

Making Remote Work for Women in Tech

Nicola Marsden,¹ Karen Holtzblatt²

Abstract: Remote working during the pandemic goes far beyond the global remote work that occurred in prior years. In this paper, we look at remote working from the point of view of creating the experiences women need to thrive. Within the context of our research on retaining women in tech, we have studied the impact of remote work on women. We reveal our findings and indicate how to improve the experience of tech women in remote work.

Keywords: gender; remote work; retention

1 The @Work Experience Framework

Increasing the number of women in the tech industry is a high priority. Yet there is another issue: Once hired, women are less likely to stay in the tech industry than men [14a; 16; 20; AME16]. The first 12 years in technology seem to be the most vulnerable: 50% of women leave the field for other occupations, compared to 20% of professional women leaving non-STEM fields [G113]. For the European Union, it has been shown that by age 45, more than 90% of the women who graduated with a degree in information and communication technology have left the field [13].

Our research indicates that 45% of women in tech are thinking of leaving their job [HM22]. We have identified what women need to thrive and key intervention techniques to help improve the daily work practices of diverse teams. We developed the @Work Experience Framework to outline the experiences that matter to retain women in tech. The factors of the framework are: A Dynamic, Valuing Team That's Up to Something Big; Stimulating Work; The Push and Support; Local Role Models; Nonjudgmental Flexibility for Family Commitments, and Personal Power.

2 Remote Working and Retention of Women in Tech

During the pandemic, the whole tech world became a living lab with people working remotely. To understand if working remotely is good for women and if our recommendations

¹ Heilbronn University, Social Informatics, Max-Planck-Str. 39, 74081 Heilbronn, Germany <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1316-8147> nicola.marsden@hs-heilbronn.de

² InContext Design, Silver Springs, Maryland, USA, karen@incontextdesign.com karen@incontextdesign.com

and perspectives still hold in a remote work context, we launched The Remote Work Project, doing in-depth interviews with women in tech in a variety of job roles [HM22]. The “glasses” of the @Work Experience Framework help us anticipate and be on the watch for issues. Our current findings from The Remote Work Project and other research [14b; Bi21; KPA21] revealed issues that will impact women. Here are the points—as presented in our book—that we identified as being impacted by remote work.

Creating connections. People have an increased difficulty getting to know each other both socially and as work partners. The lack of easy connection impacts team cohesion, building new relationships with work partners and managers, and enjoying the natural chitchat that allows for breaks in a co-located workplace. Remote working makes it hard for new hires to make relationships and develop a sense of belonging. The difficulty of creating and maintaining connections for all workers has a direct impact on forming Dynamic Valuing Teams.

Getting help and coaching. People, and especially new hires, feel that it is more difficult to get one-on-one help from managers and co-workers. Scheduling one-on-one meetings feels more like an intrusion when remote. New hires don’t want to impose given how busy everyone is. Asking for time when it involves setting up a meeting is harder. In general, drop-in questions and help are not easy when remote. This finding tells us that working with Local Role Models and getting a Push and Support may be harder when remote.

Stimulating work. The above two findings raise the worry of whether women working remotely will get the stimulating work they want. If women receive less coaching, will they advance their skills? If they do not feel supported because it is harder to make relationships all around, will they be less likely to put themselves forward for challenging work? In a remote context, will women’s contributions be less apparent to managers and co-workers? With less daily interaction will our bias against women’s skills in tech disadvantage women even more?

Communicating informally. Informal communication outside of meetings suffers when everyone is remote. Side conversations, which used to happen before and after meetings and in the hallway, have nearly evaporated. Also gone are the informal sharing of work and helping each other when stuck that were common practices when co-located. Our interviewees were surprised by how much collaboration depended on dropping in. They did not realize that informal interactions drove forming shared understandings of what to do or decide and reported both errors and time wasted by formal requests through systems. Setting up meetings to chat does not substitute for dropping in and seems like an imposition. More importantly, this informal collaboration is invisible; people don’t think about how to replace something when they don’t know it is happening. The work, the relationships, and the sense of collaborating on something that really matters all suffer. Remote working makes it is harder for teams to collaborate dynamically, which impacts being a Dynamic, Valuing Team.

Structuring practices. We find that managers and teams have introduced more structure to their remote group working meetings. When remote, less structure and more freeform interactions in group working meetings have led to the experience of time being wasted, confusion in managing participation, and the work not getting done. Senior people have naturally gravitated to increasingly explicit practices and using remote collaborative tools to make the purpose and interactions in the meetings clear. Indeed, research finds that more structure in remote collaboration heightens the collective intelligence of the team [To21]. And more structure is good for women because the implicit becomes explicit, interactions are potentially better managed, and practices are clear. As we return to more face-to-face interactions, we hope that managers and teams will bring this increased structure with them.

Supporting life flexibility. People have emphasized that during the pandemic their manager and teams have been more willing to flex when home needs appear. Teams seem to be more understanding of home/work commitments when remote. The pandemic highlighted how the crush of home and family demands can overwhelm—and that working at home can reduce the burden because home chores and childcare can be interleaved with working. But as numerous others have pointed out, during the pandemic the burden of children and the home has fallen within gender norms; too many women are struggling to do the work and deal with home life [21a; GWY21]. Until all schools, daycare, and elder care are safe and back in place, we will not know if Nonjudgmental Flexibility will continue and how the balance of responsibility will shift as we move to more in-person work. This will have to be watched.

Increasing self-confidence. Given our overall findings about remote work, Personal Power and self-confidence will be affected. Without connection, coaching, help, and informal information, the opportunity for misunderstanding and accomplishments being overlooked is great. But we found that some managers, teams, and companies are deliberately trying to be more valuing. Self-confidence is also related to feeling psychologically safe. Interestingly, some women report feeling safer to express themselves behind the screen, more willing to participate or take a risk. And they report using side chats in a meeting to check in with each other and send notes of support if interpersonal issues get out of control [Sa21]. Of course, this works better when the camera is on, and everyone can see each other's nonverbal responses. Overall, self-confidence is clearly impacted in remote settings.

Keeping cameras on. We know from years of research on remote meetings that video on sends more cues to guide interactions than video off. But it's complicated. Most people are more comfortable with their own camera off. At the same time, people often would like to see the others in their meetings. Negotiating this contradiction is one of the challenges of remote meetings. And there is no right or wrong. There are, however, considerations regarding women that play a role here [Dh21]. We have some indication that keeping the video on in a remote setting may help women feel more able to speak up. At the same time, being on camera puts pressure on women to look good that men do not have in the same way [21b] and having video on is more fatiguing to women than to men [Sh21]. But more of our findings surround what happens with cameras off. Camera off choices can

be policies designed to respect individual choices. In meetings, some people are on video while others are not, a personal choice. But we also see people following the lead of their managers. We find that if people are new and don't know co-workers it is much harder to get to know them with the camera off [Ro20]. And some of the women we talked to report that getting negative feedback remotely with the camera off can come across harsher. From an interpersonal dynamics perspective, the camera on vs. off clearly changes the experience of working meetings. As we become more permanently remote, we will have to examine if there is a gender effect and the real impact on team cohesion and connection.

3 Conclusion

Stepping back, our research on remote experiences only makes attention to the issues raised in The @Work Experience Framework more important. A good team onboarding process is even more important when new hires and teams are remote. If all new hires, including women, do not get a good start, ensuring their success when remote will be even harder. Since more can be misperceived when remote, increasing structure when giving feedback in the processes used in working meetings is essential. Remote work needs even more explicit practices, rules of engagement, procedures to manage participation, and good facilitation. Maybe then remote work could become what one might call a leveler between men and women that some people are hoping it could be [Jo22]. Because interpersonal connection is more difficult, remote work requires even more attention to interpersonal dynamics. Increasing valuing behaviors and managing devaluing behaviors is a must in remote interactions. As for jerk behavior, we do not find more or less of it when remote. It seems that people who behave non-professionally when face-to-face also engage in these behaviors when remote, but it is more apparent to others, who may intervene. In other words, with remote work the daily work life changes, but the challenges for retaining women do not. Whether we are working face-to-face or remotely women need the same things to thrive. To make that happen, we need to deliberately design interventions ensure that remote works for women.

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