



## **Going, Going...Gone: Why Women Are Leaving Technology (It's All About the Culture)**

### ***What's going on?***

According to an article published in the LA Times in February, computing jobs will increase to 1.4 million by 2020, yet currently men outnumber women in the technical sector by 4:1. In 2008, Harvard Business Review conducted a study (which it updated in 2014) that found as many as 50% of women working in engineering and technology will leave over time citing a hostile work environment. In 2014, Fortune magazine interviewed 716 women who left the technology industry. 87.3% of this group indicated that they have no plans to return to the technology field. Only 3% said they would definitely return. In 2014, NPR cited that 40% of women with engineering degrees leave the profession or never enter the field. Any time there is a talent drain of this magnitude, it is time to understand, and do something about it.

### ***The going, going, gone culture***

Women are not leaving because the work is too hard or too demanding. Women are leaving the technology industry because of the culture - a culture they describe as hostile and isolating. Some of the behavior is overt and some is subtle. What does a Going, Going, Gone culture look like? Women describe it as a culture of chronic disrespect that is displayed through communication and behavior. It is a culture where they do not feel seen, respected or heard.

Destructive communication styles are at times inadvertently rewarded within a company culture and given descriptors such as strong, blunt or influential. While these poor communication styles affect both genders, women leave in higher numbers because in addition to destructive communication, they are frequently completely left out of the conversation. The end result is that these styles are damaging to employees' well-being and the cost becomes too high to stay. .

“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did,  
but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

~Maya Angelou

## ***Why does it matter?***

A workplace thrives when people feel valued and there is an atmosphere of collaboration, respect and diverse thought. Companies excel when they are eliciting the best contributions from their entire talent pool. When women are underrepresented in the highly competitive world of technology, ultimately the consumer suffers and so does the company's bottom line. In addition to approaching problem solving differently than men, women bring different communication, relational and leadership styles to the workplace. It is important to include these female perspectives not only for the optimal health of the organization, but for the critical collaborations with other companies that include the voice of women. Women are leaders and decision makers and keenly aware of organizations and industries that are falling behind in the support and advancement of women. It makes good business sense to have a strategy to address this escalating problem of talent flight.

## ***What can be done?***

It starts at the top. Company leadership needs to foster a supportive environment wherein all employees feel respected, and this begins with communication. Relationships are built one conversation at a time. In each exchange, a foundation of trust is increasingly established or eroded. A person feels validated or disrespected. What people say and how they say it really does matter. Technical professionals are motivated to work at a level consistent with their perception of self-competence. If they feel de-valued, criticized or ignored, their motivation wanes, they cease to express their valuable ideas, and they eventually leave.

## ***Creating a shift in the culture***

A culture can only change through an awareness that it needs to change. This process begins with inquiry. Do language or behaviors exist within your organization that may be subtly telling women they don't belong? If you aren't sure, it's time to ask. Once aware of the issues, an intention to change with clearly defined desired outcomes can be set and a plan put in place.

## ***The role of dialogue***

A significant piece in changing a culture is changing the way people communicate with each other. Creating a space where empowered dialogue can take place is the first step. What does empowered dialogue *look* like?

- There is a free-flowing exchange of ideas.
- Eye contact is maintained.

- Participants seek to understand each other rather than jockey to be heard.
- Each contributor is acknowledged and not dismissed.
- Open-ended questions which invite further discovery and exploration fuel the conversation.
- Brainstorming is encouraged.
- Criticism, one-upmanship and judgement are absent.

### ***What does empowered dialogue feel like?***

It feels *safe*. Whether in personal or professional relationships, people need to feel safe and free of censure in order to be able to freely express their ideas and their creativity. Creativity is the cornerstone of innovation. When creativity flows, ideas build upon each other in an inspired process. In creating safe environments in which empowered dialogue is possible, companies nurture and encourage innovators of both genders to contribute to their fullest potential. These companies retain their competitive edge.

### ***Establishing expectations for communication***

Creating an environment in which *both* genders feel respected and heard begins with setting expectations - expectations for communication and group engagement. This includes defining the manner in which conflict and disagreement will be managed. These expectations may be considered a set of values, or rules of engagement which the employees help define and agree to uphold. They may be anything that works for the group. For example, when meeting to discuss a new idea or brainstorm about how best to handle a client issue, the group may agree that all ideas need to remain on the table until each has been fully listened to and discussed. Perhaps only open-ended questions are allowed. Engaging employees to help define these expectations empowers them to create a culture that enables both genders to contribute to their maximum potential.

How are you currently empowering your employees to shape an environment that will support them?

For more information about creating powerful communication in the workplace, go to: <http://theheartofcommunication.net>.