



The Innovation Gender Gap

By Paul Sloane

A report by the Kaufmann Foundation found that only 3% of technology start-ups are led by women. There are many theories for this remarkable gender discrepancy. Girls are less likely than boys to study science, technology and computing. Only about 18% of patents are filed in women's names. It is more difficult for women to get start-up funding.

But a bigger factor seems to be that men are more likely to be risk takers and women to be risk averse. Whether this difference is due to nature or nurture is open to debate. According to a study by Alison Booth of the Australian national University and Patrick Nolen of the University of Essex, teenage girls at girls-only schools were less risk averse than girls at mixed schools. They ascribed this difference to the absence of 'culturally driven norms and beliefs about modes of female behaviour.' Upbringing and experience seem to encourage girls to play it safe and boys to take risks.



A controversial new book, **The Confidence Code**, by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman argues that men are naturally more self-confident than women. Women outnumber men in higher education and are well represented at middle management ranks but men are promoted faster and earn more. Kay and Shipman say that the main reason for this is women's lack of self-confidence. They claim that women are more likely to:

- Carry criticism around for too long
- Stay inside their comfort zones
- Fail to voice their opinions
- Fail to take risks because of fear of failure

Furthermore Shipman says, *'Testosterone probably gives men more of a natural confidence boost because it increases risk-taking.'* The authors cite various supporting evidence but their views are disputed by those who argue that discrimination is the main culprit.

The four traits listed above all militate against innovation in a corporate or a start-up environment. Innovators are risk-takers who move out of their comfort zones, strongly argue their case and shrug off criticism. So if Kay and Shipman are correct then it looks as if innovation as it is currently set up is a sport designed for men and not women. This might mean that we are excluding a large proportion of the best ideas and best talent from our innovation processes.

What can be done about this? At a national level there are steps in

place to encourage more girls to study STEM subjects (Science, Technology and Mathematics). Also we need more women's business networks and funding sources for women entrepreneurs. At a corporate level maybe we need to change the rules of the game in order to persuade more women to play. Can we make our new product and innovation processes less competitive and more collaborative? Many brainstorm meetings are poorly facilitated and dominated by the biggest egos (usually the alpha males). Radical ideas are subjected to fierce initial criticism so that only the thick-skinned or powerful continue to pursue them. Innovation projects are given to aggressive young cadets who are expected to fight their way through the corporate defences.

We could make our innovation efforts additive rather than competitive. We can use advanced brainstorming techniques that encourage everyone to participate rather than taken over by the noisiest. One such is the Nominal Method. Above all we need more female role models who can talk about the risks they have taken.

Although there are far fewer women-led private technology companies there is some evidence that the ones that exist are more successful. They are more capital-efficient, achieve 35 percent higher return on investment, and, when venture-backed, bring in 12 percent higher revenue than male-owned tech companies. That's according to new research presented at a recent conference in San Francisco organized by

Women 2.0, a media company devoted to women founders in the tech industry.

If we want more and better innovation in our firms and across our economy then we have to face up to the innovation gender gap and find innovative ways to remove it.

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Paul was part of the team which launched the IBM PC in the UK in 1981. He became MD of database company Ashton-Tate. In 1993 Paul joined MathSoft, publishers of mathematical software as VP International. He became CEO of Monactive, a British software company which publishes software asset management tools. In 2002 he founded his own company, Destination Innovation, which helps organisations improve innovation. He writes and speaks on lateral thinking and innovation. His latest book is The Leader's Guide to Lateral Thinking Skills published by Kogan-Page.

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