

# Here's how some tech companies are chipping away at bias against women

April 16 2018, by Rachel Lerman, The Seattle Times

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Bridget Frey was the only woman on Redfin's engineering team in Seattle when she joined the online real-estate company more than six years ago. She wasn't surprised, having worked in the male-dominated tech field for much of her career.

But Frey was determined it would be a short-lived imbalance.

One of the reasons the tech field is so heavily male is that people tend to hire job candidates who remind them of themselves, feeling immediately most comfortable working with similar people, studies find. So Frey made it a mission to participate in many of Redfin's interviews with potential hires, and she called several female candidates herself to recruit them to the company, reasoning that more women were likely to accept job offers if they knew they wouldn't be the solitary woman on the team.

Her attempts—together with multiple tactics the company has employed—are starting to work. Women now make up 31.7 percent of the company's technical workforce, up from 12.5 percent when Frey joined in 2011. In Redfin's upper ranks, the number is even higher: Women hold 46 percent of positions at the manager level and above.

"Now I walk around, and it's rare that I'm the only woman in a meeting," she said in the company's downtown Seattle headquarters.

Tech companies are notorious for the dearth of female employees in their ranks and for the treatment of those women—something that has

been put in the spotlight in recent months with the gender-discrimination lawsuits against Microsoft, Google, Twitter, and Oracle.

It's one hurdle for women to get in the door in the industry, and another for them to advance within a company. At each higher level, there are fewer female employees, partly because they are promoted at slower rates than men. Other studies suggest they leave the male-dominated companies in droves.

In Seattle, a few midsize tech companies—including Redfin, Zillow, Expedia, and Tableau—have had some success in changing the gender balance of their workforces, particularly in management and leadership roles.

## TESTING SOLUTIONS

The not-so-secret secret, the companies say, is to treat diversity challenges much the same way as tech challenges: Test solutions, kill those that don't work and implement those that do as companywide processes and systems.

For Redfin, where Frey now serves as [chief technology officer](#), that means a "bug tracker" for its diversity initiatives: a software system that allows anyone from the company to log on, check out top priority "bugs—meaning anything that isn't working at the company—and tackle a project. It's the same kind of system that Redfin uses to solve technology issues.

A couple dozen engineers pitch in to work on diversity bugs at any one time, Frey said. One project focused on the company's use of the Slack internal messaging tool. If a Slack user, composing a message, includes a term that could be offensive to a specific group, the system generates an automated reply noting that the word could be derogatory and sends

information to the user about it.

It's a small effort to make all employees feel welcome at work, Frey said, but that welcoming attitude is a major factor in retaining women and minorities and advancing them into management positions.

Women, especially women in technical roles, tend to fall out of the ranks the higher up the corporate ladder you look. According to AnitaB.org—an organization for [women](#) in tech, formerly called the Anita Borg Institute—the average U.S. company's technical workforce is 28.5 percent female at the entry level. That falls to just 19 percent at the senior leadership level.

"I don't think there's a [company](#) in the world that has no cause for concern," said Joelle Emerson, CEO of San Francisco consulting firm Paradigm, which helps companies implement diversity and inclusion strategies. "The default is for organizations to not be inclusive and equitable because they are mirroring society. They have to be proactive."

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Citation: Here's how some tech companies are chipping away at bias against women (2018, April 16) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-04-tech-companies-chipping-bias-women.html>

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