WHY WE NEED MORE WOMEN OF COLOR IN TECH

Susanne Tedrick

One of the important duties in my job is helping my customers figure out "why."

Asking you to considering a career in tech prompts the same question. Of the career fields and options available, why should you, as a woman of color, pursue a career in technology? More specifically, why should you pursue this career field considering the well-known, heavily researched, and persistent challenges we continue to face in the field?

To be honest, I struggled with how to effectively answer that question every day while writing my new book, *Women of Color in Tech*. I deal with many of the issues raised in the book, and more, such as the following:

- Keeping up with dynamic and complex technology areas, while balancing what's demanded of me daily at work and home.

- Dealing with the occasional insensitive comment made by the ignorant and the unpleasant, rooted in misconceptions about my race and gender, and then wrestling with whether to respond and be dubbed as "sensitive" or let the comment stand but let it slowly eat away at my spirit.

- Seeing many people willing to give easy praise and "advice," but few willing to publicly advocate on my behalf professionally. There are people who say they are allies but whose words, actions, and motivations reveal anything but.

- Being the only one like me in the room and sometimes feeling tokenized.

- For the women of color peers I do have, sadly watching them leave for other industries because they've simply had enough.

- Feeling like I had to work 10 times harder to be taken seriously, let alone advance in my career, and feeling pressure to always exude perfection rather than vulnerability.

Some days, as I was writing the book, it was tough to get excited about what I do, and I kept thinking, *If I can't be excited about why I'm in tech and why I stay, then how can I inspire someone else to take this path?*

My "why"—what inspired me to come to tech and to stay—is that it is one of the few career fields that fully utilized my interests, skills, and passions. While I face challenges, and not always of the good, constructive kind, I am fully engaged. I love getting lost in my work, learning new things, and never having two days that are the same. I love what I do, and that love and the benefits I've received far outweigh any challenges that have come my way. It is also, among the societal upheavals we're currently facing, one of the most stable and constructive fields to be in, and a way to make a difference.

Tech is a field full of creativity, research, and discovery, where innovations can be used to solve the world's most pressing problems. Essential and purposeful work is being done all throughout the tech sector, and I love being part of the solution.

More importantly to me, I want to make the path easier for the future generations of female tech leaders. When they see other women of color out there making it happen, despite the difficulties, they know that these opportunities are out there for them, and they know that they truly are not alone, because we will always be there and have their backs.

It is not an easy path, but it can be a richly rewarding one—for your mind, your heart, and, hopefully, your wallet! And really, is there any path that is easy for us? I hope that you'll bring your talents and energies to the field, because you belong here, and you are very much needed.

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THE CURRENT STATE OF WOMEN OF COLOR IN TECH

It is probably no surprise to you that there is a lack of women in technical careers in the United States. If you perform a general web search on "women in technology," you will find numerous articles, studies, podcasts, and more that point out this deficiency. In a 2019 study from the National Center for Women and Information Technology (NCWIT), the number of women in computing professions has remained relatively stagnant at 25 percent since 2007. While tech companies have made strides in increasing the number of women in technical roles, it's disappointing considering that women make up nearly 60 percent of the total US workforce. What does not get reported, or at least not very often, is the lack of women of color in technical roles.

In the NCWIT study, it denoted that the percentage of African American/Black women in computing professions has increased to 12.9 percent in 2017. This is wonderful in many ways, as the numbers were considerably lower for many years, but there has been a negative migration of women in general occurring at some top tech companies. That means that more women are leaving tech companies and careers than staying in them.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission reports that women held only 26 percent of computing roles in 2013, a 9 percent decrease from 1990. The breakdown by race is also dismal. In a study of the career and economic progress of minorities in top technology companies by the Ascend Foundation, the number of Black women in technical professions declined by 13 percent over a 12-year period.

For women of color who do make it into a technical career, the workplaces they enter may not be completely welcoming or made with them in mind.

The most problematic workplaces are the ones that have low representations of people of color in general. In such workplaces, the few present are usually in lower-level, non-managerial positions—positions that require more routine, have less complex actions, tend to pay lower, and have limited opportunities for advancement. You would typically find most of these types of positions in administrative support, facilities management, operations, and customer service.

Almost all employees of color, regardless of their function within an organization, have to deal with *explicit bias* (when someone engages in direct verbal or physical harassment against you based on their held beliefs and attitudes) or *implicit bias* or *microaggressions* (when someone is not conscious enough to recognize that their behaviors and attitudes are harmful yet exhibits them anyway). According to Deloitte's 2019 State of Inclusion (a survey conducted at companies with more than 1,000 full-time employees), 63 percent of African American respondents and 46 percent of women respondents reported experiencing bias at least once within the year from when the survey was taken. I wish those numbers were surprising.

Years ago, at a previous employer, I remember coming to work the day after Christmas. A few minutes after I got settled for the workday, one of my white, male colleagues approached my desk. He asked why I was in the office, to which I replied simply (although baffled) that the office was open. He then replied, "But it's Kwanzaa. Did they make you come into work today?" I did not know how to respond. On the one hand, you can argue that the colleague meant no harm and was concerned that my civil liberties were being violated. Yet, it is also true that he was making a racist observation because I was the only Black person in the office. In the interest of ending this episode quickly and without incident, I simply said I don't celebrate Kwanzaa.

This seemed to floored him—how could I not celebrate Kwanzaa? How could I not be knowledgeable about Kwanzaa? From there, he felt it his "duty" to inform me on the background and importance of the holiday by coming back to my desk, at least five more times throughout the day, to tell me why and how Kwanzaa is celebrated.

When I tell this story now to friends and others, it's usually in a humorous *"Really? Seriously?"* tone. But, in retrospect, there were many things wrong with this interaction, and because I was a minority in every sense of the word at that place, I did not feel empowered or safe talking about it with Human Resources or anyone else with authority in the company. And when I was let go due to budget cuts, I was secretly relieved. That is not a good situation for me or the company, and it is just one of many problems people of color and women are likely to encounter.

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Tokenism, when someone is hired more for the sake of appearances than whether the organization believes in your abilities, also occurs. This is likelier to happen in organizations that employ affirmative action in their recruiting and hiring methods or look to achieve certain placement goals in hopes of increasing diversity.

Affirmative action itself generates a ton of debate; many argue that race and gender should not be considered in hiring decisions, that only the person with the most skills should be hired. Yet, as a society, we have more or less agreed that women and people of color have been disadvantaged even before they could enter the American workforce and do not have access to the same opportunities that white males do, and therefore, accommodations need to be made for an equal playing field. As someone who had been told by another previous employer that I was an "affirmative action hire," I can tell you how belittling and humiliating it feels. While I was doing well in my job and had gotten along with my white male colleagues for the better part of two years, it hurt to learn that I wasn't their first, second, or even third choice, that the only reason I got the position was that Human Resources intervened and insisted that I be hired. And I still believe it was the right thing to do, not just for the sake of diversity, but because I was the best choice—the most skilled in many different ways.

Then, there are the issues of pay and advancement. Historically, women and people of color have made less than their white male counterparts. For every dollar earned, women of color average 64 cents for every dollar a man makes. For Black women, they earn 61 cents for every dollar. It sadly is not much better in technical professions. Men are offered more pay for the same role that a woman takes 60 percent of the time; Black women averaged 89 cents for every dollar their white male counterparts made.

It should not be surprising that women of color are leaving tech jobs. The *Tech Leavers Study*, a study by the Kapor Center for Social Impact, highlighted that the experiences of women of color are dramatically different than their white peers. Thirty percent of women of color respondents claimed that they were passed over for promotions, and 24 percent reported being stereotyped. Thirty-six percent of the women of color cited unfairness as their primary reason for leaving their jobs.

Seventeen percent were subjected to what is called the cross-race effect, where they were mistaken for another person of the same race or gender. Although these inter-actions may be unintended, people who commit these mistakes (usually someone who is not of a person of color) downplay just how harmful and offensive these blunders can be to the person on the receiving end. It can solidify that they are not seen as a person to be valued or respected.

This is not to say that this path (or these experiences) is true for every woman of color. Every woman's path to tech is remarkably different. Some women have fully supportive environments and communities from the time they're born. Others transition into tech after having worked in completely different fields.

But when we examine the entire pipeline of bringing women of color into tech, it's clear that there are significant "leaks" in the pipes. It's clear that women of color are challenged at almost every stage of their journey, and the likelihood of their success is small. Just as there is no single reason for the lack of women in color in tech, there is also no single fix to this complex problem. But one of the fixes may just be for more women of color to enter the field.

WHY YOU SHOULD BE HERE

I realize that the picture I have painted so far is a bleak and depressing one. You might be asking yourself why on earth I would subject myself to a field that has typically been non-welcoming to women of color and where the support structures are iffy, at best.

For all the negative news and statistics, there really is no greater time for us to be here. I'd like to share with you why by sharing my journey to tech.

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MY JOURNEY TO TECH

Prior to starting my technology career, I was in an entirely different profession and industry. For many years, I worked in mostly administrative and support positions within the financial services industry. My duties were wide ranging and diverse—they ranged from answering telephones, greeting guests, and ordering office supplies, to coordinating travel for managers and reconciling invoices.

I was good at my job. My managers and colleagues complimented me often on how hardworking and committed I was to my job, and I was well liked. My pay and benefits were good, I received modest raises, and I enjoyed relatively good job stability, meaning I didn't think that I'd lose my job due to a company not performing well financially.

But as good as all of that was, I didn't enjoy my work—at all. Those types of jobs are negatively described as being in the "pink-collar ghetto." Jobs like these are primarily held by women, had mostly routine and, well, boring work to be done, and had limited pay-increase potential or advancement opportunities. In administrative support and similar roles, you have little control in how you perform your work and the type of work you get to perform.

I also did not enjoy the industry. Like the tech industry, sadly, women of color are underrepresented in financial services. While careers in financial services can pay well, they can also be stressful. There are many rules and regulations that companies in this industry must follow, and in some ways, this limits the amount of creativity one can have in approaching their job.

I mistakenly kept changing jobs, thinking that it was the pay, culture, or some other outside factor that was contributing to my career unhappiness. At some point, I had to stop and ask myself, "Why am I doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result?" Why was I sticking to a career path that was not serving me well? Why was I trying to conform to an industry that I had no interest in and taking roles that were only going to make me miserable in the end?

It was after my first year in my last admin/financial services job when I decided I had to stop and deeply examine where my interests were, what I wanted and needed out of my career, and where I ultimately wanted to grow. The tech field was always something I had given some thought to but never really fleshed out. I knew that I was always drawn to technology; I always took apart my parents' appliances (much to their annoyance) to see how they worked. I always loved playing on the computer to see what I could do with it, and always kept up to speed on technology news.

But I had always thought to myself, "Was interest alone going to help me land a tech career?" My math and science grades were so-so, and up to that point, I had no formal technology training of any kind. And what kind of options did I have? Was becoming a coder the only route I could take?

The answers to these questions were not going to come overnight or easily. For many months, I thought about my interests, strengths, weaknesses, and goals. I thought about what I knew that I could already bring to the table for an employer, as well as what I needed to learn. I thought about the time and money investment it was going to take. I researched, networked often, and revised my plans repeatedly as needed.

I ended up going back to school while working, studying a field that gave me a broad overview of information technology while allowing me to refine my communications skills at Northwestern University. I used much of my vacation and holiday time from work not only to study but to attend conferences, interviews, boot camps, and the like. I did homework during lunch breaks or before the start of a full workday, only to go to class for several hours in the same evening. I did volunteer work whenever possible to apply and strengthen the technical skills I learned in the classroom. I had to juggle family obligations, while also missing out on events with friends and family, and while I was financially in a better position than others with similar situations, funds were still extremely limited. I was lucky if I got six hours of sleep in a given evening, and to say that I was tired was a huge understatement.

I did this for about three years before starting my current job in technology. Was it hard? Absolutely. I'd say that my journey into tech was one of the top five hardest things I've ever had to do in my entire life. Was It worth it, and would I do it again? Yes, and yes, with a few changes.

I now get to work with some of the latest emerging technologies. Instead of following orders without input, my thoughts and contributions are sought after and welcomed. Instead of following the technology news, I help make it. I get to help clients make meaningful technology decisions that will impact their business. I have met some wonderful people who serve as mentors, colleagues, and lifelong friends. I've had great opportunities to share my experiences, mentor people, and travel all over. Finally, the salary for my first tech job was double that of my highest-paying administrative job, and I have far more ways that I can advance my career than had I stayed an office manager or a client service representative.

My work can be challenging, and yes, sometimes both my race and gender can make some of those challenges feel more pronounced. But this is the first time in my life where I can honestly say that I am engaged with my work in a meaningful way. I feel that I have a fulfilling career versus having a soul-crushing, dead-end job.

IT'S (SLOWLY) GETTING BETTER

It's important to keep in perspective that many great strides and efforts have been made to make tech open to everyone who wants a seat at the table. Increasing the diversity in tech workplaces may not be progressing as quickly as we'd like, but we have come a considerable way. In our society, we are having the hard conversations with one another surrounding gender, race, equity, and fairness. We're looking at the undeniable figures that indicate the work that's yet to be done. We're continuing to do the things that we do well and either tweaking what we need to improve or getting rid of ideologies or practices that are hindering making tech hospitable for all.

For all the negative news and statistics, there really is no greater time for us to be here.

WE NEED YOU!

Simply put, we need more diverse representation at all levels to address the current technological challenges our society is facing. In the case of artificial intelligence (AI), businesses are using it more, through chatbots and other means, for low-level tasks— tasks that they believe are repetitive and do not generate a lot of money for them. By automating many of these tasks, and not requiring a lot of human interaction, businesses can save money on overhead costs, salaries, and more.

That's great for the business, but that isn't exactly great for everyone. Let's take the example of someone applying for a business loan at a traditional bank or lending institution. If a person applies and is, let's say, rejected or offered a higher interest rate than what they expected, a person can speak directly with a lending officer to find out why they took that course of action and could potentially negotiate or compromise to reach an agreement.

If a bank or lender uses an AI interface alone to process a loan application, the process to approval or rejection may happen faster. But, if the development team behind the AI application inadvertently programs their own gender and race biases, or those of society as a whole into it, applicants from specific demographics may experience higher rates of rejection or discrimination than others. As the process is automatic, rarely is there a human being that you can speak to in order to contest or change the decision.

Development teams at these institutions, who are likely to be white and male, may not realize that they are entering their own biases when building algorithms to determine whether an applicant should get a mortgage. They tend to have the same background,

experiences, and ways of thinking that put people who are outside of this scope at a severe disadvantage. Women and people of color areat a distinct disadvantage.

Where major financial decisions are involved, like buying a home and trying to start a business, women and people of color have had a historically difficult time obtaining funding. Women-owned companies receive 33 percent loan approvals in comparison to those that are male owned, and those that are people of color get far fewer approvals. In 2017, Black women led start-ups were only able to raise .0006 percent of the venture capital they needed for their business (not even a full percent!). And independent, decision-making AI systems that have biased algorithms have the potential of making this situation much worse.

One of the best and most effective ways to combat this and to ensure that systems are designed properly is to have diverse development teams, made up of people who come from different educational, economic, and social backgrounds. This ensures that AI systems are designed to serve a wider population, not just a select few.

As girls of color get older and enter tech in greater numbers, the idea of a nonwhite female software engineer or data scientist won't seem like a weird or foreign concept. When women of color in these fields become more common and not an exception or anomaly, they will become confident that those career fields are accessible and possible for them.

Lastly, as you go through this journey, always know in your heart that you are worthy and deserving of a seat at the table that is tech, if that is what you want. I know in my heart you have what it takes to be successful. **Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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