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Tech diversity means reaching outside the network, says Denver consultant

The founder draws on her background to help entrepreneurs avoid hiring imbalance.

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Elaine Marino could hardly ask for better timing for launching her consulting business.

The Denver veteran of advertising and software programming launched Equili, a consultancy helping technology companies build more diverse organizations, just as controversies about the lack of diversity and mistreatment of women shook the industry.

Just since spring, the CEO of [Uber Technologies Inc.](#) was deposed over companywide problems of sexual harassment and discrimination, while Silicon Valley venture capitalists have resigned over sexually harassing female entrepreneurs and, in August, a controversy erupted after a [Google employee's](#) memo questioned whether women could be good software engineers.

Software companies are upending several industries and becoming a dominant economic force. Yet employment in tech skews heavily white and male, and the imbalance hasn't been getting better despite years of industry talk about the issue.

To Marino, the roots of tech's problems go deeper than just hiring.

"We like hiring people in our networks because they feel like they're vetted," she said. "Everyone needs to reach outside their own network — it takes more work and it feels a little uncomfortable. But if you don't do it now, you're going to have to do it eventually."

Marino has focused Equili on helping companies build a culture of diversity from the start and avoid the pain of trying to shift their culture and hire to be more diverse later, she said.

The Boulder startup accelerator [Techstars](#) brought in Marino this spring to give the 10 teams of entrepreneurs advice about making their company cultures inclusive and how to avoid unconscious bias. The Techstars program's biggest successes have been diverse companies, said [Natty Zola](#), general manager of Techstars Boulder.



KATHLEEN LAVINE, DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

Elaine Marino (center in red), founder of Equili with colleagues, Jessica West, left, software developer and advisor Taryn Fuchs, marketing coordinator.

"We've seen it make sense for companies to embrace this early on," he said.

Marino had been in advertising in New York City before deciding to move to Colorado in 2011 and break into tech. She learned coding at a specialty school and spent eight months interviewing for jobs.

As a 35-year-old Hispanic woman, she wasn't who most interviewers seemed to picture at their company, she said. Once she landed jobs, she discovered tech firms generally aren't well set up to help novices learn new skills. Things like internships are rare.

She came to believe that the industry narrows an already scarce talent pipeline by discouraging those that didn't already fit in, Marino said.

In 2013, she started Lady Coders, which ran conferences and programs to help women find professional opportunities in tech. Marino also helped launch and run the Colorado Secretary of State office's annual coding competition, GoCode Colorado, which helps fund Colorado startups.

Through Lady Coders, several tech founders sought Marino's help to improve inclusivity at their companies. That led her to focus that as her main business earlier this year and form Equili.

Her lead recommendations involve companies setting a value of being inclusive, define what it means, write it down and put it on the company website. That makes it harder for the company to revert to the easier path of relying on established habits and professional networks.

Inclusion in tech grows in importance as the industry takes on a more prominent role in the economy and people's day-to-day lives, Marino said. The limits to tech's diversity ultimately limit its potential growth, she said.

"What appears on your phone or your tablet is being made by this industry. There are things that aren't being built," she said. "It isn't wrong. It isn't bad. It just could be bigger and so much better."

Marino had hired people in her prior career, and the processes she saw in tech seemed unlikely to find entry-level employees with broad skills, Marino said. Similar strategies have been used broadly in tech, especially among startups looking to for immediate help on specific tasks.

Marino dislikes the technical job interviews and white-boarding exercises a lot of tech companies use to screen job candidates.

In one job interview, Marino was given three hours of quizzes during which she wrote software code to solve problems, then sat with eight members of the company — all young white, male software engineers — who critiqued what she wrote.

The process felt intimidating, more like a thesis defense than an interview at a company she'd want to work for, she said.

Many companies run by young founders highlighted their foosball tournaments and their beer and pizza parties to seem like attractive, fun places to work. The workplace culture popular among a lot of startups stuck her as juvenile and likely unimpressive to someone more interested in good health or retirement benefits and significant technology projects to work on.

Still, her advice isn't to cut out the fun stuff. Make sure events include things for people who aren't interested in drinking and food that can include people with dietary restrictions.

Tech's culture imbalanced enough that some in the industry interpret the lack of women in technical roles as affirmation that women don't belong, Marino said. That's the argument made by Jame Dramore, whom [Google](#) fired after he wrote an internal memo arguing women didn't have the inherent skills suited for tech.

That's something Marino never experienced in advertising. The ad industry had its sexism, Marino said, but she never heard anyone in the industry say that women couldn't be competent in the profession.

"Men have openly said that to me in tech," Marino said. "I say 'OK, if we go with that argument, where are all the men of color? The African-American men and the Hispanic men?' What it shows is that there's an issue of culture."

A company that's inclusive will have something close to gender balance and people of all ages and from different, ethnic, educational, economic backgrounds, meaning there would be a diversity of ideas as well, she said.

Encouraging that kind of diversity can seem like affirmative action or a mandate to lower standards to people who don't know there are talented people in other professional networks, Marino said.

"We're talking about changing the culture," she said. "If tech tracked even a little bit more with the population it wouldn't feel like a mass of people feeling threatened, it would feel like normal business."

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