

Workplaces

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Workplaces

BoF Workplaces 

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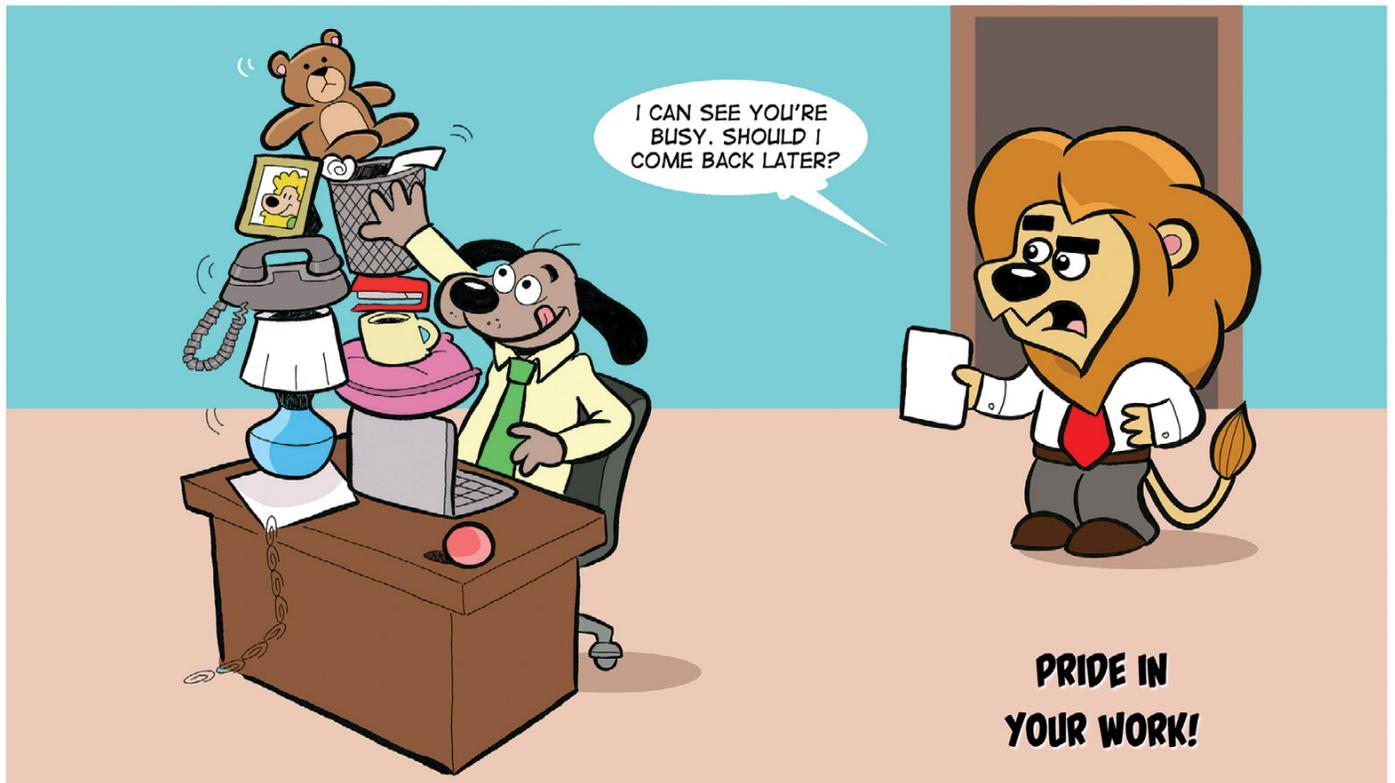
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ROB KIRKBRIDE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



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Business buzzwords come and go, but there's one word that really means something to tech company Scalable Press: Diversity. It's not because it's popular, though, it's because it's right for workplace teams and right for a company's bottom line.



10. WHERE I'M WORKING:

It was a horrible stay. Overpriced and with spotty service and amenities, the Hilton Cologne has a lot to work on when it comes to business travelers. Since I'm not loyal to any hotel chain, I can choose to stay at a different property next time I'm in Cologne. I feel sorry for the business traveler who is tied to the Hilton brand and has to stay there.

12. NEW AI TECHNOLOGY AMPLIFIES THE INTELLIGENCE OF BUSINESS TEAMS

A new study by California Polytechnic State University and Unanimous AI shows business teams, when connected by AI algorithms that enable them to make decisions together as a "hive mind," achieved significantly higher accuracy on a standard intelligence test than individuals alone.

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As we dream up big ideas, we get stymied by one very important reality: software developments move quickly.

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Much is made of office design in the San Francisco Bay Area. We've all seen stories about amenities that would make a five-star hotel blush, the pingpong tables and offices that get from floor to floor seemingly using chutes and ladders.

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This kind of change is already evident in warehouses and distribution centers, where robots handle much of the work us mere mortals did, with human assistance only used to oversee and intervene in the rare instance when something goes wrong.

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Designers use AR to take their clients into a space and feel what it's like.

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Many of today's most progressive workplace designs resemble the coworking typology of amenity-rich space with a mix of settings and vice versa.

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Poked, prodded and tested products for you.

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The smartphone app allows consumers to transport the SIXINCH products directly into their physical world, making the buying experience more convenient.

Navigating the Big D

HOW ONE COMPANY BELIEVES IT'S GETTING DIVERSITY RIGHT.

By EMILY CLINGMAN

Business buzzwords come and go, but there's one word that really means something to tech company Scalable Press: Diversity. It's not because it's popular, though, it's because it's right for workplace teams and right for a company's bottom line.

According to social impact reports from the Kapor Center in Oakland, California, in the tech industry women make up only 25 percent of the tech workforce, and black or Latinx adults combined make up just 15 percent. Only 6 percent of Fortune500 CEOs are female.

Scalable Press boasts a staff of more than 75 percent people of color, 49 percent women and 25 percent minority employees from 12 countries. Fifty percent of the company's executive team is female.

"I don't think we can honestly say that diversity was a priority focus at first," said Julia Li, Scalable Press marketing vice president. "But it became



a focus when we realized in order to get where we need to go, we really need a diverse staff — not just diversity in the makeup of the team, but also diversity in thought. So, there was a lot of conscious decision making that went into developing a diverse staff into a reality.”

In a society where mostly white males make up the corporate American workplace, Scalable’s numbers are impressive, especially since it wasn’t supposed to be a company in the first place.

Eight years ago, founder Raymond Lei was stuck in a bind in high school. He had to get T-shirts printed for his tennis club but found getting them professionally printed was out of his allocated budget. Lei decided on a whim to buy his own manual screen-printing equipment, using \$2,000 of his personal savings, and make the shirts on his own. For an 18-year-old kid, that’s a lot of money to be out. So, Lei started selling shirts to other athletes at school, classmates and parents — and, shockingly, made enough money to pay for college.

While at University of California Berkeley, the company, named OO Shirts at the time, started making well over seven figures. Lei, a college student in his 20s with sudden access to millions of dollars, could have been buying cars or blowing through the money in various ways. Instead, he decided to drop out of school and build a business.

That great T-shirt experiment has resulted in a profitable company with more than 300 employees. Headquartered in San Francisco, Scalable Press, with 27-year-old Lei still at the helm, has four facilities around the country printing millions of products per year in more than 200,000 square feet of production space. The

company has averaged triple-digit growth over the past three years, and every month there are 10 million more unique users. Lei has never taken outside funding since he raided his personal bank account in high school.

Considering Lei’s background and aptitude for making innovative and wise decisions, his company’s outstanding diversity statistics aren’t that surprising. But there was a process in getting to this point.

“It took a lot of hard work to get here, and we’re very proud of that as a team,” Li says. “There are a lot of steps we took that we didn’t have to take. If we were like many of the tech companies that we’re surrounded by, Scalable Press would have a predominantly white, male staff. We’re sharing this advice for the same reasons that we originally had for our own company.

“Raymond could have dropped out of school and enjoyed his money — sitting on the beach with millions of dollars. But, he believed, and we, as a company, believe, this is the right thing to do. It’s better for everyone if we’re all invested in this and doing this together. It’s less costly, even if that cost is not real, but a perceived cost. We’re happy to talk publicly about how to get here. This is not something that we want to keep a secret.”

Having different perspectives breeds innovation, Li explains. Diversity is not just the demographics of the team, it’s also the way people attack problems, the way they find solutions. It’s a difference in mindset. Diversity for Scalable Press also means employees from different parts of the country and different parts of the world.

“It’s unlikely that a homogenous team will accurately represent your customer base,” Li says.

Four steps to diversity

With Julia Li, vice president of marketing, Scalable Press

ONE: SET INTENTIONS AND CLEAR DIVERSITY GOALS

Setting transparent hiring goals for certain positions ultimately impacts the overall diversity of the organization.

“That’s easy to say, but, what does that even mean? How do we get there? It was the first step in making the hiring process meaningful,” Li said. “Without that emphasis, I don’t think we would have invested the time, money, or people development. None of this would have worked.”

TWO: SELF-SELECT YOUR CANDIDATE POOL

Be inclusive in your job posting by considering where opportunities are shared, beyond the traditional channels.

“In recruiting, when looking for world-class talent, recruiters, for better or for worse, tend to congregate in the same sort of communities,” Li said. “What was really a win for us was going outside the traditional channels, tapping into different types of talent pools.”

For instance, Scalable Press recruiters look to organizations like Kinstep, (which connects value-aligned companies with immigrant talent), women’s groups and LGBTQ groups.

“We took a chance, basically,” Li said. “A lot of people told us the pool is not big enough, it won’t be worth it, or candidate pools would not be sustainable at this size. But, we realized, if we set the intention and go after these candidate pools, we will become known. It created a virtuous cycle. People learn what you’re all about. One female leader can recommend our company to another female leader. People in the LGBTQ community can talk about how we recruit in a very thoughtful way. I think we were aware of expectations. We did not expect a huge candidate pool out of our unique approach, but were just going to try.”

THREE: CREATE AWARENESS AND EDUCATION AROUND BIAS

Having thoughtful conversations about unconscious bias strengthens a team’s ability to make more equitable and informed decisions.

“I think in team building, everyone has good intentions. People, for the most part, don’t intend to be biased in recruiting,” Li said. “For us—and I recommend this for all companies—education happens at all levels of the team that touches recruitment and leadership in any way. Don’t think that awareness and education stop once the recruiting conversation is over. In terms of team management, I’ve seen a lot of positive things happen when we equalize the understanding of unconscious bias. If people feel like this is a conversation that we’re avoiding, or if we just don’t dedicate time and resources to it, they won’t be inclined to bring that up in their day to day. [Keeping the conversation up front and open] makes it more comfortable to support each other.”

FOUR: REWARD BASED ON MERIT AND PERFORMANCE ALONE

Rewarding employees based off merit and measurable performance alone leads to a less biased and more equitable workplace.

“We think that merit and performance go hand-in-hand with diversity,” Li said. “They are all equally important to us.”



“If you have a diverse team in various ways — in demographics, in thought, in geography, in age — you have a better chance in tapping into what your customers want and creating things that your customers want.”

Employee feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, according to Li. One employee said the makeup of the workforce was key to convincing her to accept a job. She saw a future at Scalable Press for herself.

“That really hit it home for me” Li says. “What we’re doing means so much to people.”

Though the company lacks exact data, Li reports employee performance is higher. Creativity and innovation is flourishing. Drawing from different backgrounds and experiences, ideas generated at Scalable Press aren’t likely to be homogenous.

“For no other reason, there are lots of benefits to diversity, but one primary driving reason that every single company should focus on diversity

is because it’s good for the bottom line,” Li says.

Growing a diverse team in the workplace does come with certain challenges. With so many different perspectives, there’s lots of variety but different belief systems can be tricky, Li notes. Generational and cultural gaps come with the territory.

“How we communicate around these different beliefs and different gaps are the biggest challenge that we want to tackle,” Li says. “These are actually very addressable things. In terms of accommodating different kinds of beliefs, a lot of HR methods are available to facilitate conversations around beliefs and understanding.”

The way Scalable Press thinks about diversity is the way people think about a lot of things — if you want to do something, don’t just say you’re going to do it, Li says. Set the intention for real, develop a plan for getting there and always check in with yourselves, asking, “Are we actually doing this?” **WPM**

Diversity fatigue

Silicon Valley tech companies are often leaders in workplace innovation and culture, but they are failing in one area—diversity. According to a 2018 report commissioned by tech company Atlassian (“State of Diversity and Inclusion in U.S. Tech”), despite massive amounts of attention and discussion about diversity and inclusion, most of the tech industry is not making significant progress toward building more balanced teams. Representation, retention, and sense of belonging among underrepresented groups remains below 30 percent in the tech industry.

One reason is due to diversity fatigue—It takes a lot of energy and resources to solve these complex problems, and it’s difficult to stay committed when progress is slow or non-existent, states the report. Many individuals feel they can’t make a significant difference in such a complex web of problems, and they become too overwhelmed to act.

Sometimes this can be the result of having the wrong conversation in the first place. Most diversity and inclusion programs focus on increasing the representation numbers of a narrowly-defined category of “diverse” candidates, instead of focusing on belonging and inclusion throughout the company. Listening to and believing marginalized people who tell their stories and suggest solutions, even for little things, taps into their valuable expertise.

In a *Harvard Business Review* report, “Diversity Policies Rarely Make Companies Fairer, and They Feel Threatening to White Men,” research found groups that typically occupy positions of power may feel alienated and vulnerable when their company claims to value diversity—which may be one explanation for the lackluster success of most diversity management attempts. When people feel threatened, they may resist efforts to make the workplace more inclusive.

Instead of avoiding conversations about diversity efforts, the Harvard report suggests managers may need to spend a bit more time crafting messages and designing programs that are more effective and inclusive.

Dr. David Livermore, with the Cultural Intelligence Center, offers another angle to consider: Drop the “shame on you” approach. For example, workers voluntarily sign up for a workshop only to be accosted all day long about how racist or sexist they are. This is not effective. Livermore suggests organizations need to address diversity the way they address other business opportunities and challenges—assess the situation, create a strategy, and form metrics for measuring accountability.

Diversity training must also move toward an emphasis on building skills, he says. Training that focuses on practical solutions is better appreciated, and it’s even sought out by workers who want to get better at doing their jobs and learn from their teammates.