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techUK Data Centres Professionalism group
So You Want to Employ More Women?

The data centre sector struggles to attract and retain female staff, especially in technical roles. In truth, UK data centre operators find it hard to recruit enough technical staff of either gender. Missing out on half the workforce reduces the number of potential employees by 50%, which is not a good place to start. So what are data centres doing wrong? What can we do about it? Emma Fryer has worked within the sector since 2011, albeit not in a technical role, and makes the following observations.

Let's be honest, if I had been asked in my late teens what I would be doing as a career, the phrase "data centre" would not have featured on any conceivable list, yet this sector has been a very happy place for me for the last six years. Like many others, I arrived by accident rather than design. It's true that there are not many women working in the sector and the evidence that I have seen from professional bodies like the IET and sector surveys by analysts like 451 Group suggest that there are severe problems not just in recruiting women but in retaining them in technical roles. At the end of this note I've included links to some particularly good initiatives to encourage women into the sector and into technology and engineering roles but in the meantime I share below some thoughts on what we could do to help ourselves.

1. *Firstly, Motherhood and Apple Pie: make sure you do the things that will attract everyone, because they will attract women.*
2. *Secondly, make sure you position the sector appropriately as a career destination of choice. Data Centres ARE amazing, wonderful things.*
3. *Thirdly, identify where special attention is needed – even it if is just inside your own head - and get going.*

1   Motherhood and Apple Pie: Do the things that will attract everyone because they will appeal to women

- <u>Provide flexible working</u>, both in terms of time and location (remote working) where you can. Be honest when you can't: don't pay lip service to flexible hours or remote working if you aren't prepared to provide, enable and support them.

- <u>Leadership:</u> Ensure your business leaders demonstrate the personal and professional values that you want your staff to adopt. Identify role models and value them. Make sure your managers are doing the three things managers should do: Inspiring, protecting and supporting.

- <u>Mentoring:</u> Ensure staff have access to external mentoring and that there is a genuine 360 feedback process that is not just lip service and where issues raised are not routinely buried.

- <u>Be a meritocracy:</u> Be absolutely transparent on career progression and promotion. There are too many pathetic little cronyocracies in business. Let's make sure there aren't any in our sector. Examine your career management structures for implicit bias – bias is like nits, often there but hard to spot - so bring in an external perspective.

- <u>Be realistic:</u> Don't promise what you can't provide (or have no intention of delivering).

- <u>Managing (up):</u> Be absolutely sure that you can distinguish those who manage well from those who manage upwards well.

- <u>Competence and confidence:</u> Ensure that you differentiate competence from confidence. Call out people who understate their own achievements and those who overstate them. Anecdotally, this is one of the biggest complaints I hear from women, that their hesitancy to overstate their abilities places them at a disadvantage.

- <u>Don't be a troglodyte:</u> A good front of house helps, comfortable offices in an accessible location. We don't expect technical facilities to be trendy but that is no reason to provide inferior coffee. Any fool can be uncomfortable.

- <u>The Best is the enemy of the good:</u> Broaden your horizons when defining the "ideal" employee – don't set people up to fail because they aren't Superwoman, and don't turn a job description into a wish list.

2   Position the sector as a career destination of choice

- <u>Remember that data centres are amazing wonderful things:</u> And tell everybody. Explain how data centres underpin and enable everything that is familiar and important and exciting in our modern economy – from the weather forecast to eBay to Formula 1.

- <u>Career choices:</u> Be clear about the career choices available within the data centre, the variety of technologies and roles and pathways for progression.

- <u>Mobility:</u> Be clear about the scope for career mobility and geographical mobility.   Nobody has to stay in the sector but it equips employees for all sorts of external roles.

- <u>Opportunities:</u> Be clear about the continuous spectrum of new opportunities presented by a sector that is developing and changing so rapidly, and the exposure to new technologies and business models. Use these changes to review job roles and competency frameworks.

- <u>Being the Best:</u> Be clear that this is a globally important, market leading sector that it is a privilege to be part of.

- Getting paid and going on getting paid. Don't forget the boring but important things like job security and salary.

3   Address areas that need special attention

- Actively support returners: In some fast moving technology sectors employers are reluctant to take on people without continuous experience. This is based on a misconception that will affect women more than men. Don't be an unwitting misogynist.   Have a look at [techUK's Returners Hub](#) which is a fantastic resource to help people get back into the tech sector.

- Accommodate change: Many women with children, and those caring for elders, will need different working conditions when they return, such as shorter or more flexible hours. Don't be like many employers who allow this to limit opportunities. Don't make a few low grade concessions and sit on your laurels: this problem gets worse with seniority so stay on top of it.

- Understand the meaning of "career break": For primary carers, still predominantly women, this is a misnomer, disguising episodes of prolonged medieval torture followed by several years of hard labour, all unpaid.   Don't use terms like "time off" or "lady of leisure". Keep in touch with those on carers' or parental leave.

- Examine your conscience: Is your recruitment of women an attempt to meet quotas, to appear more gender diverse, to avoid being criticised? Do you really want more women in your workforce?   If you don't, then stop pretending. Go and look at the comic book store in *The Simpsons* and in *Big Bang Theory* and think again.

- Be a Hunter-Gatherer: Many women are reluctant to put themselves forward. Go out proactively and identify potential female candidates when recruiting for a position. Call them. Call them again. Don't just wait for them to come to you.

- Value, don't patronise: Make it clear that in a sector with few women, female employees will be highly valued. I like being valued; the data centre sector has noticed this and that's why I'm still here.

- Beware of banter: Banter is a two way thing. One-way banter is harassment. Harassment is unlawful. Banter is best between equals, but never make assumptions. Banter is rarely fun when you are isolated, at a disadvantage or the only one receiving it. Me, I love banter, but not everyone is like me.

- Pay people fairly, and ensure your female staff have the same level of logistical and administrative support as male colleagues. "She doesn't need a PA because she can type" is not something we ever want to hear, unless the solution is to pay both salaries to the same individual.

- Forget the cant, look at the evidence. Are women holding positions of equality? Count them. What sex and age were the people made redundant over the last five years? Count them too. What do women employees actually say? Have you asked them? When you last did a staff satisfaction survey did it go to everyone? Was it anonymous? Were people convinced it was anonymous? Really?

- <u>Use quotas with caution:</u> A quota is a double edged sword. On the plus side a female quota ensures that senior management, especially when reluctant or lazy, are forced to seek out and recognise women who are contributing. It also gets the issue on the table.   On the negative side it can be viewed as tokenism and can create resentment among male colleagues who can say that these positions are only due to gender (the obvious answer to that is that men have been promoted on the basis of gender for several millennia so perhaps it's someone else's turn). However there is a risk that quotas can set women up to fail. At public events women want to be asked to speak because of what they have achieved and because they know what they are talking about, not because of the arrangement of their chromosomes. Nobody wants to be a Patsy. So gender balance quotas have to be carefully managed.

- <u>Talk to women.</u> I know, a radical idea. Implicit bias means that even with the best intentions people are simply unable to grasp some of the nuances of life and work that other people experience. Some of the most enduring barriers to entry, advancement and equity in the workplace are almost invisible unless you experience them first hand. Ask women what they see creating unintentional barriers or inequity and do something about it.

Links:
- techUK 's Returners Hub: https://www.techuk.org/returners
- IET 2017 Eng. & Tech Skills Survey: http://www.theiet.org/factfiles/education/skills2017-page.cfm
- Why Work in a Data Centre? http://www.techuk.org/images/Why_work_in_a_data_centre_FINAL.pdf
- Keep your options open: http://www.techuk.org/images/Oh_my_God_I_forgot_to_study_Maths.pdf
- techUK commitment to abolish all male panels: https://www.techuk.org/insights/news/item/11151-techuk-makes-commitment-to-abolish-manels

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