

# Evolution of gender-balanced recruitment processes in the African telecoms sector

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Historically, society has perceived a career in technology or telecommunications as one that involves oily hands, messy overalls, and heavy lifting. For many years, partly because of this, women have shied away or actively been side-lined from work prospects in the space, making the telecommunications workforce dominated by males. A recent study shows that women account for less than 40% of the workforce in telecommunications. In my over 13 years in the sector, the human resourcing patterns rarely have varied, with few women penetrating technical and leadership positions. However, the tide is changing, and the telecommunications industry is playing catch-up in gender representation equality.



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To understand the evolution of gender-balanced recruitment processes in telecommunications, we must first ask why women have not generally penetrated the sector.

## The fear of the unknown

As an HR practitioner, the irony for me is that my field is perceived as a woman-led one (at least in most parts of the world). The opposite is true in the telecommunications field, and often this results from the fear of the unknown. Many young, brilliant women I have interacted with simply do not know much about the sector and tend to gravitate towards its male-driven stereotypes. Many women have not been exposed to the tech environment; they are the late entrants in the space. As a result, they often lack self-awareness and confidence in their abilities to succeed in the sector.

What exacerbates this is that many recruiters reinforce this thinking and tend to prefer male hires to their female counterparts. In HR practice, a lack of exposure does not necessarily translate into an inability to deliver value. There is a need for a mindset shift that promotes a corporate culture and environment of inclusivity in the tech space.

## Education and skills gap

Most technical positions in telecommunications require training in the hard sciences, technology, engineering, and maths. Studies have repeatedly recorded that only around 25% of women who attend tertiary education major in these disciplines.

This creates an education and skills gap that negatively impacts inclusivity in employment. Deliberate career development programmes that encourage females to study technical courses should be enabled at the formative stages of education.



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### Cultural barriers

Closely related to education and skills gaps are cultural norms that dissuade females from pursuing the sciences and technology. At the household level, families are responsible for encouraging sisters and daughters to challenge themselves to take on disciplines considered the preserve of males.

Further, cultural barriers are experienced at the workplace when networking opportunities are scheduled late in the evening. Most women being caregivers cannot maximise these opportunities; I have missed out on a few myself as I had to be home taking care of my son.

Despite this, females must be nurtured from a young age to develop their unique comparative advantages in male-dominated fields and not merely imitate their male counterparts. In my experience, it is essential to recognise that as a woman, you bring an exclusive skillset that is valuable in any sector, let alone telecommunications.

It is undeniable that successful businesses are those that have recognised the value-add of women, especially at the leadership level. Studies reveal that gender-diverse companies are 45% more likely to improve market share, achieve 53% higher returns on equity, and are 70% more likely to report successfully capturing new markets. Organisations that have women in leadership at the highest level tend to put people at the centre, increasing productivity and retention.

Gender inclusivity in telecommunications is especially crucial during the Covid-19 pandemic as businesses are shifting operational models to emphasise employee psychological safety by prioritising empathy and compassion, natural qualities for women. Telecommunications companies have realised the importance of attracting women in their ranks and are actively changing the gender landscape in the business.

So, how is this narrative changing? What is being done to encourage more women in telecommunications?

### Coaching and mentoring

Businesses in the tech environment have increasingly developed tailor-made programmes that attract and mentor women into the space. This is a long-term initiative that requires reshaping the image of a traditionally male-dominated industry. More and more telecommunications companies are investing in awareness and outreach programmes to inspire women

and girls by the possibilities of working in this area. Leading women in the business are engaging schools and universities to market telecommunications opportunities and stimulate the passions of female students. Further, firms in the sector are developing professional incubators to nurture young female professionals to excel with a specific focus on strategic growth, financial understanding and business acumen.



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## Creating a conducive environment

This must start from home. I owe my success in my career to my upbringing. My parents never exposed us to stereotypes and always encouraged us to go after our goals no matter how farfetched they seemed. Families must create a conducive environment for females to explore their full potential without limitation.

At the workplace, a conducive environment starts from the recruitment process, and many telecoms companies have a deliberate gender diversity policy that promotes women entrants into the business. Firms are reviewing corporate policies with a gender dynamics lens to ensure no discriminatory workplace practices.

In addition to this, companies should standardise equal pay for men and women. This is one of the many areas that Liquid Intelligence Technologies is a pioneer in, with no pay disparities between male and female employees. Further, Liquid encourages an environment where women can be assertive without having to be perceived as aggressive. This catalyses women participation in decision making that makes the business thrive.

## Conclusion

There has perhaps never been a more dynamic period in the technology and telecommunications space. The last decade has seen explosive growth in the sector, and the Covid-19 stay at home restrictions have only deepened this. Such industry expansion demands change. The evolution in technology services challenges incumbents to meet ever-changing consumer demand. This necessitates a fresh look at the skills available to the sector. Gender inclusivity continues to represent a key challenge and a significant opportunity for the industry's future. What is undeniable is that we need more women in telecommunications if we are to secure the sector's longevity.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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