Women thriving in technology & AI

How we, organizations,
and society can drive to increase
female representation in today's
digital world

Nature

I have been invited to enough panels and discussion forums to observe how the first questions asked are usually about the challenges women face, especially working in technology. Let me start by first highlighting the biggest realization I have at my age: women rock! By nature, and by design, women have inherent strengths as leaders, nurturers, integrators, influencers, orchestrators, organizers, and innovators – attributes that women should proudly celebrate. I do not subscribe to the notion that women are victims; instead, we are products of nature and nurture. Women need to confidently show and liberate these natural strengths, while society needs to nurture these innate qualities that raise the cradle of our civilization.

Nurture

One of the challenges I (and many working women) constantly face is having to earn a seat at the table and prove our worth repeatedly… with almost always a burden of proof hanging over us every time we undertake new roles. Most women do not get to assume competency, despite many years in the business, to belong in leadership circles and to assume authority until having effectively demonstrated their capability, unlike perceived impressions that most men are sometimes automatically granted.

Along my journey, I have fortunately received confidence building boosters from mentors, encouragement and motivation from leaders acknowledging my accomplishments, and the trust and heightened responsibility that gradually comes from a job well done. As a career mom, having a sense of balance through active shared parenting with my husband and the support system enormously help, as is the leverage you get from a supportive work team. Putting in time for personal care, health, and well-being is also critically important.

Early STEM education

The number of women in STEM is increasing, and we are seeing more women in executive and board positions in STEM companies. Whilst improving numbers in universities and industry are great, it is not fast nor impressive enough, and significant gender imbalance remains. Gender bias and stereotyping around STEM careers being more suited for men persists and this needs to stop. Leaders of such organizations need to serve as role models for future generations. Exposing kids early to STEM education is crucial too, and it starts with leaders and teachers capturing young girls' curiosity and harnessing this thinking into a fun, enjoyable, and inclusive learning process.

Power of allyship

Many women say allyship is key and most refer to lack of role models, learning, and skills development. Organizations have a responsibility to address these areas if they are to gain grounds in increasing women in the workforce.

From my perspective, allyship is proactive support from male peers and leaders to encourage women to be successful. A couple of months back, I watched Black Panther: Wakanda Forever where the main characters had positive male role models. Princess Shuri, the tech expert sister who is the innovation brain of Wakanda, said she grew up with a brother who encouraged her interests in technology, whilst the character who played an MIT prodigy (who invented the vibranium tracker) said that growing up, her mechanic dad allowed her to freely play with toolsets in the garage.

Although portrayed in a film, there is truth in that when someone has male allies, be it a father, a brother, or a friend, it boosts confidence and insinuates females can also thrive in such areas. I can call out three distinct male allies who were instrumental in my professional growth and put me in leadership roles where I discovered I can do things I initially doubted I could. It really does make a difference when male leaders recognize female potential and help them to see their best through encouragement

and active coaching to give new roles a try.

Maintaining a top agenda

Diversity at all levels should remain a top agenda for any high performing business with clear and concrete key performance indicators (KPIs). While this may seem obvious, progress is not rapid enough; however, if we care any less, then we risk stalling and business outcomes will exhibit a decline in performance fast. Company initiatives need to be bold, perhaps even controversial, or push the boundaries of possibility like we do with technology. Ultimately, companies should not dare slip into inaction.

Increasing women leaders

Increasing representation is also driven through increasing women role models at the top. It is not about making statements about "breaking the glass ceiling;" it is conveying an assurance that it is possible and not as daunting as many may think it to be, that the view is fantastic up there, and that there is no shame in admitting and celebrating that accomplishment.

Technology in the workplace

Technology plays an important part in breaking down barriers for women. It allows women to increase their flexibility and have the option to work remotely or hybrid whilst balancing childcare. This has been proven during the pandemic when careers in technology were least affected due to technology enabling us to continue to work; women were also able to continue and pursue their STEM careers.

Women representation in tech and AI

As the world increasingly embraces digital, and everything metaverse, technology designs that promote diversity (e.g. women in different shapes and sizes represented in avatars) balance the notion that only men can play in the virtual world. I once played in Dreamscape, an immersive and virtual reality experience, with my twin girls and my son who was accompanied by his friends for a birthday celebration adventure. I was fascinated with how my

girls loved having their female avatars doing what the boys were doing and pushed them to feel they can enjoy adventures as much as the boys and be active participants, not just bystanders. By peeling back the intimidating exterior or impressions built around STEM or anything tech, we can encourage girls to pursue STEM interests.

Government role in enabling women in tech

Governments have a huge role in promoting and encouraging women to thrive in technical jobs. One way is to promote funding for women in tech and digital start-ups, guiding and mentoring their developments, and celebrating their successes publicly. Government programs like scientific space projects where there are female line-ups are so awe-inspiring for the youth. Conscious female representation in departmental or ministerial leadership line-ups and STEM programs also speak volumes. Merits also come with government sponsored events tackling technology and innovations showcasing women expert speakers.

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The Fourth Industrial Revolution and the future of work

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is transforming how and where work is done. For today's 1.8 billion global youth who are between the ages of 15 and 29, this revolution is significantly shaping their roles as the future workforce. Automation, digitalization, AI, and robotics mean businesses should rethink how and where work is done. What this implies is that men and women are to embrace working with technology and digital – it is no longer an option, it's a must.

With the integration of technology into our daily lives, getting more technical and digital is increasingly becoming a way of life. Most school curriculums, even outside STEM, have digital educational toolkits making digital learning and application of technologies a norm. I truly believe that technology is a great parity equalizer and it will only be a matter of time when more women become very adept at it.

Technology organizations, such as Deloitte, can help encourage women to pursue careers in technology by taking away the stigma or notion that it is an area mainly for men. This can be accomplished by putting the spotlight on Women in Tech, celebrating their achievements, and showcasing how it can offer a fulfilling, enjoyable, and rewarding career.

For example, Deloitte and The Female Quotient (The FQ) are in a strategic alliance dedicated to helping advance inclusion in the workplace by developing client solutions and creating a community where thought leaders can engage in inspirational dialogue, brainstorm solutions for change, and collaborate to share real experiences for women in IT. Women in data science and analytics careers and creating a space for female data scientists to network, share experiences, and be part of a supportive community are additional areas highlighted. Deloitte is actively driving internal and external marketing of Women in Technology such as Women in SAP,

Women in Cyber, Women in Analytics & AI, Women in Cloud, and so many others. Finally, Deloitte is also collaborating with Girls Who Code to help inspire the next generation of female leaders and is dedicated to providing access to STEM fields and skills necessary for the future through scholarships and programming.

Advice to my younger self and the young girls choosing their future path

I would say to my younger self who took a lot of convincing to take up computer science – you go girl! Fast forward to today, it has brought me a whole new world of possibilities and put me at the forefront of conversations on developing and emerging technologies and innovations that can impact society for the better. For young girls, I would say enjoy taking arts, music, and ballet, but also try to learn how to play chess, build with Legos or robots, and learn how to code. For parents of girls, to expose them to wider learning options, not just those considered feminine. Finally, I advise growing girls not to allow themselves to be boxed-in; whatever path they choose to take, to boldly and confidently soar high and spread their wings as the future looks digital and bright! ●

By **Mia Buban**, Head of Enterprise Technology & Performance Portfolio, Consulting, Deloitte Middle East