Promoting diversity through inclusive leadership

By Christin Wiedemann, February 2017

Abstract

We need diversity; diversity drives innovation, and diversity is key to our growth as individuals, and as organizations. There is a strong business case for diversity, but to make it sustainable we also need *inclusion*. It is not enough to bring different people together, but we must create an inclusive environment that embraces people's differences and allows each and every person to thrive.

As individuals, we can promote increased diversity through *inclusive leadership*, without necessarily having the formal title or role of a leader. The first step can be to become aware of our own biases, and make a conscious effort to not let those biases impact our actions. The technology industry would benefit immensely from increased inclusive leadership, and software testing is a good place to start. Testers are user advocates, and for testers to accurately represent the diversity of users, the group of testers should be diverse too. Testing as a profession also needs to get more innovative and creative, which could be translated into a need for testing to become more diverse.

Introduction

Diversity has become a buzz word; there are diversity councils, diversity festivals and even job titles that have the word diversity in them, such as Diversity Manager. Everyone is talking about diversity, but does it really matter, or is it just hype? Does diversity matter in the context of software testing? Let me start by trying to explain why diversity matters to me and why I feel that this discussion is so important to have.

I have worked in male-dominated environments my whole life. My training is in particle physics, and I spent 11 years doing research at a university. My first job in industry was as a software developer, and I am currently the Co-CEO of a consulting company. Physics research, software development and the C-suite are three environments where women are still in the minority. I have been fortunate enough to work in supportive and encouraging environments, but it has still contributed to

me becoming a passionate advocate of gender diversity. Gender is, of course, only one aspect of diversity. It is sometimes lost, or neglected, in discussions, but diversity is multi-faceted, and there are many more aspects of diversity than, for example, gender, or ethnicity. There are more aspects of diversity than we may care about, or be impacted by, personally.

As important as diversity is to me, I have recently started to wonder if maybe diversity is *not* the end goal, but a step on the way towards something even more important: inclusion. Diversity really just means bringing different things, or people, together, but diversity itself does not imply cohesion. An organization can mandate a diverse workforce, but for diversity to be sustainable we also need an *inclusive* environment. It might even be the other way around - maybe inclusion drives diversity?

Diversity and inclusion are important to me personally, but I believe they are also important to software testing, my chosen profession, where we act as user advocates. In my mind, testing is about asking questions, and by surrounding ourselves with people who are not like us, we tend to ask more, and better, questions.

Diversity

Diversity is *variety*, but variety of what exactly? When we talk about diversity, we typically talk about diversity of gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, nationality etc. If an organization wants to increase diversity, they tend to pick one of these attributes and find someone to hire that has that particular attribute. In doing[1] so, we unfortunately fail to understand that each individual is a conglomerate of identities and that we cannot address a lack of diversity by viewing people as "building blocks" that individually add one dimension, or unit, of diversity.

An eye-opening moment for me was when I listened to Sallyann Freudenberg's keynote presentation at the developer conference Øredev 2015. She talked about understanding and supporting neurodiversity in software development, and I realized my definition of diversity up to that moment had been very narrow. Neurodiversity is diversity in how we think, and how we feel. It is diversity in our cognitive styles and aptitudes. It is an aspect of diversity I was perfectly aware of, but had never thought of as diversity. In my mind, I would have considered it a *difference*, and being different is rarely seen as something good. Diversity on the other hand is normally interpreted as something positive. I suspect that we tend to define diversity in terms of what we can see, and that I am not the only one who should consider broadening their definition of diversity.

Anthropology teaches us that success is adaptation, and diversity makes us more adaptable. Diversity is crucial for the survival of the human race. Being adaptable also tends to be crucial to get through a software development project. Using an, admittedly tenuous, deduction, I would argue that diversity is key to success for software development, and software testing.

The business case for diversity

I have tried to provide *a*, not *the*, definition of diversity, and it is time to move on and focus on *why* diversity is so important. What is the business case for diversity? I have already briefly mentioned a few benefits of diversity, but let us look at it in more detail.

The benefits of diversity for an organization

An organization needs diversity to stay relevant, and a smart organization leverages internal differences as a competitive advantage. For organizations, whether they are for-profit or not, diversity is especially important when talking about *innovation* and *adaptation.*

Innovation is the ability to imagine something *new*, something no one has done before. Innovation is having the creativity, and courage, to ask *new* questions and seek out potential answers. A homogeneous group is likely to ask the same questions over and over again, potentially with some minor variations. A heterogeneous group, on the other hand, is more likely to ask *different* question because its members all bring different perspectives and viewpoints. Diversity drives innovation.

Diversity also makes us adaptable, and in the last decade we have seen plenty of big companies perish because they could not adapt. One well-known example is Blockbuster. They failed to adapt to the changing market, and the changing needs of the customers. They also failed to innovate. I would be interested in knowing how diverse their workforce, in particular at the executive level, was when those fatal decisions were being made.

Furthermore, numerous studies indicate that organizations that have a diverse workforce outperform other companies financially. Last, but not least, a diverse workforce means you have access to more talent. Diverse hiring increases the talent pool significantly; there are more potential candidates when you take diversity into account, and diverse hiring is also likely to *attract* more talent. An organization that publicly states that it values diversity will have an edge over other organizations in the competition for talent.

The benefits of diversity for individuals

Are there any benefits of diversity for the individual? Interestingly enough, there is research that suggests that diversity makes us smarter.[2] Working in a diverse group actually forces us to work harder, and to critically review our work, thinking of alternative ideas and solutions before presenting it to another group member. We would be less inclined to engage in such scrutiny in a homogeneous group where we would anticipate no disagreement. I would also argue that working in a diverse organization is more stimulating and interesting, but there is no question that diversity is hard and can create conflict too.

The benefits of diversity for software testing

The reasons why diversity matters in the context of software testing echo the reasons why it is important to organizations and

individuals, but I would like to add a couple of more things.

As testers we are user advocates, and to act as such we need to accurately represent the users. It can never be perfect, but striving for diversity is a good step on the way. In most cases, our users are a very diverse group of people. And do not fool yourself; your users are probably more diverse than you give them credit for. They may for example all be medical doctors using a medical journal tool, but where were they trained? How old are they? Are they male or female? They will still have very different expectations of the tool, and likely also use it quite differently.

Testers need to be creative, and innovative. I see testing as a quest for knowledge, and knowledge starts with asking questions. Bringing a diverse group of testers together will lead to *more* questions being asked, *different* questions being asked, and in the end, probably *better* questions being asked.

Inclusive leadership

I think of diversity as having different pieces, and inclusion as bringing those different pieces together and creating one whole. "Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance."[3] You can have diversity without having inclusion, and you can have inclusion without having diversity, but it is when we bring the two concepts together that we have something truly powerful and valuable. When we focus on promoting diversity I think there is a risk that we create separation and unintentionally generate exclusion. Striving for diversity should not mean promoting one group at the expense of another. We need inclusion, and we need inclusive leadership.

Inclusion is about creating an environment that supports and encourages diversity; an environment where everyone can thrive and be happy. Unfortunately, diverse environments are not automatically inclusive, but it takes leadership to *make* them inclusive. Inclusive leadership, on the other hand, drives diversity. An inclusive environment will attract different people with different strengths, and different weaknesses; people who complement each other and make the group stronger.

Furthermore, Sallyann Freudenberg makes a very good point when she says, "Be under no illusions - statistically you have neuro-diversity in your organization whether you are aware of it or not."[4] Most organizations are probably more diverse than they are aware of. The question is what they are doing to embrace it, and to capitalize on it.

Being an inclusive leader

A leader is someone who people *choose* to follow. You cannot be a leader without followers, and you cannot decide for people whom they should follow. That is, in my mind, the beauty of leadership and being a leader: you must *earn* it and you can lose it at anytime. To me, a leader is not a manager or a supervisor. I think of a leader as a *spokesperson* that speaks on behalf of their followers, making sure their voices are

heard and their interests safeguarded. A leader is someone who advocates for their group while providing direction, support and encouragement. A leader is a *guide* that helps their followers explore new paths, pointing out interesting sights along the way and highlighting potential dangers.

What does it mean to be an *inclusive* leader? I think inclusive leadership hinges on two things:

1. Providing a safe environment
2. Self-awareness in the leadership

To embrace diversity, we must ensure people are comfortable displaying diversity, and that will only happen in an environment that is safe, non-judgemental, and supportive. An inclusive leader must establish trust. Part of that is speaking up. If you see behaviour that is not inclusive you must *speak up* and *act*. You need to be the role model of inclusive leadership that other individuals mimic.

Being an inclusive leader also requires a high level of self-awareness. For example, we all have biases, but an inclusive leader must be aware of their biases and try to minimize the impact of them. An inclusive leader also needs to be aware of their leadership style: does your style only fit people who are like you? Ask for feedback to find out how other people perceive you, and to identify areas where there is potential for improvement. Increasing your self-awareness can be uncomfortable since we sometimes learn things about ourselves that we do not like. Try to be open to the good *and* the bad, and be kind to yourself. The purpose of feedback is not to make us feel good; it is supposed to help us grow.

Keep in mind that a leader is not a manager, and you can be an inclusive leader without having a formal leadership title. If you are a leader, take your followers down a path that embraces diversity and allows everyone to grow and be content. Make your inclusive leadership deliberate and purposeful.

Otherization

Otherize is a word you will not find in a traditional dictionary, and it is also a word that it is very hard to get past auto correct. It is; however, a word that is highly relevant. Otherize is a verb that means to make a person, or a group, seem different or alien. To otherize someone is to create a barrier between yourself and that someone. It means you are intentionally emphasizing differences rather than trying to find commonalities.

I first encountered the word in an NPR podcast episode[5] that talks about how some of us live in what can best be described as insular bubbles; enclaves where we surround ourselves with people who think like us. To me, otherization is the opposite of inclusion. Unfortunately, it is easy to be selective in our inclusion of people without realizing it. As long as there is an "other" and "other people" there is no true, or complete, inclusion. Inclusion means including everyone.

Food for thought

As testers, we often bridge the gap between development teams and users, and since we exist on the border between theory and

practice, I think software testing is an excellent place to start trying to make the technology industry more diverse. Diversity in testing can mean many different things, but I primarily think of it as a necessity for testers to truly be user advocates, and to ask better questions. Testing also needs more innovation and creativity, which I think translates directly into testing needing more diversity.

I do not think leadership is something you achieve and then you are done; it is a continuous journey. There are two stops I would like to suggest that you make on your inclusive leadership journey:

1. Do Catalyst's inclusive leadership self-assessment, http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/quiz-are-you-inclusive-leader

2. Take the Harvard Implicit Association Test, https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/canada/takeatest.html

The world is constantly changing, and if we want to have an impact on the direction of the change, we must be part of the change.

Acknowledgement

My ideas and thoughts do not evolve in isolation; they are the product of reading, listening and discussing. I am constantly reading articles, blogs, books and magazines. I listen to the radio, podcasts and people. I discuss my ideas with anyone who is willing to take the time to give me feedback and input. In writing up my thoughts on diversity and inclusive leadership I am especially grateful for the insights provided by Sherry Heinze. Thank you.

---

[1] Understanding and Supporting Neuro-Diversity in Software Development, Sallyann Freudenberg, Øredev 2015, http://oredev.org/2015/sessions/understanding-and-supporting-neuro-diversity-in-software-development-

[2] Scientific American, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-diversity-makes-us-smarter/

[3] Verna Myers, http://www.americanbar.org/publications/gpsolo_ereport/2012/june_2012/diversity_invited_party_inclusion_asked_dance.html

[4] Sallyann Freudenberg, https://salfreudenberg.wordpress.com/2016/05/12/the-case-for-neurodiversity/

[5] NPR's podcast Hidden Brain, episode 59, "The Deep Story", aired on January 24, 2017, http://www.npr.org/podcasts/510308/hidden-brain