# So, about this Googler's manifesto

August 11, 2017



*On August 5 a Google employee named James Damore published a 3,500 word manifesto entitled "Google's Ideological Echo Chamber," in which he agued the biological inferiority of women, making them incapable of being equally talented computer engineers. First circulated internally among Google's thousands of employees, the manifesto was posted in its entirety on the web by Gizmodo on August 5. Google fired Damore, the manifesto's author, on August 7.*

*On August 5, Yonatan Zunger, a former Google employee who had only recently left the company, wrote a response to Damore, published by Medium, which we republish here. – DL*

You have probably heard about the manifesto a Googler (not someone senior) published internally about, essentially, how women and men are intrinsically different and we should stop trying to make it possible for women to be engineers, it's just not worth it.

Until about a week ago, you would have heard very little from me publicly about this, because (as a fairly senior Googler) my job would have been to deal with it internally, and confidentiality rules would have prevented me from saying much in public.

But as it happens, (although this wasn't the way I was planning on announcing it) I actually recently left Google—for entirely unrelated and actually really-good-news reasons which you can read about here. So when all of this broke, I was just as much on the outside as everyone else, and I know what was written in this only because it leaked and was published by Gizmodo.

And since I'm no longer on the inside, and have no confidential information about any of this, the thing which I would have posted internally I'll instead say right here, because it's relevant not just to Google, but to everyone else in tech.

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So it seems that someone has seen fit to publish an internal manifesto about gender and our "ideological echo chamber." I think it's important that we make a couple of points clear.

(1) Despite speaking very authoritatively, the author does not appear to understand gender.

(2) Perhaps more interestingly, the author does not appear to understand engineering.

(3) And most seriously, the author does not appear to understand the consequences of what he wrote, either for others or himself.

1. I'm not going to spend any length of time on (1); if anyone wishes to provide details as to how nearly every statement about gender in that entire document is actively incorrect,[1] and flies directly in the face of all research done in the field for decades, they should go for it. But I am neither a biologist, a psychologist, nor a sociologist, so I'll leave that to someone else.

2.What I am is an engineer, and I was rather surprised that anyone has managed to make it this far without understanding some very basic points about what the job is. The manifesto talks about making "software engineering more people-oriented with pair programming and more collaboration" but that this is fundamentally limited by "how people-oriented certain roles and Google can be;" and even more surprisingly, it has an entire section titled "de-emphasize empathy," as one of the proposed solutions.

People who haven't done engineering, or people who have done just the basics, sometimes think that what engineering looks like is sitting at your computer and hyper-optimizing an inner loop, or cleaning up a class API. We've all done this kind of thing, and for many of us (including me) it's tremendous fun. And when you're at the novice stages of engineering, this is the large bulk of your work: something straightforward and bounded which can be done right or wrong, and where you can hone your basic skills.

But it's not a coincidence that job titles at Google switch from numbers to words at a certain point. That's precisely the point at which you have, in a way, completed your first apprenticeship: you can operate independently without close supervision. And this is the point where you start doing real engineering.

Engineering is not the art of building devices; it's the art of fixing problems. Devices are a means, not an end. Fixing problems means first of all understanding them—and since the whole purpose of the things we do is to fix problems in the outside world, problems involving people, that means that understanding people, and the ways in which they will interact with your system, is fundamental to every step of building a system. (This is so key that we have a bunch of entire job ladders—PM's and UX'ers and so on—who have done nothing but specialize in those problems. But the presence of specialists doesn't mean engineers are off the hook; far from it. Engineering leaders absolutely need to understand product deeply; it's a core job requirement.)

And once you've understood the system, and worked out what has to be built, do you retreat to a cave and start writing code? If you're a hobbyist, yes. If you're a professional, especially one working on systems that can use terms like "planet-scale" and "carrier-class" without the slightest exaggeration, then you'll quickly find that the large bulk of your job is about coordinating and cooperating with other groups. It's about making sure you're all building one system, instead of twenty different ones; about making sure that dependencies and risks are managed, about designing the right modularity boundaries that make it easy to continue to innovate in the future, about preemptively managing the sorts of dangers that teams like SRE, Security, Privacy, and Abuse are the experts in catching before they turn your project into rubble.

Essentially, engineering is all about cooperation, collaboration, and empathy for both your colleagues and your customers. If someone told you that engineering was a field where you could get away with not dealing with people or feelings, then I'm very sorry to tell you that you have been lied to. Solitary work is something that only happens at the most junior levels, and even then it's only possible because someone senior to you—most likely your manager—has been putting in long hours to build up the social structures in your group that let you focus on code.

All of these traits which the manifesto described as "female" are the core traits which make someone successful at engineering. Anyone can learn how to write code; hell, by the time someone reaches L7

or so, it's expected that they have an essentially complete mastery of technique. The truly hard parts about this job are knowing which code to write, building the clear plan of what has to be done in order to achieve which goal, and building the consensus required to make that happen.

All of which is why the conclusions of this manifesto are precisely backwards. It's true that women are socialized to be better at paying attention to people's emotional needs and so on—this is something that makes them better engineers, not worse ones. It's a skillset that I did not start out with, and have had to learn through years upon years of grueling work. (And I should add that I'm very much an introvert; if you had asked me twenty years ago if I were suited to dealing with complex interpersonal issues day-to-day, I would have looked at you like you were mad.) But I learned it because it's the heart of the job, and because it turns out that this is where the most extraordinary challenges and worthwhile results happen.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

3.That brings us, however, to point (3), the most serious point of all. I'm going to be even blunter than usual here, because I'm not subject to the usual maze of HR laws right now, and so I can say openly what I would normally only be allowed to say in very restricted fora. And this is addressed specifically to the author of this manifesto.

What you just did was *incredibly stupid and harmful*. You just put out a manifesto inside the company arguing that some large fraction of your colleagues are at root not good enough to do their jobs, and that they're only being kept in their jobs because of some political ideas. And worse than simply thinking these things or saying them in private, you've said them in a way that's tried to legitimize this kind of thing across the company, causing other people to get up and say "wait, is that right?"

I need to be very clear here: not only was nearly everything you said in that document wrong, the fact that you did that has caused significant harm to people across this company, and to the company's entire ability to function. And being aware of that kind of consequence is also part of your job, as in fact it would be at pretty much any other job. I am no longer even at the company and I've had to spend half of the past day talking to people and cleaning up the mess you've made. I can't even imagine how much time and emotional energy has been sunk into this, not to mention reputational harm more broadly.

And as for its impact on you: Do you understand that at this point, I could not in good conscience assign anyone to work with you? I certainly couldn't assign any women to deal with this, a good number of the people you might have to work with may simply punch you in the face, and even if there were a group of like-minded individuals I could put you with, nobody would be able to collaborate with them. You have just created a textbook hostile workplace environment.

If you hadn't written this manifesto, then maybe we'd be having a conversation about the skills you need to learn to not be blocked in your career—which are precisely the ones you described as "female skills." But we are having a totally different conversation now. It doesn't matter how good you are at writing code; there are plenty of other people who can do that. The negative impact on your colleagues you have created by your actions outweighs that tremendously.

You talked about a need for discussion about ideas; you need to learn the difference between "I think we should adopt Go as our primary language" and "I think one-third of my colleagues are either biologically unsuited to do their jobs, or if not are exceptions and should be suspected of such until they can prove otherwise to each and every person's satisfaction." Not all ideas are the same, and not all conversations about ideas even have basic legitimacy.

If you feel isolated by this, that your views are basically unwelcome in tech and can't be spoken about... well, that's a fair point. These views are fundamentally corrosive to any organization they show up in, drive people out, and I can't think of any organization not specifically dedicated to those views that they would be welcome in. I'm afraid that's likely to remain a serious problem for you for a long time to come. But our company is committed to maintaining a good environment for all of its people, and if one person is determined to thwart that, the solution is pretty clear.[2]

I'm writing this here, in this message, because I'm no longer at the company and can say this sort of thing openly. But I want to make it very clear: if you were in my reporting chain, all of part (3) would have been replaced with a short "this is not acceptable" and maybe that last paragraph above. You would have heard part (3) in a much smaller meeting, including you, me, your manager, your HRBP, and someone from legal. And it would have ended with you being escorted from the building by security and told that your personal items will be mailed to you. And the fact that you think this was "all in the name of open discussion," and don't realize any of these deeper consequences, makes this worse, not better.

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[1] Nearly, but not every. One very important true statement which this manifesto makes is that male gender roles remain highly inflexible, and that this is a bug, not a feature. In fact, I suspect that this is the core bug which prompted everything else within this manifesto to be written. But the rest of the manifesto is basically about optimizing around the existence of this bug! Don't optimize your bugs; fix them.

[2] Those of you wondering about the "paradox of tolerance" can check out this essay for more.

***Yonatan Zunger is a former Google employee and writer.