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## Prioritizing Diversity In 2015

Posted Jan 24, 2015 by [Joelle Emerson \(@joelle\\_emerson\)](#)1,356  
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**Editor's note:** *Joelle Emerson is the co-founder and CEO of [Paradigm](#), a strategy firm that helps tech companies more effectively build diverse organizations.*

At a recent forum on diversity in tech, Google's Director of Global Diversity Talent & Inclusion, Yolanda Mangolini, explained that it is incredibly hard to move the needle on diversity by even 1 percent at Google's size. In a [blog post](#) on how to recruit more women into tech companies, Jennifer Dulski, President and COO of [Change.org](#), echoed the same sentiment, advising startup founders to think about gender diversity early in their company's formation.

Just as developing skills and habits early in life makes them far more intrinsic and

sustainable, the foundation laid early in a company's life cycle becomes ingrained, increasingly difficult to change as the organization scales. For companies that depend on innovation and build products for a diverse customer base, diversity should be understood not simply as a social imperative, but as a business priority warranting early investment. Diversity makes teams [smarter](#), leads to [better decisions](#) and helps groups [solve problems](#) more effectively. It also helps businesses better understand the needs of existing and potential customers.

Startups that want to grow into diverse companies should lay the right foundation now. Here are some specific strategies to get started in 2015.

## **Founders and leaders, get involved**

Diversity initiatives are far more successful when a leader within the organization plays an active role. When Etsy decided it needed to boost its gender diversity, for example, CTO Kellan Elliott-McCrea was involved in restructuring the company's recruiting and hiring approach. After a year, Etsy had [grown](#) the number of female engineers by almost 500 percent.

While an increasing number of startups have individuals or teams thinking about diversity internally — a step in the right direction — these roles are often filled by engineers or recruiters with a passion for diversity, but without the support and resources necessary to make meaningful changes company-wide.

*Without good data, it's difficult to know which processes in an organization are most inhibiting diversity and where strategies should be targeted to produce the best outcomes.*

At least one C-suite level executive, and preferably a founder in new companies, should be directly involved in these efforts, developing company goals around diversity, supporting and rewarding employees who dedicate their time to building a diverse organization and ensuring accountability.

At Pandora, founder Tim Westergren has been [vocal](#) about his commitment to improving the company's diversity. Pandora has [more gender diversity](#) than many of its peers and is developing and executing [a comprehensive diversity strategy](#) to do even better. By involving leaders early, a culture is created that values diversity from the top.

## Collect better data

The release of workforce diversity data from a number of tech companies in 2014 helped to quantify the industry's problem and sparked a broader conversation about solving it. (In addition to larger companies, startups like [Pinterest](#) and [Indiegogo](#) shared their diversity data and committed to doing better.)

Despite this move towards transparency, and the data-driven focus in every other aspect of startups, there is often a reluctance to collect more meaningful and granular data related to diversity. Without good data, it's difficult to know which processes in an organization are most inhibiting diversity and where strategies should be targeted to produce the best outcomes.

While the specific data points will vary, in general companies should be looking at the following areas, considering how experiences differ for women and people of color: how candidates are attracted and recruited; how work is assigned; how performance is evaluated; how much employees are paid; how employees advance in the company and when they leave; and how happy employees are. Embedding these data-collection measures early will make it far easier for companies to identify and address barriers to building a diverse organization.

## Expand your network

Tech companies often attribute their lack of diversity solely to the lack of diversity in computer science and computer engineering programs where most hiring comes from. But this pipeline problem doesn't account for the significant gap between the percentage of African-American and Hispanic graduates in computer science and computer engineering (11 percent from top research universities alone) and the representation of those groups in technical roles in Silicon Valley (around 5 percent). Nor does it explain the diversity gap in [non-technical roles](#).

Still, the lack of diversity in the technical pipeline is a significant challenge. Until that pipeline is more diverse, tech companies should prioritize finding and hiring diverse employees from sources outside their traditional networks. The process most companies use to find candidates — relying on informal social networks and referrals from current employees — is a great approach for finding more employees like the ones you already have. For a company that's not yet diverse, this can perpetuate the problem.

There are many highly qualified diverse candidates that either don't know about opportunities in tech (Tristan Walker, founder and CEO of Walker and Co., [didn't know](#) Silicon Valley existed until he was 24), or haven't had the opportunity to break in. Companies committed to diversity need to make a conscious effort to build more diverse networks and find these candidates.

*Building a diverse organization requires a focus not only on recruiting diverse candidates, but on creating a culture that welcomes and cultivates diverse employees.*

Startups like [Walker and Co.](#) and [Findery](#) have built diverse teams in part by leveraging diverse networks. Partnerships with organizations that cultivate these networks, like [Code2040](#), [Women Who Code](#), and [Hackbright Academy](#), are a great start. For startups big enough to recruit on college campuses, consider visiting schools with a more diverse candidate pool like Harvey Mudd, where 40 percent of computer science majors are women.

## **Think deliberately about your hiring process**

There is a common perception among startups that their hiring process is designed to attract and select the best person for a given role without regard for gender, race, or ethnicity, and that efforts to hire more diverse candidates require changing standards. This is based on the flawed assumption that the hiring process is purely meritocratic. In the overwhelming majority of companies, even despite best intentions, it's not.

For example, job descriptions may unintentionally deter women by using male pronouns, including words that evoke masculine stereotypes ("rock star," "ninja"), and listing qualifications that are not actually required for the role (women are far [less likely](#) than men to apply for a job unless they meet all of the listed qualifications). [Twilio's](#) job descriptions offer a great example of how to avoid these pitfalls while emphasizing company values that actually support diversity, like mentoring and a belief in work/life balance.

Social and psychological factors like unconscious bias and stereotype threat can also hinder success in the recruiting process for diverse candidates who do apply. Unconscious bias can lead interviewers to unintentionally apply different standards to

diverse and non-diverse candidates, and stereotype threat can result in highly qualified, diverse candidates not performing to their full potential because of anxiety that they will confirm negative stereotypes about their social group. Awareness of these issues, and a focus on strategies that minimize their impact, will lead to more effective recruiting of diverse candidates and better hiring decisions overall.

## Create a company culture that supports diverse employees

The high [attrition rate](#) among women in tech and the lack of diversity in leadership roles in tech companies indicate that there are obstacles to success for women and people of color in the industry. Building a diverse organization requires a focus not only on recruiting diverse candidates, but on creating a culture that welcomes and cultivates diverse employees.

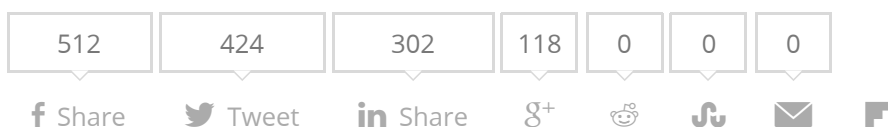
Creating such a culture should include establishing explicit structures that support diverse employees, like better paid leave for new parents — a benefit that significantly [reduced women's attrition](#) at Google. ([Change.org](#) and Reddit have [great paid leave policies](#), offering 18 weeks and 17 weeks, respectively, for all new parents.) It should also include strategies to interrupt the implicit barriers, like [gender-biased performance reviews](#), that make it harder for diverse employees to be successful.

There is a growing body of research on how to disrupt obstacles to diversity like unconscious bias; companies should use that research to develop efforts that go beyond [raising awareness](#) and focus on actually changing behavior.

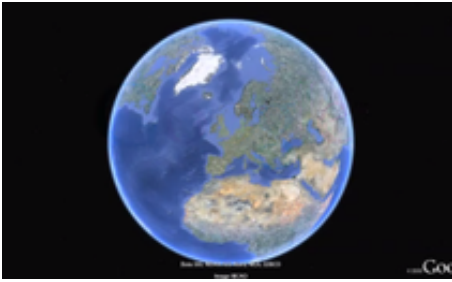
Instead of waiting to be in the position that larger tech companies are in now — investing heavily in diversity to achieve only incremental change — startups should leverage the inherent advantage of their youth and begin focusing on diversity today.

FEATURED IMAGE: [KARELNOPPE/SHUTTERSTOCK](#)

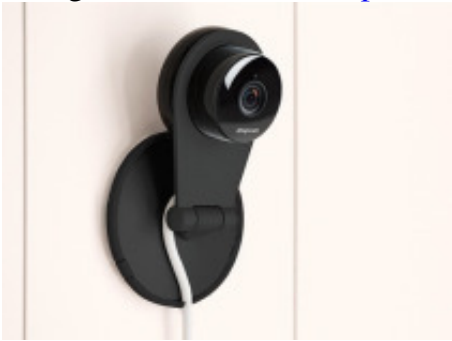
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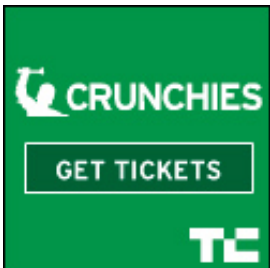
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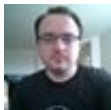
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**Jaron Rolfe** · Top Commenter · Site Reliability Engineer at Pinterest

As long as you're treating people with different skin colors like pokemon that have to be caught you're not making very good strides towards a diverse team.

It's true that teams with people from diverse backgrounds perform better than homogenous ones, but at what point do we grow up enough to look beyond skin color and genitals? People who look the same can have drastically different lives, just as people who look very different may have grown up as neighbors and gone to the same schools and had all of the same friends.

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**Jeremy Wagner-Kaiser** · Top Commenter · San Francisco, California

I find it interesting that diversity is being regarded as a goal in and of itself. Perhaps I am wrong, but I was under the impression that diversity itself is not a product that people pay for, and that there are larger goals than diversity.

I'm aware of the "diverse teams perform better" research. I'm also aware that it's not that simple and the effects are not uniform across all scenarios. Nor are the costs zero.

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**Micah Chiri** · Top Commenter · Minneapolis, Minnesota · 151 followers

What's your point? What are the larger goals? Are they mutually exclusive? You sound like you're trying hard to rationalize your fear of diversity by speaking in meaningless generalities. You presented no actual point of substance to speak of but apparently still felt you needed to comment about it.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · January 26 at 12:48am



**Jeremy Wagner-Kaiser** · Top Commenter · San Francisco, California



**Micah Chiri**

You misread me badly. Might I suggest just asking next time, without the hostile speculation upon my motives or misplaced accusations?

The goal is to produce better products and services for a minimum of cost and effort. It's not necessarily clear that diversity is inherently in alignment with that goal. Certainly, the measures discussed such as scholarships run directly counter to the minimum of cost and effort criterion.

The point is that diversity is not the end-goal for the companies at hand. That is a point of substance.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · 1 · January 26 at 8:46am



**James Gazin** · Top Commenter · Dallas / Fort Worth, TX

"Diversity makes teams smarter, leads to better decisions and helps groups solve problems more effectively. "

Would you please substantiate this statement? From my experience, a cohesive and relatively homogenous group with a common goal makes much better decisions than a purposely diverse group ever could. Diversity, for instance, did not put men on the Moon. The pursuit of diversity for its own sake produces nothing but chaos.

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**Laura Gluhanich** · Top Commenter · Michigan

[https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=diversity+in+teams&hl=en&as\\_sdt=0&as\\_vis=1&oi=scholar&sa=X&ei=VCDEVJfUN4bVoAScniHoDA&ved=0CBsQgQMwAA](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=diversity+in+teams&hl=en&as_sdt=0&as_vis=1&oi=scholar&sa=X&ei=VCDEVJfUN4bVoAScniHoDA&ved=0CBsQgQMwAA)

Research seems to show that indeed, diversity of background (vs expertise) is better for solving new problems or exploring new areas, whereas less diversity is better for implementing known solutions.

Now please provide more than an unsubstantiated anecdote supporting your perspective.

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**Laura Gluhanich** · Top Commenter · Michigan

Brandon Phillips - there's statistical proof that women and non-white sounding names aren't called for interviews or offered jobs across the board, with otherwise the exact same resumes.

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**Brandon Phillips** · Top Commenter

Laura Gluhanich - If I'm understanding that correctly, the same exact resumes were used with altered names to mimic women and non-White sounding names. Is that correct? Is it possible to determine from the data whether the resume was overlooked because of the name or because of the familiarity of the resume and its structure? When using non-White sounding names, did it include foreign White sounding names like German and Swedish names? Were they also overlooked? And, is it possible, from the data, to determine whether the individuals were overlooked because they didn't meet the criteria that the manager was looking for or solely on their name? Finally, what were the ratio of White sounding names to non-White sounding names? And, what was the ratio of male names to female names?

This would have to be some very convincing data to read the minds of HR, hiring managers, and interviewers in this "conspiracy" that's being surfaced. I'm going to go ahead and search for this data to see if I can answer my own questions, but I hope you all considered them as well.

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**Brandon Phillips** · Top Commenter

I agree that diversity is an asset and that companies might be able to gain more insights that could potentially lead to better innovation. I believe that this is the case especially when the target market is well-represented among their employees. especially management teams. Nevertheless. I don't doubt



...not represented among their employees, especially management teams. Nevertheless, some suggest that the same benefits can be achieved through good market research and analysis when diversity is low. I also don't regard low diversity as "bad" if the business practices leading to it don't suggest discrimination.

This article seems heavily biased toward the authors profession and the goals of her company. However, it doesn't properly identify whether the call-to-action should be on companies offering jobs or job seekers qualified for jobs being offered. It doesn't even touch on how "focusing on diversity" can be perceiv... [See More](#)

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**Emmanuel Kelechi Ndekwe** · San Jose, California

I wasn't surprised when I read a blogger saying he feels comfortable hiring his kind over people of color. I live in silicon valley, majority of the big name companies uses unconscious bias to recruit. He may not fit the culture or friends reference are the major forms most employers use in their hiring process.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · January 27 at 2:08am

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*Posted Jan 24, 2015*

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