

# Experts Weigh in on How to Set Up Women for Success in Tech

Three women leaders in tech discuss the challenges they've faced and how companies can promote and empower other women.



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**Dr. Danfeng Yao**  
Elizabeth and James E. Turner Jr. '56 Faculty Fellow and CACI Faculty Fellow in the Department of Computer Science, Virginia Tech

## What challenges have you faced as a woman in technology?

**Danyelle Ireland:** I'm a social scientist and educational researcher who supports students through UMBC's Center for Women in Technology (CWIT). My students sometimes doubt their skills and potential due to notions about who can succeed in computing and engineering.

**Marie desJardins:** It gets exhausting to always be in the minority, so connecting with the other women in the field has been really important to me. Also, many attributes that are seen as positives in male leaders, such as assertiveness, confidence, or decisiveness, are often seen as negatives in female leaders.

**Danfeng Yao:** Last Saturday, a remote family friend told me that he was surprised by my achievements, because women "usually

suck at technological fields." This type of stereotypical and impostor syndrome-inducing microaggression routinely happens to women in technology. They drag women down, making their work less and less enjoyable.

## What can technology companies do to empower their women employees?

**DI:** It's imperative that tech companies empower employees and look critically at programming, policies, and professional development to make sure all stakeholder voices are included. Also, don't underestimate the power of nurturing relationships at the professional level.

**MD:** Men who want to be effective, active allies for women in tech need to recognize situations where the existing culture is not inclusive or diverse, and take steps to change things. Proactively

suggest women for advanced technical training, leadership opportunities, and visible positions in your organization.

**DY:** Technology companies need to put women in powerful decision-making positions. Give the benefit of the doubt to women. Women might not always look like or talk like the executives, board members, or presidents in stereotype-perpetuating Hollywood movies. That does not mean women cannot do the work.

## Can you speak to the importance of gender diversity in technology roles?

**DI:** Many challenges in the field could be mitigated by including a wider range of voices at the design table. Companies have encountered problems of bias, accessibility, and safety with new products that they could have addressed much earlier by having a

more diverse team from the start.

**MD:** Diversity of all types is the key to success for any organization. Research has shown that more diverse teams work better together, produce more robust engineering solutions, and lead to more sustainable organizations.

**DY:** Great minds don't think alike. We need both men and women to contribute their ideas freely. Oftentimes, I was the only woman in the discussion and I had different opinions and ideas from others — good ones.

## How do you measure success in your current role as a female leader?

**DI:** To see students develop over time is tremendously exciting, as they begin taking on leadership roles and advocating for themselves and others. It gives me confidence that CWIT is closer to

achieving our vision: Students are prepared and empowered to be change agents in creating technology workplaces that are diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

**MD:** Being a university dean means having many tasks to juggle and many hard decisions to make. It's impossible to please everybody, so I just try to keep my personal values and the institution's values at the core of my decisions and interactions.

**DY:** To me, success means more females are given the opportunities and resources to fulfill their career pursuits and are able to contribute to this field in a significant and meaningful capacity. The tech talent pipeline is very leaky, losing women all the time, especially mid-career females. Our field needs to be aware of the problem, acknowledge the problem, understand possible causes, and — most importantly — improve. ■