

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/embrace-diversity-early>

Software engineer Tracy Chou, a leader in the effort to make the industry more inclusive, explains how the immediate business pressures startups face can force them to de-emphasize the issue and result in “diversity debt” that becomes much harder to overcome once the organization grows. Chou, a founding advisor to Project Include, says relying on homogenous professional networks for hiring just perpetuates the problem.



Transcript

that are very deep down.. Even for the people that are very committed to change, it's difficult to change culture and processes.. And these things take a very long time, so it's hard to see immediate games.. And sometimes that can be frustrating when efforts are being put out there and we don't see immediate changes.. And, particularly in the start-up world, where you're doing a lot of trade-offs, long term versus short term.. If you're in an start-up that only has so much runway, and you just need to ship your product, and get some customers, it's hard to prioritize diversity, in that short term.. But what happens then is that you start to accrue this diversity debt.. So, similar to technical debt, if you start doing things in ways that aren't sustainable, it works in the short term because you need to get over that hurdle.. You need to hit that product launch.. But as that debt accrues sometimes, at some point it becomes so much that you can never recover from it..

And there are some companies that have gone so far down these paths, it's kind of unclear if they all will be able to fix their problems, and pay down that diversity debt.. It's easy to keep doing things the way that we've been doing them.. One example of something that accrues diversity debt is the way a lot of companies do hiring, which is based on referrals.. And it's easy to refer people from your network, that you know, that are similar to you, that you've worked with you in the past, and bring them in.. It's very easy to get going like that.. What happens then though is because these networks, social networks tend to be very homogeneous, you end up just perpetuating the demographics of your initial teams.. And the further along you get, the harder it is to change that.. Once your team is thousands of people and they're still doing all these referrals, and everybody looks very similar, it's very to shift very hard in the other direction.. Okay so, lots about problems.. It'd be nice to also talk about solutions..

So a couple years ago, I and a few other women in tech, who would often get together and talk about these issues, were frustrated about all the talk of problems, as I just laid out.. And we thought we should actually start trying to focus on solutions and see what we could do, instead of having the same conversations over and over again.. What came out of those initial discussions, a couple of years ago, was a nonprofit called Project Include, which I'm now a finding advisor to.. The idea was that we need to start giving people solutions.. And there are people who want to do the right thing, and just don't know what to do.. We were often getting people asking us for one-on-one coffee so we can get them some brain dump on what they could do around diversity.. And we thought it would make more sense, it would be more scalable if we actually just wrote down those recommendations and tried to compile these resources to make it easier for people..