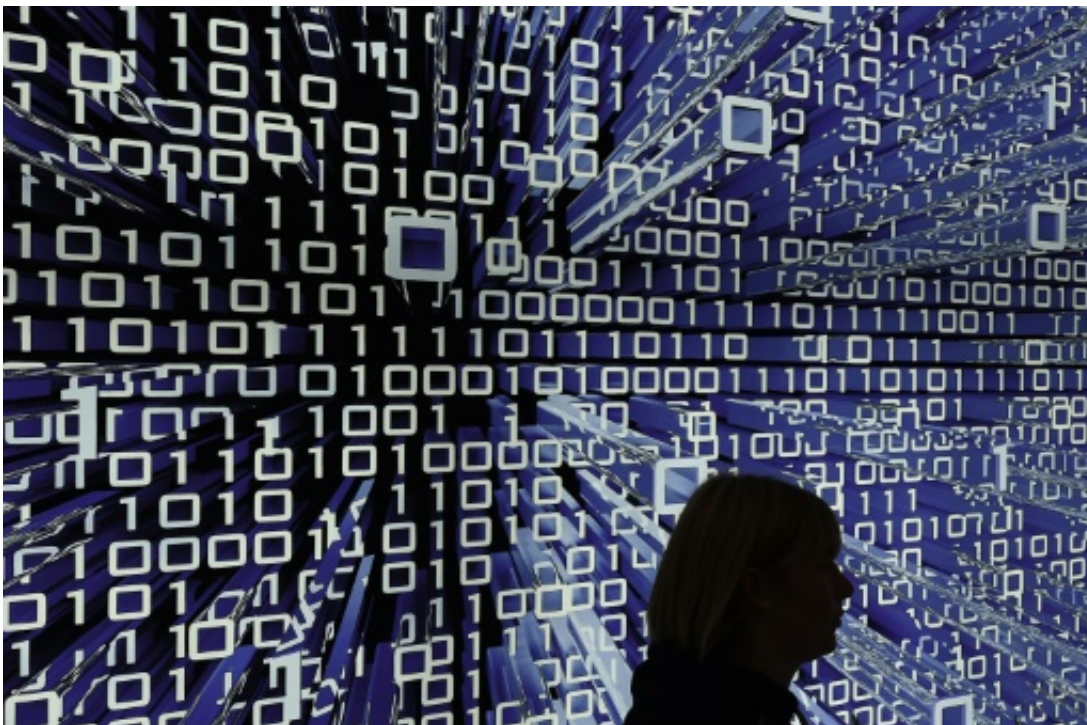# Opportunity found in lack of diversity in US tech sector

September 6 2015, by Sophie Estienne

The homogeneous workforce in the US technology industry became a hot topic after an attention-grabbing civil trial last year

Too many white men and too few women, blacks and Latinos: While fueling debate, the lack of diversity in Silicon Valley is also inspiring startups focused on improving the mix.

The homogeneous workforce in the US technology industry became a

hot topic after an attention-grabbing civil trial last year that aired charges of sexism at a powerful Silicon Valley venture capital firm and disclosures by Internet titans that workforces are mostly male and very white.

It was "logical" that entrepreneurs would strive to tackle the challenge, according to Angela Benton, a black woman with a pioneering role in NewMe accelerator that has worked with minority entrepreneurs since 2011.

Benton cited the example of Pigeonly.

Frederick Hutson was serving time in prison for moving a mountain of marijuana when he came up with a million-dollar idea for Internet startup Pigeonly.

Along with frustration over getting pictures from loved ones outside prison walls, he felt that US inmates were charged astronomical rates for phone calls.

Hutson was in a halfway house for ex-cons in 2012 when he and a partner went to work on Pigeonly. The startup provided online tools for locating inmates, sending them pictures, and saving money on prison phone calls.

NewMe has directly invested in 39 startups, and has given "hundreds of entrepreneurs" access to its network, according to Benton.

"Minority entrepreneurs don't have a lot of people in their network where they can get help on their ideas," Benton said. "We kind of become that person."

Unconscious bias

Notions that they lack influential connections or are missing degrees from "good" universities are among handicaps minorities must get past when seeking investors or jobs.

Startups launched since last year have set out to tackle unconscious prejudices that can thwart efforts to build more diversity into workplaces.

Frederick Hutson was serving time in prison when he came up with a million-dollar idea for Internet startup Pigeonly

Seattle-based Textio uses machine learning and linguistic analysis to make sure that the way something is written, such as a job posting, resonates with the desired audience.

"Textio was founded on this simple vision: how you write changes who you reach," the startup said at is website.

"We use the patterns that we find to predict the performance of your job posting and help you fix it before you ever publish it."

For example, Textio flags sports or military analogies popular in tech job posts because they tend to attract men while putting off women by seeming overly aggressive, according to Textio chief executive Kieran Snyder.

"We think of ourselves as sort of a spell-check that is very powerful," Snyder told AFP.

Twitter last month enlisted Textio's small team in Seattle to help the one-to-many messaging service reach aggressive workplace diversity goals.

Northern California-based Unitive was founded with a vision of eliminating "unconscious bias" by recruiters.

Job recruiters often have images in their minds of who they think would be best for a position, according to Unitive founder Laura Mather, who said the software is tailored to keep recruiters focused on what matters.

Unitive software showcases applicant information relevent to jobs and "hides" other resume information on secondary pages. It also lays out interview questions that target relevent skills.

Buzz and good intentions

"The success of efforts will depend on what is happening in your organization now, and what your culture is," warned Joelle Emerson, a former discrimination and harassment case attorney who founded

consulting firm Paradigm, whose clients include Pinterest.

Helpful hints for companies interested in improving workplace diversity included anonymizing resumes and making a practice of including at least one minority candidate when interviewing for positions.

Achieving diversity could also require giving recruiters more time to seek out minority candidates and revamping corporate culture so women or ethnic minorities lean in instead of pull out.

"Women are leaving the technology sector at twice the rate of men," and not due to "family reasons" but because of workplace culture and lack of advancement opportunities, according to Emerson.

With this perspective in mind, San Francisco startup Doxa applies a dating profile style approach for women seeking promising workplace matches.

Compatability criteria include schedule flexibility, parental leave benefits, and opportunities for advancement.

Some of those interviewed lamented that while some companies polish their images with talk of diversity, the "good intentions" are not backed by meaningful resources.

Emerson noted that oftentimes firms not committed to change have leaders who "do not understand" the value of diversity to their businesses and who think it is just the latest "buzz."

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