

**How we
doubled the
representation
of women in
Engineering
at Clio**

In June 2018, we were preparing to kick off a big hiring push with the goal to nearly double the size of Clio's 61-person software engineering team in the second half of the year. Hiring that many people in such a short period of time posed a risk of further homogenizing our 87% male engineering team, but more importantly, it was an opportunity to meaningfully change the makeup of our team for the better.

Looking ahead at the next few years of growth, we needed to set our team up for success, and we knew a more diverse team would be a higher performing team. If you're unfamiliar with the business case for diversity and inclusion, I'd recommend checking out [Why diversity matters](#) by McKinsey & Company and [Why diverse teams are smarter](#) by the Harvard Business Review before continuing with this post.



We also knew that our culture was primed, from an inclusion perspective, to welcome a higher number of underrepresented Clions, particularly women, because we'd been laying the groundwork for some time in terms of education and engagement. And we strongly believed that we needed to 'get it right' now, versus trying to catch up on diversity debt later.

To get there, we decided to use a quota, that's right, a quota.

Our stance was this: A homogenous team thinks the same, challenges each other less, innovates less, and will therefore be lower performing. Therefore, a homogenous team is just not an option for a company that has goals as aggressive as Clio.

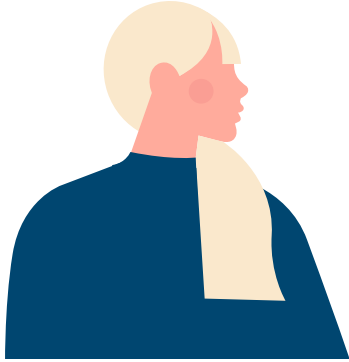
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What can we do about diversity as we scale?

At [Canadian Tech @ Scale](#) on June 1, 2018, a few leaders from Clio's engineering team heard [Sarah Kaplan](#), Director of the [Institute for Gender and the Economy](#), present a [talk](#) that covered not only about the business case for diversity and inclusion (i.e., it's critical for innovation and therefore company performance) but also how to build a more diverse team (i.e., make a commitment to achieve a specific goal versus just saying it's important to you).

Sarah specifically spoke about [research](#) that proves a quota is very effective at creating meaningful change in the makeup of a team. While her talk sparked a lot of conversation, we assumed that something like a gender quota would be perceived as far too extreme or controversial to implement in reality.





Only 13% of our 61-person engineering team at that time were women.

A couple of weeks later back at Clio, we had kicked off our big hiring push and the first few candidates had started coming in for interviews. In our Calgary office in particular, we noticed that the first wave of interviewees were all men. We had only opened that office earlier in the year and were in the process of filling the first 30 seats.

When we looked at the data, only 13% of our 61-person engineering team at that time were women. This prompted a discussion during which our engineering leadership team agreed on three things:

- 13% women in engineering is nowhere near good enough. Not only are we not doing our part to correct how underrepresented women are in this field (women represent ~25% of the tech workforce in both [Canada](#) and [the US](#)) but building a homogenous team doesn't set us up for success in the future.
- Hiring a lot of people in a short period of time presented a significant risk to make this worse, because, as evidenced by the first few interviewees, women weren't organically applying for the jobs or getting referred.
- Hiring a lot of people in a short period of time also presented a great opportunity to change the makeup of our team for the better with a huge influx of new talent.

WHAT IF WE TRIED A GENDER QUOTA?

So, we asked ourselves, "What would it look like if we created a gender quota for this hiring push?"

We reviewed the research, primarily [research done by the Institute for Gender and the Economy \(GATE\)](#). We needed to understand the hesitation and concerns that exist regarding quotas.

In response to the imposition of a quota, GATE reports that:

- While there may be a perception of unfairness (a gain for one group is a loss for another), which can trigger reduced employee engagement, research shows that there is hostility towards quotas where they do not currently exist and enthusiasm for



quotas where they do exist, demonstrating that fears about quotas are not realized.

- While there may be a perception of a pipeline problem, research shows that the imposition of quotas leads acquisition teams to search more creatively and expansively for candidates, beyond the usual channels, and this can drastically increase the candidate pool.
- While there may be a perception that women could be stigmatized and seen as less qualified, which could undermine their effectiveness, research shows that few women who have been beneficiaries of quotas report feeling stigmatized or isolated, because once they have achieved a critical mass, they are no longer marginalized.

In addition, GATE's research shows that not only are the perceived negative effects not reality, but there are significant positive effects of imposing a quota, such as increased innovation and better decision-making due to introducing new viewpoints. The research also shows that a "shock to the system" is necessary because of how ingrained our unconscious biases are.

Armed with that data and with the support of our leadership team, we decided to proceed with a quota.

We decided to aim for our total engineering team composition to include 25% women by the end of the year. We chose 25% because it felt doable, but hard: an ambitious goal that we might be able to come close to.

At the time, somewhere in the ballpark ~15% of engineering hires were women, on average. If we wanted to reach 25% by the end of the year, about 35% of our hires would have to be women, more than doubling the rate at which we hired women in the past.

This would be especially challenging since we were aiming to hire double the number of people we normally would during this period. Yet, our internal talent acquisition team immediately accepted the challenge, jumped on board and started working with us on how we could make this happen.



Under pressure during such a big hiring push, we knew it would be very easy to keep recruiting and sourcing candidates the same way we always had, which would mean that we would hire the same kind of candidates we always had.

We had a hunch that imposing a real constraint could be very effective in incentivizing ourselves to get creative and do things differently with regards to how we recruit and source candidates.

[Paulina Cameron](#), author of [Canada 150 Women](#), shared this quote with us by Caroline Codsí, who Paulina interviewed in her book:

“

When we legislate,
we find women.

When we don't legislate,
we find excuses.

— Caroline Codsí

As with a constraint on many software projects, things like the timeline and quality aren't negotiable, so what other levers are available to us to still meet our objective? We had to innovate and work hard to go find women who wouldn't have entered our recruitment funnel otherwise.



THAT MEANS WE'LL HAVE TO LOWER THE BAR, RIGHT? HOW CAN IT BE LEGAL TO CHOOSE WOMEN OVER MEN?

We chose the word 'quota' intentionally; we intended for it to actually create meaningful change in the makeup of our team and not just be something we were passively pointing our ship towards or paying lip service to. However, many folks believe that the only way to change the makeup of our team was at the "hire/no hire" stage — in other words, that in order to "fill our quota" we would have to prefer hiring certain candidates because of their underrepresented status.

Let's get this out of the way — we never extended a single offer because of a candidate's gender.

First, our *hiring* process and how we evaluate candidates has not changed at all, with the exception of always trying to get better at removing implicit bias from the process. Second, Clio is in the position to hire from a place of abundance, not scarcity; if we had an exceptional candidate identifying as a man and an identically exceptional candidate identifying as a woman, we would simply hire them both.

What did change was our recruiting process. At this point, more than 90% of our inbound applications and referrals were men, so obviously only about 10% of our hires would ever end being women. So, in order to have brilliant, talented women joining our team at a higher rate, we had to change the odds.

What if we could change it so that 35% of applications going into our recruitment funnel were women? Assuming that those applicants are as qualified as the average applicant we get, then we should expect to see women represent 35% of our hires.



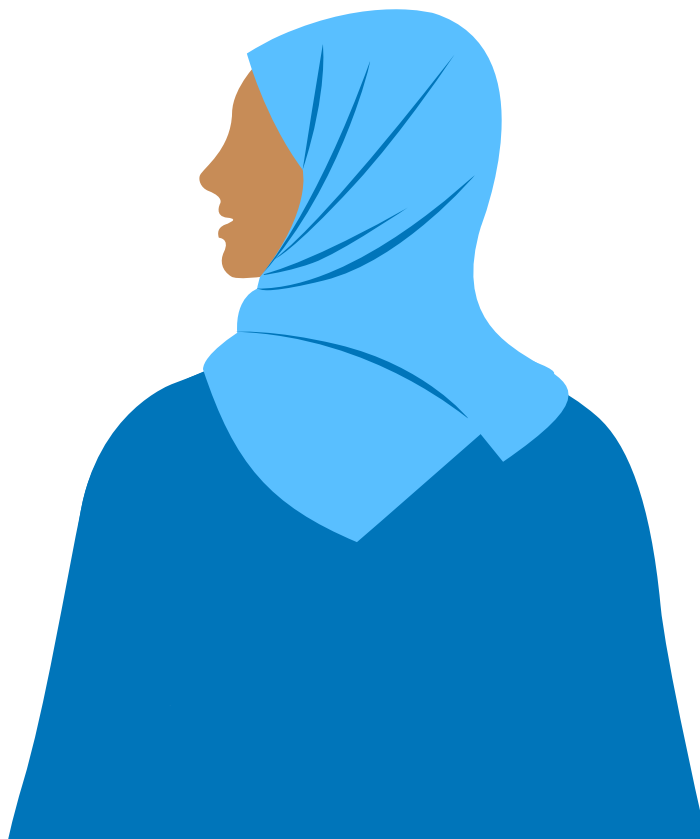
But, considering we get more than 1,500 applications per year for software development jobs at Clio, it seems pretty daunting to try to increase the number of organic applications and referrals for women developers by about 3.5x. They simply weren't applying for roles at the same rate as men (women represent 25% of the tech workforce, yet we don't get 25% of applications from women).

How could we influence an entire population to change their behaviour that drastically? What if instead we focused our efforts on sourcing women candidates who are more qualified than the average organic application? This would change the odds dramatically.

We thought it would take some time to ramp up hiring from 10% to 35% women, but in reality it happened immediately (that's not to say it was easy — the whole team hustled hard) and then we just had to sustain it for six months. And we did.

This was by far the thing that surprised me the most about this entire experience. It was so within reach and we had no idea. It is easy to make excuses when the message is "this is important to us." By mandating "we will do this," we found a way.

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WHY DON'T WE JUST DIVERSIFY THE CANDIDATE POOL? THAT'S GOOD ENOUGH, RIGHT?

If all you want to do is make yourself feel better, go for the 'diverse slate' approach. If you really want to meaningfully change the makeup of your team, that's not good enough.

Check out this study from the Harvard Business Review: [If there's only one woman in your candidate pool, there's statistically no chance she'll be hired.](#)

The reality is that every person on your team and every person on our team is battling some amount of unconscious bias that favours candidates that are men. If you include a token woman in a pool of candidates, it's likely that she'll look so different from the other candidates that she'll never be successful, no matter how good she is.

Filling your funnel with a ton of qualified women is one way to start breaking down our biases. We have to change our unconscious definition of what a software developer looks like so we start recognizing talent that looks a little different than what we are used to.

And this is where the importance of using a quota as a mechanism becomes clear, and why the outcome we were aiming for was number of hires, not number of candidates. Using a quota meant that we couldn't take the heat off of sourcing when we reached a certain number of candidates that were women.

We had to keep going until we had enough *qualified women candidates* that they were making it through our interview process and getting *hired*. It doesn't matter how many candidates you have from an underrepresented group. That's a great way to just pay lip service to something and not fix shit that's broken.



WON'T THIS CONTRIBUTE TO IMPOSTER SYNDROME? WON'T THE WOMEN HIRED DURING THIS PERIOD FEEL LIKE THEIR CREDIBILITY IS COMPROMISED OR THAT THEY DON'T DESERVE TO BE THERE?

This is a common misconception. The Institute for Gender and the Economy has studied this extensively and [found no correlation](#) between a quota and increased imposter syndrome.

However, this is only true when you actually follow through and reach a critical mass of the underrepresented group. Sure, if you set a quota and then only hire one or two women, they're going to feel like they were a "diversity hire".

If you set a quota and use it to reach 25, 30 or 40% women, those women are going to realize they are surrounded by incredibly smart and capable women who were all hired, themselves included, because they kick ass at what they do.

That being said, we wanted to proactively mitigate any negative effect this could have on women joining the team during the quota. We communicated at both the department and company level, repeatedly, that we have levers, other than quality, to pull in order to meet the quota.

One of the best explanations of how we can be certain we aren't lowering the bar came from our VP Engineering who said, "Because if we did, I'd get fired." In other words, if we hire a bunch of people who don't actually raise the bar for our team, we'll be setting ourselves and the company up to fail. It's not an option.

We also made sure that managers took time to reinforce with new hires (no matter their gender) why we hired them, why we're so excited they chose Clio, as well as bringing out into the open any growth areas we want to focus on, to eliminate any feeling of 'They just don't know that I'm weak in this area,' and worked with them to create development plans.



Then we sat down with every woman hired, within her first few days, to introduce the concept of the quota so she understood what it was and how it worked, instead of maybe hearing about it around the proverbial water cooler and creating her own narrative about it. This worked incredibly well, and most women responded with how impressed they were and asked about how they could refer their friends.

BUT WAIT, SHOULDN'T INCLUSION COME BEFORE DIVERSITY?

Diversity and inclusion represent an interesting chicken and egg dilemma.

It doesn't seem smart to diversify your team if your culture isn't inclusive because they won't thrive when they arrive (it can be pretty scary to be the first and only woman or non-white person on a team). However, it's impossible to create a truly inclusive culture if your team is homogenous (imagine asking a team of white dudes to become inclusive of women or other ethnicities before adding anyone who looks different).

So, what's a leader to do? Improving diversity and improving inclusion really have to happen at the same time, which, yes, is totally terrifying, because what if it doesn't work? You could invest a ton of time and money in hiring people only to have them churn out.

But it's the only way to build a diverse team. You have to start changing the makeup of your team, while also supporting the existing team in how the culture needs to evolve to be inclusive of people on your team that are different.

We've focused a lot on diversity so far and you're probably wondering what Clio did to create an inclusive environment.



In March 2018, we ran our first annual optional, company-wide inclusion survey (we use [Culture Amp](#) for this survey as well as our bi-annual company-wide engagement surveys) which measures sentiment about inclusion as well as demographic information. This has given us a ton of metrics on how we're doing, as well as highlighted hot spots for us to focus efforts on.

We also have an employee committee for diversity and inclusion, which is a group of about 40 Clions whose mission is to 'enhance our culture by creating a safe, welcoming environment where difference is valued and embraced, and where all Clions feel they belong.' This committee also digs into our annual inclusion survey results and forms task forces around hot spots to explore how we could move the needle. We recently reviewed our second annual (2019) survey results and are pleased to report that in nearly every metric, sentiment has improved over the past year.

The inclusion survey is an awesome tool for helping us measure how we're doing on the inclusion side of things while we count heads to see how we're doing on the diversity side of things. Both diversity and inclusion matter, and you can't successfully have one without the other.

So WHAT HAPPENED?

We reached our goal of 25% women on Dec 16, 2018, five months after rolling out the quota formally. Today, 27% of our 104 folks in engineering are women.



HOW DID WE DO IT?

We sponsored the right events, we created great content for our engineering blog, we spoke at meetups and we drank a ton of coffee, chatting and connecting with as many people as possible. We ran a contest to engage the entire department in driving referrals (in addition to our regular referral bonus program). We watched our metrics like a hawk, reporting back to the core working group of managers and recruiters as to how we were doing, because, as they say, 'what gets measured, gets managed.'

When we wrapped up the hiring push at the end of the year and entered a new fiscal year with new hiring targets, we officially dropped the quota, as an experiment.

We wanted to see if we would keep hiring at that rate without a quota in place. Have we built the muscle? Do we know how to find, connect with and attract women in engineering now? Six months later, we've only added 3 percentage points.

We're still trending in the right direction, at a faster rate than we were prior to trying a quota, but not at the rate we were during the hiring push, while the quota was in place.

As a result, it's likely that we will consider adding a gender quota to any big hiring pushes we do in the future. It's just too risky not to apply this focus to diversifying our recruitment funnel. During a hiring push without a quota, we are so much more likely to decrease the representation of women on our team because women just don't enter our funnel organically at the same rate.

Our work here is not yet done, as we believe ([as do others](#)) that a team will reach optimal performance (and negative impact on the underrepresented group will be most mitigated) when the split is no larger than 60/40.



WHAT'S NEXT?

30% of individual contributors (people without direct reports) in engineering at Clio are women, and nearly 70% of those women have been at Clio for less than a year. This means that managing a team that is about one-third women is pretty new for many of our managers.

This is important because of the [differences in how women approach work and their careers](#). So we're applying a ton of effort right now to figuring out how Clio can avoid participating in the [career stagnation of women](#) that is so prevalent in this industry.

Also, you might have done the math and realized that we weren't super successful at hiring women into management roles last year, so our engineering management team is still only 14% women.

To address this, we're focused on both attracting effective managers that are women, as well as developing our internal team this year. Every woman in the department opted into monthly coaching circles in groups of five with our internal performance coach, to work together on challenges related to advancing their careers, such as building confidence, in a supportive environment.

We're also rolling out a mentorship program, developing progression plans, and having more growth conversations than we've ever had before. Managers are finding ways to get more involved in ushering their reports' careers forward, and we're teaching individuals how to drive their own careers as well, whether it's on the manager track or the individual contributor track.



WHY SHOULD THIS MATTER TO YOU?

These are hard, crunchy problems to solve, but hopefully this post has given you some hope that they're solvable. We're sharing our strategy because we believe that if more companies hire more women and create workplaces that are conducive to growth for women, it will create a tremendous force that will attract more women. Let's work together to show women and girls considering or studying programming that this industry is not only ready for them, but it needs them to build higher-performing teams and therefore, better software.



Ainsley Robertson is the Manager of Developer Experience at Clio, which means she works on anything related to being a developer at Clio outside of writing code, such as how to recruit, hire, build and retain a high performing engineering team. It's part project management, part human resources, part marketing and part human swiss army knife. Outside of work, you can find Ainsley running meetups, volunteering on nonprofit boards, spoiling her niece and nephews, and enjoying the great outdoors in Vancouver, Canada.



About Clio

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We consider ourselves to be high achievers who are setting new standards for what it means to be a tech company. In the past three years, we've launched a new interface and experience of our software, acquired our first company, launched a second product, secured the largest Series D in Canadian history at the time, and launched a \$1 million dollar relief fund to help legal professionals navigate the challenges of COVID-19 (just to name a few).

We are dedicated to *creating diverse teams and inclusive workplaces*. We know that different perspectives, skills, backgrounds, and experiences result in higher-performing teams and innovation. We believe you do your best work when you can show up as your authentic self—and that's a key part of our culture.

**We know our technology
changes lives and we're
committed to making
an impact.**

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