

# Counterpoint Conversations

CULTURAL CHANGE UNLOCKS INNOVATION

**verizon**<sup>✓</sup>

WHITEPAPER  
August 2022

# Counterpoint Conversations

CULTURAL CHANGE UNLOCKS INNOVATION

## Foreword

Verizon is committed to fostering an inclusive environment. We care about diverse representation among our employees and our suppliers. Our *Counterpoint Conversations* series aims to deliver informative, engaging discussions that can help us learn from the successful leaders across the public and private sectors who have paved the way for increased diversity and inclusivity.

*Counterpoint Conversations* explores themes surrounding women in government and the broader workforce, and the structural and cultural factors that impact how they are supported during their career progression.

Through discussions between private sector experts and their 'counterpoints' in government, we have built a picture of how a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion unlocks innovation for organisations and government.

A commitment to shifting culture is a common thread throughout the series. While we recognise persistence and long-term thinking are needed to truly unlock change, meaningful progress can start today.

We are pleased to present the insights we gleaned from *Counterpoint Conversations* - which are relevant and actionable across all sectors, from defence and intelligence to science and business.

## Rob Le Busque

Regional Vice President,  
Asia Pacific, Verizon

## Diversity and inclusion in the workplace

Diversity can be considered across all spectrums, including but not limited to race, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, disability, age and experience.

Gender is the lens through which many workplaces consider diversity issues, given it affects 50% of the population and is a highly visible challenge.

Lack of representation, unconscious bias, conscious discrimination, pay inequality and lack of commitment to genuine change can all create cultures of discrimination, which in turn can stifle innovation. It is important to understand and be aware of the societal bias and discrimination that flows into work culture.

## Getting clear on why diversity is important

The BCECIWGEA Gender Equity Insight series, released in 2021, assessed 6 waves of equal opportunity data mandatorily extracted from companies, that shows longitudinal effects like profitability and performance for businesses that have reached parity in executive teams. It is the first objective hard proof globally that more diverse groups of people in leadership make for better business results.

Earlier research also reveals diversity delivers benefits including better financial performance, increased creativity, greater employee satisfaction, lower absenteeism and talent retention, and that companies with the most diverse leadership teams outperform their less diverse peers on profitability.<sup>1</sup>



**“The demand for frictionless global trade has also increased competition for talent. Employers started responding to this challenge with more flexible working arrangements, but it wasn’t enough. The pandemic quickly drove a meta-trend of being connected all the time, which requires a shift in mindset and diversity of thought to make fundamental changes to workforce models and policies.”**

— Rob Le Busque, Regional Vice President, Asia Pacific, Verizon

1. McKinsey <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-still-matters>

Diversity is vital in tech and innovation, considering there are inherent biases built into many modern technologies, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning. Conscious and unconscious biases are perpetuated through narrow thinking and blind spots incorporated during algorithm development. Teams need to be aware of gender bias and how it manifests in algorithms. It isn't always obvious but catching it in the early stages is critical.

While tech can perpetuate stereotypes if not carefully executed, it also has the potential to enable diversity. For example, improved online meeting infrastructure enables flexible working, which benefits parents – who are challenged with inflexible childcare responsibilities. And although the fundamental changes to working patterns brought on by the pandemic have caused one of the biggest shake-ups to our everyday lives in living memory, this challenge primarily impacts women – who are still five times more likely to take on the primary caring role.<sup>2</sup>



**“New tech opens up the ability to use and deploy human capital in a very agile and inclusive manner.”**

— Commodore Jonathan Sadleir AM,  
Chief Strategy Officer, CEA Technologies

On a larger scale, tech can enable participation in new sectors such as defence. For example, new autonomous vehicle applications in the army mean certain physical attributes for operating specific equipment are no longer required, opening roles to a broader workforce with a wider range of physical capabilities.

2. [Families in Australia Survey: Life during COVID-19 Report No 1 Early Findings](#)

## New perspectives unlock innovation

New ways of thinking and new perspectives can unlock innovation and strong long-term strategy. However, innovation doesn't happen in a vacuum; the outputs will be one dimensional without diverse voices feeding into the process.

Drawing from sources of thinking outside the traditional, 'older guard' sensibilities, that tend to breed groupthink and unconscious bias, is needed. Significant learnings can come from the oldest continuous culture on earth, which prospered for 40,000 years in some of the planet's harshest environments.



**“Our governance systems and ways of living with land have supported a rich and healthy and vibrant culture that still exists today. We can explore how the cultural insights of Indigenous knowledge systems can be translated into cultural standards and protocols.”**

— Professor Angie Abdilla, CEO, Old Ways, New

Indigenous knowledge systems can be drawn from and applied to various design obstacles, particularly social practices and conservation and environmental challenges. For example, local government councils around Australia are now employing Indigenous knowledge systems to manage bushfire risk more effectively.

Exploring the different relationalities and modalities of thinking, focusing on harmony with the environment and creating systems of balance and sustainability are pertinent to grappling with the predicaments facing modern post-industrial economies and environments.

With technology increasingly impacting daily life, it has never been more important to have diversity of representation inside organisations of all sizes to reap the benefits of varied approaches to thinking, input and problem-solving.

According to ANZ Bank chief information security officer Lynwen Connick, the borderless nature of online commerce and social interaction means the cyber industry needs people from all walks of life to understand and study security. The intimate connection of people in cyberspace requires strong diversity of genders, skills and cultures.





**“We need people with the right skills. We need a diversity of people who bring different views and ideas into the picture.”**

— Lynwen Connick, Chief Information Security Officer, ANZ Banking group

## Culture is key to unlocking diversity

Cultural change is how diversity and inclusion outcomes become embedded within an organisation. Taking people on the journey to cultural change is the key to transformative projects that generate lasting and meaningful shifts.

In the same way many organisations have embedded a health and safety culture at work, changing critical behaviours, underlying beliefs, and mindsets means workers are safer at work and home. A similar commitment to equality is needed to see the same shift.



**“Cultural change did happen, but it took time, and it was successful when it was done carefully. Cultural change that is done well and sticks – in my observations – comes from the type of leadership that uses language carefully and has effective conversations, because there are a number of people to bring along on the journey.”**

— Josephine Sukkar AM, Principal, Buildcorp

At this moment of cultural upheaval, leaders of today and tomorrow need to recognise that traditional thinking and existing company cultures don't necessarily provide the best outcome.

A hybrid mindset can bring benefits. Dharmica Mistry, co-founder and former chief scientist for BCAL Diagnostics and head of MedTech and BioTech for Cicada Innovations, learnt the value of this dual approach when transitioning from science to business.



**“I had quite an identity crisis early on. I was scared of not being a ‘real scientist’. You never know who your research might be relevant to, so being able to make your findings accessible to a broad audience helps identify new applications for it that you haven’t even thought of yet.”**

— Dharmica Mistry

Many academic mindsets cause conflict and hinder innovation. Some have started to argue that an over-emphasis on research papers is outdated and counterproductive when there is a need for real-world applications of new and exciting ideas.

Challenging preconceptions and stereotypes like these unlocks innovation; Ms Mistry found that doing so allowed her to look at possible applications of research in (sometimes surprising) commercial places.

Taking the perceived risk of moving between industries and breaking the mould of a ‘real’ scientist pays off. Similarly, gender stereotypes that are used to maintain the status quo can negatively impact growth.



**“One of the things we need to do is break down this stereotype of the hoodie and the green screen and the ones and zeros, and even the thought that you can’t be a good communicator if you’re good at technology.”**

— MJ Salier, Managing Associate General Counsel  
& International Regulatory

The current cybersecurity stereotype hurts diversity in the sector. The male in a hoodie sitting at a green screen working on ones and zeros in a dark room is a false representation and implies a lack of social engagement and isolation that creates a barrier to attracting diverse talent to the field.

The notion that technological proficiency and good communication are skills that don't exist together is also false. Technically-focused experts might not always be natural people managers or have the innate ability to argue strategically and persuasively for change - but this is why the industry needs people with a diverse range of abilities.

Companies are responsible for challenging stereotypes when promoting jobs across the tech sector, and developing position descriptions that move away from bias can assist with this. For example, refocusing language from managing to collaborating can attract more female applicants.

Rethinking stereotypes around certain career paths and valuing gender inclusive communication goes a long way in helping to instil cultural change.

### **Persistence and long-term thinking are needed to unlock diversity and its benefits**

New perspectives and ideas within a company's culture requires long-term thinking and commitment to issues, not just token programs. For example, normalising flexible working and parental leave for men benefits all employees.

Well-considered graduate programs, cross-skilling and equity in employee sponsorship can create a more diverse workplace by ensuring a talent pipeline. However, the impact of these programs takes time. It can be challenging for the new generation of leaders to reconcile the fast-moving pace of change in modern life with the slow process of true, permanent cultural change.

Skills pipelines and the engagement and support of minority groups within an organisation help identify potential leadership candidates early on. The solutions that work for the majority might not work for everyone, and this needs to be taken into consideration.

This consistency can be challenging for government organisations, especially when governments change. This makes leadership on diversity even more important in the public sector, and associated values must become engrained in an organisation's culture so if the administration changes, the mindset remains.



## Culture shifts don't happen overnight, but progress can start today

Maintaining momentum through an often-slow process of change is a big challenge. True diversity comprises many voices as part of the solution, and companies must identify and incorporate these views into their business.

The fact that real change doesn't happen overnight isn't a reason shifts can't start today. Observing the cultural change that has happened over the last few years shows us what we're capable of - for example, the COVID pandemic has opened up many tools for engaging workforces that weren't conceivable even two years ago.



**“We underestimate how much change has happened, and how far we’ve come. Sometimes I feel we’re taking two steps forward and one step back. It’s important we keep the momentum up.”**

— Patricia Kelly, Australian Research Integrity Commission  
Chair and Council Member, University of Canberra

Australian Research Integrity Commission Chair, Patricia Kelly, reflected on the public sector back in 1975, only a handful of years after the demise of the notorious 'marriage bar', which prohibited the employment of married women within the civil service. "It wasn't surprising that there weren't many women leaders, but the sorts of behaviours that were accepted back then are just unthinkable today," she says.

The further back in time, the larger the culture shift seems, which highlights the ability of true change to create long-term impact. Traditionally considered monoculture sectors, such as defence, are moving from considering diversity as obligatory to knowing it is a necessity for success.

Making change today has the potential to shift the needle and support wider technological transformation. In the absence of certainty of outcomes when dealing with agile new technologies and a growth mindset, diversity of opinion and input at the planning stage may actually be an organisation's best insurance to mitigate risk.

Understanding the strategic importance of long-term culture change and committing to diversity and inclusion fosters success across both government and business. A stronger organisational culture will lead to better employee outcomes, which enables better performance and benefits citizens and customers.

*Counterpoint Conversations* shows us that sharing learnings between the public and private sectors helps develop best practices, to the ultimate strengthening of the Australian economy and society.