



SPEAK UP: Bringing More Women's Voices to Tech Conferences

Opening Letter

Sometimes, important conversations start in the unlikeliest of places — like the women’s bathroom at AWS re:invent.

That’s where Ensono director of Public Cloud Product Lin Classon came to a significant realization in 2017. Despite attendance that eclipsed 40,000 people, Lin took to Twitter to point out the surprising emptiness of the conference’s washroom facilities. Her observation received dozens of reactions from around the world, with women tweeting photos of similarly barren restrooms at conferences they had attended. The post even garnered attention from the likes of Tech.Co, who called women’s bathrooms the “[Bechdel Test](#)” of tech conferences.

What was a one-off — albeit genuine — observation about the state of a tech conference’s lavatories sparked a much more revealing conversation: If women were notably missing from someplace as routine as a bathroom, where else might their absence be felt throughout the convention hall? On the keynote stages? During expert panels? Moreover, if there is a disparity between the experiences of men and women at tech conferences, what is the cause, what are the consequences and, most importantly, how can this be changed?

These questions deserved a closer look. Data shows women struggle to achieve equality in tech. Industry conferences can be a reflection of that fact, but a quantifiable picture of how they are represented has been difficult to find.

As this report lays bare, tech conferences in the U.S. and abroad indeed have become more inclusive for women, but still are still a far cry from what we believe they can be: Wholly representative, comfortable spaces that are as accommodating to women as they are to men. And while it is clear the organizers of these events have the opportunity to make a difference in the way that they curate keynote speakers, populate panels and promote equality, there is another equally important element in achieving better representation for women at tech conferences. Businesses themselves can be far more vigilant when deciding who will represent them. They also have the opportunity to be more mindful of the training, resources and support available to female associates looking for enriching professional experiences and the ability to contribute to their organizations beyond day-to-day responsibilities.

In reading this report, you may find yourself uncomfortable by the number of women who have experienced sexual harassment at a tech conference, or shocked at how often panels consist of a “lone woman.” You might be unsurprised that our survey results show that about a quarter of the keynote and standalone speakers at global tech conferences are women, or well-versed in the general lack of accommodations for women at these events. No matter your reaction, it is our hope that this data spells out the opportunity for further change, and identifies some concrete steps for how you can encourage your company to be part that change — whether you are a member of senior leadership or just beginning your career.

Sincerely,



Lisa Agona

Chief Marketing Officer

lin classon @lin_irl · 27 Nov 2017

Something serious for 1sec. Every ladies room I've been in was near empty. Although I'm grateful for the gender inequality that affords me quiet, empty bathrooms at these conferences, I'd take a long line at ladies room instead for a change #AWSreInvent #reInvent #reinvent2017

5 19 64

lin classon
@lin_irl

Follow

I've taken so many pictures of empty ladies rooms and selfies at these conferences. It was funny, sardonic for a while. It's getting more and more like tired news though. We could do better. #reInvent #AWSreInvent #reinvent2017

Introduction

Tech conferences around the globe promise crowds of attendees a first look at new gadgets, the chance to hear from elite CEOs and ample learning opportunities like workshops, breakouts and panel sessions. These conferences are rife with opportunities for companies to demonstrate industry leadership by speaking at these sessions.

But no matter how rich the programming, tech conferences are often accompanied by regrettable, headline-grabbing incidents. Some examples include [the robot strippers at an unofficial Consumer Electronics Show \(CES\) event in 2018](#); the perennial appearance of “booth babes”; and [even questionable presentation slides](#) that have allowed tech’s gender representation problem to spill over from the office into some of the world’s largest industry gatherings. It also is no secret that women in technical roles are often met with institutional unconscious biases, and in some cases, their career prospects are even actively hampered by fellow associates, like the case of [a Google employee’s “manifesto” about males being more suited for technical roles](#). Because of this, their chances of attending these events can be stifled, let alone their ability to speak at them.

In order to gain a fuller picture of how women are actually represented at tech conferences, as well as their perception of the events they attend, Ensono conducted a first-of-its kind global data study of two categories:

Women’s Voices on Tech’s Biggest Stages

Much of the draw for major conferences in the U.S. and abroad is the keynote speaker lineup. To quantify one aspect of female representation at tech conferences, Ensono audited three years’ worth of keynote and standalone speaker lineups from 18 major technology conferences around the world.

The Attitudes and Experiences of Women at Tech Conferences

Do headlines about sexist events and anecdotes about the male-dominated atmosphere depict what it is really like at tech industry conferences? In order to get a true picture, Ensono surveyed 500 women across the U.S. and U.K. who have attended a tech conference in their careers. The goal was to gain a real understanding of women’s experiences at tech conferences and glean insights into how these experiences shape women’s attitudes and behaviors.

“In order to gain a fuller picture of how women are actually represented at tech conferences, as well as their perception of the events they attend, Ensono conducted a first-of-its kind global data study.”



The goal of this research is to present an objective, clear examination of women's representation and experiences at tech conferences. It is neither meant to put a negative spotlight on conference organizers, nor a positive spin on their efforts to improve representation and accommodations for women. Instead, it merely seeks to show there are opportunities for us all to do better.

This data study and subsequent commentary is also meant to provide actionable advice that can be implemented by companies that send associates to attend and represent them at tech conferences.

Conferences are part of the work experience, and sponsoring and attending companies can have a big impact on the representation and experiences of women. Our actionable recommendations include both making changes to processes and taking a more active role in the selection and preparation of the individuals who attend these conferences.

As a tech company ourselves, Ensono is no stranger to the struggles to recruit women and create an inclusive and diverse workplace. But we have taken a proactive strategy toward more inclusivity and diversity, and are lucky to have some of the brightest women in the business representing us, both in leadership roles and at the biggest tech conferences around the world. We hope this report shines a light on these issues and helps other companies in the industry fight this battle alongside us.

“We have taken a proactive strategy toward more inclusivity and diversity and are lucky to have some of the brightest women in the business representing us.”



Laura McLeod
@LauraMac_101

Follow

Unconscious bias at a tech conference . . . staff on the door 'we're waiting for the speaker, he's due in next 5 minutes' - it's a female speaker but they expected the speaker to be male due to the nature of the talk #DiversityandTech #WomenInTech #GirlsInTech #UnconsciousBias

6:36 AM - 27 Feb 2019 from East Ham, London

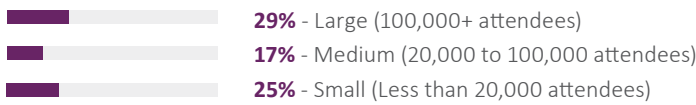


Audit Findings

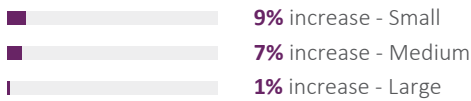
Major tech conferences featuring predominately male-dominated programming and speakers are often accepted as a given. Negative headlines, one-off social media posts and even memes historically have highlighted the lack of women in prominent presenter roles at conferences. However, a more objective analysis of the speaker lineups at major tech conferences may validate some of the criticism on social media and in the press.

On a broad scale, our audit found some progress. Globally, there was a 4 percent increase in the number of female speakers in tech conference lineups from 2016 to 2018. Even more promising: Conferences with the most attendees also feature the largest representation of women, and the share of women speakers is increasing.

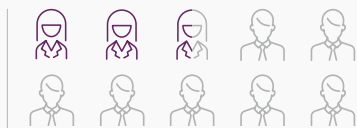
Average female speakers across all 3 years



Change in female speakers between 2016 and 2018.



“There was a 4 percent increase in the number of female speakers in tech conference lineups from 2016 to 2018.”



On average, **women made up just 25 percent of all keynote or standalone speakers** in the past three years.

In the U.S., women made up 27 percent of speakers in this period, as compared to 24 percent of speakers at conferences outside the U.S.

Matthew A. Cherry @MatthewACherry Follow

Caption this

Brittany Packnett @MsPackyetti Follow

“We’d love for you to join our panel...”

Matthew A. Cherry @MatthewACherry
Caption this

Audit analysis and commentary

The representation of women as featured speakers at tech conferences can be attributed to some of tech's larger gender representation issues.

According to the most recent McKinsey data, the representation of U.S. women in tech as a whole has remained almost flat throughout the past three years. And according to one estimate, only 20 percent of tech jobs are held by women. It would seem reasonable, then, that our audit found an approximate 4:1 ratio of male speakers to female speakers.

According to our survey, 76 percent of women are more likely to attend a conference with a keynote speaker, panelist or other programming that features a woman. Additionally, 94 percent of women who have attended a tech conference indicated it is important to have female representation among the keynote speaker lineups.

These statistics make it clear that women care about better representation, and the solution is not to simply wait for conference organizers to create change. It's apparent that fostering a more inclusive, accommodating environment at tech conferences is a responsibility that also falls upon organizations that attend them. Who is chosen to attend, how these people are trained, what they are expected to do and the support they are given during their time at conferences are critical considerations for companies. Fortunately, solutions exist, and they don't have to be complicated.

“76 percent of women are more likely to attend a conference with a keynote speaker, panelist or other programming that features a woman.”



Survey Findings

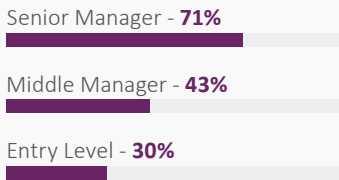
The lack of women prominently featured as speakers at conferences is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the need for better representation. The experiences of women who attend these events — to learn, network and influence the future of their respective industries — are equally as important.

Our survey asked a broad range of questions about what it’s like to attend tech conferences as a woman. The findings make it apparent that both conference organizers and companies that send associates to these events have work to do when it comes to achieving a valuable, equitable experience.

Panelist experience

Panels at tech conferences are a prime opportunity to showcase a diverse range of opinions and perspectives on a given topic. However, these sessions can be rather homogenous, and often feature a “lone woman.” Seventy percent of women surveyed who have sat on a panel at a tech conference report being the only woman.

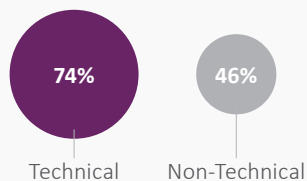
“Both conference organizers and companies that send associates to these events have work to do when it comes to achieving a valuable, equitable experience.”



69 percent of women surveyed that hold senior manager titles or higher have spoken on a panel. By comparison, only **43 percent of middle managers** have done so, and only **30 percent at an entry level** position have done so.



The “lone woman” on a panel does not seem to discriminate based on industry experience. Nearly every career level surveyed hovers around **70 percent having been the only woman on a panel.**



74 percent of women in a technical role have been the only woman on a panel, versus **46 percent of women in a non-technical role** who report being the only woman on a panel.



Code of Conduct

Expectations for professional behavior have evolved even more rapidly as a result of the #MeToo movement and reports of alleged sexist behavior at prominent tech companies. Consequently, some tech conferences have made an effort to develop a “code of conduct” for attendees, which outlines general rules and expectations for conference behavior. These guidelines, often published in official programs or on conference websites, are meant to foster a more inclusive, accommodating experience for all attendees.

But having such a code or set of guidelines is one thing; making them visible and, more importantly, adhered to by attendees is another.

“Those who report being at a conference with a code of conduct are actually more likely to have witnessed or experienced sexual harassment.”



49 percent of women are unclear about the existence of a code of conduct at conferences they attend.

Surprisingly, those who report attending a conference with a code of conduct are actually more likely to have witnessed or experienced sexual harassment, as compared to those who reported not seeing a code of conduct or being unsure if one existed.



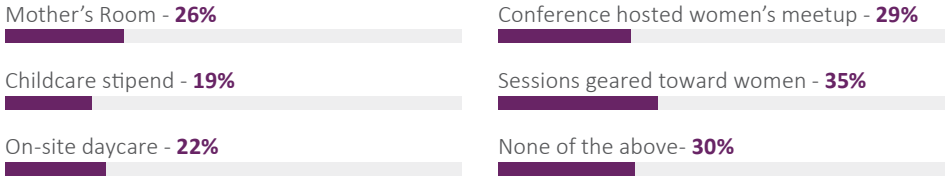
38 percent of those who had seen a code of conduct at a conference said they have experienced sexual harassment.

13 percent of those who had not seen a code of conduct at a conference said they have experienced sexual harassment.



Conference accommodations

A need for better accommodations and more inclusive programming for women is apparent based on the survey findings.



For the purposes of this survey, sexual harassment was defined as the harassment of a person because of that person's sex. This includes unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature.

Harassment does not have to be of a sexual nature, however, and can include offensive remarks about a person's sex. For example, harassing a woman by making offensive comments about women in general.

Both victim and the harasser can be either a woman or a man, and the victim and harasser can be the same sex.

Sexual Harrassment



41 percent of women report having an experience at a tech conference that makes them less likely to attend a future event.
One in four women who have attended a tech conference report experiencing sexual harassment.



Nicole Bedera @NBedera · 2 Aug 2018

But it was on my mind while I presented at my first ever ASA panel. And it was on my mind for the rest of my time at the conference. I worried about him approaching me angry. I worried about who else was sexualizing me while I was trying to stake a claim for my career.

1 1 21

Nicole Bedera @NBedera [Follow](#)

The ramifications of the case of sexual harassment have extended far beyond one conference.

11:54 AM - 2 Aug 2018

1 Retweet 10 Likes

1 1 10

Tweet your reply

How Companies Can Be Part of the Solution

It is clear from the survey results that tech conferences still have work to do when it comes to providing an inclusive environment for women. However, the companies that send representatives to these tech conferences also can make a difference. By assuming responsibility and committing to concrete, actionable changes within their organizations, companies can have a major effect on how women are represented at tech conferences and even on representation in the industry as a whole.

It's important to note that these recommendations are not limited to just female attendees. Considerations like these make attending a conference more accessible to everyone — which should be the ultimate goal for everyone. At the end of the day, anyone who wants to participate should be able to participate.



A more engaged marketing department

Often, a company's presence at a conference is focused on promoting a new product or the company at large, meaning the marketing team takes the lead — and maintains the budget. This can mean associates who might be interested in attending are overlooked, or worse, aren't made aware of the opportunity to participate in the first place. Companies can make simple changes like:

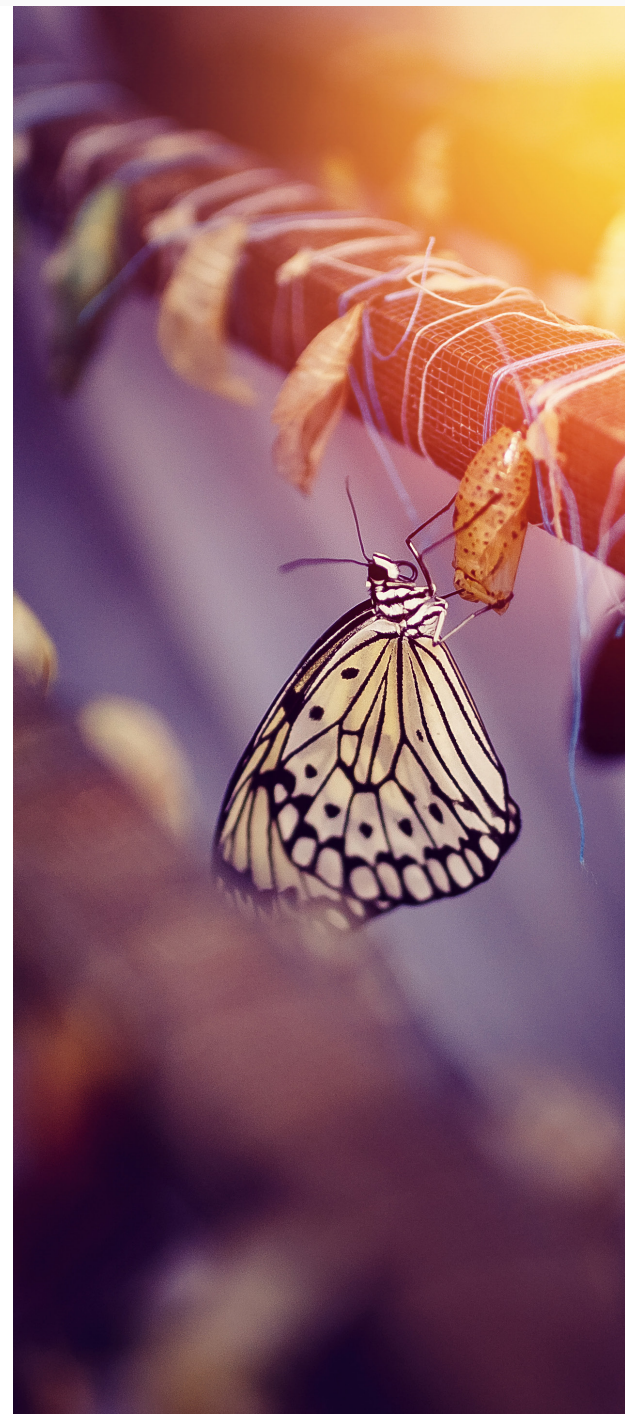
- ✓ Promoting corporate presence at these events internally, as well as any other opportunities that may be available. Your associates can't participate or show interest in these events if they don't know about them in the first place
- ✓ Sending out open calls for speakers and presenters, as opposed to selecting from existing groups of thought leaders
- ✓ Celebrating the associates who will speak or present at the events, encouraging other associates to attend and promoting these opportunities to the public via social media



Better training and preparation

The lack of women chosen to represent their employers on panels and at speaking engagements is not because they are not interested. In some cases, a basic lack of opportunities to advance their public speaking or presentation skills exists. Companies can help more women prepare by:

- ✓ Offering to pay for public speaking or presentation training
- ✓ Creating a mentorship program designed to encourage a new group of women to speak on behalf of the company





Establishing “equality riders”

Part of companies improving inclusivity includes committing to a set of values. This means taking a critical look at all facets a company chooses to participate in. By establishing an “equality rider” — or a set of criteria that determines company participation in an event — companies can affirm their values and show conferences that a lack of inclusivity is unacceptable. Criteria can include:

- ✓ Not participating in panels that do not include women or people of color
- ✓ Not sending associates to attend panels that do not include women or people of color
- ✓ Rethinking participation in conference-adjacent activities that feature sexist or non-inclusive themes
- ✓ Committing to sponsoring conferences that feature a code of conduct in line with company values



Creating an internal code of conduct

As the survey made clear, nearly half of women were unclear about the existence of a code of conduct statement at the conferences they have attended. Companies can counter this by creating their own conference code of conduct and requiring all associates to agree to adhere to it if they are to represent the company. Even if the conference they attend has a code of its own, a company’s own conduct expectations can go above and beyond to create the best environment for everyone. A code of conduct that promotes a more inclusive environment for women can include:

- ✓ General guidelines for behavior, and a section dedicated to outlining what constitutes sexual harassment
- ✓ A clear explanation of consequences for any inappropriate behavior
- ✓ A section outlining what associates should do if they witness sexual harassment



Associate support

In addition to training, employers should offer additional support to associates who represent them at conferences. This can include:

- ✓ Offering a stipend for childcare when the conference does not feature it
- ✓ Allowing associates days off or time set aside to prepare for conferences
- ✓ Paying for any materials or technology necessary to present at a conference



Conclusion

Tech conferences have their fair share of work to do before women can enjoy the same experiences as men. It is not acceptable to see a major conference lineup that lacks female voices, or to read yet another headline about a sexist booth demo on a show floor.

It is apparent from the data that change isn't happening quickly enough. Our data shows women want to see more female professionals on the big stages at these conferences, and when they don't, they have made it clear they are less likely to return. And far too often, women are encountering sexual harassment and a lack of accommodations that cast a pall over their entire experience.

Companies can do better to address these challenges and speed their own internal change rather than waiting for conference organizers to catch up. Proactive, thoughtful strategies can be deployed by all tech companies to make these conferences more valuable and inclusive, creating a better environment for everyone.

“Companies can do better to address this evidence and speed their own internal change rather than waiting for conference organizers to catch up.”

About Ensono

Ensono helps IT leaders be the catalyst for change by harnessing the power of hybrid IT to transform their businesses. We drive digital transformation by enabling increased agility and scalability through the modernization to public cloud. Our broad services portfolio from mainframe to cloud, powered by an intelligent governance platform, is designed to help our clients operate for today and optimize for tomorrow. We are award-winning certified experts in AWS and Azure and recognized as Microsoft Datacenter Transformation Partner of the Year. Ensono has nearly 2,000 associates around the world and is headquartered in greater Chicago.

Visit us at www.ensono.com.

ensono® | OPERATE FOR TODAY.
OPTIMIZE FOR TOMORROW.

