

A memo to Google – firing employees with conservative views is anti-diversity

Written by Akshaya Kamalnath, Lecturer, Deakin University

Google's recent [sacking](#) of James Damore for circulating a [memo](#) will do the tech giant more harm than good. Not only has the memo been incorrectly dubbed “anti-diversity”, but a majority of Google employees surveyed in a recent poll [disagreed](#) with the decision to fire Damore.

A more productive response to the memo would have been to setup an official channel for employees to air these kinds of issues. This way employees feel their views are heard and the company can take into account different points of view while formulating policy.

Read more: [What the Google gender ’manifesto’ really says about Silicon Valley](#)

Google's chief executive, Sundar Pichai, [wrote](#) to all Google employees saying that Damore's memo had crossed the line by “advancing harmful gender stereotypes in the workplace”. It might have been more advantageous to have a full and frank discussion of Google's diversity policies and what they are intended to achieve.

Is it too dangerous to talk about diversity?

Although painted as “[anti-diversity](#)”, the memo itself raises issues of the alienation of conservative views at Google and the need to be able to discuss diversity more openly. In other words, diversity shouldn't be a concept that people are scared to discuss openly for fear of being vilified or shamed.

[Damore’s memo](#) suggests that those with differing views on diversity are dismissed and vilified. The response to his memo seems to prove his point. This might in fact be the heart of the problem - fear of saying something politically incorrect might in fact be holding people back from understanding the need for diversity measures.

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One [study](#) found that American corporate directors thought board diversity (in racial, ethnic and gender terms) was an important goal worth pursuing. But they seemed unable to substantiate this opinion with examples of how board diversity might help the company. The authors of the study concluded that diversity seemed to be a “dangerous” subject to talk about.

Shutting down differing views on the matter is antithetical to the idea of diversity. “Inner diversity”, meaning diversity of viewpoints and opinions, is as important as “outer diversity”, in terms of gender and ethnicity etc.

A Canadian report on women on company boards [found](#) that boards with more women surpass all male boards in their attention to audit and risk oversight and control. It also highlights that outer diversity (such as having more women on the board) is a proxy for inner diversity - it is a sign of different “gifts, skills, experiences, and perspectives”. If a company focuses singularly on outer diversity while discouraging diverse viewpoints it won't realise the real benefits of diversity in the first place.

Rationales for diversity

The rationale for measures promoting diversity is twofold. Women and minority groups have to overcome many barriers including selection bias while being recruited. And diversity, particularly in problem-solving groups, is [ultimately good for business](#) .

Diversity measures seek to reduce (if not eliminate) [biases](#) by expanding or diversifying the pool of candidates being considered for each position. For example, programs where female candidates are given mentors opens up new opportunities.

[Damore's memo](#) argues the biological differences between men and women might be one of the reasons for the low number of women in the tech industry. However, [recent neuroscience research](#) shows there is not enough evidence to conclude that there are significant differences in the male and female brain. So while Damore's view is not unequivocal, this perception could impede the effectiveness of diversity measures.

Other [research](#) shows that more men than women study computer science, engineering,

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physics and mathematics in the US. This could account for some of the gender disparity in tech companies. However, this is not true in all countries.

For instance, women make up [nearly half](#) of computer science and computer engineering students in India. It might be interesting to study what factors deter women in the US from studying these subjects.

But in order to address these issues it is necessary to be able to discuss them, and then assess what a diversity policy is intended to fix. To that end, companies must create forums and events to discuss the rationales for diversity policies and also allow employees to voice their views in this regard.

A starting point could be to have employees fill out anonymous surveys to gauge perception of diversity policies. Based on this, appropriate discussions can be encouraged. Companies could also consider making the rationale for the diversity policy available along with the policy itself. This process will result in more informed policy choices and perhaps a more inclusive work culture.

Akshaya Kamalnath does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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