 'sweet-spot' of a 50/50 gender split. It is only when this question was followed by asking respondents to specify what percentage of the tech team is female, that a gloomier picture emerged. Indeed, only 21% of the average tech team comprised of women, and only 7 respondents reported that figure to be 50% or more.

The logical next step was to ascertain how many of these companies had targets in place to try and equalise these numbers. 10% said they did, 26% did not provide an answer, and 64% stated that their company had no such target in place. It would follow that this explains the imbalance.

However, when scrutinising the data, we see that there is no discernible correlation between the number of women in tech teams and the presence of gender targets. According to the data Henderson Scott's study revealed at least, targets are not having the intended impact.

> ## Only 21% of the average tech team comprised of women

Taking the initiative

With the presence of gender targets appearing to make little, if any difference, Henderson Scott shifted their focus towards the initiatives companies have in place to attract more women into tech roles. All representatives of the companies who took part in the survey reported that at least one initiative was in place to attract more women. There was little in the way of a correlation between the number of initiatives a company had in place, and the number of women they had in tech roles.

Likewise, initiatives such as "Proactive research and investigation to identify reasons why women may not be being hired" and "Supporting competitions and workshops for coding in schools" were rarely deployed and deemed to be of lesser importance/significance.

However, the fact remains that the data does not support the opinion. Regardless of how significant respondents believed initiatives to be, when looking at the percentage of

[
One company, despite having a tech team which was 75% female, had only two initiatives in place
]

For example, one company, despite having a tech team which was 75% female, had only two initiatives in place, whereas another company which had 11 separate initiatives in place had a tech team which was only 15% female.

Despite the lack of correlation between number of initiatives and women in tech roles, some initiatives were more commonly used than others. "Working with schools and colleges to introduce technology careers" and "More flexible working arrangements to support work/life balance" were amongst the most popular initiatives and widely believed to be important/significant in attracting women into tech roles.

women in tech roles, the deployment of highly rated initiatives is not uniformly matched to a higher number of women in tech teams.

Targets and initiatives then, as far as Henderson Scott's research could discover, have little impact on how many women companies can attract to tech roles. If this indeed the case, then how can we explain why there are comparatively so few women working in tech? And is there something that could be done besides implementing targets and initiatives?

CONFLICT ABOUNDS

For a study which yielded little in the way of patterns or trends, one theme was apparent; the resentment from many of the respondents that getting more women into tech roles has become such a focus for the sector.
It was from three questions such responses emerged:

1　*WHO IN YOUR ORGANISATION DO YOU CONSIDER TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR ATTRACTING MORE WOMEN INTO TECH?*

2　*ARE THERE ANY FURTHER INITIATIVES YOUR ORGANISATION IS TAKING TO ATTRACT WOMEN INTO TECH ROLES?*
(almost 50% answered no)

3　*DOES TECH OFFER THE SAME CAREER ADVANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEN AND WOMEN*

Many respondents took the opportunity to use these questions as a means of venting frustrations at what they perceive to be an attempt to usurp a recruitment process they believe to be founded purely on merit.

Answers included:

"We put exactly the same effort into attracting developers, regardless of sex, ethnic origin, religion, etc. We do not believe in discrimination against white men to appease hypocritical sexist activists."

"No but again I am uncomfortable with this, this gender bias exists with primary school teachers, nursing etc. etc. Roles should be filled on skills and capability not gender. Maternity and paternity applies to both genders."

"No, please stop this nonsense, you're not helping women by painting them as victims. 99% of garbage truck drivers are men, 95% of iron smelters are men, 80% of psychologists are women, 93% of workplace fatalities are men. Get a real cause please."

"If we focused on women that would be discriminatory and we would risk the big picture which is hiring the best people."

> ## Men are awarded better in this industry, because it is men at the top. I say this as a man.

Such responses raise the issue of whether initiatives to get women into tech roles could end up becoming counter-productive. However, not all agreed that tech is a sector which recruits and promotes on merit alone.

Other comments included:

"After having children roles to permit family commitments are low status. Most women with children work at lower status jobs than before they had children. They are the first to be made redundant when an organisation is downsizing. Tech is increasingly sexist and ageist."

"I have been a female in tech for a lot of years and there has been no change in the gender gap. It still feels so much harder to progress as a woman."

> ## It is not equal, men are discriminated against.

This dizzying array of responses articulating such opposing views paints a picture of an industry in conflict. Targets and initiatives seem to have little effect, there is evident hostility towards a perceived move towards positive discrimination, yet many women in the sector still feel that there is a lack of equal opportunities.

Nature v nurture

It's perhaps an uncomfortable avenue to explore, but we must consider the possibility that tech-orientated IT roles are usually male-dominated simply because they are inherently more appealing to men, in much the same way sectors such as childcare and nursing are traditionally more appealing to women.

As Henderson Scott's study has shown, targets and initiatives, however abundant, have little effect. 47.5% of respondents believe tech offers the same career advancement opportunities for men and women, as opposed to just 13% who believe otherwise, and only 18% of respondents said their tech organisation does not consider cross training or accommodating women returning to work after career breaks.

When asked, why they think tech is traditionally not seen as a more attractive career for women, themes within the answers surrounded the sector being 'male orientated', 'geeky', 'not people focused', and 'having a male/laddish culture'. Whether these are real barriers to women's entry into the sector is not clear though.

Conclusion

Henderson Scott's study returned results from which no firm conclusion can be arrived at. The overall picture of the contemporary tech sector is one in which women are a growing presence, albeit a slow growth. Pinning down the reason/s for this growth is difficult. Are targets and initiatives indeed working, but in a way too subtle for individual studies to detect? Or is the reason more to do with the growing empowerment of women in all professional spaces?

As for why the growth in presence of women in the tech sector is so slow, a perhaps controversial reason, alluded to earlier in this report, might be that the nature of tech work, in general terms, simply holds more appeal to men than it does to women. Moreover, as some of the more colourful responses suggest, pursuing with the agenda of attracting more women into tech roles may well prove counter-productive in a sector which seems to pride itself on a 'colour-blind' meritocracy.

Perhaps then, the only conclusion we can come to, is that the gender divide within tech roles is equalising but attempts to accelerate this equalisation should be done tactfully, or risk back-firing altogether.