



Disrupting Tech to Get D&I Right: 10 Essential Principles

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The tech sector has a people problem. Indicators signal significant concerns inside many of these organizations, particularly for the women and racialized persons who beat the odds to make it through the door. Given the clear [innovation and business value of Diversity and Inclusion \(D&I\)](#), a lack of commitment and proficiency to make the most of a broad mix of talent is not good news for tech leaders, employees, customers, or investors.

Ride sharing company, Uber, is one well-publicized example. A former Uber software engineer's [account](#) of alleged sexism and sexual harassment at the company offers insight into critical problems in the company. Unfortunately, although Uber has been described at the “[epitome of the bro-grammer culture](#),” the dynamics detailed by this female engineer are neither unique to her, nor to Uber. As reported in the Atlantic article, [Why is Silicon Valley so Horrible to Women](#), most surveyed female leaders in tech have experienced some form of workplace sexism and discrimination, with racialized women at greatest risk. Hostile conditions drive women (and men) to turn down opportunities and leave jobs they love, and companies are wasting opportunities to benefit from all talent. It's bad business.



We know companies benefit from bringing together a mix of experiences, styles, and identities (diversity) *and* creating an ecosystem supporting everyone in contributing their complementary talents (inclusion). But the opportunity to effectively engage [D&I for innovation and growth](#) requires commitment and strategic partnerships between business leaders and D&I experts.

Uber does not appear to have prioritized diversity and inclusion. [Reports](#) indicate that the company under-invested in the human management side of business and, more specifically, was reticent to recognize the business relevance of a strong gender and racial mix. As well, D&I efforts they have engaged appear to be removed from supportive data (i.e., D&I statistics) and limited to piecemeal activities, such as Employee Resource Groups, that [are limited in their capacity to effect change](#), particularly in isolation. Even more concerning, a recent [Guardian article](#) indicates that some leaders have given up, accepting sexism and its destructive impacts as just part of the tech business.

Uber is not alone. Although [Dots](#) and Slack are among valuable models of what is possible when tech leaders choose to meaningfully engage a wide array of talent, they are the exceptions. **Many organizations fail to make the most of strategic D&I from the start. But the tech startup that gets it right can gain significant competitive advantage.**

Smart organizations invest in the full spectrum of talent needed to advance and sustain business goals. To those who seek to fix existing D&I problems or – even better – seize opportunities to embed D&I into the fabric of the organization right from the beginning, I recommend the following:

1. **Act now:** Ideally, embed D&I from the beginning. But if you already up and running, start now. You are missing critical opportunities, and this work does not get easier as you grow.
2. **Know the rewards and risks:** [There is no good business case for homogeneity and exclusion.](#) D&I savvy tech companies can mitigate legal and publicity risks. Even more, they can achieve healthy, engaging, and productive environments that are good employees and for business.
3. **Move beyond awareness:** Knowing you have a problem does not fix it. Be cautious of approaches that simply *identify* concerns (e.g., unconscious bias awareness training). You need to sustainably change behaviours, systems, and outcomes.
4. **Take a whole systems approach:** Piecemeal change does not work. Evaluate *all* the key processes and structures in your organization and consider how they enable or restrict efforts to attract and engage a mix of talent, customers, and investors.
5. **Coordinate strategies:** A contemporary, effective D&I strategy is aligned with the directives and goals of the business as a whole. Work in partnership to develop ways to sustainably [leverage a broad mix of talent for innovation, competitive advantage, and business results.](#)
6. **Design for diversity and inclusion:** It is not enough to attract a mix of talent; you also need to create an environment where you can inclusively make the most of this mix to advance business goals.
7. **Use contemporary metrics:** Don't just count heads. You [need meaningful, comprehensive metrics](#) that [quantitatively and qualitatively](#) measure the business-relevant impact of a vibrant mix of perspectives and attend to dynamic factors over time. Be specific and transparent.
8. **Focus on results:** It is not enough to say how much you spent, what actions you took, or even what accolade or award you received for D&I. Focus on D&I *outcomes and impact.*
9. **Disrupt:** Tech companies are often leaders in disruptive change. Rather than acquiesce to the challenges of engaging a mix of talent, use familiar disruption and design approaches to build a more robust workforce able to deliver products and services that resonate with a wide range of customers. Don't accept problems as inevitable. Do something different and get results that matter.

10. **Engage experts:** You do not have to do this alone. Nor should you. Hire experts in forward-thinking D&I and engage them as strategic business partners.

Separate from perks offered to employees at many tech companies is the wider matter of how talent is sourced, engaged, enabled, and rewarded. Respecting the evidence that a thoughtfully managed mix of perspectives and identities can be a lever for business success, tech companies must get better results. The D&I challenge might be common, but it is not insurmountable. Getting it right gets you ahead. Getting it wrong leaves your business and reputation behind.

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