

# Turning the tide on diversity in technology

These Canadian companies are building stronger businesses through equality — and the world could learn a thing or two



Huda Idrees, Dot Health's CEO, has been referred to as both a prodigy and a juggernaut in Toronto's tech scene. CONTRIBUTED

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Michelle Obama challenged tech leaders to make sacrifices for the sake of gender equality last week during Dreamforce, one of the world's biggest tech conferences.

"If we're not willing to share the power," Obama said, "and maybe step down from a seat or create more seats at the table, if we're not just hoarding seats and thinking it's all mine mine mine mine mine, until we do that, then it won't change."

The numbers show a clear problem. In 2016, women made up only 23 per cent of science, technology, engineering and mathematics jobs worldwide, according to LinkedIn.

But, if one thing was clear at

the San Francisco gathering, it's that the tech world is undergoing a much-needed shakeup. Equity and diversity have gone from buzzwords to core values. Companies, and the women within them, are realizing their power — and making changes.

This is how four Canadian tech companies are taking new approaches to gender equality:

**1 Shopify**  
**Problem:** Archaic, male-dominated co-op programs

**Solution:** A new bachelor of computer science program

Finding that Canada's technical co-op programs haven't changed in more than 50 years, Shopify was inspired to partner with Carleton University in its hometown of Ottawa on an inclusive, experiential bachelor of science program.

The program has students

earn a salary while splitting their time between school and the Shopify headquarters.

After changing the language in the application to encourage more women to apply, the first cohort included six women and five men. The next had six women and eight men.

**2 Hootsuite**  
**Problem:** Unconscious biases

**Solution:** Top-down education

The Vancouver-based social-media management company has a multi-year plan in place that includes education on unconscious bias, which many of the company's seniors leaders have already undergone.

Hootsuite also donates to and hosts women-in-tech initiatives, such as Girls Learning Code, and recently added two female tech geniuses to its board: longtime

executive Sara Clemens and BroadbandTV CEO Shahrzad Rafati.

**3 BroadbandTV**  
**Problem:** The gender pay gap

**Solution:** Quarterly reviews

Led by founder and CEO Shahrzad Rafati, the Vancouver-based digital-entertainment company has taken an aggressive approach to ensuring equal pay for equal work.

The company monitors pay quarterly, resulting in a disparity of less than 2 per cent. It also has more women in management positions (46 per cent) than the national average (39 per cent).

**4 Dot Health**  
**Problem:** Closet discriminators

**Solution:** "No A-holes"

Dot Health's CEO, Huda

Idrees, has been referred to as both a prodigy and a juggernaut in Toronto's tech scene. Idrees was recently the chief product officer at Wealthsimple, one of Toronto's hottest tech companies, and now heads Dot Health, which offers patients secure and easy access to their health records.

The company, launched in February, employs nine women and one man and proudly boasts a "No A-holes" rule.

This means having potential employees work with the company for a few weeks so they can uncover any discriminatory behaviour.

"It's hard to hide that for an hour or a day," Idrees said, "but even harder to hide it for weeks." Dot Health also seeks equal gender representation in its vendors, whether it's an accounting firm or a law firm.

TECHNOSOCY

## Equality a win for everyone

The importance of equal representation and equal pay in tech took centre stage at Dreamforce.

Thought leaders like Michelle Obama, Natalie Portman, IBM CEO Ginni Rometty and the conference's host, Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff, made it clear that it's about more than striking a balance; it's critical to a company's success.

Salesforce is among thousands of tech companies suffering from a lack of diversity, specifically when it comes to gender.

While the U.S.-based cloud-computing company's tech division is made up of 77 per cent men, many of them in Canada, the company is trying to improve.

Salesforce has spent \$6 million over the past four years to balance wages among men and women working in the same roles, according to chief equality officer Tony Prophet.

Chief people person Cindy Robbins said other efforts include: funding programs around the world that encourage girls and women to pursue STEM careers; a commitment to weeding out bias in recruiting, hiring and promoting processes; donating products and profit to NGOs promoting women in tech; and making equality a focus of their annual conference, which this year hosted more than 170,000 people.

**\$6M**

Amount that Salesforce has spent in the past four years to balance wages

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