# ENABLING PROGRESSION: WOMEN IN TECH

# We need to talk about progression for women in tech...

Women make up half of the UK's total workforce, but only 28% of tech employees. Tech Talent Charter research recently highlighted that gender diversity in tech roles falls even further to just 22% senior tech positions.

If we're going to tackle the gender gap in tech, we to ensure women are able to find lasting career success in the sector, and to do that, we need to understand what's hindering women's progression.

This guide draws insights from a meeting of technology leaders, convened by Sky's and the Tech Talent Charter. It offers actionable solutions for organisations to empower women and tackle a critical issue: retaining and progressing women leaders in tech.

# Tackling barriers to progression for women

✓ **Create a career web, not a ladder:** A one-size-fits-all approach to career progression doesn't work. Help employees identify their transferrable skills, and leverage them into multiple career pathways, rather than a single pathway with expectations modelled on a majority group. Don't underestimate the value of lateral moves - they can be hugely meaningful progression steps, especially during periods where promotion opportunities are scarce.

✓ **Meaningful mentoring:** Mentoring is effective but only when it's done properly: create sustainable mentorship programs that provide ongoing support; invest in experienced mentors who understand the challenges of their mentees; engage senior leaders to actively champion it. And keep it tailored: create structured programs where mentees progress through different levels, gaining access to increasingly experienced sponsors and broader networks as they advance in their careers.

However, we must also address the gender bias in mentoring practices. Often, women are mentored on empowerment, finding their voice, and assertiveness, while men receive guidance on business acumen, strategy, commercials, and finance. Equitable mentoring demands covering a spectrum of topics relevant to all participants, regardless of gender, to ensure equal opportunities for career progression.

✓ **Celebrate diverse voices:** Amplify the voices and perspectives of successful women across the organisation. You can't be what you can't see. Celebrating diverse stories helps signpost a more diverse set of career pathways for others, influencing career aspirations and making our pipeline for senior talent more inclusive.

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✓ **Recognise compounded diversity challenges:** Women of colour, LGBTQ+ women, disabled women and those from working class backgrounds face complex intersectional barriers, and at different career points, their impact changes. Consider the different moments at which intersectional barriers emerge and take action to address them.

✓ **Hold leaders and employees accountable:** Leaders must be able to manage and develop diverse talent. Make diversity and inclusion a core responsibility for all leaders and evaluate them on their ability to cultivate and develop diverse talent. Incorporate diversity goals into performance reviews for all employees. Make progress on D&I initiatives a significant factor in bonus structures and promotions and ensure you resource managers with the time to undertake this work.

✓ **Build technical domain knowledge:** Provide technical upskilling resources and allocate time for them during work hours. Tech changes rapidly and progression is tied to a person's ability to maintain up-to-date domain knowledge, even in low and no-code roles. Women need to be enabled to undertake upskilling at work rather than expected to find time for it outside of work, especially when it may conflict with caring responsibilities.

# Tackling barriers to progression for women

✓ **Focus support around transition periods:** Offer targeted support during personal life or career transitions. Promotions, role or manager changes, starting a family, bereavement, illness, and returning from extended leave are moments when structural inequities can cost women career opportunities. Design comprehensive transition plans that support women in their roles at these moments, providing the resources they need to (re)gain momentum. Making succession planning an expectation for all leaders is not only good talent strategy, it also helps to normalise proper progression support for everyone.

✓ **Tackle the motherhood penalty:** Rethink traditional work models that prioritise presenteeism and long hours. Embrace flexible work arrangements, remote work options, and part-time roles to empower women to balance their careers and personal lives. Challenge assumptions and stigmas associated with taking leave: create a culture that supports and welcomes women back to work and respects their professional standing and their work preferences.

# Understanding your gender data

To effectively address and dismantle the barriers that women face in tech leadership, organisations need to consider their gender pipelines at each level critically. Understanding your data is key to this process. For instance:

**1. Distribution Analysis**: Evaluate the proportion of women across various seniority levels. If the representation of women (e.g., 28%) is predominantly among junior positions, what measures can be taken to boost their presence in senior roles?

**2. Promotion Rates:** Do women get promoted at the same rate as their male counterparts? Understanding promotion trends is key to identifying potential biases or systemic barriers.

**3. Learning and Development (L&D) Engagement**: Analyse if there's a disparity between how men and women engage with L&D opportunities. Are men allocating more time to L&D than women, and if so, what are the reasons and solutions?

**4. Performance Ratings**: What percentage of women are in your top performance ratings? The distribution between women and men in these ratings can uncover biases in performance evaluations.

**5. Extra Responsibilities**: Assess if women are disproportionately taking on 'side of desk' activities and Employee Resource Group (ERG) engagements. To address this, leaders should take action to equalise the distribution of glue work and ensure that ERG contributions are seen as a valuable form of professional development. Participation in ERG can foster a sense of belonging and confidence, which is crucial for career progression.

**6. Recruitment and Retention rates:** Analysing your entire talent pipeline - from who applies to who gets hired and who remains - is vital, especially when paying close attention to the experiences of women returning from career breaks and parental leave. Monitoring how the retention rates of these employees stack up against other groups can highlight areas of improvement. Low retention rates in these cases may uncover potential barriers or lack of support systems hindering women from progressing in the workplace.

# Ideas for building technical domain knowledge

**Idea:** allocate work on new tech stacks fairly across teams, and ensure women have the opportunity to learn new tooling.

**Idea**: ensure women get internal exposure to tech stakeholders where they can develop their strengths 'talking tech' at a senior level.

**Idea**: create opportunities for women to use their tech skills across multiple settings. Not only does it build confidence, it also enables them to provide varied and strong evidence of their technical ability.

**Example 1:**
Run learning sessions on new technologies during work hours to create a relaxed setting to learn new skills without the pressure of a formal project delivery or independent study after hours.

**Example 2:**
Include mentors and subject-matter experts in these sessions to provide real-time assistance and guidance, boosting confidence in navigating new tech spaces.

**Example 3:**
Organise hackathons or side projects where women can pair programme, use new technologies and tackle work in different technical or business environments. It helps skill-development and cross-functional awareness whilst also promoting team collaboration.

# Address barriers at every career stage

It is essential for organisations to identify and address shifting barriers women face at each pivotal career juncture. For example:



At **early career stages** women might receive less organic peer support, networking or mentorship because they aren't in the male majority group; they may be subject to stereotyping or unconscious bias and overlooked for challenging work; they may also be expected to undertake a disproportionate amount of "glue work" - non-promotable tasks that are valuable to their team, but not to their case for promotion.



As women look to move into **mid-level roles**, lack of representation in leadership may make it difficult to envision a path for growth or find the necessary sponsorship needed for advancement. They may also struggle to demonstrate evidence of experience for progression especially if they have come to be relied on for "glue work" at the expense of stakeholder-facing or technically challenging work.



At a **senior level**, women may experience isolation and lack of peer support as an outlier in the boardroom. They can also be pigeonholed into acting as the spokesperson for the organisation's D&I message, and expected to share their personal time and information whilst other leaders are not expected to do the same. They may also be required to deal with more serious and triggering D&I situations whilst holding others in the business to account for D&I.

# Supporting Women Through Different Life Stages:

Recognising and accommodating the various life stages women experience is crucial for their career progression in tech. This section aims to address specific life stages and offer guidance for both women and organisations to navigate these transitions successfully

**1** **Returning to Work After Motherhood:**
A common challenge is the gap in recent work experience or technological advancements.
Organisations can offer 'returnship' programs that provide training and update skills, making the transition smoother and helping mothers regain confidence in their professional abilities.

**2** **Family Forming and Reproductive Challenges:**
For many individuals and couples, the road to parenthood can involve fertility treatments, pregnancy loss, surrogacy, adoption, or other family formation methods. For LGBTQI+ individuals, these experiences can be particularly complex, navigating personal challenges alongside potential societal biases and unsupportive work environments. Organisations can provide comprehensive policies and flexible time off policies that provide support for various family-forming paths. It's equally crucial to ensure a culture of inclusivity and privacy, that specialised training be made for managers and HR teams to understand these unique challenges.

**3** **Hybrid Working and Caregiving:**
Caregivers may struggle to manage synchronous work demands with caregiving responsibilities, especially if working hours are inflexible. Implementing flexible work policies and providing resources for childcare can help caregivers manage their schedules more effectively, ensuring they can contribute professionally without compromising their caregiving responsibilities. However, it is vital that these adaptations are not perceived as favours or special allowances, rather, they should be embraced as part of the toolkit for better productivity and retention.

**4** **Navigating Menopause:**
A major challenge women experience during menopause is the lack of understanding about this phase, which can often lead to stigmas and silent suffering in the workplace due to symptoms like hormonal changes and hot flashes. Creating a supportive work environment can include providing temperature control options, flexible working hours, and health and wellness programs that address menopause-specific needs.

# Mythbusting: progression for women in tech

| Myth | Busted |
|------|--------|
| **Confidence issues and 'imposter syndrome' are the main barriers to progression for women in tech.** | It's not women's confidence that is the main problem. It's the environmental barriers they encounter. Imposter syndrome was originally called the 'Imposter Phenomena' because it's not meant to imply a deficit in a person. Inclusive practices in talent processes are far more important for alleviating biases against women in the workplace. |
| **It's anti-meritocratic to create progression programmes for women.** | Tailored programmes actually enhance meritocracy, by giving women opportunities that pre-existing inequalities may have denied them and enabling them to be appraised fairly in talent processes. Offering tailored progression programmes not only enables high-potential female talent, but also builds the culture of tailored progression for all employees, which ultimately enables everyone to do their best work. |
| **Mentoring happens voluntarily outside of work between people who naturally want to support each other! We don't need to organise it or fund it.** | While rapport is important, structured mentoring programmes create relationships between individuals who might not otherwise network together. Cross-functional mentoring and reverse mentoring within organisations can break silos and encourage knowledge sharing. Responsibility for mentoring should not be placed on minority groups, because this requires minorities to be pulled away from their core work and sets them at a performance disadvantage. Mentoring is a skill. Ensure you invest in training and monitoring mentors properly so that the process is effective. |
| **Women returning after a career break don't want to focus on promotions and they prefer to work core hours so we shouldn't offer them projects with shift work or non standard hours.** | Don't assume what women want or need from work! Everyone is different and what helps the most is having clear and structured options. Many women return to work with high ambition and employers should be ready to actively engage with this and provide structured support. Similarly, don't assume what work arrangements do or don't work for balancing work and home life. For example non standard hours can enable parents to split caring responsibilities with a partner and save on childcare costs. Ask women what support they need, and be prepared to check this periodically, especially during periods of career transition. |

# Lift others as you climb

By highlighting ideas that work and busting myths that hinder meaningful action, this guide aims to provide a better understanding of the challenges women in tech face. Understanding what the real problems are is crucial for implementing effective solutions and dismantling the barriers that prevent women from reaching their full potential in the industry.

Ultimately, its about making deep-rooted changes across all parts of the career journey and talent management so that all employees are lifting others as they themselves climb. As the tech industry evolves, let's ensure it does so in a way that brings everyone forward, making women's advancement in tech not an exception but the norm.