

# Champions of Change unveil 12 steps to boost women tech leaders

**James Eyers**, *Senior Reporter, Australian Financial Review*  
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The CEOs of Telstra and Microsoft are encouraging 252 fellow members of the Champions of Change Coalition to step up the co-ordination of programs that reduce gender discrimination in the digital economy.

The coalition, which dropped “male” from its original title last year to reflect more women being involved in its campaigns, has announced 12 commitments to promote female leadership in the information technology sector, traditionally one of the most blokey.

These include ensuring artificial intelligence algorithms avoid harmful gender stereotypes, targeting training on digital skills and hiring, protecting women during restructuring processes, and making gender equality expectations clear to contractors supplying contingent labour.

Each member of the coalition will decide which to apply. However, a virtual round table on Tuesday afternoon, attended by about 30 CEOs and technology sector leaders, pointed to many programs under way to turn the pledges into action.

The discussion recognised the need for detailed communication and better measures for success to counter criticism the group is ‘pink washing’ – with more talk than action.

The meeting was briefed about several programs that will create clearer pathways for women wanting to re-enter the workforce after career breaks to have children.

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“We are not just about words, we are about action,” she said. The program will kick off early next year, allowing thousands of women to enter a sector Ms Bondi said many found intimidating.

Microsoft CEO Steven Worrall said supporting women to be certified with programming skills would help provide a leg-up to entry the industry and “we think it is a model that can be scaled”.

Engineers Australia CEO Bronwyn Evans described how introducing flexible working arrangements for all its 300 staff, including men, would allow women in the traditionally male-dominant industry to avoid being disadvantaged for having to juggle family commitments. The program encouraged men and women to be overt about the times they were not available for work.

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– Cathy Foley, Australia’s chief scientist

Demystifying the tech industry and providing access to partner programs could help women fill a “skills gap” in the Asian workforce of 29 million jobs, Mr Davis said.

## Unconscious bias

Women make up 29 per cent of employment in technology in Australia, compared to 48 per cent in similar occupations in the professional, science and technical services industry, according to the Australian Computer Society report, Digital Pulse 2021. In part, this reflects “long-standing gender stereotypes about suitable careers for men and women”, the report said.

Australia’s chief scientist, Cathy Foley, told members of the coalition to compile more comprehensive statistics when they conduct redundancy programs, and suggested leaders push back on privacy requirements, to ensure women are protected.

“Organisations lose a lot of women when they are restructuring, and women often put their hand up in a voluntary process,” Dr Foley said. “That is something that hasn’t really been looked at, to understand why women walk.”

Telstra Health CEO Mary Foley said the health industry was on the cusp of a major digital revolution and women should not be left behind. Last year, it started a networking group called “Brilliant connected women in digital health”, which had grown to 1000 members and celebrating the best operators in the space was helping to lift morale.

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– Jane Hume, Minister for Superannuation, Financial Services and the Digital Economy

Telstra CEO Andy Penn, one of the most vocal CEOs supporting the Coalition, said the telco was lifting female recruitment and was focused on preventing “unconscious bias” pervading the digital ecosystem, especially as artificial intelligence technology emerges, because historical data sets can entrench gender bias.

“Technology developed with women’s needs in mind does have the potential to be more marketable, profitable, and to increase safety and outcomes,” Mr Penn said.

“As we start to adopt technology such as AI, we need to ensure we don’t entrench unconscious bias into the next great leap forward. We need to discuss the future of AI before the entrenched inequality of the past becomes the entrenched inequality of the future.”

Minister for Superannuation, Financial Services and the Digital Economy Jane Hume – also the Minister for Women’s Economic Security – said she would ask a meeting of national cabinet next month to consider standardising measurements for public sector gender equality and suggested these could be applied in the private sector.

“It’s not about a redistributionist agenda or grandstanding programs of government largesse to make up for inequity of the past, which then doubles down on the dependence and disparities in the future,” she said. “It’s about removing barriers, creating choice and chances, and giving women the best opportunities to create fulfilling lives on their own terms.”

The founder of the Champions of Change Coalition, Elizabeth Broderick, said the gender equality debate area had suffered from a lot “vaporware” over the years and the focus was now on tangible action and outcomes.

“As we start to scale these promising practices across the coalition, [we will] put in place some good monitoring and evaluation, so it is not just a slogan. We are talking about substantive outcomes that are driving impact, [and as] we learn from each other and lift together, we would like to lift with the government as well.”

Correction: An earlier version of this article said Amazon Web Services’ “SheDares” program had a goal to get to 40,000 women by the end of the year. The goal is 20,000.

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