

Walking the talk

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Attracting women to the technology sector – and retaining them – is not just the right thing to do, it's good business, says Xero CEO and Founder, Rod Drury.

"You want to reflect your customer base and have their voice at the table. Our customers are mainly SMEs, where there are more women in accounting roles, so it makes sense to seek diversity in your management teams," says Rod.

Last year's winner of the Diversity Works 'Walking the Talk Award', Xero says that it has no gender pay gap for women and men in the same roles.

Half of Xero's leadership team is female, as are 38 percent of staff. Women make up 27 percent of the company's technical staff and hold 43 percent of graduate internships. This stacks against a technology industry average of 29 percent women, with just 15 percent women in the technical side of a business.

Xero has always made a point of being innovative and inclusive. The accountancy software company launched a formal diversity and inclusion plan in 2015, but has been implementing gender initiatives since 2008.

"Right from the start, we would think about what a large corporate might do – and do the opposite," says Rod.

He believes that a better gender balance means "meetings are more respectful, staff are more engaged, and there is more empathy, which is important for design-led cultures."

"No one is twisting our arm here – it is just good business. Research shows that businesses with a diverse staff out-perform others. Why wouldn't you encourage a whole section of the community to work for you?"

But he's far from complacent about what still needs to be done to achieve gender equity.

"It could take half a generation to smash the glass ceiling but right now we can build a groundswell of women in the industry, and encourage senior females to stay in the business."

Finding that many women left on having children, Xero set out to create a more family-friendly workplace.

"We have so many good people and we want to be flexible with them. When someone asks for parental leave, we say, 'take as long as you like, you won't know how you feel until you have a child. There will always be work for you, so come back when you are ready.'"

Flexible and part-time hours are available, as is working remotely.

“We have 20 offices around the world, so we have people working from home all the time,” says Rod, who adds that he actively looks for targeted ways to benefit staff.

One of the challenges in closing the gender pay gap has been measuring and rewarding productivity.

“You have to have really good measurement systems so you can see who is delivering for you. Experience is a factor but that tends to go against females because Xero is quite new on the market, and women will often have fewer years in a role. Our answer is to put them on a career plan over two to three years aimed at closing that experience gap.

“Also, research shows that women are less likely to be confident about negotiating for pay rises and promotions – so we need to look at ways we can encourage women at Xero to do this better.”

The company actively fosters an interest in technology in young people, regularly hosting tours by girls’ and boys’ schools.

“It’s about paying it forward – we already have staff on board who first came here with their school. We are a high-profile, high-tech business – I’d be uncomfortable lecturing others if we weren’t doing these things ourselves.”

