CREATING A THRIVING WORK ENVIRONMENT FOR WOMEN
In 2017, the Illinois Technology Association (ITA) launched the Women Influence Chicago initiative with the goal to make Chicago the leading tech ecosystem for women.

Women Influence Chicago operates as an umbrella organization to cultivate women leaders, connect the community and increase female leadership at growth and enterprise tech companies. Through pre-workforce and in-workforce education for both men and women, the initiative aims to catapult women into roles of influence as a member of the C-Suite, as Presidents/CEOs and into Public Advisory Board positions.

The Advisory Board of Women Influence Chicago tackled, as one of its first projects, the development of a set of best practices to guide and educate Chicago tech companies on creating successful and inclusive environments for women.

The following best practices are focused on practical, immediate steps that growth-stage tech companies can take today to improve gender equality in their workplaces. These recommendations recognize that start-up and growth-stage tech companies won’t be able to emulate the diversity and inclusion programs that companies like McDonald’s and Allstate have been building for years. However, the steps below will help them make changes to their culture, policies and procedures to not only make a difference today, but position them for long-term success.

Purposefully organized in a quick to read and digest fashion, this blueprint is not meant to be a manifest that sits on a shelf. But rather a checklist that c-level leaders can leverage to compare their current practices and implement new ones that create a platform for women’s advancement in the field.

**HIRING PRACTICES**

**INTERVIEW PROCESS AND TRAINING**

- Create consistent skill set requirements for each job in advance of interviews.
- Don’t discuss things that may unconsciously sway your decision until after the interview (rethink cultural fit question). For example, talking about going to the same university or being from the same town, may lead to employees connecting with the candidate on facts that should not factor into him or her being qualified for the job.
- Developing strategies to combat these tendencies is crucial in your hiring decisions. Learn more about this subject in Paradigm’s Managing Unconscious Bias resource here.
- Have a diversity recruiting strategy.
  - At which colleges are you recruiting? Some STEM schools work hard at this topic and have gender parity within their engineering schools (e.g., Harvey Mudd).
  - Do you leverage apprenticeship/internship programs that target boot camps or candidates from diverse backgrounds?
  - Have you implemented explicit strategies to actively source women and minorities from within tech recruiting?
  - The NFL’s Rooney Rule which requires league teams to interview minority candidates for head coaching and senior football operation jobs is a policy worth emulating. For more on how it works, check out this article from SBNation here.
- Have you taken a hard look at your job descriptions?
  - Scrub descriptions to reduce gender stereotypes. AnitaB.org’s Solutions to Recruit Technical Women white paper provides specific examples of Do’s and Don’ts here, see section 6.
  - Women are more likely not to apply to a job if they don’t meet 100% of criteria on a job description.
  - See section 4 in AnitaB.org’s aforementioned whitepaper, here.
- Reduce use of referrals given research that shows employees tend to hire others like them.

**OFFER PRACTICES AND NEGOTIATIONS**

- Proactively letting women know this is the first offer and they are open to negotiation has been proven to reduce salary gaps.
- Salary negotiation tactics.
  - Always give candidates at least 24 hours to absorb the offer before asking for a response.
  - Ensure candidates know that other components of the job are also open to negotiation – equity, time off, bonus, etc.
- Agree on internal practices/guidelines of salary bands and equity grants before interviewing candidates.
- Provide details as to maternity/paternity leave up front in offer - as most women won’t ask.
- Publish Salary Bands. “Salary transparency is the single best protection against gender bias, racial bias or orientation bias.”
CULTURE

TEAM EVENTS
• Alcohol should not be a mainstay of every event.
• Hold events at varying times of day to be inclusive of employees that may not be able to stay late into the evening.
• Schedule events with advance notice to include everyone.

ENVIRONMENTAL
• Ensure a blend of masculine and feminine objects and décor.
• Remove any pictures or objects that could be offensive, from both common areas and individual employee’s workstations.
• Images of teams should include both genders.

EDUCATION AND SELF AWARENESS
• Provide yearly management training.
• Publicly recognize women.
• Participate in AnitaB.org Top Companies award – it forces collection of important diversity data for company tracking.
• Develop, support and fund Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)
• Develop a Code of Conduct.
  • Specify a process for reporting issues.
  • Write and communicate a clear anti-harassment policy.

Make gender diversity a top organizational priority by holding executives/managers accountable for diversity goals. See Section 6, page 23 of AnitaB.org’s previously referenced recruitment whitepaper, here.³

Involving men as gender diversity champions. According to the 2017 BCG US Gender Survey, the share of women respondents who agree that their company has made good progress toward gender diversity in the past one to three years, is 2.5 times greater at those companies where women agree that men are actively involved in championing gender diversity.

Measure and evaluate company efforts to track progress. See Section 6, page 18 of AnitaB.org’s previously referenced recruitment whitepaper, here.³
GROWTH AND RETENTION PROGRAMS

HAVE A DOCUMENTED MATERNITY/PATERNITY LEAVE POLICY

- According to the 2017 ITA Salary Survey, 45% of the companies that offer paid maternity leave provide 12 weeks and 30% of the companies that offer paid paternity leave provide two paid weeks.

PROVIDE A MOTHER’S ROOM

- Safe, discreet location.
- Lockable room.
- Area for working/electrical power source.
- Refrigerator for milk.
- Medical grade pump or cubbies to store pumps.
- Cleaning services.
- Paper products.
- Sink is preferable, but not mandatory.
- Try to make a “welcome” location - comfortable chairs, paint, pictures of people’s kids to make it friendly.

OFFER FLEXIBLE REENTRY FOR WORKING PARENTS

- Proactively discuss options for reentering workforce.
- Explore remote work arrangements.

OFFER MENTORSHIP/ADVOCACY PROGRAMS

- Provide leadership development programs.
- Create opportunities for sponsorship and networking across levels.
- Further reading on this topic can be found in AnitaB.org’s Advancing Women Technologists Into Positions of Leadership white paper, here.

PERFORM FAIR PAY REVIEWS

- Assure data is being tracked by job family and not cost center.
- Implement a process to assure no one is significantly under their salary band.
- Take part in a salary survey (via ITA or other) to ensure your salary bands are at market for Chicago.

PROMOTION PROCESSES

- Create consistent job descriptions to describe each level of a role.
- Create a process where an employee is vetted against consistent skillsets/behaviors of the role.

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WOMEN INFLUENCE CHICAGO

FOUNDING PARTNERS

REFERENCES

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4. Torres and Huffman, 2004; Gorman, 2005; Rubineau and Fernandez, 2010