

# ALLYSHIP – SUPPORTING A MORE INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE

Allyship in the workplace means using your personal privilege to support colleagues from marginalized communities. Allies use their influence to amplify the voices of underrepresented co-workers, which helps promote greater diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging throughout the company. Allyship requires ongoing education, self-reflection, and action to challenge discrimination, prejudice, and inequality.

Forbes also describes allyship as a continual investment of time in supporting others, holding ourselves accountable when mistakes are made, apologising and being prepared to rework the approach towards allyship as needs change. Not promoting underrepresented groups will lead to a lack of diversity in companies. And without diversity and inclusion, we cannot expect to produce truly innovative and market-leading technology reflective of the society we are serving.

**Women in Tech spoke to Capco and four of their senior allies (Steve Watts, Partner, Steve Harrison, Managing Principal, Kaveh Rahnejat, Executive Director, and David Cecil, Managing Principal) about what allyship means to them.**

Capco actively encourages allyship. Steve Harrison describes the concept as being “both internal and external, and the two must work in harmony in order to effectively be an ally. The commitment to doing so must be there, and thus you need to ask yourself ‘do I want to be called an ally or do I really want to BE an ally?’. The internal, human-centric parts (like supporting, mentoring and empowering women) must work hand-in-hand with the external, organisational-level parts (like giving women a platform to be seen and ensuring equal opportunities, etc.). Only doing both holistically will enable allyship to work.”

“*Making sure that your behaviours, actions and words actively demonstrate your belief that there should be equity in the workplace*”

It is all well and good saying that you want to be a supportive ally in the workplace, but it is a different thing to make the effort to become one. This starts with truly understanding what being

an ally means. For Steve Watts it means “far more than just expressing support – it is making sure that your behaviours, actions and words actively demonstrate your belief that there should be equity in the workplace, and that nothing else is acceptable. As the exec sponsor of Women in Technology at Capco, I have both power and privilege, and I strive to use this to effect positive change, whilst recognising that there is always room to take feedback and improve. Why is it so important? For the simple reason that in 2023 we have yet to achieve a fully inclusive working environment for all, and that must change.”

You might wonder why it is so important that we achieve a diverse and inclusive environment. Research has shown that organisations that have above-average levels of diversity outperform those with lower levels by 46-58 percent. Another key benefit is that unless you have a diverse team from different backgrounds, genders, races and cultures, you won't be producing a truly diverse product offering. This demonstrates that not only is it beneficial for individual employees, but also for the company itself. It also achieves higher levels of loyalty and motivation for employees, making them less likely to leave the company. In addition, if companies don't have a varied group of people, it is more likely to lead to a toxic working environment, where coming to work will not feel comfortable for everyone. Therefore, it is important that companies have allies who can support these minority groups in the workplace, so everyone feels appreciated.

Steve Harrison describes how he is “extremely proud of our work in Capco Technology, and more specifically, our Architecture & PhD group, for the balance and diversity they have. This has been by design from day zero. I think part of this has been that as an ex-academic, I've simply been brought up in an environment which places knowledge above all else, regardless of background or demographic. While this model has failings of its own, I do think it helped shaped the early days of growing out the team - we simply looked for good people, and we continue to do so.” This demonstrates first-hand how companies can achieve an environment where people enjoy coming to work because they are made to feel equal.

“*Women working in technology do not want special treatment or unfair advantage*”

With a staggering 56 percent of women leaving the tech industry 10-20 years into their careers (double the rate of men), it is important that we recognise ways we can help reduce this number. With only 26 percent of the tech force being women in 2022, it is not surprising that a lot of companies are male-dominated, which can put women off and make them feel unheard. In a recent survey by Women in Tech, 76 percent of the respondents said that they have experienced gender bias or discrimination whilst at work. This is why male allies in the workplace can bring so much value to a company as they can speak up on behalf of their female colleagues and help them to be recognised.

As Steve Harrison pointed out, “women working in technology do not want special treatment or unfair advantage. What they’re asking for is the confidence and platform for them to be seen as technology SMEs, and to show their skills to be the specialist they are in their field.”

Another common reason why women are leaving the tech industry is a lack of opportunities for career progression. This is largely due to the fact that as many as 68 percent of men believe women have equal opportunities in the industry. This is where male allies can help bring awareness to the issue and support the growth of women’s careers.

There are many ways in which men can be proactive in helping with the issue, such as ensuring that any good work is not only acknowledged but celebrated. This will help establish an inclusive culture, where women feel recognised and valued. Another way is by being aware of unconscious bias, both as an individual and as society, and ensuring everyone is offered equal and fair opportunities. Whilst these may seem like small changes, they will have a large impact on encouraging and maintaining a diverse and inclusive culture, where everyone feels supported and appreciated at work.

“*Because it is the right thing to do*”

Allyship is the right thing to do not only to help improve diversity and inclusivity for our current workforce, but also for future generations, so it is crucial we get this right! Dave Cecil demonstrates the significance of this. “I have a son and a daughter. When they enter working life, I’d really like them to join a society where they both have an equal opportunity and an equal choice for the career they want to have, and for that

simply to be the norm. Doesn’t sound much when you put it like that, but we have a long way to go. Even at this young age they’re faced with a society of stereotypes and preconceptions that can shape their view of the world. I have often observed this imbalance as I progressed through my early career. I wanted to help but initially found that either I did not have the confidence, or there were few role models who encouraged change and making people feel supported whilst doing so themselves. Or maybe it was because it was easier to go with the flow, avoid being controversial – after all, change is difficult, isn’t it?”

He goes on to say, “Except that it isn’t. Not one bit. Making changes or being an ally can take many forms. There are big steps that take time, planning, thought and a little patience, but it isn’t all about the big steps, small steps are important too – and there are loads of them to pick from.”

“*Showing care and consideration for the experience of others*”

Whilst we can make big steps in allyship, such as putting people from minority groups up for big projects, even just showing care and consideration for others is a good place to start. This will help everyone feel supported and build their confidence. This might be simply asking for their opinion on a task or including them in social activities.

Kaveh Rahnejat adds that it is about “being aware that without a special effort, some people will have a worse experience in the working environment than others. The obvious common examples are things like women being treated as if they are more junior than they really are, or non-native speakers being treated as if they are less intelligent than they are. However, I think the effort can be extended to include showing consideration for anyone who finds themselves at a disadvantage through no fault of their own.”

Kaveh also gives an example of a time when he realised how he could have been a more effective ally. “To give a tangible example, I recently presented a complex set of outcomes to a senior group of clients. I was in a rush and didn’t have much time to prepare, so I presented the whole thing myself as it seemed the most expedient thing to do. Afterwards, a colleague pointed out that I missed the opportunity for a more junior person in the team (who happened to be female) to prepare and present the same work. Had I spent more time thinking about that, I could have saved myself the stress, whilst also

giving that person a great learning experience and promoting what they do.” This shows how self-reflection and learning from experience are also key factors in being a successful ally.

Other simple ways in which David Cecil suggests we can help include “listening to or seeing another’s viewpoint, checking the language you use, write, or subconsciously promote as well as giving people the opportunity to be heard in meetings and speaking up when something isn’t right. Making small changes that don’t feel drastic on their own but add up to something bigger when most of us do them as often as we can, is what will make a difference.”

*“Part of being an effective ally is to know you are still learning and growing”*

Part of being an effective ally is understanding that you might not get everything perfect when trying to become an effective ally. Steve Harrison describes some experiences he has faced and what he learnt from them. “I’ve had more than one difficult conversation this year where someone has confronted me (rightly) about my use of throwaway language or engrained behaviour. And that’s good, although it was highly uncomfortable for me. Part of being an effective ally is to know you are still learning and growing. It must be taken seriously.”

## How do you know if you are any good at being an ally?

If you are still unsure if you are good at being an effective ally, you can seek feedback from friends, family and colleagues, as one of Capco’s allies has done. Kaveh Rahnejat shared that he was surprised to be asked to write about allyship. “My first thoughts were ‘what is allyship?’ and ‘am I actually any good at it?’” However, after taking the time to talk to friends, colleagues and his wife, he realised that, whilst he might not have known the term ‘allyship’, he demonstrates many characteristics that make a good ally. For example, he often asks himself whether he is treating people right and helping to create an environment where others do the same. Taking time to reflect on past behaviours and look for potential improvement, is how we learn and grow and get better at helping others.

The ability to Speak up on behalf of minority groups is also a way we can evoke change. For example, one of the simplest ways men can be effective allies for women in tech is to speak out against stereotypes and discrimination publicly. This might feel uncomfortable to start with but the effectiveness of seeing a man speak up for women’s rights is huge. It is key to educate yourself on all forms of bias and how you can effectively help those who feel less comfortable to speak up. Discrimination or bias are not always explicit, for instance, as a woman you may be invited to an interview with an all-male panel or be interrupted by male colleagues in meetings.

You can find out more about the importance of allies [here](#).

## AUTHORS

**Stephen Watts**, Partner

**Kaveh Rahnejat**, Associate Partner

**Stephen Harrison**, Managing Principal

**David Cecil**, Managing Principal

**Razan Abdelgadir**, Specialist

**Ioana Martinas**, Associate

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