

Women Leaders in Technology: Are We There Yet?

November 2019 – Connie Moore

Do you remember riding in the car when you were a kid, and after an hour or two you, your siblings, your friends, and even the dog would join in the chorus of, “are we there yet?”

I think back on childhood vacations, driving with my sisters and parents on the never-ending trip from North Carolina to Florida, every time I attend a high-tech conference and spy the lineup of men on the main stage.

When it comes to women leaders in technology, I keep wondering, “are we there yet?”

The hard truth is no – we aren’t even close.¹

Women have many more hours and hundreds of miles to go on their career “road trip” before their professional dreams and aspirations become a reality, and before women leaders in technology achieve gender parity.² (And

as we’ll see, this oversight could be bad for business and unintentionally add to a negative work culture for women.) A look at the statistics for women in leadership across all businesses is discouraging:

- **In 2017, only 6% of top executives in Fortune 100 companies were women.**³
- **Between 2017 and 2018, the number of female CEOs in the Fortune 500 dropped by a whopping 25%, from 32 to 24.**⁴
- **Women held just 18% of S&P 1500 board seats in 2016.**⁵

The numbers for women leaders in technology are equally disheartening:

- **Currently, women represent only 5% of leadership positions in the tech sector.**⁶
- **Women hold 11% of executive positions at Silicon Valley companies, and only 7% of partners at the top 100 venture capital firms are women.**⁷
- **In 2016, 43% of the 150 highest-earning public companies in Silicon Valley had no executive officers who were women.**⁸
- **Women represent only 20% of engineering graduates and just 11%**




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of practicing engineers. Plus, the percentage of women majoring in computer science has dipped to 18% from 37% in the mid-1980s.⁹

You may be wondering what prompted this lament. The answer is, even though the number of women leaders in tech companies is low, they do exist and they should be on stage at conferences.

Every year when I go to high-tech conferences, I allow myself to hope there will be more (or any) women in leadership roles on the main stage. My hopes are always dashed to smithereens. All too often, these high-tech companies feature a truly impressive lineup of their all-male C-suite executives, bolstered by a bevy of male C-suite executives from their customers. Too many conference organizers forget to include a single woman speaker in the main tent. Or (maybe even worse), they reach down into the organization and find a mid-level female manager to demo the firm's latest, greatest software. This is sad and pathetic, particularly since there are usually significant numbers of women in the audience (20-30%, I would guess).

I find myself wondering why they don't see how wrong this is, and how unsettling it is to women in the audience. It's a glaring blind spot, the same one that keeps women from being encouraged, coached, mentored, and promoted into leadership positions. Harkening back to the road trip analogy, women will never "get there" unless there's a proactive effort to make sure women get what they've earned: a

crack at the next rung in the ladder. But right now, having just attended several conferences, I'd settle for seeing some impressive women leaders take the stage.

I have chaired plenty of conferences in my career. If I had anything to do with planning these high-tech conferences, I would ensure that women executives from the company and at least one of its customers are on stage. (I made this my life's work as a conference chair.) And if there wasn't anyone to draw upon, I wouldn't stop there. I'd check if the firm had a female board member (highly unlikely) and if all else failed, I'd hire a high-powered speaker who is a woman and an authority in the field.

I know this is only one small part of the overall gender-equity picture, but companies should never underestimate how important it is to put women leaders on stage at their main events. Here are just a few reasons why:

- **Many of the high-tech companies' customers that are sitting in the audience are also women who are forming an overall impression of the vendors on stage.** Even if the negative impact is subliminal, this failure to include women execs could be a deal-killer. And if not a deal-killer, the all-male lineup still may create a lasting negative impression.
- **This could send a negative message to the hosting firms' women employees.** Often, there are women in the audience who are executives at the firms hosting the conferences (their CMOs, for example),

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who are not asked to be speakers. It's demoralizing to women when they see other women passed by, and it could cause the most promising of employees to decide that a firm isn't good for their long-term future.

- **Conferences are often covered in social media, blog posts, and print media.** In other words, the events are amplified by other outlets. Showcasing women execs and having that exposure show up in social media is a great recruiting tool for attracting the best and brightest women as employees – as well as men who support gender equity.
- **Women influencers (e.g., press, industry analysts, bloggers) are also in the main tent sessions getting an overall impression of the firm's commitment to gender equality.** If they don't see women execs on the stage, their impression may be less than positive.

I just heard a quote from the late Rep. Elijah Cummings: *"the cost of doing nothing isn't nothing."* In this situation, the cost of doing nothing could be quite high if a company loses a deal, doesn't put its best foot forward with the press and influencers, or never gets that really brainy applicant because she decided another firm would be more gender-aware and provide better opportunities.

"Are we there yet?" Hell no. But we've got to start somewhere, and this oversight is not that hard to fix. Really folks, it's not.

Endnotes

- 1 "The Latest Stats on Women in Tech," The Muse, <https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-latest-stats-on-women-in-tech>
- 2 For recent statistics on female employees in top high-tech companies, see Felix Richter, "The Tech World Is Still a Man's World," Statista, March 8, 2019, <https://www.statista.com/chart/4467/female-employees-at-tech-companies/>
- 3 Jena McGregor, "The number of women CEOs in the Fortune 500 is at an all-time high – of 32," *The Washington Post*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2017/06/07/the-number-of-women-ceos-in-the-fortune-500-is-at-an-all-time-high-of-32/>
- 4 Valentina Zarya, "The Share of Female CEOs in the Fortune 500 Dropped by 25% in 2018," *Fortune*, May 21, 2018, <http://fortune.com/2018/05/21/women-fortune-500-2018/>
- 5 David A. Bell and Kristine M. Di Bacco, "Gender Diversity in Silicon Valley: A Comparison of Silicon Valley Public Companies and Large Public Companies," https://www.fenwick.com/FenwickDocuments/Gender_Diversity_2016.pdf
- 6 Kasee Bailey, "The State of Women in Tech 2019," Dreamhost, March 7, 2019, <https://www.dreamhost.com/blog/state-of-women-in-tech/>
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 "The Women's Leadership Gap," Center for American Progress, November 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2018/11/20/461273/womens-leadership-gap-2/>
- 9 Ibid.

About Deep Analysis

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Connie Moore is Vice President and Principal Analyst at Deep Analysis. She joined the firm after four years as Senior Vice President, Research, at Digital Clarity Group, and more than twenty years as Research Director and Vice President at Forrester Research. Connie is a widely acclaimed speaker, advisor, consultant, and expert in digital process automation, customer experience management, digital experience platforms, and content services. In 2014 Connie received the Workflow Management Coalition's globally recognized Marvin Manheim Award for influence, contribution, and distinction based on standout contributions to the field of workflow and business process management.