

Impact Report:

BREAKING THROUGH: Celebrating Gains and Confronting Barriers for Women in Tech



women
tech
council



In the last decade, the journey for women in the tech industry has seen promising strides at several critical junctures, from education to boards. Beginning in high schools, targeted initiatives have significantly increased the engagement of young women in STEM subjects, fostering a foundation for future growth. This effort has translated into a higher influx of women pursuing STEM degrees at universities, encouraged by programs designed to demystify and amplify the appeal of technology fields. At the entry-level, tech companies have become increasingly conscientious about hiring and supporting women in their early careers, spurred by research underscoring the benefits of gender diversity. Moreover, the presence of women on corporate boards has seen a notable increase, reflecting a broader change in corporate governance that values diverse perspectives. This progression across the pipeline not only highlights the areas of achievement but also sets the stage for continued advancement and advocacy for women in tech.

The pathway between Director and advancement into the c-suite is riddled with invisible barriers which must be Tackled so that companies can shatter glass ceilings when it comes to the career progression of women in tech. This report highlights areas where progress has been made, and also where the path is currently blocked.

Empowering Progress: Milestones and Achievements for Women in the Tech Pipeline

REDUCING THE BARRIERS TO ENTRY

In nearly two decades, there have been a myriad of national initiatives to help girls gain early access to technology and coding. WTC's SheTech program provides early STEM education opportunities and has activated 40,000 high school girls across the Intermountain West with its in-school clubs, mentoring, internship opportunities, and annual Explorer Day Conference. 90% of high school girls say that they don't select careers in STEM because they don't know any women in tech and they don't have any role models. However, high school girls who interact with and meet STEM role models and mentors opt in to STEM degrees 50% more, based on WTC research. And research shows that girls who were engaged in a girls coding education program chose to major in computer science at 7x the national average. These community efforts are bolstered by a rise of tech education in schools.

The US public education system is keenly focused on technology education. In 2009, only 32% of schools offered computer science courses. This only increased to 35% by 2018. However, that number increased to 57% in 2023. This is a 22% increase in just five years. In 2007, less than 18% of AP Computer Science Exams were taken by female students. In 2017, AP expanded its computer science courses by adding a Computer Science Principles (CSP) course. Moving away from merely coding Java, this course aims to deepen student understanding of how software can be used across industries. The change instantly attracted more girls. A report from last year revealed that 33% of AP Computer Science exams are now taken by female students. Even more importantly, girls that take the CSP course are 3x more likely to declare a major in computer science than peers who did not take the course. While the progress of tech education was slow over the last two decades, there is evidence that growth has started to accelerate.

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STARTING CAREERS OFF RIGHT

Women starting their tech careers are entering an industry that is much more aware of the impact women have on organizations. Research from MIT found that, on average, women receive higher performance ratings than male employees. McKinsey also found that companies “leading in gender diversity” have been shown to be 25% more likely to have above-average profitability. Tech companies have also realized and are working to mitigate corporate gender bias. 97.8% of tech companies now provide managers with education focused on eliminating bias from management and performance processes. In addition, 89.6% of tech companies track promotion outcomes by gender. Companies that do employ these gender inclusive initiatives have been found to promote women at the executive level 40% more than other tech companies.

Promotion Denied: The Invisible Barriers Facing Women in Tech Leadership

Women hold only 26.7% of tech-related jobs, with an even lower percentage (24%) holding tech leadership positions. While study after study has proven how impactful women are on the industry, women are not secure in their tech careers. During the 2023 tech layoffs, women were 1.6x more likely to be let go than their male peers. Since the pandemic, 5 million women have lost their tech jobs. Women are also voluntarily leaving the industry at a 45% higher rate than men, with more than 50% quitting before the age of 35. One significant and often cited reason for departure is an egregious lack of upward mobility to higher level leadership positions. Understanding the reasons behind this unacceptable reality and increasing the promotion rate of women in tech is the next crucial focus for helping women succeed in the industry.

THE INVISIBLE BARRIERS IMPACT

There is no question that women are impacting their teams, organizations, and the entire tech industry. However, their ability to advance does not reflect their strong impact. The WTC community added insights from their own experiences to a growing body of academic and industry research as to why women are often passed over for promotion. The following are significant barriers to career advancement:

Low-promotability Workplace Tasks: Women are often assigned mentoring and culture-building roles, responsibilities overlooked in promotion assessments. This work was not considered in promotion evaluation, so women are stepping away from these roles in order to focus more on their own promotability. And women have directly communicated this in their experience. One WTC member who was leading inclusion and belonging initiatives in her company was surprised to find that her volunteer work throughout the company was not part of her performance evaluation. When she immediately stopped volunteering her time, the program was shuttered. As women leaders change their focus, companies will lose both the program and leadership in those areas.

Desire for Flexible Work: While there has been a clear demand for more flexibility in the workplace, leaders across industries have deemed remote workers as less committed and less effective employees. However, research shows women take their remote-roles seriously. On average, women are twice as likely to get promoted than their remote-working male counterparts. In addition, research found that women actually care more about being able to choose the hours they work than the location of where they work. Many WTC members have explained that they work even harder for a company that allows them flexibility. Their common desire is for companies to merely hold them accountable for their assigned work. One WTC member remarked, “I love my work. Just because I want flexibility doesn’t mean I want to work less or work less hard.”

Self-advocating is Complicated: Societal norms continue to require women to be less vocal about their needs or accomplishments. Women are even more likely to accept dry promotions, where titles change and responsibilities increase, but compensation is not upgraded. Many WTC women shared frustration regarding self-advocating. One woman shared that even when she did receive a promotion, her leaders did not announce the promotion in order to protect the feelings of another member of the organization. She was left trying to manage a team that did not know she was their leader.

Mentor Disruptions: The constant mergers and acquisitions in the tech industry means that higher level mentor relationships are often disrupted and do not necessarily lead to promotion. One WTC member shared that even when a leader had promised a hard-earned promotion, a merger meant that the leader left the company and the promotion was no longer available to her.

Different Leadership Styles: Women, on average, have a more communal leadership style characterized by stereotypical female traits like a focus on relationships, modesty, and understanding. This is counter to the predominantly male agential leadership style, distinguished by vibrant energy, strong presence, and effusive confidence, which has for centuries been associated with effective leadership. Not surprising, women’s style is often undervalued in promotability assessments. Even women’s tendency to talk more in an effort to enhance cooperation is counter to men who predominantly “use language to inform, preserve independence and compete to maintain status.” One WTC community CEO responded to a woman’s verbalized concerns about a promotion as a sign that she was uninterested or incapable of doing the job. The woman, however, was deeply disappointed that she was passed over for that promotion when she was simply seeking more information about the role.

Changing the Script

While women have done amazing work on their own to pioneer and build a solid foundation for their place in tech, it will take more advocacy from tech industry leadership for women to achieve parity. Stephen M. R. Covey posited that “[w]hile both management and leadership are vitally needed, we live in a world that is overmanaged and underled.” According to research, the majority of business leaders today (65%) utilize a command and control style. This style, however, does not serve the majority of workers, and is especially detrimental for women.

In order for companies to attract female talent and better support women, CEO’s must focus on becoming leaders that value the contributions of women in their organizations. They must adapt to the flexibility needs of the workforce, build trust and inspire others to make similar changes within the workforce.