The voices of our industry

BIMA Tech Inclusion & Diversity Report 2019

BIMA

Foreword

Supporting Partners

Nadya Powell, Chair of the BIMA Diversity and Inclusion Council and Co-Founder, Utopia

On appointment as Chair of the Diversity Council for BIMA my immediate question was – what is our strategy to drive positive change in the digital and technology industry? After much reflection we realised the data was simply not there to enable an answer. Stack Overflow and the BCS Diversity in IT Report[1] have both shone some light on the diversity of the industry, however, the barriers individuals in the industry experience remain unclear.

Put simply – how can we drive strategies for change if we don't know what needs to change nor why and how.

Our answer was to commission a piece of research, the first of its kind, to deep dive into how the industry, especially marginalised groups, were experiencing the industry. What were their barriers to success? What hidden opportunities might we be missing? Importantly we wanted this research to move beyond the confines of gender and ethnicity and embrace everyone including the neurodivergent, the disabled and those who may have poor mental health.

We have uncovered far more than we expected and thank everyone who took part so honestly to share their experiences, as well as all of our supporting partners and contributors who made this report a reality.
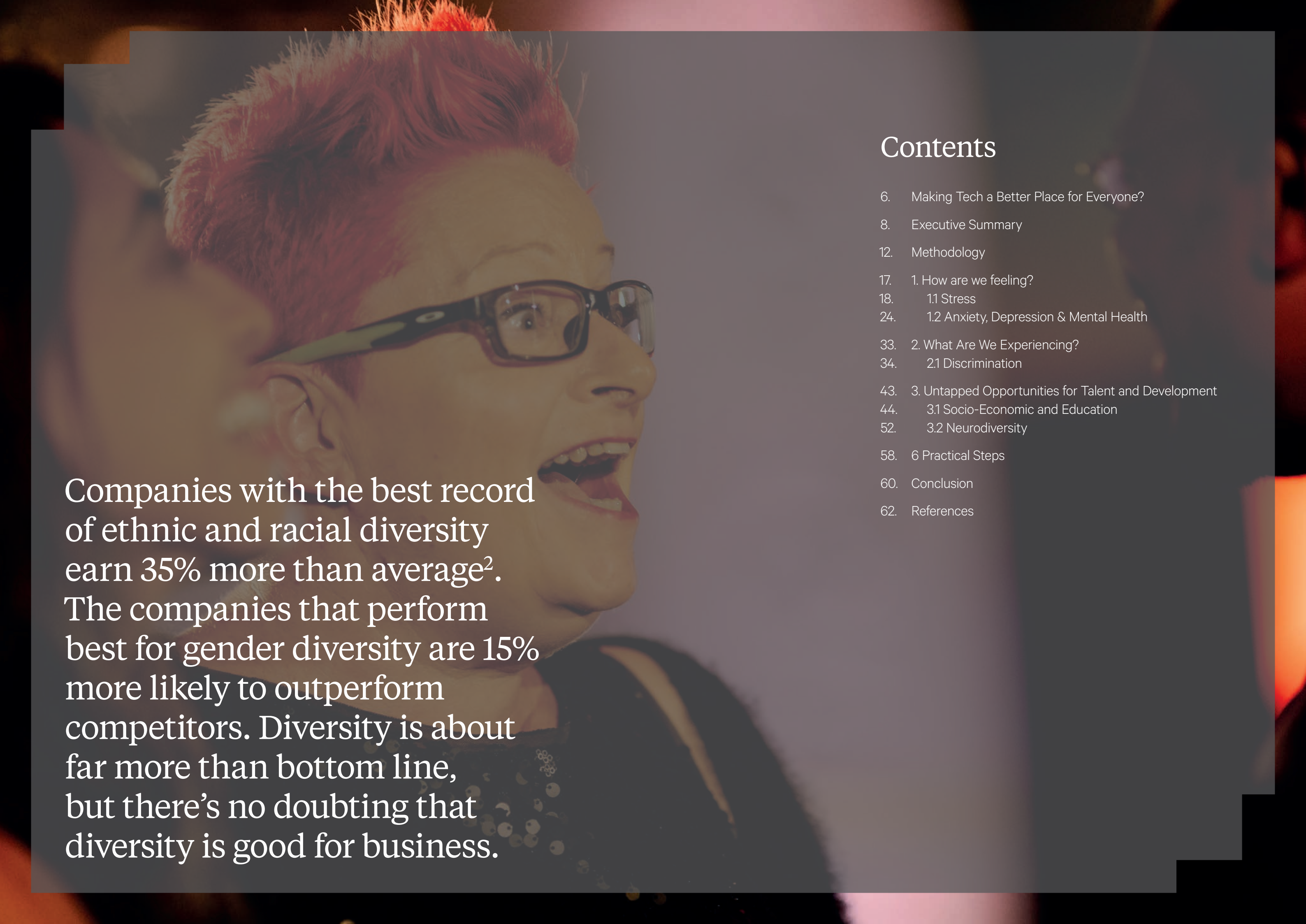
We have found out that mental health, stress and anxiety are challenges within the industry and for marginalised groups, such as the neurodiverse, the figures are deeply upsetting with incidences of anxiety and depression appearing much higher at 84%. We have also discovered that 40% of Afro-Caribbean and those of mixed heritage, 31% of Asian and South East Asian and 35% of women have reported experiencing discrimination. Whilst we make efforts to bring people from diverse backgrounds into the industry, we are also driving them away.

There are also positive shoots for us to dwell on. These suggest that a renewed focus on enabling individuals to transfer into tech at later stages in life would have a significant impact on the diversity of the industry. And that education and socio-economic background are less likely to be limiters to entry.

These insights compel us to action and for the first time provide a clear sign-post on what to do next. Don't read this report and put it to one side in the pile marked tomorrow. Instead read this report, look deep into yourself and commit to at least one change to enable this wonderful industry to flourish.

And do not make this change alone. If you or your team don't have lived experience of the barrier you wish to tackle, work with an organisation, community and employees who do. We need to both make the industry inclusive and deliver this change respectfully and inclusively too.

BIMA

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Companies with the best record of ethnic and racial diversity earn 35% more than average[2]. The companies that perform best for gender diversity are 15% more likely to outperform competitors. Diversity is about far more than bottom line, but there's no doubting that diversity is good for business.

Making Tech a Better Place for Everyone?

The BIMA Tech Inclusion & Diversity Survey is not an attempt to add to the existing pile of census-type survey data but to do something that hasn't been done before. By asking employees of diverse age, race, and gender within the industry how they feel, we explored the experience of being a member of the UK digital and technology community in 2019.

An industry worth joining, an industry worth staying in

Our industry tends to focus on the numbers element of the skills gap – on bringing enough people into the industry to enable it to grow. Our findings show a growing need of equal importance: how do we make the industry attractive enough not just to attract but retain the talent we need?

Diversity is good for business

While diversity is about far more than the bottom line, there's no doubting diversity is good for business.

Companies with superior records of ethnic and racial diversity earn 35% more than average[3], and those with higher instances of gender diversity are 15% more likely to outperform competitors without.

At the last count[4] in 2018, the UK tech sector was worth almost £184bn and it's growing faster than virtually any other UK industry. If we want to keep the industry's growth on track, diversity has to be at the heart of our plans.

Diversity is critical to talent recruitment

Our industry faces a considerable talent shortage[5]. This survey offers insight into why that might be. Tech people feel as stressed as those in high intensity professions like medical work. Depression amongst people in the tech industry runs at five times the UK national average[6]. Respondents report discrimination in the form of a multitude of subtle and overt instances and practices.

And yet, the survey also reveals the green shoots of an open and diverse industry. If we can give our managers the tools to support diverse people, create environments that help remove stress, rather than simply manage it, and structure our work in a way that better supports individual difference, then we really will be on our way to creating a better place for everyone.

Executive Summary

In late 2018 and early 2019, BIMA surveyed more than 3,000 people to explore their experience of diversity as members of the UK technology community.

Their responses showed that, from tackling stress, anxiety, and depression, to fighting discrimination and making more of untapped opportunities for talent and development, our industry has much to do.

How are we feeling?

– 66% of respondents are stressed by their work

– 52% have suffered from anxiety or depression at some point

– Tech people are 5x more depressed than the UK average[6]

People in tech are as stressed as those working in the health service. This is not people reporting periods of stress[10], 13% stated they are constantly stressed with symptoms such as headaches, anxiety attacks, sleeplessness, indigestion, and continual tiredness affecting their daily lives. Those working in business ops, web design and development, admin and project management are particularly at risk of stress.

Four in 5 members of susceptible groups (i.e. those with a long-term health impairment, recent anxiety or depression, or are neurodivergent*) feel stressed by their work.

Incidences of anxiety and depression appear much higher in the neurodivergent (84%) compared to the neurotypical (49%) and are more likely to affect women (21%) than men (16%).

To combat this, organisations need to transform the way they think about mental health. It should be considered as seriously as physical health. Mental health first aiders (discussed in this report) need to become as commonplace as physical first aiders. Managers need to be supported with a toolkit of ways to help stressed, anxious or depressed staff. And organisations need to realise that stress kills creativity and adds nothing to productivity.

Neurodivergence revealed in the survey includes dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, Tourette's syndrome, dyscalculia and autism.

What are we experiencing?

– 35% of women feel their gender has negatively affected their career progression

– 31% of Asian and South East Asian and 40% of Afro-Caribbean and mixed heritage people say they have experienced negative discrimination as a result of their ethnicity

– 14% of all respondents believe their ethnicity has negatively affected their career progression

– 24% of neurodivergents felt their condition has negatively effected their career

Companies need to implement policies and processes that support the creation of cultures where the subtle biases that 'stack the deck' in favour of one type of person no longer go unchecked.

Untapped opportunities for talent and development

– 3 in 10 respondents did not attend university

– 1 in 5 had no previous tech experience

– 23% say they are self-taught

– 20% of respondents are neurodivergent – twice the UK average

– 36% of parents don't return to their current employer after parental leave

Our study shows that neither a university education or an independent school background is essential to a career in tech. Because the industry offers lots of entry points, it can provide opportunities for those who did not learn to code through formal education, or who are returning to work after caregiving. That said, 83% of university computer science places go to men, and therefore there is much work to be done to provide women with opportunities to acquire STEM skills earlier.

The industry increasingly values the unique abilities of the neurodivergent thinker, but we need to match our appreciation with practical support. That includes creating neurodivergence friendly recruitment practises, engineering low distraction environments, and giving managers the skills to support and get the best from their neurodivergent staff.

In Brief

How are we feeling?

What's the problem?

Tech people are more stressed and 5x more depressed than the UK average[6]. While some people in the industry may be more susceptible to stress, many companies don't know where to begin with talking about mental health, and many managers are not trained or equipped to best support their employees in this area.

The solution

We need to break the silence. We know that when individuals speak up about their mental health, the response has been positive in many instances. By putting structures in place which encourage communication and remove stigmas around mental health, employees may feel comfortable asking for help.

What are we experiencing?

What's the problem?

Discrimination in tech is pervasive. Discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, neurodiversity, and age are of particular concern. 40% of Afro-Caribbean and mixed heritage people in the industry say they have experienced discrimination, and 35% of women and 24% of neurodivergents say discrimination has negatively affected their career.

The solution

We need to move the dial, not just in terms of recruitment, but onboarding, welfare, mentoring, structure and support. To begin, companies need to look again at their data to find the true extent of bias in the workplace.

Untapped opportunities for talent and development

What's the problem?

Our study found that few women are coming into coding at an early age, many neurodivergents are appreciated but under-supported, and many parents don't return to their employer after parental leave.

The solution

We need to create broader recruitment strategies to find the talent that doesn't come through university. Workspaces and processes need to become less rigid, so they can be tailored to individual needs.

Methodology

The BIMA Tech Inclusion & Diversity Survey was issued to a broad pool of members of the UK technology industry, through outreach to BIMA members, the broader community, industry organisations and supporters.

Throughout the marketing of the survey, we placed no emphasis on seeking responses from any particular demographic, although responses received indicate a natural and expected bias in terms of diverse groups.

The survey launched on 30 November 2018 and closed on 25 January 2019, receiving 3,333 responses. In a sector of approximately 80,000, that represents just over 4% of the entire workforce.

Gender

The gender split in our survey paints a considerably more equal picture than other studies[7] which tend to indicate a heavy male bias within the tech sector. This, though, reflects only the people completing this survey rather than the industry as a whole. According to the Office of National Statistics[8], the gender split of the UK population is 51%/49% female/male.

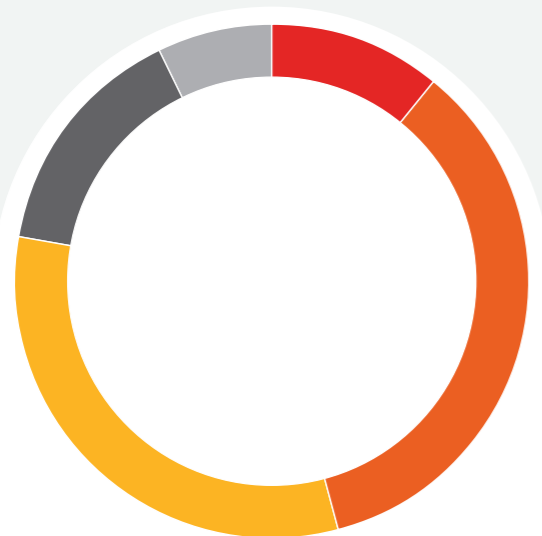- 1% Prefer not to say
- 51% Male
- 48% Female
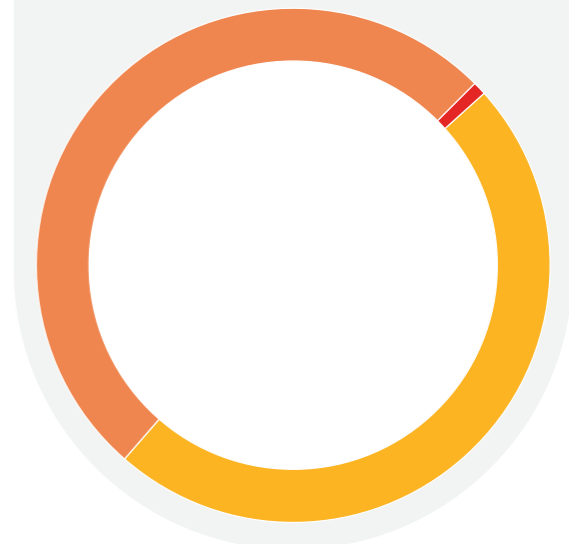
At 9%, respondents of Asian and South East Asian descent were the highest represented BAME* group.

Age

78% of survey respondents were under 45, emphasising the relative youth of the industry and potentially underpinning some of the age-related discrimination reported by those aged 55+ (see 2.1 Discrimination).

- **11%** Under 24
- **35%** 25-34
- **32%** 35-44
- **15%** 45-54
- **7%** 55+

Ethnicity

At 16%, the total of BAME* (Afro-Caribbean and mixed heritage, Asian and South East Asian, minority ethnic) respondents is slightly higher than the national average of 13%[9] and only 1% higher than the figure reported by Tech Nation in 2018[10].

At 9%, respondents of Asian and South East Asian descent were the highest represented BAME* group, although this figure is skewed by particularly high figures in the West Midlands (16%) and London (11%).

- **69%** White British
- **13%** Other White
- **9%** Asian
- **4%** Mixed
- **3%** Black
- **2%** Other/Prefer not to say
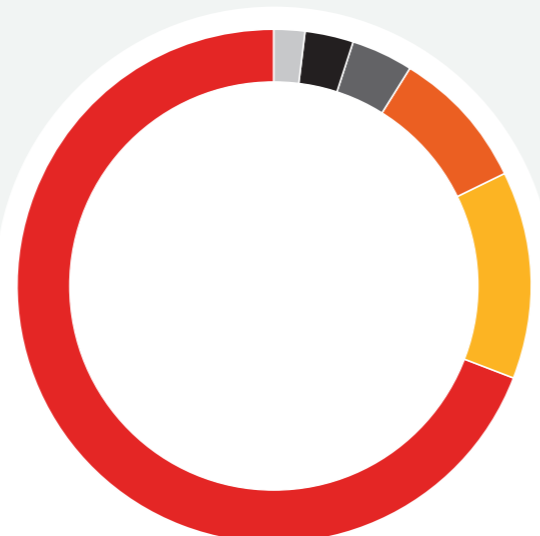
Sexual orientation

UK figures for the LGBTQ community tend to vary between 2% and 7%.

Whichever figure is nearer the mark, it is small compared to the numbers of gay, lesbian or bisexual respondents in our survey, where 5% identify as gay or lesbian, 5% bisexual, 1% prefer to self-describe and 1% prefer not to say.

- **88%** Straight / heterosexual
- **5%** Gay or Lesbian
- **5%** Bisexual
- **1%** Prefer to self-describe
- **1%** Prefer not to say
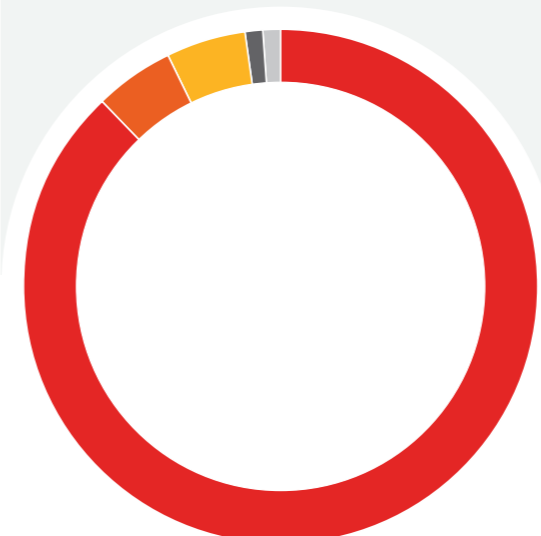
Seen Disability

More than 11 million people in the UK have a disability, and between 16% and 19% of those are of working age. Yet we know that the majority of people with a disability don't display obvious symptoms or use equipment that may indicate their disability (e.g. a wheelchair).

In our survey 8% of people reported they had a visible condition.

21% reported a hidden condition. This would appear to largely comprise neurodivergent people, who make up 20% of our survey group and have differences including dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, Tourette's syndrome, dyscalculia and autism.

*Whilst we understand that conversation is continually evolving around how to identify ethnicity, for this survey we have, in places, grouped as BAME in order to better compare to external data.

Key Findings

1. How are we feeling?

Our survey shows mental health issues such as stress, anxiety and depression are frustratingly commonplace in the tech industry. So how stressed, anxious and depressed are we? And what can we do about it?

1.1 Stress

66% of respondents are stressed by their work, 13% feel constantly stressed by their work.

What we found

66% of respondents are stressed by their work. 13% feel constantly stressed by their work. Over half say that they 'sometimes' or 'constantly' experience symptoms including headaches, anxiety attacks, sleeplessness, indigestion, continual tiredness or similar.

People

The people experiencing the greatest stress* within the industry are:

– Those with a long-term health impairment (83%)

– Recent sufferers of anxiety and depression (81% – 12 months, 79% – last 2 years)

– Bisexuals (76%) and those preferring to self-describe their sexuality (82%)

– The neurodivergent (autism 79%; dyslexia 78%; dyspraxia 83%; ADHD 69%; Tourette's syndrome 90%; dyscalculia 90%)

– Returning parents, particularly those returning within the last 12 months (71%)

– 18-34 year olds (58%)

– Women (58%)

Reporting stress constantly or sometimes

Roles

– Business ops reported by far the highest levels of constant stress (27%)

– Web design and development, admin and project management are the most stressful roles overall (i.e. reporting constant and occasional stress)

Do you feel you are stressed by your work?

- **13%** Yes - Constantly
- **53%** Yes - Sometimes
- **22%** Yes - Rarely
- **11%** Never
- **1%** Prefer not to say
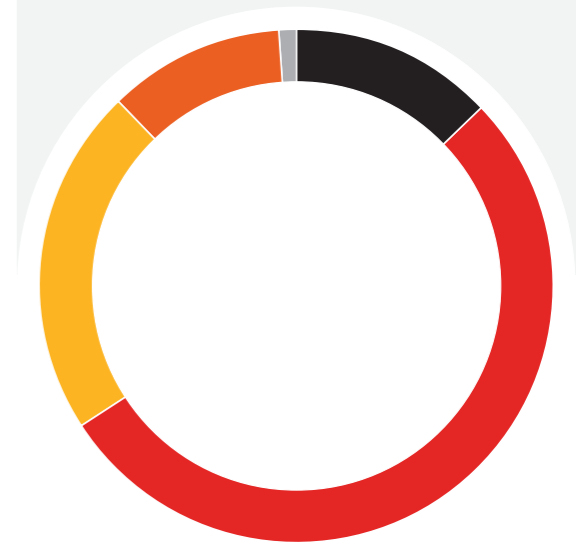
What does this mean?

Tech people are more stressed than the UK average

Stress surveys invariably shift the 'sometimes, regularly, always' boundaries for responses, so accurate like for like comparison is difficult. The 2018 UK Workplace Stress Report[11], surveying a near identical number of respondents, finds stress levels at 59% across the UK workforce, 7% lower than our survey in general.

We're as stressed as the NHS

Worryingly, the 66% overall stress levels within the tech sector are equal to those reported in health, an industry frequently highlighted in the media for its stressful conditions.

Stress is worst in susceptible groups

If you have a long-term health impairment, have recently suffered anxiety or depression or are neurodivergent, our survey suggests you have a 4 in 5 chance or higher of experiencing occasional or constant stress. The industry clearly needs to be doing more to support those most susceptible because stress causes people to quit work and to develop mental health issues[12].

Increased stress for some LGBTQ respondents

Stress among gay and lesbian respondents is lower than that for heterosexual respondents. Figures for bisexuals and those self-describing their sexuality are significantly higher. We don't know why this is, but our figures compare with the wider industry, where sexuality-based discrimination and bullying are reported to be far more commonplace[13]. We need more work to determine the specific issues being faced by bisexuals and self-describers, and to develop a support structure to help address those issues.

Early achievers feeling greatest stress?

That 18-34 year olds are the most stressed age groups could reflect the fact that the tech industry has so many young leaders. Senior or not, however, we need to understand what is behind stress levels that score far higher than in those aged 45+, and take steps to reduce them.

"Stress kills creativity. The most successful organisations create stimulating, energising environments, so why do so many businesses seem to want to suck the creativity right out of us? Individually and collectively we need to understand that hours worked, emails sent and 'always on' deliver lots of added stress but virtually no productivity bonus."

Bruce Daisley, European Vice President, Twitter and author of The Joy of Work

More help for women and neurodivergents

We know that the neurodivergent is more likely to feel stress than the neurotypical[14] and that women are twice as likely to leave tech jobs as a result of stress than men[15]. Our survey confirms this and shows that, if we want women and neurodivergent people in the industry to be able to work to their potential, we need to support them with proven stress-reduction strategies.

We haven't addressed existing problems

The fact that stress remains for so many of our groups suggests, worryingly, that:

– The specific needs of these groups are being ignored or overlooked

– That measures implemented to date to remove/reduce stress have proved ineffective

Ongoing research suggests that chronic (i.e. long-lasting) stress can prolong activation of the immune system, affecting the brain and increasing susceptibility to anxiety and depression[16]. So relieving and eliminating stress in the workplace isn't only an important end in itself; it can also help reduce the wider mental health issues explored on the following pages.

"The results of this survey should be taken very seriously. Our bodies are designed to be under stress for only very short periods of time. Prolonged stress, such as work stress, is highly correlated with mental illness such as anxiety and depression, as well as some forms of cancer, heart disease and Alzheimer's disease.

I applaud BIMA's research into stress in the digital & technology sector and whilst the results are worrying, the good news is that there are ways to help people better cope with stress. There are proven strategies which help people adapt to work stress, so that they can develop resilience to illness and at the same time, become more productive."

Matt Janes, Neuroscience, Functional Medicine & Mental Health Practitioner

Many organisations are successfully creating joined up programmes to tackle workplace stress and wider mental health. On the following pages you can find case studies and practical steps to help your organisation do just that.

Take action

Ask for help – our evidence shows the response is almost always positive.

For employers

– Raise understanding of and resilience to stress through awareness and/or mindfulness sessions, and make stress awareness and support a regular part of team communications.

– Understand the physical, emotional and behavioural signs of stress – knowing what to look for can help managers identify issues before they become problems.

Signs may include:

Actions

– Arriving late for work more frequently

– Leaving earlier than usual

– Taking more time off

– Making more mistakes

– Deterioration in quality of work

Emotions

– Irritability or anger

– Mood swings or increased sensitivity

– Becoming unusually withdrawn

– Lack of motivation

– Loss of confidence

– Introduce mental health first aiders, stress counsellors or similar to provide a trained point of contact for those experiencing stress. For more on mental health first aid, see 1.2 Anxiety, Depression & Mental Health.

– Give managers a 'toolkit' of responses for people who may be feeling stressed. These might include authority to:

– Offer a worker 'time-out' for a few minutes when feeling stressed

– Offer the use of a quiet(er) space to aid concentration

– Agree to on the job contact with a mentor or support worker

– Temporarily adjust flexible working arrangements to help reduce stress factors

For individuals

– Understand your 'triggers' – the things that make you feel more stressed – and aim to manage them by taking short breaks from your desk, rewarding yourself as you complete each task and being realistic about timescales. You might find it useful to create a wellness plan, where you make a note of the things that make you stressed and keep you well.

– Ask for help – our evidence shows the response is almost always positive

– Talk to your colleagues – they may be able to offer practical help; they'll probably be able to offer moral support and a chance to share feelings

– Use online resources to find information about stress and how to manage/treat it. Mind has lots of material that could help you.

– Take an online course to understand your stress and the science behind it, for example: thethrivecourse.com

– Focus on work/life balance – when you're stressed the temptation is to do more and work longer, but you still need to be able to switch off and find a balance. You'll be more effective as a result

– Take it higher – if you don't feel supported having spoken with your manager, talk to HR, senior management or your trade union

1.2 Anxiety, Depression & Mental Health

What we found

Anxiety & Depression

– 52% of all respondents have suffered from anxiety or depression at some point, a figure at least five times the national average[6]

– Almost one third report symptoms (which are wide ranging but which may include fatigue, sadness, pessimism, loss of interest, feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness) over the last 2 years

– Incidences of anxiety and depression appear much higher in the neurodivergent (84%) compared to the neurotypical (49%) and are more likely to affect women (21%) than men (16%)

– Anxiety and depression are slightly higher than average in LGBTQ respondents

Mental health

– 28% of respondents say they have been diagnosed with a mental health condition, with more women (32%) than men (23%) affected. 43% of those revealing such a condition say their career has been negatively affected by it

– 45% of respondents feel there is not enough awareness and support for mental health within their company

Have you ever been diagnosed with a mental health condition?

- **28%** Yes
- **71%** No
- **1%** Prefer not to say
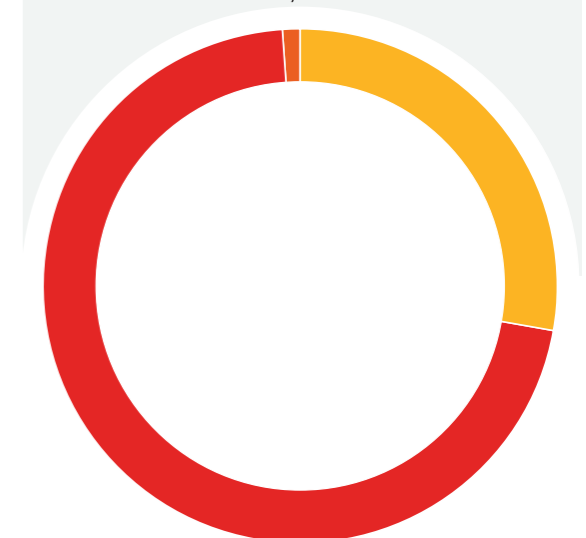
What does this mean?

In the UK in general, around 1 in 4 people[6] will experience a mental health condition (anxiety, depression, phobias, OCD etc) each year. Women appear to be more affected than men in our survey, and this is also borne out by studies of the wider population[17].

Figures for anxiety and depression (as distinct from the catch-all category of 'mental health') vary. The Mental Health Foundation[18] states that 4-10% of people will experience depression (including anxiety) in their lifetime. Mind reports 5.9% of people suffer generalised anxiety disorder and 3.3% depression[19].

We have a real problem with anxiety and depression

At 52%, the position for the UK tech sector is massively above the 4-10% that is the national average. In part, that difference may be explained by the higher proportion of neurodivergent members of the tech community, who are far more likely to experience depression (see 3.2 Neurodiversity), although this is far from the only potential explanation.

Leaders and entrepreneurs suffering

Guy Tollhurst of Don't Lose It reflects on the tendency of entrepreneurs to suffer in silence.

"Building a successful business is hard work and it can take a significant toll on your mental health and personal life. Our research reveals that a quarter (25%) of participating founders have suffered with mental health issues, but most suffer in silence and very few (only 8%) seek medical help.

We know that being able to talk openly and knowing that you're not alone in your experiences can be enormously helpful, but most of our entrepreneurs say they want to manage their mental wellbeing without external support.

We believe a constructive way forward would be for more in the investment industry to embrace a 'mindful investor' culture – a culture that offers greater commitment to mental health and wellbeing, and where investors provide support and guidance to entrepreneurs about how to find help and treatment."

Case study

Michelle Morgan
Mental Health First Aid Instructor,
MHFA England & Founder, Pjoys

We all have mental health, just as we all have physical health. Mental ill health can strike at any time and can affect people from all walks of life. That's why MHFA England is on a mission to train one in ten of the population in England in Mental Health First Aid and I'm proud to be one of their instructors and champions.

I'm also an entrepreneur and business leader. I know from my own experience, and that of others in my businesses over the years, the ups and downs of mental health, especially if the downs are left untreated.

In tech, sub-cultures of working late and long hours can often pervade. We are living in increasingly pressured, 'always on' and 'always accessible' times. No matter how positive the business culture, life and business can take its toll on mental health. Often people find it hard to talk openly about it. They brush it off – and that's when things can escalate.

MHFA courses are proven to be a robust, evidence based and accessible way for organisations to begin raising and instilling mental health awareness and support skills among employees. Through the training we're seeing more people being empowered to talk about and deal with mental illness, and more people willing to raise the topic with managers and HR teams. Referral pathways are becoming clearer and organisations are spotting the gaps in their support processes. The good news is they are, in the main, open to taking action rooted in business and people benefits.

Within your organisation, there are many ways you can help look after the mental health of your people.

I would recommend starting by training a core group (including but not limited to your HR team) as Mental Health First Aiders. They become your advocates and help set the tone, permissions and encourage the conversation.

Follow up with some half day awareness sessions for larger groups. This really supports the message that we all have a role in making mental health more of an everyday conversation. Align this to strong internal policies, processes and provisions that go beyond tick boxes. Be thoughtful and remember there's not a one size fits all solution. Leadership buy-in and visibility is absolutely key. So is having a good spread of different people, departments and roles across the business as your core Mental Health First Aiders.

We need all employers to give mental health first aid in the workplace the same level of importance and investment as we do physical first aid. MHFA England has been part of driving that at national level through the 'Where's Your Head At?' campaign and petition, but let's not forget that mental health is covered by the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. It's already part of business responsibility.

MHFA England courses don't teach people to be therapists, but they do teach people to listen, reassure and respond, even in a crisis.

In the UK in general, around 1 in 4 people[6] will experience a mental health problem (anxiety, depression, phobias, OCD etc) each year.

The loneliness of tech

Jo Carnegie, Workplace Wellbeing Consultant, considers the impact of remote working:

"Stress and anxiety and workplace loneliness is a bit of a chicken and egg scenario. Which comes first?

The tech sector has a reputation for embracing remote working more strongly than other industries which, whilst providing great benefits to employees including increased flexibility and autonomy, can also bring about loneliness and a feeling of not knowing the people you work with. Maintaining those small but valuable social interactions in a virtual environment can be a challenge.

It's not just having teams based in different locations but the volume of the workload. If you don't physically work with a team in a structured environment it can be harder to switch off and have a clear divide between work and downtime, which can further isolate someone from family life and friends.

So what can organisations be doing?

1. Build a supportive infrastructure including daily check-ins with your team/colleagues that aren't just work focussed.

Even simple things like asking someone how their day is going or what their plans are for the weekend makes them feel recognised as humans and not just task completers. Building stronger social ties increases trust, so people are more likely to share any work stresses or anxieties. You could also introduce a 'buddy' scheme where employees meet face to face or virtually for weekly brainstorms and social time.

2. Loneliness can be a normal and natural by-product if you work alone.

Create a culture where loneliness and isolation is discussed openly so people feel more comfortable talking about it.

3. Encourage employees to get out of the house, to do some exercise, to go out for lunch with a friend, or seek social engagement that works for them.

Building a more connected workplace is an organisation's responsibility, but employees have to be proactive as well."

Case study

Sally Evans
PwC UK Wellbeing Lead

Be Well, Work Well is PwC's name for the ways we try to help our people stay well and support them when they are unwell. It's a holistic approach, encompassing mental, physical, spiritual and emotional wellbeing – and mental health is a key programme within our overall approach.

Through it, we are rolling out mental health awareness and mental health first aid training across the organisation. We are continuing to upskill for good wellbeing conversations, for example, implementing the e-learning we developed with the Samaritans firm-wide. Our Green Light to Talk campaign, which aims to break the stigma around mental health and shift our culture, has now been running since 2016, and every month since launch one of our people has shared their mental wellbeing story on our firmwide news channel.

Other initiatives have also driven us to introduce measures including:

We are signatories to the Time to Change Pledge, clearly demonstrating that we recognise the importance of mental health in the workplace. We raise awareness of and encourage conversation about mental health through hosting events.

Launching a resilience programme to help people take care of their personal wellbeing and adopt more wellbeing-enhancing team behaviours has positioned resilience as a key business performance and leadership skill, helping our people to sustain performance while staying physically and psychologically well.

Making our people's wellbeing a factor in the design of our buildings. For instance our newer offices are designed to allow more daylight, which helps to boost people's immune system, something we know is a factor in reducing the long-term effects of stress.

They also have facilities for our people to take time out and rest or reflect during the day, enabling us to better tailor the work experience to individual needs.

Offering our people training and information on how to manage their mental health and wellbeing in a 24/7 world through 'digital dieting'.

Introducing bike racks, showers and lockers, cycling and walking route information, and discounts on gym membership to encourage our people to keep active, because we know this benefits mental as well as physical wellbeing.

Launching a dedicated mental health section as part of our Be Well, Work Well microsite. This gives our people access to a wide range of support, guidance and information, and can connect them with a specialist internal Occupational Health Team, linking directly to our external expert provider.

We've worked hard to deliver more than awareness, valuable as that is. We're working to build the environment to minimise mental health problems, and the skills to support them with confidence when they arise. We are four years into this journey so it certainly doesn't happen overnight, but we're proud to say it has become a real 'movement' within the business.

Take action

For employers

- Adopt the six standards for supporting employee mental health contained in The Government's independent review, Thriving at Work. Mind's guide to implementing Thriving at Work can help you implement best practice planning, communication, tools and conditions in your workplace

- Don't make assumptions – don't assume you know what the problem is. Don't assume you don't have a problem. Keep talking to your staff

- Map referral pathways – what happens when someone in your organisation reports a mental health problem? Mapping the process from initial referral to review can help you ensure you have the correct skills and support in place, and help you identify the gaps

- Train a core group of Mental Health First Aiders. Ensure they are drawn from across the business, and that they are the right fit for the mental health culture you are looking to build. Follow up with awareness sessions for larger groups and ensure all training is aligned with strong internal policies so mental health first aid becomes a meaningful, central plank of your wider health activities

- Create an infrastructure that supports remote workers, which builds stronger ties, and which increases trust. It can help limit stresses and anxieties, and if there are problems, the right structures can help people open up:

    - Ensure managers check-in with remote staff each day. But be aware that people have different communication styles, some may prefer email over face to face conversation

    - Encourage internal and external networks for different minority groups

    - Introduce a 'buddy' scheme where remote workers can regularly check in with another colleague

- Encourage remote employees to support their own mental wellbeing by:

    - Stepping away from the desk and getting some fresh air

    - Going to the gym

    - Going for a walk

    - Having lunch with friends or colleagues

- Review – monitor the effectiveness of your measures and use each new mental health issue as an opportunity to test and improve your processes

For individuals

- Ask for help – our survey shows that the response from employers is almost always positive

- Keep talking – despite the temptation to withdraw, stay in touch with friends, family and work

- Don't avoid the things you find challenging

- Stay healthy – getting active, eating healthily and avoiding too much alcohol can all help you manage daily life more easily

- Build a routine – try to get a consistent amount of sleep. Go to bed and get up at the same time. If your employer agrees to some flexibility in your working hours, agree a plan and stick to it

- If you are disabled or have a health condition you may also be able to get support from the government's Access to Work scheme

Don't make assumptions – don't assume you know what the problem is. Don't assume you don't have a problem. Keep talking to your staff

2. What Are We Experiencing?
Attracting and retaining diverse talent requires equal opportunity. Our report suggests we have much to do to counter and eradicate discrimination.

2.1 Discrimination

31% of Asian and South East Asian, and 40% of Afro-Caribbean and mixed heritage people say they have experienced negative discrimination as a result of their ethnicity.

What we found

To understand the impact of discrimination within tech, our survey asked respondents whether they felt their career had been positively or negatively affected by a certain characteristic.

General

– 22% of respondents feel their career progression has been discriminated against in some way. The numbers are significantly higher for age, gender, ethnicity, mental health and neurodiversity

Gender

– 35% of women feel their gender has negatively affected their career progression. 10% of men feel their gender has negatively affected them

Ethnicity

– 31% of Asian and South East Asian, and 40% of Afro-Caribbean and mixed heritage people say they have experienced negative discrimination as a result of their ethnicity

– 9% of white people say they have experienced discrimination because of their ethnicity

Mental Health & Neurodivergence

– 12% of respondents with a physical condition feel discriminated against

– 22% for those with a mental health condition and 24% for neurodivergents

Age

– 34% of those aged 55-64 say they feel their age has negatively affected their career progression, a figure significantly (9% or more) higher than any other age group

Effects of discrimination

– 1 in 3 respondents say they experienced discrimination that manifested itself in them being denied opportunities, support or training; or through assumptions based on stereotypes

– Almost 1 in 5 reported they have experienced prejudicial or abusive language and/or felt the need to leave their employer as a result of the discrimination

– Two fifths of respondents say they have seen negative changes since the Brexit referendum, specifically in relation to political views and to those from outside the UK

– More respondents in the West Midlands (30%) say they have seen an increase in discrimination since the Brexit vote than anywhere else in the UK

What does this mean?

35% of women and 14% of BAME respondents feel their gender or ethnicity has disadvantaged them.

The impact of being Afro-Caribbean and mixed heritage

The tech industry struggles to recruit people from Afro-Caribbean and mixed heritage backgrounds. So the finding that 40% of Afro-Caribbean and mixed heritage people within the industry say they have experienced negative discrimination is a hugely worrying statistic.

Improving the picture requires two elements. First, we need to create inclusive environments, free from discrimination, so the industry can retain its talent and broaden its appeal. We must also look at our recruitment practices. In recent years, we've seen many companies take steps towards doing this: through ensuring recruitment reaches a wider demographic; through appointing more Afro-Caribbean and mixed heritage mentors and champions; through tailored career development, and through partnership with organisations such as UKBlackTech[20] which aim to help companies increase Afro-Caribbean and mixed heritage and ethnic minority representation.

Keeping women in tech

Cultures of inclusivity are important in ensuring more women feel valued and supported. 35% of women feel their gender has negatively affected their career progression, and in our survey sample, men outnumbered women in leadership roles by 59%/40%. As a session at 2018's London Tech Week[21] noted, it's about improving structures that support women (e.g. equal pay, flexible working hours), about not underestimating the power of the role model, and crucially, about taking diversity seriously. As Suzy Levy, Managing Director, The Red Plate notes:

"Modern businesses need policies and processes to support all aspects of discrimination, bullying and harassment. But perhaps more importantly, we also need to create cultures where the subtle gender biases no longer go unchecked. If the workplace is architected for only one type of person to succeed, the masculine, self-assured, always-on person for example, we will continue to see very little change in the diversity of our senior teams. It will also limit our ability to bring diversity of thought and innovation to our clients."

Age discrimination is compounded by other forms of discrimination

Older age is reported to be a negative modifier across the board. That is, if you feel you are experiencing discrimination for any reason, that discrimination is likely to be compounded if you are 55+.

Perhaps a product of being part of a nascent industry with an overwhelmingly young workforce, unconscious marginalisation of employees over the age of 55 appears commonplace. This is not confined to the tech industry. In one survey of UK office workers[23], just 23% of the 55+ age group said they felt appreciated by their company, and 80% said they suffered from workplace stress, a figure far worse than the overall tech industry.

Discrimination against Asian and South East Asian employees

That 31% of Asian and South East Asian employees say they have experienced negative discrimination as a result of their ethnicity is alarming enough. Yet this is compounded by the 30% of respondents in the West Midlands (home to the highest proportion of Asian and South East Asian respondents in our survey) who say discrimination has worsened in the post-Brexit referendum world.

We need a cultural shift within the industry that increases conversation, reduces bias, and teaches more people to celebrate diversity rather than feel threatened by it.

We may value neurodiversity, but we need to do more to support the neurodivergent

More than any other category of discrimination, neurodiversity is reported to have a polarising effect. At 42%, more people felt their neurodiversity had positively impacted them than any other category. But also 24% more people felt their neurodiversity had a negative impact.

That would clearly constitute a significant variance in the way organisations value neurodiversity. According to a 2018 CIPD poll[22] just 1 in 10 organisations include neurodiversity in their people management practices. Until more do, and offer the corresponding support, the danger is that neurodivergent talent will continue to drop in and out of the industry, valued, but not always supported.

Anti-discrimination policies aren't working for everyone

For an industry so reliant on attracting and retaining diverse talent, the level and breadth of discrimination revealed in the survey is concerning. That almost 1 in 4 feel they have been negatively discriminated against on the basis of age, gender, ethnicity, neurodiversity and mental health indicates that whatever anti-discrimination policies and actions are in place, many may not yet be mature or sophisticated enough to tackle all forms of discrimination.

The Expert View
Kemp Little

If an informal approach doesn't resolve the matter, consider raising a formal grievance and throughout the process, ensure you follow your company's grievance procedure closely.

The tech-focused law firm offers some practical help for employers and individuals

1. Key actions for organisations to create better policies and guidance in the area of discrimination

It's not enough merely to have an anti-discrimination policy. To be effective, your policies need effective implementation. This may include:

- Involving staff in its creation, review and development

- Providing appropriate training for all staff and the opportunity for regular and ongoing reflection

- Communication of the policy to all staff as part of your induction process

- Discussion and reinforcement of the policy at staff meetings/through line management processes

- (Vocal) support from senior executives and line managers

- Creating an environment where people feel able to raise issues (through 1-2-1s/mentoring)

- Provision of a confidential Employee Assistance Programme to which an employee can turn for initial impartial advice

- Evaluation of harassment and discrimination in the workplace, e.g. through regular staff surveys on dignity at work, exit interviews

- Consideration of risk areas and how to minimise them, e.g. business travel, alcohol-fuelled conferences, lone working (customer facing)

2. Practical ways for individuals to get help if they feel discriminated against

In some circumstances, a brief informal conversation with the alleged perpetrator can quickly resolve an issue. If you don't feel able to raise it with the alleged perpetrator, consider:

- Talking to colleagues to find out if anyone else is suffering/has witnessed what has happened to you

- Going to see someone who you feel comfortable discussing the problem with on an informal basis (this may be your line manager or HR)

- Keeping a diary of incidents – dates, times, witnesses, your feelings

- Using your employer's confidential Employee Assistance Programme to obtain some initial impartial advice

If an informal approach doesn't resolve the matter, consider raising a formal grievance and throughout the process, ensure you follow your company's grievance procedure closely. You should also:

- Set out the incidents in chronological order, including dates, full details and any witnesses

- Think about how you would like the matter to be resolved (informally, mediation, disciplinary action)

- Consider whether you would feel able to stay with the business if your grievance was not upheld

Case study

Nancy Rowe
Head of Inclusion & Diversity, Publicis Sapient

Working with a leading external Inclusion & Diversity specialist, we learned that historically our management of some employee relations (ER) issues (that is, the way we manage the contractual, emotional, physical and practical relationships between employer and employee) was not best in class.

As a result, we have set up a dedicated employee relations function with a dedicated person for the capturing, objective investigation and resolution of employee grievances and disciplinary issues. Furthermore our People team is actively involved in reviewing the log of (anonymised) ER issues on a monthly basis with a view to reducing these to zero over time.

As well as altering the process of how we handle these sorts of incidents within our HR function, we are also rolling out a series of internal communications and learning and development modules to re-educate employees across the business around the topics of respect and inclusion and their informal and formal resolution paths within the workplace.

Since rollout, we've had more people (male and female) coming forward with lots of questions around what constitutes bias, harassment and discrimination within the workplace, and the routes to resolution. Increased awareness of the new formal process is also changing behaviours. All employees are now aware that inappropriate behaviour and conduct is a serious matter at Publicis Sapient, where we are striving to build a culture that is inclusive and enables all employees to thrive. With a rise in more informal conversations around these topics we are hopeful the need for more formal routes to resolution will decrease over time.

> Since rollout, we've had more people (male and female) coming forward with lots of questions around what constitutes bias, harassment and discrimination within the workplace, and the routes to resolution.

Take action

For employers

– Gather the data to understand where prejudice sits in your business. What do your surveys tell you are the biggest problems. What are the reasons for them? What do your exit stats and interviews tell you about who leaves the business and why?

– Where and how do you recruit? What language and imagery do you use and how could it better support your commitment to diversity? For a personal view, talk to staff or work with an external diversity champion to explore the ways unconscious (or conscious) bias may be affecting your processes. As one example, consider name-blind recruitment to remove any unconscious bias

– Introduce unconscious bias training to help remove it from all your business structures. Be sure to understand what you need from the training and have clear and measurable outcomes

– Review people processes to identify blocks to diversity. What changes would enable greater diversity in training, progression and recognition?

– Do you celebrate diversity? Build genuine cultural change by raising awareness and understanding of diverse cultures with initiatives and events (e.g. run in-house events based on International Women's Day, the Paralympics, Diwali or Eid)

For individuals

If you experience discrimination, you should:

– Complain directly to the person discriminating against you

– If you feel unable to do this, or you do complain and nothing happens, talk to your immediate line manager

– If you feel unable to do this, or you do complain and nothing happens, talk to your trade union representative if you have one, or talk to a mediation service. You can find help via the Equality Advisory Support Service

– If none of the above result in change, you can take your complaint to court or tribunal

3. Untapped Opportunities for Talent and Development

A career in tech should be open to anyone who is interested.

3.1 Socio-Economic and Education

What we found

– 20% of respondents are from C2DE backgrounds (the three lowest socio-economic groups) higher than the 17% noted in the Advertising Diversity Taskforce Survey[9]

– 34% were eligible to receive free meals when at school and 30% are from families that receive(d) income support, more than double the national average of 14%[24]

– 11% of respondents went to fee paying schools, increasing to 20% for leadership levels. That's higher than the national average, but lower than many comparable industries

– 44% are the first generation of their family to go to university. This is a little lower than the national picture, where 50% of undergraduates starting university in 2017 were the first in their families to do so[25]. For 1 in 10, not only have they not been to university, no one else in their family has either

– 1 in 5 had no previous tech experience and 23% say they are self-taught

– 52% of respondents are parents and 36% of those did not return to their current company after maternity/paternity leave

1 in 5 had no previous tech experience and 23% say they are self-taught.

What does this mean?

Case study

Holly Hall
Managing Director, BIMA

"Before BIMA Digital Day, many students would not even have considered a career in that area. Having someone come in to show them the possibilities makes all the difference."

Michael Worden, Westholme School, Blackburn

Skill in tech isn't correlated with privilege

Fee paying school attendance within the survey group is well below the figure identified in the Advertising Diversity Taskforce Survey[9]. In that report 22% attended independent school, rising to 31% at leadership levels. The Sutton Trust[26] reports that senior positions in the law, military, journalism and medicine all predominantly comprise independent school alumni.

Our survey shows that a successful career in tech doesn't have to start with a privileged upbringing. Even at senior levels, where 20% of respondents are from private or fee-paying schools, more opportunities are spread more widely than in many other sectors.

Self-taught skills create opportunity

That 1 in 5 people report no previous tech experience and 23% say they are self-taught demonstrates the level of opportunity within the industry.

Today, self-teaching is commonplace amongst all age groups within the industry. The 2018 StackOverflow Survey[27], specifically focussing on developers, revealed almost 90% had taught themselves a new language, tool or framework.

This is a trend that fits entirely with the acknowledged issues with the way tech is taught formally. The World Economic Forum[28] noted, "the way we teach STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) is out of date", suggesting that much of the tech featured in the first year of a university syllabus will be ancient history by the time the undergraduate starts their first job.

These opportunities for the self-taught are exciting, because they mean new talent can enter the industry in a wide range of personalised, tailored ways. The tech industry doesn't require a specific entry time or route – and this makes it ideal for those wishing to retrain, to return to work after parenthood, or for those wishing to switch careers.

Every year, BIMA's Digital Day sees digital and tech professionals head back to school to inspire the next generation. In 2018, 155 schools and more than 5,000 students took part. Not everyone who takes part will be heading to university. Most participating schools are state schools. And the young people taking part come from hugely diverse backgrounds. If we want to encourage a greater diversity of people into the industry, it starts here.

This is a day aimed at opening eyes. Virtually all of our 5,000 students will spend hours glued to their smartphone, shopping online, gaming and using social media. Yet only a fraction of them make the connection between a career in tech and the things they are doing every day. After a few hours with our professionals, students see a much wider tech world. 73% say they would consider a career in it.

One of the reasons for that is because of partner challenges that emphasise the breadth of opportunities. During Digital Day 2018, challenges from The FA, Vodafone and BBC Studios had students using tech to increase the popularity of women's football, designing new AR and VR shopping tools, and creating a marketing plan for a new online CBBC programme.

But perhaps what inspires most are our professionals, many of whom will be from the local area – some who will have gone to that same school. They are the ones who show that it's not just coders and academics who can build careers in digital – anyone can.

Our survey shows that a successful career in tech doesn't have to start with a privileged upbringing.

Formal education isn't the only route into the industry

Participation in UK higher education computer science courses is 83% male[29] and the survey tells us that women are self-teaching in a wide range of STEM and non-STEM disciplines.

If we are to increase the diversity of thought within technical disciplines, we need to encourage and support more women to learn STEM skills earlier, through formal education and other independent and less-traditional programmes.

One clear opportunity for employers and individuals is to 'bolt-on' technical capabilities to existing transferable skills. As the Vodafone case study overleaf demonstrates, retraining in a tech discipline enables the industry to attract or redeploy talent which already has the communication, critical thinking, teamworking and other skills we need.

One person who took a less conventional route into the industry is Professor Sue Black OBE, Professor of Computer Science and Technology Evangelist, UK Government Strategic Advisor and Women's Equality Party candidate for London Mayor 2020.

She says:

"I'm so delighted to read the findings of the BIMA survey which mirrors my own experience of going to college and university whilst bringing up 3 kids on my own whilst living on a council estate in Brixton. I've had an interesting and exciting career in tech over the last 25 years and encourage other women at any age to find out about the opportunities that await them at the crossroads between technology and something they love doing. Technology is becoming all pervasive, the number of jobs which involve tech are increasing dramatically. It's an amazing time to get into technology!"

The industry needs to offer more for new parents

36% of parents did not return to their current company after taking parental leave. It is not clear how many parents decided not to return to any form of work, but the figure does suggest that balancing the requirements of parenthood with the demands of work is a challenge that workplaces need to help address.

Case study

Annette Leonard
Head of Communications, Technology
Sky UK

Sky wanted to encourage more women from diverse talent pools to explore careers in the IT sector, and they didn't just want to target graduates. In 2016 they launched their Get Into Tech Initiative, providing a unique and supportive environment for women to learn the basic skills of software development in 15 weeks.

These courses, held in Leeds, London and Livingstone, start with a one-week immersive module with the remaining 14 weeks as evening classes. By the end of the course, individuals are equipped with the basic skills to apply for entry level roles, or can take their studies further and apply for the software academy.

Since the initiation of this scheme, 215 women have completed this training which in turn has seen the software academy achieve a 50% representation of women in 2018.

"Before the Get Into Tech course I was working part-time as an administrator. I did a music degree and had spent the three years since graduation trying to find a new career path.

When I decided on software development it was highly daunting to contemplate getting enough skill to be taken seriously, let alone to be hired. I started learning to code by myself, but it was being accepted onto the Get Into Tech course that was my first big boost in confidence that the tech industry might one day welcome me into their ranks.

What I most enjoyed about the course itself was no longer being alone in my journey – being joined by a dozen other women in the same position was such a huge support. I'm now a year into working at Sky and I can't believe how much I know now – still a lot more to go though!"

Sally

Jon Davies
Head of Digital, Vodafone

Vodafone's Code Ready helps frontline employees re-train as coders.

"Telecoms is a rapidly changing industry and it's vital we respond to that change. One way Vodafone is responding is via Code Ready, a digital skills programme for frontline employees in our retail stores and contact centres who would like to make the transition to a digital career. The programme launches in Manchester in 2019.

Vodafone is partnering with software development programme Makers to deliver the learning and help employees reskill. It's also fully funded, which means Vodafone employees won't have to pay a penny to retrain as a developer and secure a new job with Vodafone at the end of the course."

Take action

For employers

– Benchmark recruitment activities across the industry to ensure strategies are designed to attract a more diverse response

– Broaden recruitment strategies to look beyond traditional groups and traditional routes:

  – Make potential a core component of recruitment

  – Balance the weighting of transferable and technical skills

  – Work more broadly with training providers and coding groups to find the talent amongst the self-taught and those not from a university background

– Consider establishing networks for returning parents or those changing careers

– Reduce the tension between work and family (onsite crèches, timetabling meetings only in school hours, running school-friendly flexible working)

– Address cultural conventions which encourage or reward presenteeism but may discriminate against parents

For individuals

– Don't assume any avenue is closed. There are lots of opportunities to join the tech sector, at virtually any age

– Women in tech? There are numerous organisations dedicated to helping women get into the industry and build careers, including: Code First: Girls[30], Women Who Code[31], techmums[32] and Liverpool Girl Geeks[33]

3.2 Neurodiversity

The greatest concentration of neurodiversity is in technical IT roles.

What we found

Neurodiversity revealed in the survey includes dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, Tourette's syndrome, dyscalculia and autism. The survey didn't ask whether the respondents have been formally diagnosed. Not all neurodivergents will necessarily have a formal diagnosis, they may be unaware or waiting an assessment.

"I've been lucky to have had a successful career in IT despite having ADHD. The modern working environment is structured in such a way as to be particularly ill-suited to those with ADHD, who find excessive process, restrictive roles and sparse opportunities for creative thinking unpleasant at best and intolerable at worst. As this report shows, we tend to gravitate towards roles which maximise the opportunities for challenge and fresh experiences. Endless process, intolerance and poor understanding of differing work styles have made my 20 years in the industry a confusing and frustrating uphill struggle. That the needs of the neurodivergent are finally being acknowledged, as well as the wealth of talent and non-typical thinking that we offer is both heartening and long overdue. Businesses and neurodivergent individuals alike will benefit greatly from this sea change in attitudes."

Alex Loveless, Data Science Consultant

– Neurodivergent people make up about 10% of the general population[34]. Our survey shows those figures are twice as high in the tech industry, and higher still in specific disciplines

– The greatest concentration of neurodiversity is in technical IT roles, where 28% of people are neurodivergent. Sales, marketing and research contained the second highest concentration at 22%

– 33% of all ADHD respondents have an IT role

– 39% of neurodivergent people haven't disclosed their condition. It is unclear whether this is in anticipation of a perceived negative reaction, a lack of organisational structure enabling 'easy' disclosure, result of delays in waiting for a diagnosis referral or something else

What does this mean?

More organisations are seeing neurodiversity as a competitive advantage[35]

As the CIPD puts it, you can't have innovation without diversity of thought.[36]

The range of neurodivergent traits is broad, but the capacity for non-linear thinking, the ability to see patterns in data, for hyperfocus, big thinking or attention to detail (all commonly reported abilities for those with autism, for example) are powerful tools for tech companies – especially those, as the survey shows, in roles such as software development, cybersecurity, data analysis and similar.

Until recently, neurodivergent people in tech had arrived organically, but increasingly organisations are setting out specifically to hire neurodivergent people. As Neil Barnett, Director of Inclusive Hiring and Accessibility, Microsoft – one of the organisations pioneering inclusive hiring – says, "The impact on our business and employee culture has been tremendous."[37]

"Clearly there's a high percentage of neurodivergent people in the industry, and it's crucial that employers are aware of this and doing everything they can to support their employee's needs.

As well as being a humanitarian issue, it makes business sense to look after and attract neurodiverse talent. According to the future of jobs survey 2018, by the World Economic Forum, skills associated with the neurodivergent thinker such as creativity and innovative thinking, critical thinking and analysis and complex problem solving will be in high demand as we head toward the fourth industrial revolution.

Organisations will need to truly embrace this powerful workforce to thrive and not just survive, if they want to stay ahead of the game in this increasingly competitive market."

Lucy Hobbs, Freelance Creative Director & Founder, The Future is ND

"At Direct Line Group we have a broad diversity agenda. Within this we view neurodiversity as a key way to bring different thinking into the business. This will help us to be alive to new opportunities and to stay relevant in meeting changing customers' needs. That is why we have significantly raised the internal profile of this aspect of diversity, and started to address our reasonable adjustments and recruitment processes to ensure that we do not miss out on potential superstars of tomorrow."

Mark Evans, Marketing Director, Direct Line

Undisclosed neurodiversity leaves the industry and neurodivergent people missing out on opportunities for support and growth

That 36% haven't disclosed their condition to their employer paints a picture of opportunities missed. By definition, we don't know who and we don't know the particular form of neurodiversity but it does suggest that:

– Talented individuals aren't working to their full potential

– Individual needs aren't being supported

Our survey suggests that when neurodiversity is disclosed the results are mostly positive, with 76% describing the reaction to their disclosure as being positive or extremely positive.

Tech can be a natural home for neurodivergent talent

Our survey response is indicative of an industry that increasingly values the neurodivergent thinker, but which is currently offering patchy support in creating a safe space for people with different needs to work best (see 2.1 Discrimination).

"Creating a good working environment for those who are neurodivergent takes understanding of the issues neurodivergents face, respect for individual needs, the psychological safety to express those needs honestly, and the will and resource to make the necessary adjustments. Employers must train their people to support neurodivergent colleagues and ensure the workspace is structured and low in distractions."

Amy Walker, Diversity & Inclusion Coordinator, GroupM

Case study

Michael Vermeersch
Digital Inclusion Lead
Microsoft

Becoming autism-inclusive has made a profound difference to the business and our culture.

We launched our first pilot project to hire autistic people in 2015. When Mary Ellen Smith, our Corporate VP for Operations, spoke about it at the United Nations we received around 800 CVs. Now a CV may not be the best way to assess talent, but that response told us something – that there are a lot of brilliant people disabled by society.

We learnt that our traditional hiring processes could be a major barrier of entry for many talented candidates – so we set out to change them. In the years since we have continued to refine and develop our recruitment and onboarding so that we reach more people on the autism spectrum and enable them to demonstrate their abilities in a comfortable and supporting environment.

Today, each qualified candidate attends a weeklong hiring academy with a variety of Microsoft teams and hiring managers. We partner new autistic talent with job coaches and mentors who help candidates understand our structures and processes. We've profiled candidates and used those profiles to remove barriers during recruitment and beyond.

As one single measure of success (and there are many) there are Microsoft engineers hired through the Autism Hiring Program who have written code used by millions of customers every day.

Becoming autism-inclusive has made a profound difference to the business and our culture. Our leaders and managers are better at their jobs because the new strategies they have learned – to share written recaps of meetings, to set clear expectations, to give more regular feedback – can benefit everyone.

That increasingly inclusive feel has encouraged more of our employees not hired through the Autism Hiring Program to self-identify and feel comfortable in coming forward in being themselves. And that has shown us that the issue is often not 'how do we hire people with autism' – but recognising that they are already here.

Take action

For employers

– Lead from the top. Make the commitment (and belief in the value of) neurodiversity among leaders clear

– Appoint suitably trained neurodiversity champions to lead awareness and support actions within your organisation

– It's important not to assume every neurodivergent person has the same needs, but it is just as important to ensure that structures are in place to support neurodivergent people at work. Bear in mind you will be obliged to make reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010

Adjustments might include:

– Recruitment
  Remove friction points throughout the process, from job ads and application formats that unintentionally exclude neurodivergent people, to creating comfortable, supporting environments where candidates see familiar faces and are not surprised or confused by tests

– Environment
  Provide a consistent, personal workspace, not a hot desk. Reduce distractions from noise or light

– Development
  Provide regular meetings with coaches and mentors

– Make managing and creating inclusive cultures a distinct function of HR, and make inclusivity management a KPI for HR leaders

– Train managers to understand and support their neurodivergent staff, and to listen to individual needs in order to support them as best they can. Specifics may vary, but setting clear SMART goals, offering regular feedback and providing written recaps of meetings may all help

For individuals

– You don't have to disclose your difference, but your employer is far more likely to be able to make adjustments that support you if you do. The evidence from our survey is that disclosure is usually a positive experience

– If you feel able, talking openly about your difference with colleagues and/ or managers can raise awareness and understanding, and make it easier for managers to support you

– Find out where your points of support are. If your organisation has a neurodiversity champion or similar, talk to them

6 Practical Steps

The essential first steps to creating a more diverse workforce.

1. From the top

Whatever the initiative – whether you're looking to increase the numbers of women and BAME in leadership positions or attract neurodivergent talent – it must come with the wholehearted support of senior leaders.

2. Get the data

Assumptions are dangerous. So before you launch initiatives, find out what the reality is for diverse groups in your company. Gather data from recruitment exercises, inductions, appraisals, surveys and exit interviews to establish whether you have diversity issues and what they are.

3. Enlist help

From tackling discrimination to championing neurodiversity and training mental health first aiders, ask for help in diagnosing issues, identifying solutions, and training the people who can improve the situation.

4. Talk about it

So much of the shift required to truly celebrate diversity is cultural. It requires individuals to feel able to break the silence about their mental health, their loneliness, their stress or cognitive difference. And it requires organisations to create the right environment for that conversation to take place. You can start to make that change by appointing mental health first aiders or neurodiversity champions, by running general awareness sessions and by holding events that celebrate diversity.

5. Support managers

Managers are on the frontline of supporting teams with a diverse range of needs, and they need help to do the job effectively. For each of the elements in this report – stress, anxiety depression and mental health, discrimination, opportunity and neurodiversity – ensure your managers have the training to spot and understand issues. And give them the toolkit to make the adjustments necessary to offer real support.

6. For change to work it must be inclusive

Changes to our industry and the way we work have to be led by the communities it concerns. For example, a manager who is neurotypical cannot make the workplace more neurodivergent friendly without letting the neurodivergent voices be heard and empower them to lead the way. Managers can provide the structure and the channels for this to happen, but to make a difference change must be led by the diverse individuals who have a lived experience of the barriers we have identified.

The initiative must come with the wholehearted support of senior leaders.

Conclusion

The results are profound and far-reaching, portraying a dramatic picture of stress, discrimination and opportunity.

Nat Gross and Tarek Nseir, BIMA Co-Presidents

When we decided to undertake a diversity survey, we did so with one fundamental goal in mind.

We wanted to truly understand the challenges we, as an industry, are trying to solve – to gain a deep understanding of the everyday experiences of the community in its broadest sense.

The results are profound and far-reaching, portraying a dramatic picture of stress, discrimination and opportunity.

What the survey gives us for the first time is clarity. In doing so, it provides a platform for change, not just a headline that is gone tomorrow. It's a platform on which we can have informed conversations – about the action the industry needs to take and about BIMA's role in supporting that.

For our part, our commitment here and now is to ensure BIMA has an enhanced focus on our diversity and inclusivity work. We must also immediately begin to address wellness where we have not done so in the past. We don't have immediate answers to these complex issues; but we are stating an intent, and we will be very publicly accountable for how we address it.

Looking more widely, this report gives us further impetus for supporting the industry in building strategies for change. Our educational focus, to take just one example, which already includes Digital Day and our Universities, Apprenticeships and Talent Councils, needs to expand its reach to find new ways to encourage people to transfer into the industry, to encourage more women into coding, or to empower neurodivergent talent.

We can't do that alone. We all need to change. We all need to be challenged to do more. This report contains many action points, but if we want those points to become embedded principles, we need an industry-wide task force to take them forward and ensure change happens. And we need government to ensure that across every industry, diversity receives the resources it needs.

BIMA will continue to work with our membership, other industry associations, government, business and education – to communicate, collaborate and take action.

We look forward to working with you.

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