A MAN’S WORLD: CHALLENGING GENDER STEREOTYPES IN THE TECH SECTOR
With men dominating higher managerial positions in Europe’s technology sector, there has been no shortage of calls for greater female empowerment in the industry.

Hearing from a cross-section of female leaders in the business and political worlds, this report covers a recent event in Brussels designed to raise the issue of gender equality in the bloc’s technology sector, in a bid to encourage women from all walks of life to have the confidence to pursue ambitious and enterprising leadership roles in tech.
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Gabriel: Women ‘continue to face obstacles’ in tech sector

The tech sector needs to take the lead on gender equality
Tech firms in Europe are ‘losing out’ on a wide range of talent and diversity due to their reluctance to hire women across all levels of management, the EU Commissioner for Innovation and Research, Mariya Gabriel has said.

Speaking at an online event entitled Equality in Business Leadership in the Digital Sector on Wednesday (13 May), Gabriel noted how this loss also affects the potential of European businesses to remain competitive on the global stage.

“Women in Europe are continuing to face obstacles,” Gabriel said at the event, which was hosted by technology trade association Digital Europe. “And Europe is not only losing our talent and our diversity, women-led companies are in better positions to understand female customers, who influence 85% of consumer decisions globally.”

Specifically, Gabriel noted how Europe should look to “intervene” in the period between secondary school and university, where she believes many young women are diverging from the path of gaining skills that equip them for life in Europe’s digital sector, and that even if they do gain a foothold in the industry, they are held back from charting out a clear career path.

“The growth of women in tech careers is being held back,” she said. “More than 5% of women over 35 in the tech sector remain in junior level positions.”

As a result of this, Gabriel poured cold water over the notion that the Commission should come out with

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further frameworks as a means of fostering female empowerment in the tech sector, but instead adopt a more practical approach to the issue.

"Let’s not talk about huge strategies or declarations, let’s find out about the concrete ways to help women."

Earlier in March this year, the European Commission adopted its Gender Equality Strategy.

The more specific challenges outlined in the strategy include putting an end to gender-based violence; closing gender gaps in the labour market; addressing gender pay gaps; and achieving gender balance in decision-making and in politics – an area which came into play as part of the composition of the most gender-balanced college of Commissioners in history.

One particular area that the executive will look to legislate on is proposing binding pay transparency measures by the end of 2020.

Elsewhere, Gabriel cited several EU-led initiatives aimed at fostering female empowerment in the tech sector.

The executive’s Digital strategy published earlier this year highlights the priority of ensuring women have more ‘rewarding careers’ in the tech sector, and that the industry should actively and fairly ensure that women are able to participate in the bloc’s digital transition.

"More women can and must have rewarding careers in tech, and European tech needs to benefit from women’s skills and competences," the strategy states. "The digital transition must be fair and just and encourage women to fully take part."

Moreover, Gabriel also cited the EU Prize for Women Innovators, an award that recognises women working on inventive solutions to modern problems.

**LIFE STORIES**

More broadly, the event featured a cross-section of female leaders who shared some personal anecdotes on their trials and tribulations in making their way to the top.

Elisa Garcia Díaz, Head of R&T Cooperations at Airbus, reflected on the structural ‘unconscious bias’ against young women that was evident early in her career, while Maria Nikkila, Head of Digitalisation Unit at Finland’s Ministry of Finance, also placed responsibility at the hands of women themselves, who may feel discouraged by the lack of prospects for job progression in their career.

"Women are not aiming high unless they want to become really successful," she said.

In more a more personal anecdote, meanwhile, Hilary Mine, VP & Market Unit Leader Nordics, Baltics & Benelux at Nokia, noted how the social and economic challenges of her early life primed her well for an ambitious future, which eventually led her to embark on enterprising projects in her academic and professional career, including digitising her college newspaper at a time in which the online news industry was a platform reserved only for the largest of mass-media outlets.

A creative and bold spirit early on in life and the importance for both young men and women to take risks, is something that Marianne Dahl Steensen, Vice President at Microsoft, Western Europe, also noted the importance of.

"Early on, you need to fail," she said. "When you are on the other side you become braver and so much better at your job. Make failures in the beginning of your career and learn from them."

For her part, Director-General DIGITALEUROPE, Cecilia Bonefeld-Dahl, attempted to make the business case for having women employed in management-level roles.

"The higher you get the less women there are," she said. "It’s even a good business case to have a diverse management team. It’s a shame not to use all the talents we have."
Europe still has a gender problem in business. Data from the European Institute for Gender Equality suggests that amongst Europe’s largest listed companies, only 8% are led by female CEOs. Less than a fifth of executives are women, and only a third of managers. In short, women are still a minority in leadership positions.

Cecilia Bonefeld-Dahl is Director General of DIGITALEUROPE, the leading digital technology industry association representing over 35,000 digital companies Europe.

And yet, all over the planet women have proven themselves to be capable leaders. Just look at some of the most successful government responses to the Coronavirus crisis – in Germany, Finland, New Zealand and Taiwan.

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What do all these places have in common? A woman in charge, of course.

**So what is stopping talented women from breaking through?**

Partly it is a problem of perception. The idea of a strong male leader still looms large in our culture. This is not just about what men think. Shockingly, less than half of women in developed countries like France, Germany and Italy said that they would ‘feel very comfortable with a female CEO in charge of a major company in my country’, according to the Reykjavik Index for Leadership.

Throughout my career, I have faced comments that men in my position will never. As a young woman working in the tech sector in the 2000s, I remember being told by our CEO that he would never hire a male PA because ‘that is one job where women are just better by nature’. On another occasion at a board meeting, my concerns about the worrying signs in the global economy were dismissed with jokes and I was informed that ‘women are worried creatures’. The year was 2008, and two months later the crisis hit Europe.

Having good role models is essential for women in business. As a young person searching for one's identity, you mirror others. For me, that person was my mother, who is a renowned professor and scientist. She was a real frontrunner in an age where the social pressures were even greater than anything my generation has experienced, supported all the way by my father.

Many women suffer from a lack of role models. This is why on Wednesday we hosted an online event on women in the tech sector. I was thrilled to have Commissioner Mariya Gabriel with us – a real champion of both women’s leadership and the digital sector in the EU. Alongside her we had an impressive range of top female executives: Elisa Garcia Diaz, Head of R&T Cooperations at Airbus, Pastora Valero, VP at Cisco, Anja Monrad, Senior VP at Dell, Marianne Dahl, VP at Microsoft, Hilary Mine, VP at Nokia and Cynthia Sanfilippo, VP L’Oréal, as well as Maria Nikkila from the Finnish Ministry of Finance.

One of the most important takeaways from the event was that there must be at least 30% women in leadership roles before female leaders are considered normal. Until then there are often unconscious biases that lead to men employing mini versions of themselves. In addition, we learned that it is often the large global tech companies that are at the forefront of gender issues, with the smaller European companies somewhat lagging behind. Finally, there is a fundamental need for more women in cyber security, where diverse teams have been shown to be much more effective at catching cyber attacks.

In the tech sector, the problem of gender inequality is deep-rooted. According to Eurostat, fewer than two in ten ICT specialists’ jobs in Europe are held by women. Typically, girls do as well as or outperform boys in sciences and maths, but then something happens and their interest starts to wane by the age of 15.

In DIGITALEUROPE’s 2019 manifesto I made it our objective to boost the percentage of women working as ICT specialists from 1% to 6% by 2025. We are key partners in Women4IT, a pan-European pilot project that will train 700 girls across 7 countries and help 1000 more find a digital job that could fit for them. After this pilot phase, it is hoped that this can be scaled up to reach thousands more young women who could potentially be interested in a job as a web developer, a data analyst or a graphic designer.

To me, gender equality is about giving everybody the same opportunities in their career. As the Director-General of DIGITALEUROPE, I am proud of our diverse team. Neither age nor gender are relevant for promotions and salaries, just skills and talent.

Inequality in any industry is bad for business; a lot of talent is going to waste. It’s also bad for wider society because it increases the likelihood of bad decisions being made concerning products and services that millions of women will use. In her book Invisible Women, author Caroline Criado-Perez highlights the fact that in car crashes women are 50% more likely to be seriously hurt. Why? Because crash dummies are designed like men’s bodies.

This is also a problem in our sector, where code is often written and products conceived by gender imbalanced teams. Will software that has been designed solely by male computer programmers be the best possible product it could be? Equality isn’t just about helping women, it’s about being better businesspeople.

Achieving a more equal representation in the tech sector and the wider business community should not be seen as a burden but as an opportunity. We have so much more to gain than we have to lose. The way to get there is through businesses and governments working together and through women inspiring other women.

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