

Twitter's Sharon Ly, on closing tech's gender gap

March 20 2015, by Queenie Wong, San Jose Mercury News

Sharon Ly was in the fifth grade when a computer programming class at a community center in Vietnam sparked her interest in technology.

Ly's mom had put her through dance, swimming and martial arts class, but computer science stood out.

Now 30 years old, Ly is not only an engineering manager at Twitter but also leads the company's Women in Engineering group and Girls Who Code program.

"I definitely looked around and saw few [women](#). I think this is true previously in almost all of my career and I wasn't aware of that," Ly said. "It was like a light bulb going off and I saw an opportunity to take action and do something about it."

We sat down with Ly to chat about what the company is doing to help close the gender gap in technology. Twitter's workforce is about 70 percent male and 30 percent female, on par with diversity numbers at other Silicon Valley tech firms. The interview was edited for clarity and length.

Q: Why do you think it's important that there are not only more women in science and technology, but in social media businesses?

A: It's about inspiring the next generation and showing women that they, too, can be in any field of their choosing; that technology is not a taboo

field only for men or people of a certain archetype. That to me is powerful. When you have diversity in your workplace, I think you will just feel more comfortable expressing your ideas. Your team will probably be more creative about how they go about solving problems.

Q: What is Twitter doing not only to attract more women to this field, but retain them?

A: This year, we're hosting three Girls Who Code summer programs in Boston, San Francisco and New York to teach girls how to code but also help them build a community and network so they can take that with them in the next stage of their lives. I think Girls Who Code is one of those powerful programs that could help change the landscape of the industry in the long haul.

In the short term, we try to be fair in our hiring and promotion practices. For engineering managers specifically, we do a peer coaching forum. You have 50 percent men, 50 percent women in a room talking about gender issues, sharing what their experiences have been like and learning from each other.

We're also making sure that when you start at Twitter you have a support system and a mentor who can help you in the next step of your career. I think that strong support system is really important to help women do well in their careers and stay in the industry.

Q: What have you heard from participants in the engineering manager program and Girls Who Code about some of the barriers they face when they enter the tech field or in school?

A: There are many different reasons but ultimately at the end of the day, Girls Who Code participants say, "I didn't know that [computer programming](#) could be fun. I didn't know that I could do it." It's really

inspiring because year after year, we hear between 95 and 97 percent of participants say they're definitely going to major or minor in computer science when they go to college.

There are a couple of things that people are just not consciously aware of, like being more confident. There's research that shows women go for the job only if they're 100 percent qualified and men go for the job if they're 80 percent qualified. The first part is just being aware that there are differences in how you may be behaving or you may be thinking about yourself.

Q: When it comes to closing the [gender gap](#) in technology, there's been a lot of work centered around networking and mentorship. Are there any other solutions that Twitter is looking at or you personally think should be pursued?

A: I think when we get to the stage where women feel that networking is the same for both genders, when we get to that point of 50 percent female representation in the tech industry, then that's when you'll start hearing about what is the next big thing. Right now, we still have a lot of work to do with just those two tools.

—

5 FACTS ABOUT SHARON LY

- Her favorite literary genre is the murder mystery. Growing up, she devoured every Agatha Christie and Sherlock Holmes book in her dad's collection.

-She has worked at Twitter for almost five years.

-She and her husband love the hot pot dish Japanese shabu shabu so

much that they go to a shabu shabu restaurant at least once a week. The staff at Shabu House in San Francisco even know their names.

- She enjoys chatting about zombies, superheroes and robots.

-Her team recently launched Twitter's group direct messages.

SHARON LY

Age: 30

Birthplace: Vietnam

Position: Software engineering manager

Previous jobs: Systems engineer at Twitter; engineer at educational gaming startup Grockit

Education: Attended MIT

Residence: San Francisco

©2015 San Jose Mercury News (San Jose, Calif.)

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC

Citation: Twitter's Sharon Ly, on closing tech's gender gap (2015, March 20) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-03-twitter-sharon-ly-tech-gender.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.