

THE FUTURE OF WORK CULTURE

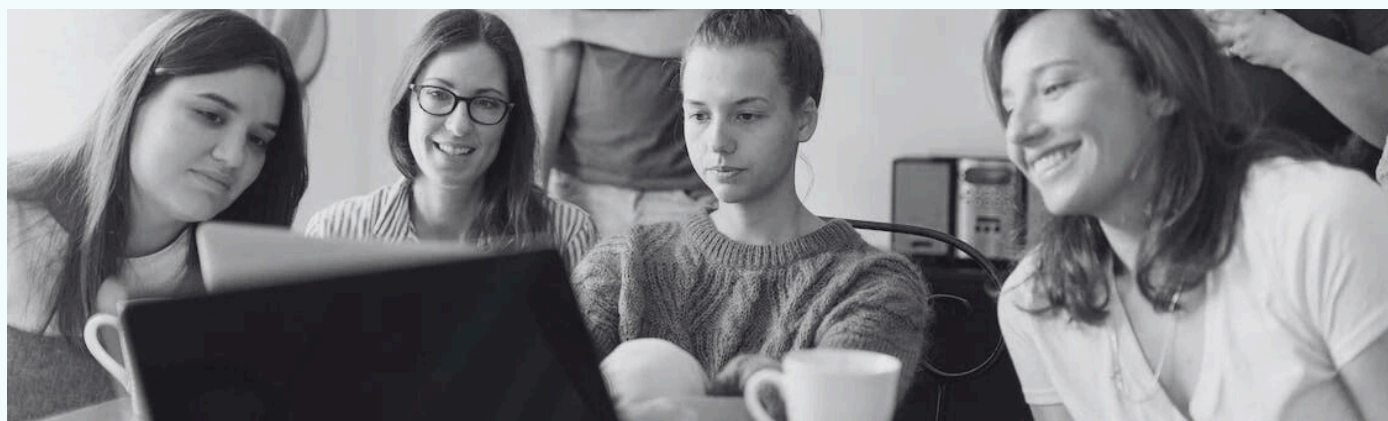
HOW TO ADVANCE AND RETAIN WOMEN IN CYBERSECURITY

2024 WHITEPAPER



**inclusion
in progress**

INTRODUCTION



In a post-pandemic era rife with artificial intelligence advancements, economic uncertainties, and geopolitical tensions, cybersecurity has emerged as a critical priority for organizations worldwide. The relentless evolution of digital threats highlights the urgent need for a diverse, innovative talent pool in order to meet the demand for the cybersecurity industry's rapid growth.

Since we first began publishing these whitepapers in 2020, the landscape of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives has faced increasing politicization. Despite the increase in company commitments following George Floyd's murder, DEI efforts have faced increasing pushback both in the United States and abroad. We witnessed the US Supreme Court decision on race-conscious affirmative action policies in universities, which has turned attention to dismantling DEI initiatives in corporate organizations. Instances of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and xenophobia also increased worldwide, affecting political discourse and workplace dynamics. We also witnessed many of our in-house DEI colleagues burn out, or watch budgets and buy-in decrease or disappear altogether.

Amidst these challenges, cybersecurity firms have a pivotal role in shaping future workplaces and driving global change. They face a dual imperative: (1) investing in expanding and diversifying their talent pipeline and (2) ensuring the retention and advancement of top talent as future leaders. To maintain their competitive edge and continue to meet client demands in 2024, cybersecurity firms must transcend the politicization of DEI initiatives if they hope to close the gender gap in their organizations.

According to The World Bank, women make up less than a third of the global workforce in technology-related fields.¹ By continuing to promote women's presence and progression, cybersecurity companies can expand talent pipelines, foster innovation, fortify against threats, and align with broader business objectives of technological advancement to close their talent gap. Elevating gender representation isn't just about ticking a diversity checkbox – it's a strategic necessity.

(1) World Bank Group: *The Equality Equation: Advancing the Participation of Women and Girls in STEM*.

In embracing and investing in DEI as an ongoing process, cybersecurity leaders can reaffirm their commitment to inclusivity, innovation, and support for our global workforce — and carve a path for gender equity that will shape our workplaces for decades to come.

KEY CHALLENGES

While we've witnessed these challenges with client partners in the broader tech industry — both within the US and outside of Silicon Valley — we've also been encouraged by how many leaders we communicate with continue to prioritize their DEI efforts in support of individual contributors and stakeholders.

In January 2024, we hosted an executive roundtable with cybersecurity leaders to understand how they're navigating the shifting landscape while realigning their gender inclusion efforts.

We decided to center our roundtable discussion on the following questions for our₁ participants:

- How have cybersecurity companies adapted gender equity strategies to support flexible working arrangements post-pandemic?
- What are the ways cybersecurity firms can mitigate gender bias in a distributed, hybrid or remote work environment?
- What strategies are cybersecurity leaders using to close the gender gap, retain top female talent, and promote women into positions of leadership?

ROUNDTABLE

To understand how cybersecurity companies are working to close the gender gap and increase representation of women² in leadership, our roundtable on “How can cybersecurity advance and retain women in 2024?” was held virtually on January 16th, 2024, with the aim to:

- Bring together stakeholders and representatives from cybersecurity firms of different sizes to discuss opportunities and challenges they were facing; and
- Contribute to the global dialogue and understanding of how to reorient gender equity strategies to close the gender gap in leadership in the cybersecurity industry.

For those who couldn't attend the live discussion, we held individual interviews with participants who were eager to share their experiences with us. Participants came from Cisco, Fortinet, Palo Alto Networks and Rapid7, and were asked to address key topics to identify challenges as well as share strategies, best practices and recommendations.

Our roundtable participants were asked to address a series of questions on several designated relevant and timely topics, designed to facilitate a meaningful discussion.

The topics were:

1. Why gender representation remains a challenge for cybersecurity companies;
2. How the cybersecurity industry can adapt gender inclusion strategies for distributed work;
3. What cybersecurity companies are doing today to close the gender gap in leadership.

It should be noted that the terms “remote work”, “hybrid work”, “flexible work”, and “distributed work” were used interchangeably in our discussion. Regardless of how companies chose to label it, each of our roundtable participants were intentionally listening to and designing their strategies around their women employees’ shared desire for flexibility in their work. DEI, HR, Talent and People leaders who joined as participants also expressed a heightened awareness of equity challenges that could affect the performance and potential of individual contributors choosing not to come to the office full-time. Lastly, all of our roundtable participants shared that flexible work continued to be a top desire for women on their teams, and showed no signs of dissipating.

From this conversation, we identified a substantial need for cybersecurity companies to continue to prioritize DEI, flexible work, and leadership initiatives for women. This whitepaper should be seen as an important addition to the dialogue around gender representation and retention strategies as cybersecurity firms continue to grow – which will affect the future of work culture beyond this industry.



WHY WOMEN ARE STILL UNDERREPRESENTED IN CYBERSECURITY



Historically, cybersecurity firms have had high-profile struggles with diversity and inclusion when building their teams, especially around increasing the representation of women in the industry overall. For example, despite organizations consistently ranking cybersecurity as a top priority, the cybersecurity industry continues to face a staggering workforce gap.

According to the World Economic Forum's Global Cybersecurity Outlook 2024:²

- There is a global shortage of nearly 4 million cybersecurity professionals;
- 52% of public organizations state that a lack of resources and skills is their biggest challenge;
- 71% of organizations have unfilled cybersecurity positions;
- 95% of cyber leaders find that greater effort should be dedicated to talent recruitment;

As cyber threats escalate worldwide, government agencies and the enterprise alike are struggling to recruit enough talent to defend against today's cybercriminals. This global talent shortage puts immense pressure on current cybersecurity teams, increasing the risk of burnout and prompting some leaders to consider leaving the industry.

By attracting more women to the cybersecurity field, leaders can tap into a vast pool of untapped talent, injecting new perspectives and energy while meeting the ever-increasing demand. While our cyber leaders were well aware of the challenge of gender inclusion and highlighted that the situation is gradually improving, there is more work to be done around "rebranding" the cybersecurity industry as a welcoming, inclusive and accessible field for women.

Our roundtable participants shared that they were adapting and building upon their gender equity strategies to enable what **Inclusion in Progress, LLC** refers to as:

Inclusive Distributed Work™: An organizational optimization strategy that ensures individual contributors can access the advantages and benefits they need to advance and perform at their highest potential – regardless of where they come from or where they choose to work. This includes optimizing:

- What employers must provide for individual contributors at home or in a shared physical workplace that enables psychological safety, well-being and performance;
- What individual contributors need in their employee experience to reduce barriers to connectivity, collaboration, performance and promotion pathways wherever they're choosing to work from;
- What policies organizations can establish for greater trust-building and transparency in communication among distributed team members – asynchronously, synchronously, in-office and virtually;
- What leaders need to model inclusive behaviors, mitigate bias, and strengthen systems that support collaboration for their teams in a distributed work environment;
- Learning and development pathways adapted to a distributed workplace that will enable performance and access to advancement opportunities for high-potential talent;
- Flexible work opportunities for distributed teams – bolstered by a quantitative and qualitative data-driven strategy that centers an equitable employee experience;
- Organization-wide systems, processes and protocols that enable inclusive distributed work – bolstered by real-time feedback loops from individual contributors and their team members to ensure sustainable progress over time.



Before the pandemic, cybersecurity firms often overlooked the importance of flexible work in their retention and recruitment strategies for women – which limited their capacity to retain current employees and attract top talent from locations they wouldn't otherwise reach. Today, flexible working arrangements are no longer a “nice-to-have” but a “must-have,” particularly for women employees. This has given cybersecurity firms a chance to restructure their retention and recruitment strategies to support their DEI goals – and expand their traditional talent pool.

Post-pandemic studies show that women are more likely to...

- Prioritize flexibility in their work arrangements, with 90% of women seeking remote work options;
- Seek to reduce experiences of in-office microaggressions (especially for women of color, LGBTQ+ women, and women with disabilities) and enhance their sense of belonging, psychological safety and productivity working flexibly;³
- Resign from a position if hybrid work options were taken away, with 72% of women polled stating they would seek a new job where flexible work was available;⁴

When we asked our roundtable participants how employees' desire for flexible work has changed their approach to gender equity initiatives, here's what a few of them had to say:

“We're very HQ centric so that's where a lot of our executives are stationed or located. But it's prohibitive because of how expensive it is to live in California, particularly the Bay Area, and not everyone can afford to move there or raise a family there. So one issue is making sure women aren't overlooked for promotional opportunities because they're often left out of the room and are not there physically. But this doesn't just affect women - it affects men as well. So we're working to increase awareness at the senior and executive level about potential biases that may arise in performance, pay and promotions when employees work remotely or choose flexible work.”

- Palo Alto Networks

“Flexible work arrangements are... very helpful for women. Especially for parents or new parents. So now we are working in a hybrid model (with three days in a week in the office), but we have customized it based on people's needs. For example, if there is a new mother that needs accommodation or a woman who is taking care of elderly family members, we provide them the resources so they can work from home 100%, and tailor flexible work arrangements to each individual's needs.”

- Fortinet

(3) Fortune: *Flexible work is feminist—and women won't return to a system that hasn't served them well to spare the feelings of powerful men*

(4) Forbes: *Women's Day: The Vital Importance Of Allowing Women To Have A Flexible Hybrid Schedule*

UK-based cybersecurity leaders are legally required to report their gender pay gap data every year.⁵ This provides a rigorous framework so that cybersecurity firms – both inside and outside of the workplace – are encouraged to think constructively about why gender pay gaps exist and what to do about them to increase women's representation in cybersecurity.

For example, in 2023:

- Darktrace reported that their workforce consists of 34% women and 66% men. Their executive team is also made up of 40% women. At the end of 2023, Darktrace shared that the mean pay for men is 4.2% higher than that of women, but the mean bonus pay for women was 43% higher than that of men. This means that women received more in the sum of commission and bonus pay in the past 12 months compared to their male counterparts, even if the base pay of men in the company was higher.⁶

- Sophos reported that they initiated a global gender gap pay analysis in 2021. The goal of this was to audit annual salaries' increase percentages and compare them by function, gender and performance levels. Previous to this analysis, Sophos leaders believed that their global job leveling framework was enough to address the gender pay gap, but corrected this misconception after the audit was complete. They utilized the data gathered in the audit and budgeted for and held off-cycle reviews throughout the year with a major focus of fixing the gender pay gap. They also changed their salary review materials so leaders could more easily identify gender pay gaps in their compensation recommendations.⁷

We were encouraged by how the cyber leaders we spoke with are utilizing data for their gender equity strategies such as pay gap audits, doubling down on flexible work arrangements that support women's work-life balance, recruitment drives aimed at reaching talent from non-traditional backgrounds, and local partnerships supporting girls and women in STEM. Not only will these ongoing efforts help these companies boost gender representation internally, they'll lead to increased innovation for the cybersecurity sector as a whole.

(5) GOV.UK: *Gender pay gap reporting: guidance for employers*

(6) Darktrace: *2022 Gender Pay Gap Report*

(7) Amanda Mallow: *Our Gender Pay Gap Journey*

At **Inclusion in Progress, LLC**, we've learned that encouraging gender inclusive workplaces is an ongoing challenge, especially when teams are geographically distributed. We've also learned that individual contributors – particularly women – are more likely to hide when they're struggling or suffer silently in a distributed work environment. Which is why we've supported client partners around three critical areas to foster inclusive environments that help retain and recruit women professionals:

1. Audit and mitigate biases that may hinder individual performance on distributed teams.

In a distributed work environment, it's easy for biases to appear as individual contributors are asked to make decisions quickly with limited information. We partner with Talent, People and DEI leaders on auditing and mitigating biases that may hinder women's performance on distributed teams. With the data we gather, we show our client partners how to anticipate when their individual contributors might experience bias and how to provide clear pathways to raise concerns and influence change when those biases hinder performance at work.

2. Adapt performance management systems for identifying high performers on distributed teams.

To help people managers address their blind spots for identifying top performers on distributed teams, we help them adapt performance metrics and growth opportunities for direct reports working in-office, hybrid or remotely, we help them establish team's individual preferences for high performance in distributed work, and we train them on how to mitigate biases and misunderstandings that may come up in a hybrid work environment.

3. Design flexible work protocols that support women's psychological safety and connectivity.

As many teams we work with are distributed across timezones and countries, we use the data we've gathered to determine shared on- and off-work hours for optimal productivity; help women professionals streamline communication channels for work and non-work purposes to reduce overwhelm and likelihood of burnout; and provide collective learning spaces to allow women to strengthen connections with one another and increase their sense of engagement and purpose within their organization.

We found that the cybersecurity firms most likely to recruit and retain top talent have been successful at regularly investing in DEI to assess barriers to performance and collaboration; fostering a data-driven approach to gender inclusion with ways to regularly iterate and measure progress; and prioritizing an inclusive work culture that would make women employees want to stay on as future leaders and also successfully recruit future talent

HOW TO ADAPT GENDER EQUITY STRATEGIES FOR A DISTRIBUTED WORKFORCE



Today, as organizations navigate remote and hybrid workforces, cybersecurity is in higher demand than ever before. Software and technology became business-critical for companies around the world when the Covid-19 pandemic hit in 2020. With the rise of AI, geopolitical conflict, flexible work arrangements, and a pandemic-fueled shift in how tech and non-tech organizations alike operate, cybersecurity firms have had to step up significantly to meet the surge in demand for their services.

Rather than being a source of overwhelm, cyber leaders have an unprecedented opportunity to lean into their diversity, equity and inclusion goals, while revamping their talent lifecycle to support the advancement and retention of women.

Our roundtable participants all agreed on the need for:

1. Ongoing education on how to identify and interrupt gender bias at work;
2. The need to hold leaders accountable at all levels of the organization for leveling the playing field for teams from different gender backgrounds; and
3. Talent strategies adapted and embedded to support a distributed workforce that effectively promotes women's advancement into leadership roles.

The cybersecurity leaders we connected with during and after our roundtable shared how they were adapting gender equity strategies for a distributed workforce:

Cisco, for example, continues to build on two initiatives geared towards increasing gender equity and inclusion:

- **Women Rock-IT Program:** The Women Rock-IT (IT's not just for the Boys!) program provides an informative, educational program throughout the year so that women at Cisco can connect, thrive, and reach their potential. Women Rock-IT's mission is to inspire more girls to study tech to ensure they don't miss out on tomorrow's best jobs. This content is offered on their internal Cisco Networking Academy, which offers free online self-paced courses for distributed teams, and gives insight into the future of IT and the expansive career opportunities that technology can offer.⁸
- **Cisco's Proximity Initiative:** This initiative is a one-on-one conversation between a Cisco Executive and an employee, specifically those from Cisco's Inclusive Communities (Employee Resource Groups), with the intention to have a conversation across differences. 84 percent of Cisco employees who participated in the nearly 2,000+ Proximity Initiative conversations have found incredible value in these discussions while 95 percent of leaders indicated they now lead differently as a result of their Proximity conversations.⁹

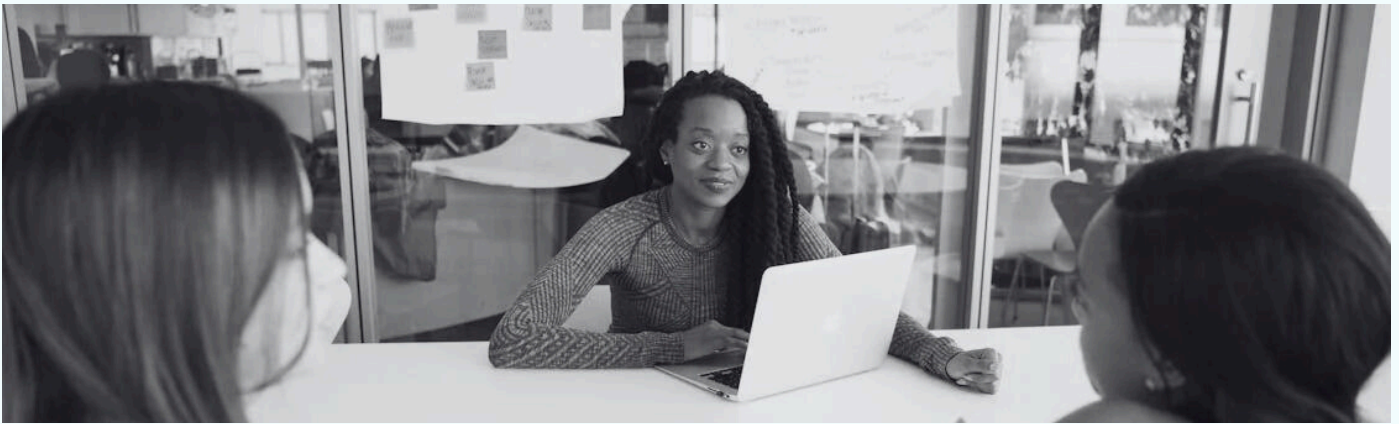
At **Inclusion in Progress, LLC** we've learned that measuring and modeling inclusive work practices that support gender equity require intentionality, innovation and imagination of what's possible – rather than waiting until women experience threats to their psychological safety that force them to leave. We've also learned that during turbulent times, it becomes business critical to ensure that women's morale, engagement and performance is supported in a psychologically safe environment. It's why we've made it our mission to support distributed teams in tech in modeling and advancing gender inclusion, by providing our client partners with:

1. Practical ways to measure and remove barriers to psychological safety for distributed teams so that they can work together more efficiently and effectively;
2. Strategies to mitigate hidden biases on distributed teams (both in-person and virtually) so that organizations can reduce costs associated with misunderstanding, miscommunication and threats to psychological safety;
3. Solutions to increase community-building and connectivity for women that supports their engagement, performance and sense of belonging at work.

(8) Cisco: *Women Rock-IT*

(9) Cisco Blogs: *Alex Allen*

HOW TO INCREASE WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN LEADERSHIP IN CYBERSECURITY



The cybersecurity industry faces a lack of diversity and female talent – and that disparity becomes clearer in senior leadership positions. Despite progress being made towards greater gender diversity in the cybersecurity industry, women continue to be greatly underrepresented in leadership roles. In 2023, women made up only 28 percent of the global STEM workforce. Within cybersecurity specifically, one report found that only 25 percent of the global workforce are women, and only 17 percent of Fortune 500 companies' chief information security officer (CISO) roles are held by women.¹⁰

When promoted to executive leadership roles in cybersecurity, women are responsible for much more than their day-to-day tasks implementing security strategies, handling compliance, managing staff training, and conducting risk assessments – they also lead organizational culture change and serve as role models for underrepresented groups in the wider cyber industry. Which is why it's crucial to not only actively recruit women into STEM and cybersecurity, but also work to pave the way for career advancement opportunities that would allow them to step into leadership roles in their organizations.

To increase the likelihood of women staying and stepping up into future leadership positions, our roundtable participants touted the importance of (1) community-building and networking initiatives for women externally and internally through initiatives like employee resource groups (ERGs); and (2) mentorship and sponsorship initiatives to connect high potential female employees with senior leaders.

"We're proud that we have many ERGs and internal support networks for women at Fortinet, which are named differently depending on region and country, and are allowed to grow very ad hoc. This enables women in different job functions to network, create community, and help to promote each other. We also have a strong mentoring program for women that has been very successful at introducing female employees to senior leaders and showing career advancement opportunities that are possible for them."

- Fortinet

(10) Cybercrime Magazine: Women To Hold 30 Percent of Cybersecurity Jobs Globally By 2025

“Our CEO really believes in mentorship. We’ll be relaunching our new mentorship program this year – it’s in the testing phase right now and should be ready to roll out before the end of Q1 [2024]. We also have our employee network groups (ENGs) where women can go here at Palo and men are also welcome to be an ally if they want to help. Our women’s ENG is our largest at the company, and also attends different events such as supporting the recruiting department. The combination of mentoring and networking has helped contribute to a stronger employee brand for us, which helps us to try to attract more women to Palo.”

- Palo Alto Networks

Meanwhile, Rapid7 partially credited their recognition in the Bloomberg Gender Equality Index (GEI) last year to the addition of three employee resource groups – referred to as Rapid Impact Groups – including the Rapid7 Women that support and advocate for women and all female identifying individuals.¹¹

While our roundtable discussions were primarily focused on proactive gender equity solutions, cyber leaders also acknowledged the difficult landscape for DEI-related initiatives overall. With inflation, geopolitical conflicts, and legal challenges to implementing strategies that support gender inclusion at work, our participants face an uphill battle toward closing the gender gap in the cybersecurity industry.

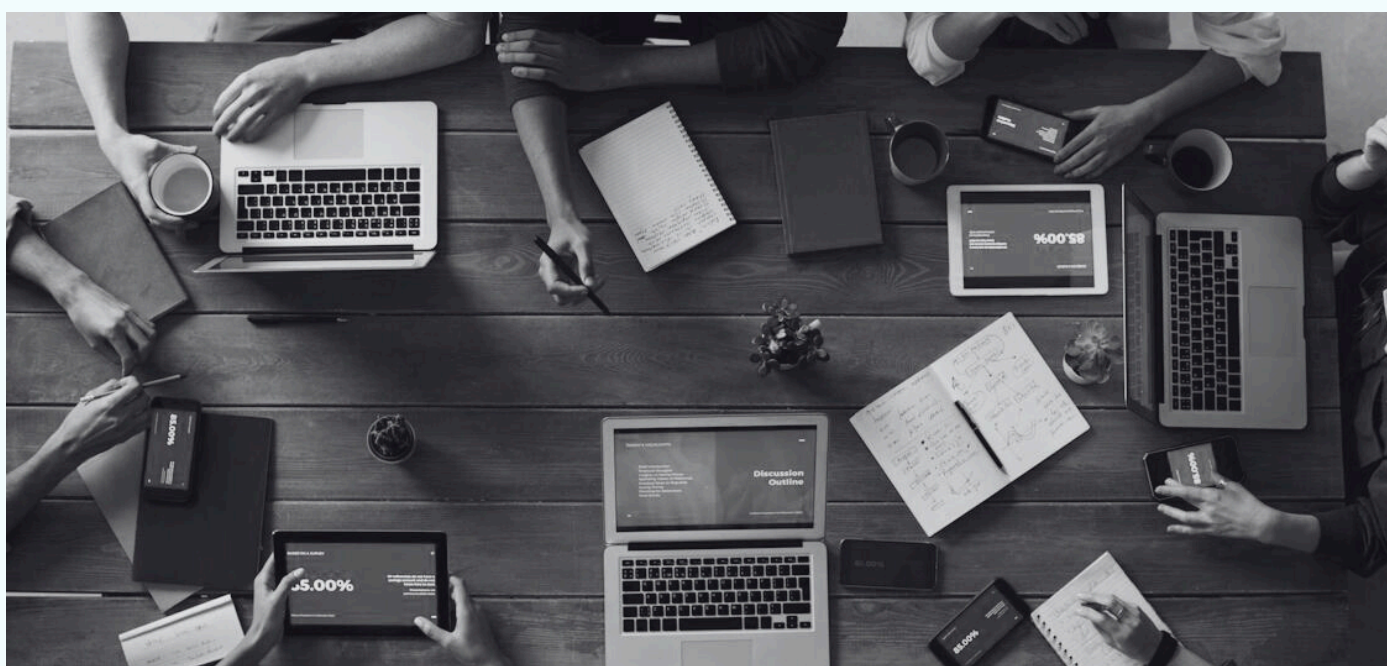
The reality is that many conversations we’ve witnessed around equity and inclusion, in cybersecurity and in the world at large, continue to revolve around shame. Shame around whose group is being left out of the conversation as majority leaders and minority groups alike from across the globe lean on what-aboutism. Shame around whether or not progress is moving as fast as we would like. Shame around whether or not tech leaders are keeping up with the pace of evolution and expectations for inclusive language – rather than incentivizing systems and enabling accountability to affect lasting workplace culture change.

The current pushback towards DEI and gender inclusion initiatives is, in part, a result of how men and those historically in positions of power were shamed into action – rather than encouraged and empowered to take part in leading change in our workplaces and industries. At this inflection point, Inclusion in Progress believes that shaming one another into action should be left behind in favor of acknowledging the shared responsibility and resulting benefit for everyone if we achieve more gender equitable workplaces.

(11) Rapid7: Rapid7 Recognized on Bloomberg Gender Equality Index, Continues Commitments to Support DEI

Encouragingly, the business case for gender inclusion remains non-negotiable for the cybersecurity firms we spoke with during our roundtable. Solving why women aren't in the room is the first step. Solving for the different layers that shape how women can access and be heard in those rooms is an ongoing yet worthy challenge. To address the global talent shortage and skyrocketing demand for their services, cyber leaders recognize the need to stack the odds in their favor to attract and retain women — whose shared identities encompass intersections across age, ability, nationality, race, ethnicity, lived experiences, locations, languages, cultures, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds.

Inclusion in Progress, LLC has learned that the most effective gender inclusion initiatives are a shared responsibility for all — regardless of role or rank. When teams are more geographically spread out than pre-pandemic, there are more potential opportunities for misunderstanding and miscommunication. Which is why leaders and individual contributors at every level of the organization have a shared responsibility to hold themselves and others accountable for an inclusive distributed workplace.





As we learned at the roundtable, working to close cybersecurity's gender gap in a post-pandemic distributed workforce requires an ongoing investment in DEI initiatives. We learned that cybersecurity firms, while better prepared than most industries for supporting distributed work, faced similar challenges across distributed teams:

- **Incentivizing gender identity, inclusion and allyship.** We learned that closing the gender gap in cybersecurity requires both systemic and behavioral change at all levels of an organization. Participants discussed the importance of incentivizing behaviors and actions that promote gender diversity and inclusivity. This includes recognizing and rewarding individuals who actively support and advocate for gender equality, as well as creating incentives for participation in diversity and inclusion initiatives. By incentivizing gender identity, inclusion, and allyship, cybersecurity firms can create a more supportive and inclusive environment where women feel valued, respected, and empowered to succeed.
- **Equipping leaders to identify and interrupt gender bias on distributed teams.** Flexible working will continue to shape cybersecurity companies post-pandemic, and senior leaders have a key role to play in fostering team connectivity and collaboration. Participants talked about the different ways they were increasing awareness among senior leaders to spot and stop gender bias on distributed teams, particularly when it comes to identifying high potential talent as future leaders of their organization.
- **Flexible working arrangements and gender inclusion go hand-in-hand.** Not only has distributed work helped exponentially expand cybersecurity companies' potential talent pool, it's a non-negotiable for women post-pandemic. Our roundtable discussion stressed the benefits of tailoring flexible working arrangements for women on distributed teams, the need to create opportunities for virtual networking and community-building through ERGs, and how flexible work would enable more women to consider themselves for positions of leadership in cybersecurity.

Giving employees more flexibility in both where and when they work improves the inclusive distributed work experience for everyone, but it makes the most significant difference for the same groups many tech companies have historically targeted in their diversity recruitment efforts. Tech firms eager to keep their competitive edge and successfully recruit top talent on the other side of this recessive period must continuously expand their strategies to retain existing talent – and ensure that current and future employees who opt to work from home still benefit from the same psychological safety and access to advancement opportunities as their co-located colleagues.

Cybersecurity firms pride themselves on innovation to meet the needs of their diverse range of customers and respond to high-level cyber threats. Our roundtable participants indicated that they were adopting the same approach to diversity, equity and inclusion – leveraging the unique circumstances of a post-pandemic distributed workplace to lead gender equity initiatives adapted to support women's desire for flexible work.

Employee expectations of flexible work, access to career advancement and leadership pathways, and an inclusive work culture show no signs of dissipating. Cybersecurity leaders will need to continue to evolve to accommodate said demands to close the talent gap, in order to match and meet the needs of their stakeholders, investors and customers.



WHAT'S NEXT?

Thank you for reading our 2024 Future of Work Culture whitepaper. If you want to explore how our Inclusive Distributed Work™ framework can support you with gender inclusion strategies for attraction and retention in a distributed workforce – please email us at info@inclusioninprogress.com.

ABOUT INCLUSION IN PROGRESS

Inclusion in Progress, LLC, is a global DEI consultancy that helps companies activate inclusive work environments for their distributed teams. Our fully remote team across the Americas, EMEA, and APAC, and brings our knowledge of the wider market to our client partners to expand DEI beyond their own borders. Through our bespoke consulting, speaking and training services, we partner with you on talent strategies tailored to keeping your distributed workforce connected and collaborating – ensuring your company's continued success.

Learn more at www.inclusioninprogress.com

CONNECT WITH OUR FOUNDER

Connect with our founder, Kay Fabella, on [LinkedIn](#).