

Episode 2 — Beyond the Business Case: The startup ‘gender problem’

Sarah: Hi! It's Sarah Kaplan again. You are listening to another limited series podcast by GATE audio. If you've joined us for our other podcasts, you will know that GATE stands for the Institute of Gender and the Economy at the University of Toronto's Rotman school of Management, and I'm GATE's Director. Our goal is to engage current and future leaders in rich conversations around inequalities in our society and how we might address them. In this podcast series one of GATE's MBA fellow's, Vanessa Ko, talks to executives about the hidden best practices for improving gender diversity in the workplace and highlights innovations that might actually move the needle on a thieving diversity and inclusion. So up next, listen to what Vanessa learned.

Vanessa: Welcome to Beyond the Business Case, a podcast by the Institute for Gender and the Economy. I'm Vanessa Ko. Each episode we interview companies on what they're actually doing to improve gender diversity in their companies. We also highlight best practices and innovations in the field to try and change the conversation on gender diversity in business. Startup's are meant to be innovative and disrupt the status quo. But when looking at gender diversity, they fall into the same patterns as larger companies. A study done by the Financial Times in 2016 shows that out of 500 start-ups in Silicon Valley, only 23% of employees are female. This is in comparison to 36% at top technology companies such as Google and Amazon, but in theory, it should be easier for younger companies to address gender imbalances when there are fewer staff and are more nimble. So why is this happening? And what can we do about it? Today we talked to Tulip Retail about this issue and how they're tackling it through their diversity practices. Tulip Retail is a foreal Toronto based Startup that creates mobile technology for retail sales associates. They recently raised a \$50 million Series B round. Our guest today is ZJ Hadley who spearheads diversity and inclusion efforts at Tulip.

ZJ: I joined Tulip in September as an employee success business partner, I had the privilege of interviewing with a lot of the companies around Toronto and sort of pitching the job that I wanted to do. And I decided to come to Tulip, because the CEO Ali and my vision for creating a amazing workplace culture were really, really aligned. So basically, I work at a strategic level on the HR team, just helping us develop policies and advising our executive layer on how we're going to move forward to create a really diverse and inclusive workplace.

Vanessa: So, gender diversity in tech and in the startup world aren't necessarily synonymous these days. So, what is Tulip doing to challenge this?

ZJ: Tech in North America definitely has a major problem with gender diversity. And I'm sorry to say that we're not a major exception to that rule. So, we have begun to track our demographic breakdown within the company. And then, as far as gender, specifically, the actions that we're taking are first of all, trying to increase the number of female applicants to our roles, and then we can track their process all the way through our hiring practices. So are women applying and if they are applying, are they're not getting hired? Is there a breakdown in our hiring process somewhere along the way, and a lot of things can contribute to that. It could be when we're hiring female developers that our take home coding test is too labor intensive for someone with caregiving responsibilities, it could be that we have a biased hiring manager working in our team. So, there's a lot of things you can look at. But if you're not measuring it, and looking at analytics, you're not gonna be able to flag those things and act appropriately on them. So those are the things that I think everyone can do. But I also believe that we should do bigger things and more things and really try to take action to take to make a difference in our community.

Vanessa: Based on your experience, then, what do you think is the most important thing for companies to do?

ZJ: The most important thing is to measure what you're doing. There's a lot of, I'm not inventing this, a lot of people have put out a lot of information. One of the resources that I enjoy quite a bit is Google's rework. They have a ton of assets there, and one of them is unconscious bias training, which is something that we've implemented here. And they talk about things like simple little things like when the

YouTube app first came out on phones, 10 to 15% of users were uploading their videos upside down. And it came to be that they didn't have any left-handed developers on their development team. And so, they never tested it for left-handed users and left-handed users uploaded their videos upside down. So, if you're not tracking these things, and like paying attention to your actual diversity, if you're just going out, and making broad speeches about how nice it would be if everyone got along, but you're not putting the money and the time and the manpower behind making real change in your company, then you're not doing anything, you're not really making a difference. That's our biggest learning, just measuring and measuring and measuring. When we first implemented our diversity survey, at which I'd like to give a shout out to Steph Little from Hubba, who has designed a brilliant open-source diversity survey with a ton of demographic questions. She has put it through lawyers, she has made sure that you're not asking very detailed questions about gender expression in an offensive way. So, if you're nervous about asking those questions, these resources are available to you for free. When we first put out that survey, people had a lot of questions like why are you asking me this? How does this affect my employment at Tulip? And so, we've had to do a lot of educating with our entire team about why we're collecting this data and people want to know how you're going to use their data. And then once you've collected that you have to make sure that you're taking action or people aren't going to be able to or aren't gonna be willing to share their private data with you. Of course, the survey was anonymous to be Clear. But since then, we've tried to put real action into place right away. And like I said, I've only been here for six months. But I wanted to make sure that we did some activities and built some structure out immediately to show people that we were taking this seriously. So, we built our employee resource groups, we have used our survey to identify where we were underrepresented. And so, we are like many companies underrepresented with women. So, we're sponsoring more women led initiatives, we are trying to sponsor different events that cater to that demographic. We're also underrepresented in LGBT community. And so, we're a gold sponsor of Venture Out coming up in March. And so those are the sorts of things where you can take real action to use your employment branding that everyone's already doing to really skew towards these groups where you're underrepresented.

Vanessa: You have to actually walk the walk instead of just talking

ZJ: And I'm not gonna lie, it's hard. And you will have some difficult conversations I get asked every day, why do I care about diversity? Why does this matter? Some people will believe that you're slowing down their hiring process, when we're trying to scale rapidly, some people may believe that diverse candidates automatically are going to be a lower caliber than other candidates, which is just simply not true. There's a ton of stats that backup how we tend to judge women and minority groups more harshly than we judge white, white men, women, and people of color do that there are things we have in common that we're all doing. And when you start to really educate people about that and just have an ongoing dialogue about it like we do at Tulip, you can start to turn that tide and just bring people into the fold. A lot of us if you weren't raised, talking about this stuff, and there's a lot to learn. It can be intimidating, but we just try to educate people, we've made diversity, one of our core values, and it's also one of our main goals for our business. So right up there with like, more sales is also more diversity. And we just talk about it relentlessly, forever and ever, and then make sure that we're taking actions that match.

Vanessa: What do you think are some of the unique challenges that Startup companies face when trying to tackle gender diversity.

ZJ: So I have worked in start-ups, and I've also worked in other industries. And I actually don't think that we have any unique challenges. I think that if anything, start-ups have power to make real change, because we are acting fast, we're nimble, we're able to come up with an awesome app idea and have like a minimum viable product a few weeks later, like we're doing miraculous things, we're moving at the speed of light. I think that if people put their energy into solving this problem, there is nothing that will stop them. But it's possibly just an issue of where people want to put their energy. Maybe some of it is education, because I can't imagine anyone doesn't want their company to be more profitable. And so, if we can teach our CEOs and our investors and hold them accountable, we can see change more rapidly. I think any investor who isn't looking at the gender breakdown of the management layer of the companies that they're investing in, I don't understand how you would possibly not take that into consideration when

study after study has proven that that will make you more money. So, if we hold those investors accountable, maybe we can get things to move faster. But I also think that we need our, we need people to hand out these titles that basically, a lot of people are talking about diversity, but we just need to take action, people just need to do a thing. So, if you want to see more women in tech, then hire a woman to be an executive at your company. It's as easy as that. And I've seen people who will bring on their pal their like college buddy to be a C level exec at their tiny Startup and then that person grows with the company. So, if you can give that chance to your buddy, why can't you give that chance to another person and allow them a high potential person to grow into the role. I also think that it will help all of us grow, we have a huge problem finding candidates for our companies, we have maybe according to some reports, five roles for every one developer. So, it's in your best interest to cast a wide net to find more people to fill your roles to build your company faster. So, I really do think that we can be the industry that makes a change.

Vanessa: So, if you can share, what's an initiative at Tulip that you're especially proud of?

ZJ: So one of the things we're doing our major project to the spring is launching the bridge. So, the bridge is a free coding school for women developers, agender developers, non-binary developers to come in and take a 12-week course to learn to develop. It's primarily targeting people with some coding experience like six to 12 months' worth. So maybe their boot camp grad, maybe they've been off work for paternal or maternity leave rather. And they're looking to get back into the industry. And we're just focusing on getting them job ready and also working on their confidence. A lot of the time women developers have the skills but not the negotiation tactics and all of those sorts of other complementary skills. So, we focus on that, and also just helping them build a network so that they have strong, experienced developers to rely on for help and ask questions and feed that network that's so crucial to people. So that's one of the things we're doing. And I just really want to make sure it's clear that that's free. That was a big thing for us. We don't want to contribute to income disparity, you know, preventing people from being able to get an education, we want to really make sure that our program is accessible to anyone who has the potential to go through it.

Vanessa: So last question. We talked a lot about taking action today. What are some actions you think people can do, whether they're in start-ups or not actually make a difference in gender diversity practices,

ZJ: I want to give a plug to a cause that I think is really valuable. So, one thing that I think that we can all do to change this is when you attend an event, or if you get asked to speak at an event, you can refuse to speak on a panel that doesn't have gender representation, and also minority representation. You can evaluate for yourself, what meets your standards, to speak. But it's those little things like a speaker refusing to talk on a panel that can make a huge difference when organizers often don't prioritize that when they're putting together their agenda. And trust me, if you say that that's an issue, they're gonna find someone there are a lot of people available to speak on every subject. So that's what you can do if you're speaking on panels. I also think if you're not a speaker, if you're just attending events, if you go to an event, and it's an all-white male panel, write to the event organizers and say that's not who I want to see speaking, I want to hear from marginalized voices. I want to hear from them on every subject at every event because they have valuable perspectives to share with us.

Vanessa: Thank you so much ZJ for your time today. So, to find out more about Tulip retail, please visit Tulip.com. And to find out more about the Bridge School, the free coding school for women that we discussed, you can visit wrangled.io/slash/bridge. Thank you for listening to another episode of beyond the business case.

Sarah Kaplan: This podcast is brought to you by the Institute for Gender and the Economy at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. To listen to our other podcasts, check out the GATE audio channel on Apple podcasts or the GATE audio playlist on Spotify. For additional myth busting research and game changing guidance please visit gendereconomy.org. And thanks for listening. Check out our other podcasts [Busted](#) and [Positively Exhausted](#)