

Closing The Gender Gap: What Climbing Can Learn From The Tech Industry

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***Note: This article was originally posted on [Medium](#).*

At the [CWA Summit](#) this year, I kept hearing one recurring question: how can we hire and retain more women, particularly in management and routesetting?

This is something I've looked into extensively and what I found is that the tech industry has learned some hard lessons on the importance of gender parity and how to start working towards it.

I've collected some of the most compelling lessons here to share with others in the climbing industry. Let's work together to create a truly inclusive and diverse climbing gym culture—one that reflects the communities we serve.

Keep in mind that while I focus here on gender equality, the same principles also apply for equality across all identity markers, including race, sexual orientation, religion, etc.

Why hiring women should be a priority

A significant percentage of the climbers in our facilities are women. We need staff at all levels—including managers and routesetters who understand women as customers, how we climb, and how to set routes that are fun for us.

Lessons from the AI field:

"If we don't get women and people of color at the table ...we will bias systems. Trying to reverse that a decade or two from now will be so much more difficult, if not close to impossible. This is the time to get women and diverse voices in so that we build it properly, right? And it can be great. It's going to be ubiquitous. It's going to be awesome. But we have to have people at the table."—[Fei-Fei Li, Chief Scientist of Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning at Google](#)

Research from the Kellogg School of Management and McKinsey Global Institute suggests that diverse teams [perform better, make better decisions, and are more profitable](#).

Women are outpacing men when it comes to earning [bachelors](#) and [graduate degrees](#). Your company's ability to attract and retain top talent will be predicated on being an appealing and friendly place for women to work.

Surveys from the Pew Research Center suggest that women in male-dominated companies [face more gender-based discrimination and more difficulties in advancing their careers](#) than at gender-balanced companies.

How to hire + retain more women

Make gender equality a core value and set concrete goals with measurable impacts. Stating that you value diversity is not enough—make sure you're actively working towards it. And remember that this isn't a one-off project: revisit the issue at predetermined intervals to make sure you're making progress towards your goals.

Don't lower your standards

"Lowering standards is counter-productive—the idea that "it's hard to hire women engineers therefore we won't hold them to such a high standard" is noxious. It reinforces the impression that women aren't good at engineering (writer's note: for us, insert managing, climbing, routesetting), which is obviously a downward spiral." —[First Round](#)

Read the tips below and get creative! Breaking a mold is difficult and requires thinking outside the box you have been operating in.

Take a look at the recruiting process

Talk to everyone who's involved in recruiting and hiring and let them know that hiring and retaining women is an important goal for the company.

Make sure that women are represented in your marketing materials and any graphics that are being used to promote job openings: women have to see themselves represented in your media in order to connect with you as a company. Beyond that, make sure that women are involved in the hiring process. We all have unconscious biases and preferences for people who remind us of ourselves. Men who are hiring may subconsciously prefer male candidates. Similarly, having women involved may help female applicants feel more at ease during the interview process.

If you aren't seeing as many women applicants as you would like, talk to women and find out why they're not applying.

Advertise in the right places

Make your employees your ambassadors: have them spread the word about job openings and let them know that hiring women is a priority for the company.

Research where women find out about job opportunities and where they get their media, then post ads there. You can also reach out to online communities for women and underrepresented genders like Flash Foxy, Alpenglow Collective, Brown Girls Climb, Indigenous Women Climb.

Hire women at the entry level

Like many other climbing gyms, The Cliffs (where I work) seeks to promote from within whenever we can and offers opportunities for our staff to grow with the company. This makes it even more important that gender parity starts from the ground up, since the people getting promoted to shift supervisor and ultimately to positions in gym and corporate management often start out as general belay or front desk staff.

Provide training

With routesetting in particular, finding qualified routesetters is tough already, and finding routesetters who are women may seem impossible. In the tech world, Etsy launched “Hacker Grants,” which provide need-based scholarships to women enrolling in Hacker School, a 3-month course designed to teach people how to become better engineers.

Although these women may have been risky hires due to a lack of hands-on experience, putting them through Hacker School groomed their hard skills while allowing Etsy to work with them closely over the course of several months. This program has been a success for Etsy, and they've hired several women out of the Hacker School.

If your facility has the resources, consider offering a training program for routesetters or providing scholarships for women who want to attend a routesetting course.

Hire women at mid-level, even if they may not have much experience in the climbing/outdoor industry

In the tech industry, bootcamps produce thousands of graduates a year, with a significant percentage being women. These graduates may have entry-level coding skills, but mid-level professional skills: you won't have to teach them how to manage teams, write professional emails, and stick to budgets and deadlines.

In the climbing industry, we can look for career changers who have cut their teeth in other sectors, but are passionate about climbing and looking for opportunities in a fast-growing industry.

Take a look at your employee benefits + perks

Make sure that your employee perks and benefits appeal to women by talking to the women who already work for you.

Paid parental leave, flex time, the ability to work from home, and medical benefits that cover family planning and prenatal care support employees who are (aspiring) parents.

Promote women

Having women at all levels of your company, particularly in upper management, provides staff with the opportunity to have women as mentors, role models, and knowledge-keepers. You'll also send the strong message that women are not only hired, but also promoted within the company, which will help attract motivated female candidates.

Further, research shows that [companies with more women in management have less sexual harassment](#).

Retaining women

It's lonely being the only woman

Etsy found the most success when there were either zero or two women engineers on a team. [“If there’s only one, she’s a woman engineer as opposed to just an engineer.”](#) Keep this in mind, particularly with routesetting: hiring two female routesetters will likely increase the chances of them both sticking around, since they won’t be alone on a male-dominated team.

Preventing + addressing harassment

Create space for people to share their experiences in the workplace and take their concerns seriously. Implement a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to harassment.

Research shows that traditional sexual harassment training doesn’t work. In a [recent article](#), The New York Times broke down several methods that work in addressing harassment, including empowering bystanders to intervene, encouraging team members to speak up in support of marginalized colleagues, promoting more women, encouraging reporting of harassment, and providing training seriously and often.

At The Cliffs, we had the opportunity to work with Alicia Ortiz for our inclusiveness and diversity training. She’s an incredible facilitator who is the Education Director for [Let’s Be Clear](#). I highly recommend her for your training needs if you’re based in the Northeast. [The Avarna Group](#) also provides trainings and resources on equity, inclusion and diversity.

Culture

Make sure women feel supported, even if they are the minority on a team. Create a [“calling in” culture](#) where team members feel empowered and responsible for letting each other know when behavior or language they use is unacceptable. Be aware of microaggressions—words or actions with undertones of sexism, racism, or any other “-ism”—which may be subtle or imperceptible to the casual observer, but can [compound over time to have serious effects on mental health and quality of life](#). (See: [How Microaggressions Are Like Mosquito Bites](#))

For more resources on “calling in,” microaggressions, and other social justice issues, check out [Everyday Feminism](#) and [The Avarna Group](#).

“Patience is a requirement. Habits are hard to break, and your culture may favor the incumbent majority until you get closer to parity.”—[Tech Crunch](#)

Check in regularly with women who are on male-dominated teams and conduct exit interviews with employees who quit. Is the culture friendly for women? Are there other issues affecting employee satisfaction that should be addressed? Knowledge is power. Letting go of defensiveness (even though it sucks to learn that your culture may be unfriendly to women) allows you to gain a true perspective on what is happening and take steps to address it.

If you’ve read this far, you’re on the right track! But thinking about gender equality is not enough. Write down three actions you’re going to take and share it with your team. Keep each other accountable! Feel free to share your thoughts below as well.

Read More

TechCrunch: [How to recruit, hire and retain female engineers](#)

SocialTalent: [Emma Watson: Your New Recruitment Guru—How to: Attract, Source and Recruit Women](#)

First Round: [How Etsy Grew their Number of Female Engineers by Almost 500% in One Year](#)

TechCrunch: [There's a simple solution to tech's gender imbalance...hire more damn women](#)

OPTIMIZING BELAY LESSONS FOR MEMBER ACQUISITION

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