Level Playing Field Institute
The Tilted Playing Field:
Hidden Bias in Information Technology Workplaces
September 2011

Executive Summary

The vast underrepresentation of women and people of color in IT is most often attributed to racial and gender disparities within the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) educational pipeline, despite research documenting hidden biases within workplaces that produce unequal outcomes by race and gender. While disparities in the STEM pipeline must be addressed, the multifaceted problem of underrepresentation within the IT sector will not be solved without also examining how company practices and culture impact the recruitment, hiring, workplace experiences, and retention of women and people of color.

To examine the underrepresentation of women and people of color in IT through a hidden bias framework, the Level Playing Field Institute (LPFI) conducted *The Tilted Playing Field: An Examination of Hidden Bias in Information Technology Workplaces* study. LPFI collected anonymous survey data from 645 engineers and managers at both large IT companies and small startups across the country.

Several important findings emerged from this study:

IT workplace experiences vary significantly by race, gender, and company size.
- Women and underrepresented people of color encounter negative workplace experiences (e.g., difficulty balancing work/family, exclusionary cliques) at rates significantly higher than their male and white counterparts.
- Women in large companies reported the highest rates of negative experiences of any group, even compared to women at startups. For example, 65% of women in large companies encountered exclusionary cliques, versus 26% of women in startups.
- Differences in workplace experiences between men and women were also present within startups with women encountering higher rates of bullying, difficulty balancing work and family, and homophobic jokes.

Negative workplace experiences lead to increased turnover in IT roles – a major cost to companies.
- Men in startups had the highest rates of job satisfaction of all groups (78%).
- Underrepresented people of color were least satisfied with their job, least satisfied with skill development opportunities, and most likely to leave the company in the upcoming year.
- Respondents who reported a higher number of negative workplace experiences were more likely to report wanting to leave their company within the next year, a significant cost to employers and a significant loss of talent for the sector.

Diversity is not a priority for gatekeepers.
- Women and underrepresented people of color were far more likely to believe in the importance of diverse representation on teams and to support company hiring practices to achieve diversity, than their white and male counterparts.
- Underrepresented people of color were nearly twice as likely as whites to be in favor of a company-wide practice to increase diversity (80% compared to 46%).
- 82% of men in startups believed their companies spent the "right amount of time" addressing diversity, while almost 40% of women believed not enough time was devoted.

The findings bring to light the substantial differences in workplace experiences based on race and gender that occur across large company and startup work environments and document the significant impact that negative workplace experiences have on job satisfaction and turnover. In order to effectively address the underrepresentation of women and people of color, there must be a deliberate effort to simultaneously address the STEM education pipeline in K-16 and to address the dynamics of IT workplaces that well-prepared candidates from diverse backgrounds will one day enter. Based on our findings, several recommendations to further address issues of underrepresentation and hidden bias include:

1 **Collaborate in meaningful ways with nonprofits, educational organizations, and corporations to develop a homegrown pool of diverse talent.**
2 **Address hidden biases and barriers within workplaces that disadvantage underrepresented groups.**
3 **Conduct research to both uncover hidden biases within the sector and examine efforts taken by companies to increase diversity.**
4 **Get the word out within your company, networks, and communities.**

To receive more information about *The Tilted Playing Field: An Examination of Hidden Bias in Information Technology Workplaces* study, the Level Playing Field Institute, or to receive a copy of the report, please call (415) 946-3030 or email *info@lpfi.org*.