

## WEPS IN ACTION



PRINCIPLE 4

**Promote education,  
training and professional  
development for women**

### Contents

1. Context
2. Actions
3. Challenges
4. Results
5. Recommendations

## CASE STUDY: Thoughtworks China

### **INCREASING THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN TECH, WITHIN A COMPANY AND BEYOND**

#### LESSONS LEARNED

- Commitment and active engagement from management teams is key to ensuring support for actions to promote gender equality across the organization.
- Setting clear targets helps measure progress.
- Creating a dedicated channel for women to speak up and share their ideas is critical in historically male-dominated industries.

#### CONTEXT

Thoughtworks is an international technology consultancy founded in the United States. By integrating strategy, design and software engineering, it aims to help companies and technology disruptors across the globe thrive as digital businesses. Founded in 1993, Thoughtworks has grown from a small team in Chicago to a software consultancy with more than 10,000 employees in 17 countries. About 2,000 of these are based across seven major cities in China, where the company opened offices in 2004.

Women are underrepresented in the technology industry globally, and they face prejudice and other discrimination-related challenges in the sector. The latest available data in 2018 shows that women made up just 6.4 per cent of academicians

in the Chinese Academy of Sciences and 4.9 per cent of those in the Chinese Academy of Engineering. There has long been a perception that women are not suitable for technology-based roles, and their voices often go unheard in the sector. To counter these narratives, Thoughtworks China has striven to increase the representation of women in the industry and amplify their voices. Among the steps taken, it has created a career development platform specifically for women technology professionals, adjusted men-to-women recruitment ratios, and targeted training and networking at women employees.

## ACTIONS

An early step was to focus on recruitment. In 2012, Thoughtworks China set a target of 1:1 men to women among new hires during its campus recruitment drives, which are a major source of future employees. Company speakers emphasize Thoughtwork's equal opportunity and gender quota policy during presentations at university career fairs. The policy is reinforced by regular check-ins from the company's Human Resources (HR) staff with its business departments, reminding the latter to observe this goal in recruitment. To reflect on progress, each business department holds a meeting with the company's Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) team once a month.

The company has raised the visibility of women tech workers and women's leadership by creating channels and platforms for them. In recent years for example, influential global team members have been invited annually to share industry insights with the China offices and to discuss issues of gender bias in the industry. One such luminary is Thoughtworks Global Chief Technology Officer, Rebecca Parsons, who was invited to give a virtual talk to China-based employees on gender inclusion and industry trends in 2021. Between 2018 and 2020, Thoughtworks China also ran a project to raise the profile of women employees and broadly showcase their expertise. Called *Tao Ma Tan*, the project invited over 20 women employee representatives and external women technicians each year to share industry views and technical insights in company newsletters or WeChat groups.<sup>1</sup> After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, an online live broadcast series called #SpeakUp was launched on a podcast platform to cover hot topics in the technical field, and women tech workers were invited to share their experience and opinions.

Turning to career progression, in 2020 the company in China set a target of achieving 50 per cent attendance from its women employees at the annual leadership trainings organized by its global side. To support this, targeted invitations are now sent to qualified women employees, particularly those at middle management level. Training sessions are organized during office hours and recordings are made available after each session, which eases the challenges disproportionately faced by women, particularly needing to train or network out of hours while balancing family commitments and unpaid care roles.

These policies and actions have demonstrated a high-level commitment to promoting gender equality in Thoughtworks China, and the company has built on this further by encouraging the development of an inclusive business culture. Each year, budget is allocated to voluntary employee-led workplace 'communities' based on their workplans, while support to the communities is offered as part of the company's own operational workplan. Notably, external influence is encouraged outside of the company: during employees' non-project performance reviews they are recognized for any influence they generate externally. This may include articles published in the name of an employee or events they attend as a speaker, and participation in Thoughtworks community activities is seen as a good way to contribute.

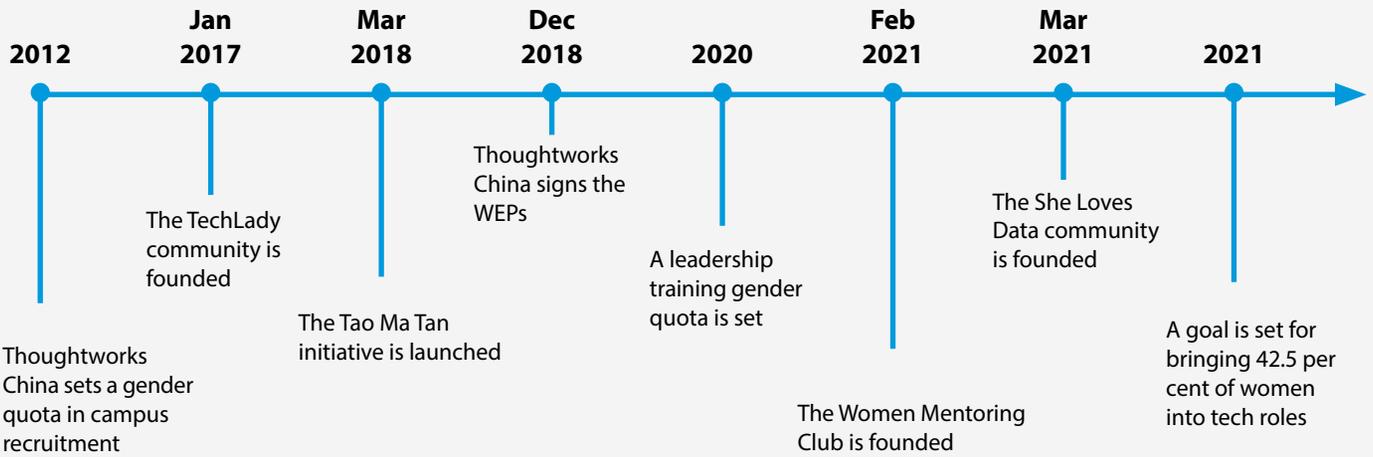
Among the communities, those of specific benefit to women include a Women's Mentoring Club, which connects mentors with women employees and focuses on personal development plans, and the She Loves Data Community: a network that brings together women across China's IT industry to share information and learning, including programming workshops. In 2017 the TechLady Community was set up to build a workplace that works for women within Thoughtworks China and provide an internal networking and exchange platform. TechLady members have provided technical expertise to education projects with Plan International since 2019, such as those to introduce students to STEM or help children prevent online violence.

Finally, reviewing its progress in 2021, the company decided to formalize its approach further: it set the goal of having women comprise 42.5 per cent of its technical roles by 2022 (see more in Results, below).



<sup>1</sup> WeChat is a major communication platform in China.

## TIMELINE



## CHALLENGES

CHALLENGE	HOW IT WAS ADDRESSED
<p>A low percentage of women employee candidates, and gender balance not being a consideration for business departments.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>By attending job fairs targeting women graduates.</li> <li>By cooperating with schools and universities, including China Women's University, and by sharing experiences of working in the STEM field.</li> <li>By ensuring that HR communicates regularly with each business department to raise awareness and promote gender balance in the workforce, and each business department has a meeting with the D&amp;I team once a month.</li> </ul>
<p>An under-acknowledgement of women's expertise in tech, which impacts their development in the industry and reinforces the bias of 'tech not being for women'. For example, there is a much higher proportion of male speakers compared to women speakers in many industry events, with women speakers more often challenged by the audience. When speaking at such events, women are much more likely to discuss work-family balance, instead of professional and technical topics.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>By inviting women employees to share their insights in the industry and planning each conversational topic one-on-one to make sure it's tech focused.</li> <li>By externally monitoring the topics that women technologists are asked to speak about when attending events organized by other organizations and negotiating with event organizers when needed.</li> <li>By ensuring that content produced by women technologists is promoted and published on a variety of external platforms.</li> </ul>
<p>Communities can become inactive over time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>By checking in with the organizers regularly, mainly via the focal point for communities, HR staff and D&amp;I staff.</li> <li>By inviting communities to participate in relevant events co-organized with other organizations, to keep momentum going.</li> </ul>

## RESULTS

In 2021, the leadership training comprised over 46 of training sessions across nearly 6 months and eight of the 16 participating employees in China were women. "This is a process of self-reflection and self-breakthrough," said one female participant, reflecting on the benefits of the training. "With the continuous guidance and feedback of an external coach, mentors and team members, we can establish a deep understanding of leadership, interact and learn with each other in different teams, and broaden our vision and mindset."

As of February 2022, women accounted for 35.7 per cent of management positions and 40.23 per cent of technical roles,

compared with 37 per cent in technical roles when the goal was set. During a recent wave of promotions, women made up almost half (45 per cent) of the new advancements.

In the last four years, women have exceeded or almost matched the number of men recruited at Thoughtworks China, as below:

- 2021 university recruitment: men (198), women (239)
- 2020 university recruitment: men (122) women (116)
- 2019 university recruitment: men (79) women (82)
- 2018 university recruitment: men (53) women (50)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

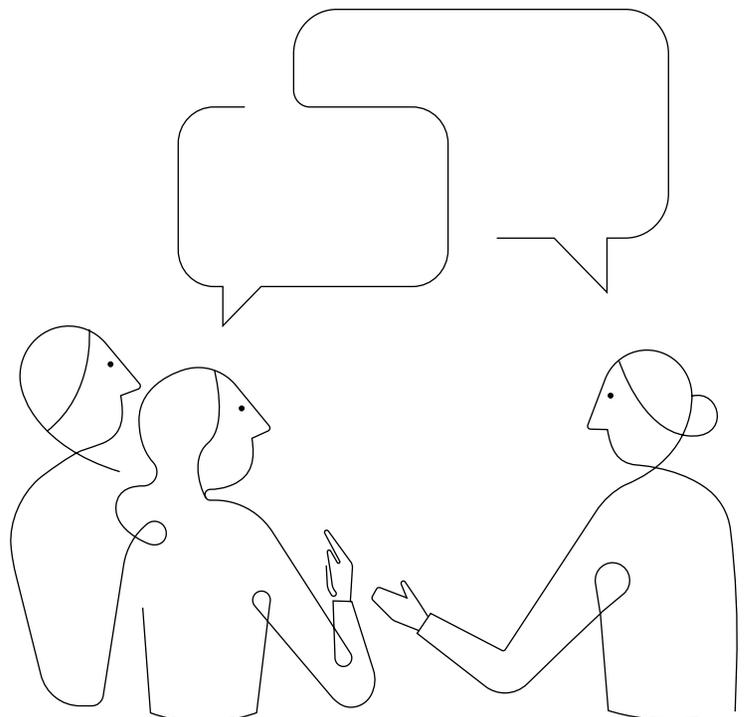
- Secure corporate commitment from the onset, as it is critical to advancing gender equality within a company. Such commitment involves setting indicators for the development of women employees and raising the gender awareness of all employees with communications approaches.
- Encourage commitments to support gender equality as part of employees' annual workplans where relevant, or in the

workplan of the department or company, to help monitor and ensure that action is taken.

- In order to ensure the advancement of more women in an organization, it is important to increase the influence of women leaders in and outside of the company, help amplify their advocacy for women's career development and leadership, and promote them as role models.

## THE ROLE OF WEPs

Thoughtworks China believes that promoting gender equality and supporting women's growth and development in the technology industry are essential corporate social responsibilities. WEPs are a vehicle for corporate delivery on the gender equality dimensions of the 2030 Agenda. As a comprehensive framework, WEPs have helped Thoughtworks China identify areas for improvement and informed their diversity strategy and gender programme development.



- Principle 1  Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality.
- Principle 2  Treat all women and men fairly at work– respect and support human rights and nondiscrimination.
- Principle 3  Ensure the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers.
- Principle 4  Promote education, training and professional development for women.
- Principle 5  Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women.
- Principle 6  Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy.
- Principle 7  Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality.

## #WeEmpowerAsia



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