

Yahoo's Mayer: A trailblazer, but no game-changer for women

July 26 2016, by Barbara Ortutay



In this Monday, May 20, 2013, file photo, Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer speaks during a news conference in New York. On Monday, July 25, 2016, Verizon formally announced that it is buying Yahoo for \$4.83 billion, marking the end of an era for a company that once defined the internet. (AP Photo/Frank Franklin II, File)

Marissa Mayer was a rarity: A major tech-company CEO who served while pregnant and, later, as a mother of young children. But her trailblazing has done little to meaningfully improve the second-class status of women in tech, a more deep-seated problem that will take many years—and certainly more than one person—to fix.

Like any CEO, Mayer really had one job: To run her company. But to many people, she represented much more than that. Her life became a lens through which the world viewed working mothers, class status (she's a very well-paid executive), female bosses, and even plain old business success and failure.

Female CEOs: The Not-Even Five Percent

Women make up 37 percent of Yahoo's workforce and 24 percent of its leadership positions, numbers typical of the technology industry, which remains dominated by white men. There are 23 female CEOs at Standard & Poor's 500 companies, including Mayer. That's actually a decline from 2014, when there were 26, topping 5 percent for the first time.

Ceiling-shattering feminist was never a moniker Mayer seemed comfortable with. Throughout her four-year tenure at Yahoo, she was "caught in a catch-22 where she doesn't want to be a spokeswoman for women at work even though she has become a spokeswoman for women at work," said Katharine Zaleski, president of PowerToFly, a job-matching service for women in technology.

Not long after taking the helm of the troubled company (a moniker Yahoo itself was never able to shed), Mayer announced that she was pregnant, but also that she'd take as little time away from work as possible. She was immediately criticized for not setting a good example at a time when many American women have little to no access to paid

maternity leave.

Others wondered why she had to set an example at all, since plenty of male CEOs have had children without becoming [role models](#) and having it affect their job performance. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, for example, was widely praised for taking paternity leave when his daughter, Max was born late last year. Had he decided not to take leave at all, it's likely that no one would have batted an eye.

Gender Bias In Yahoo Critiques

To Mayer, biases against women in the technology industry seeped into the sometimes-harsh critiques of her leadership at Yahoo.

"I used to be very gender blind," Mayer told The Associated Press in an interview Monday. "In the past year, it has become so undeniable that that some of the criticisms have been so flush with gender-loaded viewpoints that it has been really disappointing. I really think our media needs to do better if they really want to encourage a collaborative community and a really constructive approach to women in leadership."

Mayer took heat for banning telecommuting at Yahoo, which was said to hurt working mothers; for saying in a documentary that she doesn't consider herself a feminist; for negotiating a large pay package; for dressing in designer clothes; and, in the end, for failing to turn around a company that was already failing when she took its helm.

Some of that is clearly what any CEO in Mayer's position could expect. But some of it reflected rising, if disappointed, expectations about what a female CEO should stand for.

"I wish we could view her as a positive example of what a woman can be if she has the support that is needed to be CEO and have babies at the

same time," Zaleski said. Instead of a business failure, she said, maybe we should look at Mayer as someone who stepped into a company that "billed itself as the front page of the internet for years, and the front page of the internet stopped existing." In that sense, selling Yahoo's core business for \$4.8 billion looks like a smashing success, she suggested.

Role Modeling

Women and minorities still face significant barriers in the tech industry. "Women are outsiders from the start, they lack female role models and face vague review criteria, making it difficult to move up," said Anna Beninger, director of research at Catalyst, a nonprofit that aims to expand opportunities for women in business. "Role models, regardless of their level of success, are really important when there is such a dearth of women in leadership."

Female CEOs remain such a rarity that the potential departure of a very visible leader like Mayer is notable. But few suggest that her experience foreshadows anything specific for other women in high-profile roles. Mayer, in fact, believes her stint at Yahoo helped further the cause of [women](#) in general and working mothers in particular.

"Passion is a gender-neutralizing force," she said. "Focus and passion really neutralizes gender and lets you rise above it." Balancing parenthood with her CEO role, she said, helped Mayer learn "a lot about motherhood and leadership and careers," she said.

"I think that everyone has to do that their own way. There are some mothers who don't like to work and there some mothers who do like to work. It's so important that we all approach that with as little judgment as possible. I have done motherhood in very much my own way here. I needed to work, I needed to keep going. That made me the best mother I could be. I also think that made me a better leader. "

© 2016 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Yahoo's Mayer: A trailblazer, but no game-changer for women (2016, July 26) retrieved 27 June 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2016-07-yahoo-mayer-trailblazer-game-changer-women.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.