

Perspective: A solution to tech's lingering diversity problem?

Try thinking about ketchup

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Diversity is a hot, and controversial, topic in Silicon Valley. But why do so many people care about it?

At first glance, the answer may seem simple: Improving minorities' access to tech jobs is the right thing to do.

But when I moderated a panel Monday at SXSW on diversity in the tech industry, I was surprised none of the panelists talked much about what was "right."

Instead, they talked about what was right for business.

Sarah Wagener, vice president of talent acquisition and diversity at Pandora, agreed during the panel that pushing to hire more diverse candidates is the "right thing" to do.

"But," she said, "it's been the 'right thing to do' for a long time, and we're still having this conversation."

If you're trying to make the case at your company for diversifying your workforce, she said, your argument needs to be focused on "real business outcomes."

In other words, recruiting people from underrepresented backgrounds should be understood not as an obligation that could lower the bar and weigh your company down, but as an opportunity that could raise the bar, and lift your company above the competition.

Instantly, Wagener's statements reminded me of ketchup.

If you haven't heard it yet, the "ketchup question" is a thought experiment that's become something of a meme in some corners of the tech community thanks to a popular episode of the Reply All podcast. It starts as an innocent question:

Where do you keep your ketchup?

If you're like most people in the United States, odds are that you keep your ketchup in the refrigerator. But depending on where you grew up, you might keep it in the cupboard.

Imagine that you reach for the ketchup bottle and find it empty. You need a substitute sauce, and grab whatever is nearby. If that bottle is in the refrigerator, you may opt for mayo. But if it's in the cupboard, the seasoning closest at hand might be malt vinegar, or Tabasco, or salt and pepper.

Start-up culture is often centered around new ways of solving "problems" — ride-sharing apps such as Lyft and Uber solve the problem of getting around town without a car, for example. The "ketchup question" shows how a slight difference in perspective can lead a coworker toward a completely different solution that might never occur to you. That extra perspective could lead to a fresh new idea that could take your company to the top.

But without a diverse team? It's gonna be mayo every time.

What do we do about it?

Most people aren't chief executives of a major company, and may feel like they have no sway in the hiring process.

So I asked two of the panelists to give some suggestions that could be useful for employees of all levels, regardless of the industry in which they work.

Karla Monterroso, vice president of programs at Code 2040, an organization that works to place black and Latino students in engineering internships at tech companies, said that job listings could be an unexpected barrier to attracting diverse talent.

Using seemingly innocent words like "hacker" or "rockstar" in job listings could unintentionally give the impression to some women that the company would not be a hospitable place to work, said Monterroso. She recommended reading articles on the topic of bias and having informal conversations with coworkers.

More directly, she said, using these articles as "evidence" to suggest small changes in recruitment practices could be an easy first step in attracting new talent.

James Talbot, a software engineer at San Francisco web publishing startup Medium, was concerned with what happens after a new recruit is hired. He suggested using social media to follow people who have different perspectives than you, for 30 days. The key, he said, is to listen to what they have to say, simply exposing yourself to their conversations — not commenting or arguing with them.

This is important, he said, because even after a recruiter hires a person from an underrepresented community, adapting to the workplace environment can be another challenge. If people get into a job but have to deal with racist or sexist comments and insensitive treatment, they may simply leave — and take their unique perspectives and talent elsewhere.

People often say that the cause of the lack of diversity in many tech companies is the lack of an easy way to find available candidates.

"People always give excuses, saying the problem is the 'pipeline,'" Talbot said.

"But who wants to be on a pipeline into a sewer?"

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