GENDER DIVERSITY IN TECH:
THINGS CHANGE WITH TIME, BUT YOU HAVE TO CHANGE THEM YOURSELF

Despite significant effort to change attitudes, gender stereotypes persist in society, with damaging consequences. **An Exsteen** describes what effect those stereotypes have on a woman working in a male-dominated field, and how she chose to contribute to the creation of a more inclusive world.

KEY POINTS

- Stereotypes prescribe what a person should look like in a certain job and how a person should behave in that job.

- We can overcome stereotypes by creating awareness and paying it forward to support other women to reach their goals.

- Two roles are important for improving diversity and inclusion: activists and coaches. Activists accelerate systemic change. Coaches accelerate personal development.

Where it all began

When I was a little girl in the 1980s, there was a television show set in Australia called *The Flying Doctors*. A team of doctors flew to all corners of the outback to help people in need. I adored that show, not so much because of the doctors, but because of the pilot that flew the little aeroplane to take the doctors to their patients. I too wanted to become a pilot and fly an aircraft, and since then, I have always had atypical interests and passions.

When I was 11 years old, my ambition slowly started to change. This was around the time that my father bought a home computer. In 1986, those were still very rare in households, so having one was very special. From the very beginning, I was fascinated by it. I was using it all the time. My father had bought a book about programming, so I taught myself to program. As I grew up, it came as no surprise that I went

on to study computer science, and I developed my career in IT. However, the fascination for aircraft and aviation never left me.

When I joined EUROCONTROL in 2018, I got to combine both my childhood passions: aviation and IT. It is like a dream come true. But it hasn't always been easy. Being a woman in a male-dominated field involves many challenges. In this article, I outline some of these and some strategies for change.

How you look

A first challenge is the stereotypes that exist in our society about what a person in a specific role should look like. If you ask six-year-old children to draw a surgeon, a firefighter, or a pilot, they will tend to draw men. This may be partly because of their exposure to the media, such as films, cartoons, and books. A woman does not fit the stereotypical image of such roles. Then there is language (like 'fireman'), education (comments of teachers and other children), comments by family members, observation, etc.

I experienced on many occasions during my career that I do not fit the stereotype image of an IT professional. At one point, I was promoted to project leader while I was working in a big bank. I started leading smaller internal projects with small project teams of only a handful people. These were quite successful. Then I got two big projects at the same time, one in the Netherlands and one in Ireland. In Ireland everything went well, the collaboration was easy and the results manifested early on. In the Netherlands, however, it was more complicated.

I remember having to go for a first meeting in the Netherlands. My boss also had business there in the afternoon, so he decided to join me. When we entered the meeting room, the participants immediately assumed that he was the project leader. He looked older, with greying hair and a nice suit. I was a woman, looked very young and was wearing a pink fluffy sweater. The people in Rotterdam had difficulties accepting that I, as a young woman, was the project leader. At first, they only talked to my boss. They sent the required information only to him, and didn't show up in meetings that I organised.

I worked very hard, and very late, to prove my competence, and I had to remain persistent to get there. Gradually they came around and the situation improved. But I can imagine that some other people would have given up by then, given the same situation.

The key point is that because I didn't fit the stereotype image of a project leader, I had to prove my competence. My boss, who did fit the stereotype, was accepted, and was assumed to be competent from day one.

I stopped wearing pink after that, and now I only wear dark colours, like black and blue. I change what I look like to fit in better.

How you behave

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Throughout my career I found out that I don't only have to be careful about what I look like, but also how I behave. This also seems to be associated with stereotypes. Here are some examples from my experience:

- A woman who is being assertive is often perceived as "aggressive".
- A woman who is leading is often perceived as "bossy".
- A woman who tells the truth is often seen as "difficult".
- A woman who asks hard questions is often seen as "complicated".
- A woman who takes up space is often described as "too much".

I found that I have to be careful with emotions, especially strong emotions like anger. In the beginning of my career, I sometimes got angry when I saw there was a delay in delivery, or when there was a lack of commitment from other teams. Very soon I learned that this had a very negative effect on the way people perceived me.

There is much research to show that the same behaviours by men and women are interpreted and treated – even rewarded or punished – differently. For instance, in one study (Brescoll and Uhlmann, 2008), both males and females evaluated angry female professionals and angry male professionals differently, assuming lower status for angry female professionals. The same study found that while women's emotional reactions were attributed to internal characteristics (e.g., "she is an angry person"), men's emotional reactions were attributed to external circumstances.

In short, when a man gets angry, it is more likely that he is perceived to be firm and a strong leader (and so more respected), or that external circumstances were responsible. But when a woman gets angry, she is perceived as emotional and unstable and she is less respected. As noted above, a stereotype is at work: strong emotions, like anger, do not fit the picture-perfect image of a woman.

I learned over the years that if I wanted to survive in this male-dominated world, I had to adapt my behaviour. I had to comply more to the ideal image of a woman, and at the same time not sit in a corner and shut up, but actively participate in the discussions. That is not easy, because it involves suppressing one's real self. It is also not fair.

Getting support

Thankfully, I met great people who helped me in my career. These people supported, encouraged and championed me. One example is the support of a female colleague I once had. She taught me about the importance of getting the 'glamour jobs'.

It seems to come naturally to many men to work themselves in the spotlight and get high-visibility jobs. According to EU data (European Commission, 2021), women are still heavily outnumbered by men in leadership positions in the corporate sector in the EU. On average, the European Commission reported that 29.5% of board members of the largest

publicly listed companies in the EU were women, as of October 2020, with a range between Member States of 8.8% to 45.1%.

Getting in the spotlight is something that does not come naturally to me, and perhaps to many other women. I just did what was needed to get the job done as part of a team, even if it was doing a menial job in the dark corner of the room. But I learned that if I wanted a high-visibility job, I had to get myself noticed.

Paying it forward to create a more inclusive world

Looking back, I often made big steps in my career thanks to the help and support of another person. Once I realised how much of an impact such people made on my career, I decided that I wanted to do this too. I made it my personal goal to continue to 'pay it forward', by supporting other women to reach their goals. And I am convinced that I can use my own experiences, in my 'atypical' career, to support, coach and help other people reaching their career goals.

I also wondered how I could reach a broader group of people besides the ones I know personally and meet at work every day. I found the answer in a diversity and inclusion professional Michelle Mees. She says that in order to create a more inclusive world, we need both systemic change and personal development. We need to change the system, but also the people and the way we think.

Mees identifies two types of diversity and inclusion professionals that make that happen: activists and coaches. Activists accelerate systemic change. Coaches accelerate personal development. Activists are the ones who stand on the barricades and call out for change.

Personally, I have never been much of an activist. I don't feel comfortable standing on the barricades. I am much more comfortable with a non-judging approach where I share insights and make people think about themselves and the bigger picture. After all, that is what has best worked for me too. It was a key insight to learn that you can have as much impact as a coach as you have as an activist, but the roles work in different ways, and both are needed to create change.

I now do presentations on my experiences as a woman in tech. In these talks, I share my insights on what I have learned about causes and possible solutions of diversity and inclusion issues. I help people reflect on stereotypes and bias and how to consciously overcome unconscious bias. I also act as a diversity and inclusion focal point where I help individual people. We can all help by trying to be a better ally (see Melaku et al., 2020).

I believe that everybody deserves to live up to their potential, regardless of what they look like or where they come from. ⤵

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References

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