

Google CEO to girls: You belong in this industry and we need you

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Google on Thursday abruptly canceled a town hall meeting to address the fallout from an anti-diversity memo, but CEO Sundar Pichai made his feelings on the matter known Thursday night at an event honoring girl coders from around the world.

"I want you know that that there's place for you in this industry, there's a place for you at Google. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. You belong here and we need you," he told the coding teams who were being honored at the Technovation awards ceremony at Google's campus here.

The 12 finalist teams, all made up of young women who developed apps to solve challenges in their communities, came from Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, Cambodia, India, Armenia, Kenya, Canada and across the United States.

"I know the journey won't always be easy," he said, then continued, saying he hoped this was the beginning of long careers in tech for each of them, building things people around the world would use every day.

When he said they belonged in tech and, "don't let anyone tell you otherwise," the crowd burst into cheers, with the loudest coming from Google staffers who were helping host the outdoor event.

"At Google, we are very committed to building products for everyone in the world, and I think to do that well, we really need to have people internally who represent the world in totality. So it's really important that

more women and girls have the opportunity to participate in tech to learn how to code create and innovated," he told the families in a short speech at the beginning of the festivities

The speech has been his sole public comment on the ongoing issue of former Google engineer James Damore's memo questioning the company's efforts to bring more women into technology.

Pichai fired Damore on Monday for what he said was a violation of Google's policies, because his manifesto advanced "harmful gender stereotypes in our workplace."

The meeting Thursday was to have allowed staff to ask questions about the firing and the concerns it has raised. But minutes before it was supposed to start, Pichai said in an email to Googlers it had been scotched due to concern about online harassment of employees whose names and questions were published on alt-right websites.

"Googlers are writing in, concerned about their safety and worried they may be 'outed' publicly for asking a question in the Town Hall," Pichai wrote.

The last-minute cancellation is the latest twist in a saga that began last Friday with a few tweets about a long memo by Damore which quickly became a publicity inferno, calling into question Google's focus on increasing the number of women, African-Americans and Hispanics in its technical and leadership ranks, as well as the company's commitment to free speech and the limits of internal debate.

The issue became so toxic Pichai cut short a family vacation in Africa and Europe, returning Monday to discuss the matter with staffers and eventually making the decision to fire Damore.

The town hall meeting was scheduled to begin at 4 pm Pacific time and was to have been live-streamed to the company's 60,000 employees worldwide.

A document meant to clarify thoughts

The now infamous memo had its origins in a diversity program that Damore, 28, attended at Google. Such training programs are common at both Google and many tech companies as they have sought to increase the number of women, African-Americans and Hispanics who work in tech and leadership positions.

The "manifesto," as many have called it, listed multiple reasons why the author believed Google's efforts to increase the number of women in technical fields was unworkable, in part because he said women are more interested in people than ideas.

While Damore has not responded to attempts by USA TODAY to request an interview, he has done two lengthy interviews with hosts of right-wing YouTube channels, as well as one short interview with Bloomberg TV.

On Tuesday, he told Stefan Molyneux, host of Freedom Radio, that the memo had its origins in his disagreement with much of what was presented at the diversity training.

"There was a lot of just shaming and 'No, you can't say that, that's sexist you can't do this'," he told Molyneux.

As he pondered the issue on a 12-hour work flight to China, he "decided to create the document to clarify my thoughts," he said

Damore shared the resulting 3,000-word essay he'd written with some

staffers at Google a month ago.

"Many people looked at it but no one ever had this explosive reaction. All the responses were just rational discussions," he said.

He eventually posted it on an internal Google mailing list. By Aug. 4, staff had begun tweeting about it and by Saturday it had been posted on public sites. That ignited a blizzard of controversy and Damore was fired Monday.

Damore has since filed a National Labor Relations Board complaint against the company over his firing, claiming he had been engaging in "concerted protected activity" under the National Labor Relations Act, meaning that he was working to change poor working conditions.

He appears to have created a new Twitter account on Tuesday under the name of @fired4truth.

On Thursday the profile picture on the account was changed to an image in which Damore is wearing a t-shirt that reads Goolag in the distinctive colors and font of Google's logo, presumably likening his nearly four years at the search engine company to the Soviet camps in which as many 30 million prisoners are estimated to have been starved or worked to death between 1918 and 1956.

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