

# Conversations With a Diverse Group of Women

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THE  
DIAL**





# Foreword

In August and September 2019, #movethedial and Accenture hosted a series of “women who have different identities and experiences in Technology” workshops in Toronto, Canada, to explore the career challenges faced by this group and to brainstorm new ways for women to advance in their careers. Participants identified as persons of colour, Indigenous and/or LGBTQ+ across different cultures. These sessions brought together a broad group of women, and men allies, working in technology roles, from start-ups to large corporations. As the sessions progressed it made me reflect on my own 18-year journey as a technology executive in our consulting group. Many of the challenges they faced, I did too!

I was lucky enough to learn about a career in tech at a relatively early age - my dad is an engineer, and the notion of ‘barriers to entry’ didn’t cross my mind when I thought about my career. In fact, I took it for granted that I could pursue any career path I wanted. I was born in Hong Kong and came to Canada when I was 11. Growing up, my family taught me that certain career tracks are not a good fit for my cultural background. At one time, I wanted to become a lawyer. This was quickly dismissed by my family, telling me someone with English as a second language will not succeed as a lawyer in Canada. That was the first time I felt any limits to what I could do. Flash forward to today. We learned in our sessions that over half of the women who participated also believed they had a ceiling in their careers and could not achieve what they would like to do.

I studied engineering for my undergraduate degree. Even though the gender balance was far from 50/50, I didn’t feel marginalized at all. Once I started working, it was a different story. Through my childhood, my parents taught me things like, ‘Wait your turn to speak. Don’t interrupt.

Be modest and only share your opinion if you are the expert.’ That obviously doesn’t translate well in the work environment, especially not in the consulting world. As a woman, waiting until everyone finishes before you chime in probably means you are not talking at all. I was frustrated at being viewed as someone who doesn’t have an opinion and doesn’t have anything to say. I also felt I had to be loud, vocal and forceful at work. Surely, there are other ways to get the job done, without having to compromise my own personality. Can I not be recognized for what I’ve been able to achieve? Why should I only be judged by how I achieve it? But for years, there were no others like me for me to look up to. And it’s not just me and women who look like me. Not by a long shot. In our sessions, I heard many more stories like mine.

During our workshops, we heard a wide range of perspectives, from women who were just starting their careers to those who had spent decades in technology. Facilitated by #movethedial and Accenture, participants examined the challenges and misconceptions they faced and set out ways to eliminate barriers that impede a diversity of women in technology today.

Our goal is to raise awareness and visibility of the opportunities for all of us to #movethedial in changing how the technology space behaves, and to empower women from diverse cultures to advance their careers in technology.

Vivian Ho  
Managing Director, Accenture, Toronto

# Why should we #movethedial for women who have different identities and experiences in Technology?

Through our conversations with the workshop participants, we, #movethedial and Accenture, identified three common themes faced by these women:

- 1) Over half our workshop participants spoke about the challenge of **Achieving Success while Being Myself**. Throughout our research, a surprising 57% of the women were told at various points in their lives to fit their personal life choices into the cultural norms of their families, which often exclude a career in technology.
- 2) Only 44% of participants had a sponsor, someone that provides input and helps open doors to advance their career. This highlighted the power of **Building a Strong Support Network**. Where formal programs exist, it can sometimes be a challenge to match the right mentor to the right mentee. In addition, it is even harder to find the right sponsor - someone who will actively help you promote and advance your career.
- 3) Over 95% of the participants, who identified as diverse, believe they don't get the same level of **Recognition for Their Success** as their peers for the same achievements. Many women from diverse cultures are reluctant to boast about their accomplishments, nor do they overtly celebrate their success.





**Diverse women experienced prejudice especially when moving into management. There is certainly a perception that you need to fit into a particular mold to succeed as a leader. For example, you need to be outspoken and opinionated if you're going to succeed in management. As an analytical, soft-spoken introvert, this is very challenging for me. Conversely, my African-American peers shared the frustration at being viewed as aggressive and challenging of their peers, when they were simply being themselves in communicating their opinion!**

## Challenges we heard from a diverse group of women today:

“Not only do women of diverse backgrounds face challenges at work, they also face challenges at home. I still remember what my uncle said to me: Perhaps it is time for you to scale back in your career and take a 9-to-5 job so you can spend more time with the family, and let your husband focus on his career instead. This was just two years ago, right after my promotion.”

“From my experience, other women are sometimes the harshest non-supporters of diverse women. Competition in the technology field is too fierce, and the perception is out there that a diverse woman on the rise may be targeting the job of her female superiors. I have been told – I got here without support, so you should be doing this on your own too.”

“I believe the wage gap is not just a gender issue – it is driven by gender and diversity. I used to believe that merit should speak for itself. Get recognition for good work, and the pay will come. But that is putting too much faith in the system. With my cultural background, I have also been taught to be humble and modest, and not oversell myself. To negotiate for more pay makes me seem ungrateful for my promotion”

“There is a misconception that everyone has the same goal of getting to the top of the pyramid. But everyone has a different ambition for their career, and the end goal is not necessarily focused on getting to the C-suite. That said, as a diverse woman, I feel judged for not wanting to advance further in my career, because others could question my overall ambition even though I am comfortable at my career landing point.”

Supporting our discussions, Accenture’s global research “Getting to Equal” for advancement and pay found “changing the culture of a workplace unlocks all women’s potential”. Organizations know the importance of fostering diversity across all members of a company’s workforce, including leadership, and that diversity includes; age, ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity or expression, religion or sexual orientation. As we discussed ways to address these workplace challenges, we leveraged the three themes and quickly discovered that...

## **Diversity + Women + Technology = Maximize IT inclusion and outcomes across companies**

Acknowledging and celebrating the gender and cultural differences of women can spark the much-needed inclusiveness we are striving to achieve along with gender parity. This is especially true in companies with women on executive teams, C-suites and boards.

Our workshops identified and discussed findings and recommendations we can all start to address at varying degrees across all our companies.

## Offer early education to support students as they shape their career options

Among the women in our sessions 53% were not aware of technology as a career option until they began their careers. This reinforces the need to build exposure to these choices early in elementary and secondary school, while students are still shaping their interests and assessing their career options.

We need to delve more deeply into why more women from diverse cultures still aren't pursuing technology as a career and prompted several questions: Is Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) education enrollment satisfactory and why aren't these women following through to pursue a career grounded in their STEM training? Learning the root causes will reveal better answers, including how we can adjust existing programs to overcome misconceptions.

Our discussions highlighted the importance of organizations supporting girls in elementary and secondary school and continuing to reinforce the message of technology career opportunities across all girls and young women. During university and college, we can further promote diversity in technology through more scholarships and awards to recognize outstanding achievements of women. Many participants said they did not experience prejudice during school and were startled by the bias once they entered the workforce. While there are many career seminars in place at the post secondary level, none are focused specifically on this topic to raise awareness and better prepare students for the challenges ahead.

Having women from various cultures as key speakers at these seminars and events will lead to stronger awareness of the rewarding career opportunities in technology, reinforced by positive and inspiring role models. All measures will work to 'normalize' diversity both in the classroom and the workplace.



## Take matters into your own hands and focus on continuous learning

Beyond external education and dispelling misconceptions, we heard that all women should continue to advance their career by owning their power. This means being pro-active and challenging themselves to achieve their career goals. Working in the technology space, they are well accustomed to continuous technical learning. They also need to shift gears and translate that kind of learning into advancing their own careers.

We discussed how invaluable it is to continually invest in non-technical areas to support career progression. This may include training in leadership and conflict management, or courses on presentations, public speaking, and negotiation tactics. Everyone should develop a tailored training plan to expand their strengths and partner with others to reduce weaknesses. Where such a plan does not exist, we urge you to ask for what you need. Many times, simply asking will not only help you, it will help others as well.

## Build a Personal Board of Directors

More companies are starting to formalize mentoring and sponsorship programs, where leaders are paired with junior employees to provide coaching and advocate for their career progression. A real area of opportunity comes in improving the assignment of mentors and mentees. It's tempting to assume that someone is looking for another mentor "like them." However, the matching is often more complex, accounting for business areas of interest, personality, working style and chemistry. Offering feedback to continually improve company-initiated programs will benefit the experience for mentors and mentees alike.

A consistent message we heard from participants was the need for a mix of mentors and sponsors from a diversity of backgrounds. Yes, someone 'like you' can help you deal with certain challenges; however, much of the core business and technology issues women from the workshop deal with every day at work cut across all genders and identities. In fact, it's clear that if you don't diversify your own group of sponsors, you risk becoming more isolated rather than moving the dial.

Several participants spoke about expanding their mentors beyond formalized programs. They highlighted there is no need to limit having a single mentor assigned by the company.

We heard in our session where participants built their personal "board of directors." A diverse set of mentors and sponsors provides varied perspectives. Not surprisingly, the diversity of membership in a personal board of directors has the same benefit as diversity in a corporate board.

Our discussions pointed out an opportunity to taking advantage of cross-company mentorship programs within an industry. This fulfills a gap for small businesses where structured programs may not exist. Establishing communities of practice such as women in a venture capital group, where participants can openly share challenges in their areas of business, can provide regular, immediate and genuine peer support.



## Bring others into the conversation by replacing assumptions with facts

In our third workshop we expanded our participants to include additional allies who work in technology with our participants. The most important first step in moving the dial is to recognize and openly discuss the challenges faced by women from diverse cultural backgrounds in technology. Our goal is not to fight against isolation in an isolated way. If we do, it is very easy to dismiss the challenges faced by diverse women as “their own problems.”

Men play an important role in making this shift happen now, especially white men who still hold most of the senior leadership positions today. Many are eager to help, but don't know where to start because they don't have a good understanding of the real challenges. Allies may even be afraid to start the conversation. Often, people are just scared to ask because they haven't been exposed to the unique cultural or other nuances of a given group of people. This happens with all of us. We all know from our own experience that this hesitation can then further isolate the rising stars among women from diverse cultural backgrounds—all because of fear and ignorance.

One white male leader who grew up in Canada noted that he sometimes is afraid to start the conversation because he does not want to say the wrong thing and end up offending the women he is mentoring. He wants to help and needs to be educated on the challenges so that he can lean in.

We all have a responsibility to educate each other on the challenges we face together while celebrating our differences. It often begins by focusing simply on what is not working, then advances to understanding the richness that diversity brings not only to our shared culture, but to the organizations we work for and help grow and prosper. Then, once diversity becomes normal, the fears around it fall away more quickly because they are replaced by facts.

Including other women in this conversation fosters the development of more sponsors who are women. Too often, women in leadership positions forget they can be very effective role models. They may simply need a reminder that others appreciate their perspective and support, and that there is a new way to advance diverse groups of women – together.

Almost 90% of our participants believe there is a wage gap due to cultural differences, in addition to gender. Further work is needed to address the minimal market data to support the claim, or to determine the scope of the issue. Gathering and publishing statistics will increase the transparency on diversity challenges and will arm women with objective data to approach career conversations.





## Increase awareness to manage bias

It's human nature to gravitate towards people who look and act like ourselves. Bias is a reality, and everyone has biases based on their personality, upbringing, and experience. These biases need to be understood and continually managed. While training provides the language for the behaviour and the tools for change, making and sustaining those changes will always be harder. We all need to recognize the bias and adjust it before preconceptions can form and harden. Otherwise, it is easy to select candidates, assemble teams and advocate promotions while perpetuating biases. Ultimately, it's important to remember that the best person for the job may not necessarily be someone like us.

Some of the male allies highlighted the benefits of having women on their team, because they often bring different perspectives and ways of working which benefit the entire team. While most people focus on answering the "what," we heard that many women tend to ask "why." One person commented that some of the best developers were women from diverse cultures, and their background contributed to their unique viewpoints and approach to problems.

Participants recognized a clear gap in the availability and transparency of data related to women and diversity in the technology field. We found that while there is increased data regarding gender equality across most companies in Canada, the data is limited on diversity composition, especially at leadership levels of many organizations. These constraints are beginning to be addressed by companies setting a strategy for inclusion and diversity to publicly highlight the specific goals and focus.

Fostering an inclusive environment today demands a cultural shift in how organizations operate. Increasingly, companies are recognizing the truly human aspect of their workforce and celebrating individuals for their differences. Diversity is being promoted not only in cultural background and gender, but also accounting for different personalities and working styles.



## Join the conversation and become an everyday hero!

We had strong agreement that it doesn't always take formalized programs and strategic initiatives to help diverse groups of women thrive in technology. Each of us has a role to play to provide support and open doors in our daily work.

- Be a role model and stay true to your authentic self. Acknowledge we are all individuals and will lead and engage in different ways. Celebrate those differences and use them to drive innovation. Coach women to be confident and to develop and use their unique strengths.
- Lead by example by mentoring and sponsoring women who have different identities and experiences across your company. Leaders need to "leave loudly" – when leaving work early for personal commitments, we need to make it known to set an example for junior team members the importance of work-life balance.

- Provide coaching regardless of your position. You don't need to be a senior leader to provide support. Peer mentorship is especially valued and appreciated.
- Speak up to clarify assumptions and bias, such as when you hear comments about colleagues getting projects or promotion because of her background.
- Facilitate team discussions that leverage round-table opportunities to allow everyone to provide input.
- Be observant during meetings and invite all attendees into the conversation.
- Be inclusive when planning team activities. Just because a woman has children doesn't mean she isn't interested in attending networking events or dinners after hours. It is important to recognize, understand and accommodate individual preferences.

Raising visibility on the issues and opportunities is only the first step. We're excited for you to join us as we begin to #movethedial and continue to empower diverse groups of women in technology and all our teams.



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**About Our Research**

Accenture and #movethedial conducted two workshops in August 2019 in Toronto, Canada with 45 women who work in technology at organizations ranging in size from start-up to large corporations. The participants were invited to discuss the role of diverse groups of women in technology and their personal experiences. During these workshops, participants responded to a real-time anonymous survey with 10 questions that support our findings in this paper. On average we received 43 responses across the 10 questions posed.

The workshop participants were composed of women who identify as persons of colour, Indigenous and/or LGBTQ+ across various cultures. They came from a variety of industries and experience levels ranging from entry level to executives.

A third workshop to share initial findings was conducted in September 2019 and included allies who work in technology at the companies the women from the first two workshops work.

**About #movethedial**

#movethedial is an organization and global movement working to advance the participation and leadership of all women in technology. Founded on the premise that advancing the full talent pool will make Canada's tech industry the strongest and most inclusive in the world, #movethedial believes that the opportunity for equity - for all women-identified people - exists at a global level. To drive substantive, measurable change, #movethedial creates and publishes novel research, builds community through its global Stories platform, and hosts an annual global summit convening its local, national and global partners including community organizations and technology and tech-focused corporations. Supported by over 150 world-class technology ecosystem advisors, #movethedial has built a community of more than 50,000 people across Canada, the US, Japan, Portugal, the UK and Israel. Learn more at: [movethedial.com](http://movethedial.com).

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