

Google firing fans flames of diversity debate in tech sector

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Google's firing of an engineer who questioned the company's diversity efforts has sparked a fresh row in Silicon Valley

The dismissal of a Google engineer over a memo defending the Silicon Valley gender gap has fanned the flames of a simmering debate in the tech sector over sexism, free expression and political correctness.

The "manifesto" published as an internal memo by James Damore, which claimed "biological differences" were a key factor in the low

percentage of women in technology jobs sparked outcry from those claiming it perpetuated stereotypes and discrimination.

Then Damore was fired—according to media reports and his own email to the far-right news website Breitbart—which sparked a new backlash from those claiming Google was stifling free speech.

The fresh controversy comes with Silicon Valley struggling in the face of accusations of rampant sexual harassment and discrimination affecting startups like Uber and venture capital firms investing in the sector.

Google chief executive Sundar Pichai, without commenting on Damore, said employees have a right to express themselves but that the memo appeared to "cross the line by advancing harmful gender stereotypes in our workplace."

"To suggest a group of our colleagues have traits that make them less biologically suited to that work is offensive and not OK," Pichai said in his email to employees.

But Damore's firing fueled a wave of criticism from those arguing Google was suppressing a dissenting viewpoint.

"Very sad about #JamesDamore being fired by @Google for basically popularising behavioural science. Scandalous and immoral," one Twitter user wrote.

"Google went from: 'Don't be evil' to 'Speak no evil about political correctness,'" another tweet said.

Damore's firing made him a hero to the far right and those claiming political correctness has gone too far.

Breitbart published the first of what it said was a series of interviews with "rebels of Google" who claim the company is stifling dissent.



Google CEO Sundar Pichai says a memo questioning the company's diversity efforts was offensive

"Witch hunts are a well-known cultural problem at Google," one employee identified only as "Hal" said.

"A lot of social justice activists essentially spend all day fighting the culture war, and get nothing done."

Damore's 10-page memo, which was leaked on the website Gizmodo and later on Motherboard, argued that Google has silenced anyone seeking to differ with official policy, leading to "an ideological echo chamber."

Gender woes in Valley

Currently some 69 percent of Google's employees are men, according to the company's latest figures, a proportion that rises to 80 percent when it comes to technology jobs.

In 2016 at Facebook just 27 percent of senior executives were women. At Apple, around 30 percent of total employees are women.

Roger Kay, who heads the tech consultancy Endpoint Technologies Associates, said the Damore case is not about free speech, and that Google has a right to keep employees who support the company's values.

"They're not putting him in jail, it's not a criminal indictment," Kay said.

"His speech (memo) was odious, and they're absolutely allowed to fire him for it if it promotes the greater good."

Some analysts say there is no easy answer for tech firm which are seeking to promote a diverse workforce while dealing with competing factions.

"Though there's been plenty of outrage over the (Damore) post among Google employees and others in the tech industry, there are also significant numbers who have welcomed it," said Jan Dawson of Jackdaw Research in a blog post.

"Despite the broad official push for diversity from tech companies, there's still a big chunk of the employee base that holds such views and wishes they could air them more freely."

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