

CODE- SWITCHED

Stories from women of color and gender-variant people of color on the frontlines of the tech industry.

“To change how I talk in order to survive capitalism – there is definitely a loss for economic opportunity, and I grieve that.”

—Participant of the Tech Advisory Council

Code switching is a term used for when people of color feel pressured or must change how they communicate to survive white supremacy culture.

Key Reflections:

You are about to read powerful truth. Some of you have experienced the struggle of enduring racism, and these stories might sound all too familiar. For others, this will be hard truth to swallow. You are all invited and encouraged to read these powerful stories. When we call on people of color, particularly women and gender variant people of color, to share their experiences navigating an industry that was not designed for their success, we are asking much from them. They offered their emotional labor, energy, and communication so that you, the reader, could gain insight on strategies for inclusion.

These findings will be represented exactly as they are, in the powerful truth that happens when women of color and gender diverse people of color come together to share stories.

We were struck by this group's alignment about the things they wanted in life compared to their white cisgender male counterparts, things that many CEOs want as well. Tech leaders of all identities want Portland to become the center of tech nationally. Everyone is dreaming of an inclusive tech industry where folks of color, particularly women and gender-diverse, could thrive and build a career. Both groups were frustrated and sad when people of color left the industry. How did we get so off track in executing this vision? According to a recent report by Built in Beta, women of color lag behind white women and men in entry level positions. Even though many of us are seeking a more diverse workplace, we have not yet arrived at that outcome.

The discussions also revealed hope, and stories that should inspire allies to keep pushing. One of the key findings, unsurprisingly, is that the existence of a genuine and authentic commitment to racial justice really matters. It's that simple, and that hard. To truly build trust, folks in the margins must know when white folks are willing to be united in action toward racial justice and are in solidarity with people of color within their organizations. And it's clear when that solidarity has limitations, particularly financial, and turns into performative allyship. Women and gender variant people of color in this focus group don't experience solidarity as often as they need or want. But when it does happen, it's healing and powerful, and can be a reason for hope in staying at a company or in the tech industry overall.

We hope that the voices in this report are held as most valuable, more important than the latest trend, and a serious cause for intervention as well as an opportunity for our collective liberation. If you are working at a tech company, we encourage you to share this with colleagues committed to greater diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) within your company; it could be teammates, your DEI committee, or an executive sponsor. Identify actions you can take to build a more equitable company and use this report to move your business forward on a journey toward more racial equity. We hold a deep level of respect and gratitude for our brave participants and the companies and CEOs who participated in wanting to lift up the truth.

While we honor other critical voices such as men of color, we wanted to talk to folks who were experiencing intersecting identities of gender and race. When we begin and center those with compounding forms of oppression, we can build more complete solutions.

Whose brave voices are these?

These are folks from various racial identities. These are queer people, trans people, cisgender people. These are employees who have been in and out of various roles, both in leadership positions and entry-level. A few have left the industry, and a few are trying to get in. Some are with companies participating in DEI work within Prosper Portland's Tech Town initiative, and others work at companies not officially engaged in the program. Some companies have active and deep DEI programs with solid allies, and some don't have an initiative. They have different abilities and upbringings. One thing that they all share is that they are warriors, resilient, kind, and passionate about passing along this information to help the next generation of women of color and gender variant people of color in tech.

Methodology and Prompts:

In order to center the most marginalized in the tech industry, we intentionally asked women of color and people who identify as gender variant such as non-binary, gender neutral, or trans to be a part of this group. While we honor other critical voices such as men of color, we wanted to talk to folks who were experiencing intersecting identities of gender and race. When we begin and center those with compounding forms of oppression, we can build more complete solutions. Here are the questions that the group discussed. Some were planned and some were follow-ups based on where the conversation took us:

- **How were you recruited / were you recruited into the tech industry?**
- **When do you know you are the diversity hire?**
- **How were the interviews and/or onboarding process?**
- **How and when have you felt inclusion or support?**
- **How are racial micro-aggressions impacting client relationships?**
- **What would you tell a junior you? Advice for women of color and gender variant POC in tech.**
- **What would be the outcomes in Tech and in Portland if you felt included?**

Trans Specific Feedback

While most participants did not openly communicate that they identified as transgender, many participants made up a spectrum of gender identity and experience, and we had trans participants who were able to weigh in on critical dynamics they are facing in the workplace. According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, more than one in four transgender people have lost a job due to bias, and more than three-fourths have experienced some form of workplace discrimination. Being trans in a cisgender white male-dominated field or expressing your gender outside of the gender binary can be a very isolating and challenging experience.

- **Trans folks who pass as cisgender hear transphobic comments that are disturbing. This is usually a result of a colleague feeling safe to comment**
- **Restrooms are still a huge barrier to trans participants**
- **Gender variant and trans folks still feel a significant pressure to present a certain gender expression in their hair, dress, or mannerisms that make their colleagues comfortable with what cisgender people believe to be the stereotypical trans experience**
- **Companies should not tell folks they are trans inclusive if they are not prepared for trans employees, especially in cases of physical restrooms, policies that allow for a chosen name, and overall climate of understanding and inclusion**
- **Companies should let employees know immediately what healthcare benefits they have access to, when those benefits will be available (should be immediate) and if they are trans-inclusive**

What would happen if trans people of color were included in tech?

“Trans people would flourish more. There would be a lot of trans people that actually stay with us longer and bring in more trans people which would help the city, and help people think more broadly about gender.”

“If it wasn’t for x company, and to be able to get my foot in where I have – I wouldn’t be alive right now. That’s tough to think about – because x company saved my life – they gave me that cushion to transition. This felt like a miracle and that shouldn’t be the case.”

“It’s all intersectional work and make it come full circle- make trans POC the first point – (targeted universalism). I hate that trans inclusion is a nice-to-have and we aren’t doing the work to make it inclusive.”

Full Group Responses

HOW WERE YOU RECRUITED / WERE YOU RECRUITED INTO THE TECH INDUSTRY?

Most of the participants did not get recruited into the field and felt as if they stumbled into it. Additionally, many didn't know how long they would be in tech and many noted moments of questioning their belonging. However, most folks felt like the industry would be much stronger and life-changing as far as economic opportunity if there was more inclusion.

Themes among participants:

- An experience of coming into the field by accident
- Company culture is the biggest indicator for interest and safety in applying for a role
- Not appropriately prepared by recruiters for the company culture, a feeling of having to network and get the real story from other employees of color when arriving
- Flexibility was over-emphasized but underdelivered regarding work/life balance
- There was a stark contrast in the utopian external image and the real experience
- Successful recruitment tactics that participants experienced included campus visits, offer letters for internships that led to jobs, recruitment from within
- Folks are interested in products or skills that sound interesting

“Happy hours were a cool perk, but I cleaned up after them. Now I don’t want to go to happy hours, I’d rather go home and spend time with my community.”

“Felt like the token person they would bring in based on gender and race.”

“I need to learn to ask better questions. A lot of recruiters have talked up inclusion on the teams. You can’t really speak to a whole company and make a generalized statement when individuals contribute so much to culture.”

WHEN DO YOU KNOW YOU ARE THE DIVERSITY HIRE?

It was devastating and frustrating to hear how much tokenization was occurring. Many tech companies only focus on workforce diversity. While that's certainly of value, the singular focus creates a sprint mentality around who can have the most people of color. This leads to tokenizing and harmful experiences for people of color and gender variant POC who are brought into a culture that's not inclusive or primed for them to succeed or thrive. We subsequently posed this unplanned question:

How do you know you are the diversity hire?

- **Folks look at people of color or stare at people of color when the company talks about racial equity**
- **Folks would be asked by white colleagues to educate them on racism, to be the bridge to recruiting other people of color, and/or asked about their experience of being a person of color in inappropriate ways**
- **Pictures were taken or updated for the website immediately upon hire, when previously the photos had not been updated in a long time prior to their arrival**
- **Folks are the only person of color in their role or on their team**
- **Folks were directly told that they were the diversity hire or that their race played a role in them being hired**
- **Folks would be complimented generally and but not specifically about their performance or skills, indicating superficial feedback**

A few companies where participants worked displayed a genuine commitment that participants felt when these employees came to their new role. Managers were deeply supportive in their career development, very honest and specific about the company culture and what to expect, and the participant was on a team with other folks of color. These companies really made a difference for the participants. The folks who had that experience later commented that the bar is still lower than they would like, but that they had appreciated their experience of inclusion.

HOW WERE THE INTERVIEWS AND/OR ONBOARDING PROCESS?

One of the most powerful interventions the tech industry can make is the way interviews are conducted. Interviews already are a stressful experience for most candidates in most industries. It is a process in which one party has all of the power and is positioned to judge a person's skills. Often, this is solely based on a series of tests that are just snapshots of a person's whole abilities. Whether one does well often rely on an ability to know expected behaviors defined by elitist knowledge in a competitive atmosphere. Shifting the interview process for a company to ask 'how can we help the candidate to succeed and investigate who they are at their best' will not only create a more level and inviting playing field, but will give the company the information to see what their candidate is made of through a different approach.

Particularly for the tech industry, it seems that all these symptoms of competitive interview climate are exacerbated by the nature of the field. Many candidates experience highly technical and cut-throat interviews, being over-questioned on their abilities and mistrusted for their successful outcomes with coding challenges.

- Many felt the coding challenges were more focused on a high-pressure performance than actual job duties related to those exercises.
- For some participants it was too much burden to do multiple simultaneous day-long coding challenges while in multiple job search processes.
- Several participants experienced a questioning of their legitimacy by receiving direct accusations of lying through some aspect of their interview process.
- There was a conflicting message of being invited to learn in the field and then feeling punished for not being perfect in challenges.
- There was a lack of a learning environment and often interviews did not simulate real-life experiences where an employee could research a problem or ask for support.
- Participants wished they had received more information during the interview process such as knowing how people get promoted compared to over-promising abstract "growth opportunities".
- Folks encouraged companies to be honest about the climate of the company for POC, and the culture of Portland overall for folks moving to the area. If you don't know where that person can find community, either help connect them or let them know you aren't sure of those things.

“The interview process is broken. The role was just making apps but they test you like you are about to hack a federal building.”

“I had to take a break from coding after interviews... I told them ‘this ain’t fresh in my mind – I know how to do this but I just want to check a few things, am I able to google while I’m on zoom?’ ... “The feedback was that I wasn’t able to do anything, and [it]wasn’t open to learning.”

“White dudes get to look up stuff all the time. They constantly google stuff on the job. I hate the tech interviews. Those interviews scared me off from software engineering. The personality tests are also very bias[ed].”

“I got an email that I needed to retake (the challenge). Questioning if I cheated. They made me retake the examination with someone on zoom and staring at you for 45 minutes and watched while I coded.”

HOW AND WHEN HAVE YOU FELT INCLUSION OR SUPPORT?

As we planned for this focus group, we interviewed a few CEOs and stakeholders engaged as leaders in Tech Town who have pledged to increase inclusion in their company. One of them asked, “Could you have a part in the group that asks what we are doing right?” Some of the most moving discussion described how powerful it is when POC women and gender variant POC feel seen and heard. While the bar remains frustratingly low on expectations of allies, true allies, not performative ones, can absolutely make or break an experience. Sometimes, it’s the reason that people stay at companies or it’s the reason they stay in their careers.

- Participants cite that having a mechanism to be honest and feel safe really matters.
- Black participants, particularly, cited that it was rare to be able to be honest. Their emotions are constantly policed and judged as showing up too serious, not serious enough etc.
- Mentors are essential to a participant feeling like they have a support system.
- For some participants, having a group of white allies who were willing to speak up about racism in the workplace and were ready to advocate if needed was an important resource for solidarity.
- There were participants who experienced direct therapy support avenues and there was high interest within the full group for these resources.
- Inclusive managers make or break people’s experiences in wanting to stay.
- One participant was supported in being able to log hours that they spent having to educate colleagues around issues of inclusion and racism. They felt seen and respected for that additional labor.
- Participants appreciated times when they were believed instantly on their experience instead of having to explain or cite evidence of racism. They noted this was rare.
- Participants cited that mentorship and insiders who helped them navigate the company were extremely useful.
- Companies that put the employees’ needs over the customers are noticed and appreciated.

“At x company I had a manager that saw me as a person and encourage me as a person. Currently I’m missing that. That sponsorship or mentorship is missing. Makes it difficult for me to give my 100% when I’m lacking the humanity part of my job.”

“After the election I didn’t want to go into work. I was involved in the protests downtown and they were supportive of that. I felt like I could bring myself.”
...“This white woman has been very supportive and clear she is here for me for whatever.”

“Having a manager I can trust is when I feel [supported] – just the way this company treats their people is light years away from anything I have experienced.”

“It’s clear there’s no middle ground here. It’s very clear who’s down and who’s not.”

“Having somebody else address an issue – having a cisgender straight male offer to help is really priceless. If you want to be an ally or accomplice put yourself on the line too – always check in obviously with those impacted.... ‘wait, a white person will stand up and speak for me? Didn’t even know that was an option.”

“People who have helped me figure out how to navigate promotion info – that support system has been helpful to weigh my observations against the good ole network.”

HOW ARE RACIAL MICRO-AGGRESSIONS IMPACTING CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS?

We operate in a bottom-line reality. It's common to hear that if we can't make money, we can't have any resources to hire BIPOC or do DEI work. White supremacy culture yells at us daily to operate from a scarcity mindset, that the customer is king, always right and we must prioritize their needs. But when we look at the bottom line through an abundance mindset that retains talented employees who feel included and attracts customers who feel in solidarity with the company's DEI values and vision, we have more space to prioritize the work. One thing is certain: women of color and gender variant people of color are bound to run into clients or customers who have bias or are working to discriminate against your employee of color. Who will be chosen in these moments? How will you respond? The signals a business sends in those situations will be critical.

- **Companies should create a response plan when coming out publicly for racial justice, so allies are positioned to have conversations with angry customers and manage the push back**
- **Participants felt like they were given permission to open up and be themselves inside the workplace but that rarely translated to the allowance they were given with customers and clients to be authentic and be able to interrupt microaggressions**
- **Communications teams need to prepare for online and digital stands for justice. Policies like 'do not respond to trolls' can also create a harmful silence**

“Our company slapped a Black Lives Matter symbol after George Floyd on our website. It was frustrating that they didn’t listen to me internally, but when it was in the interest of public image they did something... They are weaponizing this phrase (BLM) in order to gain themselves more money and clout while completely throwing their Black and POC workers under the bus making them talk to all these clients saying all these things.”

“I had been talking to a client and at some point, they didn’t like the casual way I was talking, and they said they didn’t want to talk to a ‘thug’ – so I tagged my manager to take care of this. I came back in the morning and both my managers had gone at this client – gone at the client to shut them down – apologized to me and asked if I need anything. I was shocked because my last company shut down a conversation I was trying to have about thug – so to have this company be willing to lose a client for setting this boundary was so different. Again – the bar is so low, but it really shows where the priorities are when companies are willing to prioritize me or my coworkers as humans and our needs over the needs of the company.”

“Are you going to continue to support clients or customers that are disrespectful for the sake of money and still playing that you are diverse and inclusive because those things can’t maintain together”

“My last several jobs I show up as myself and I wear what I want to wear, and I say what I want to say. And my last several jobs that hasn’t worked out and I got fired. So we will see. I belong in this space and I know that. ... I fucking belong like everyone else. If you don’t want to see that, that’s on you, not on me. That’s why these things are so awesome. There wasn’t a single story that didn’t resonate me. Hopefully we can do some collective healing, but also some collective ass-kicking. I hope you feel like you all belong – because we belong here at least.”

“The only part I don’t get to be myself is when I talk to clients.”

WHAT WOULD YOU TELL A JUNIOR YOU?

Being able to give advice to your past self was very powerful. It essentially unearths an entire survival guide by women and gender variant people of color for other members of our community. It summarizes the whole conversation as a non-filtered way of naming what it takes to survive.

- **Keep an eye on the environment and communication styles to pick up signals of exclusion or inclusion. It can happen as early as the interview.**
- **Get comfortable and start asking what people make in their salary or hourly wage right when you join**
- **Be tactful and candid to escalate complaints quickly. Don't wait.**
- **Get a mentor!**
- **Find supportive women in the industry**
- **Ask other employees with similar identities about their experiences, even do it informally and on the side during the interview process if you can.**
- **Don't be loyal to companies that are harming you. You are transactional to them.**
- **Don't spend so much effort code-switching.**
- **Find places where you are accepted. When you try to adapt you lose your identity in the process.**
- **Be vocal and look for safe places in companies. There are always organizations out there that are safe, or safer – Don't accept not being safe in an organization you are in.**

“I found myself in the position of being mentee but had to do work of my mentor by diagnosing myself on what could be going wrong and having to articulate solutions rather than feeling supported and safe in saying ‘I’m confused, and I don’t know where to start.’”

“The safety of a remote environment has really helped POC, especially Black folks. I feel the ability to minimize impact of microaggressions by being able to walk away.”

“To change how I talk in order to survive capitalism – there is definitely a loss for economic opportunity, and I grieve that, but also to understand that there is also losing your identity.”

WHAT WOULD BE THE OUTCOMES FOR TECH AND PORTLAND IF YOU FELT INCLUDED?

Perhaps the hardest moment in this process was watching this group of participants search for an answer to this question, and to see how rare it was that they were asked for their vision. So many participants said that this question was difficult, maybe even inappropriate. Why should it matter when the answers to this question generally never mattered before? Or why should we ask it if there were already so many unfulfilled promises? Some truly struggled to know the right answer or come up with one. How different is that for white cisgender men? What would a life be like if one felt included all the time? How would that shape you and your emotional, physical, spiritual and mental well-being?

- **What would it be like to be a national hub for tech, but not with the stress that comes with exclusion?**
- **Innovation would skyrocket because ideas would be nurtured and cultivated. A safe space would mean overall transformation.**
- **Companies would compete better internationally and understand the value of other cultures and perspectives**
- **Tech tools could be utilized to drive inclusive communities**
- **Folks would have a successful journey within the industry**
- **Would impact who we elect as our leaders**
- **Our companies would reflect our global majority and the reality of cities outside of Portland**
- **The face of management would change**
- **Wage gaps would decrease**
- **Portland would become more attractive**
- **Students would flock to Portland and their families would be safer**
- **Significant positive health impact for BIPOC women and gender non-binary folks**

“Maybe we can’t focus on this dream when we have a problem, and we can’t think after this problem, until it is addressed, maybe we are still grieving – it’s too bitter to dream. It’s almost like adding more items to a list on top of a list that hasn’t been addressed. It’s a process that involves a lot of grief.”

“Imagine what could be replaced with our emotional energy”

“If you are white, male, cisgender and straight and making more than a million you need to take a year off and let someone else take your job, or you need to make real management positions and put us in them, otherwise my grandkids will be in this same focus group with incremental changes.”

“When are POC asked about what they want? I hope we get to normalize that question and demand it.”

Resilience

Every meeting of the focus group ended in a moment of resilience. Some told their journeys of emotional and mental well-being. Some pointed to folks who inspired them or sang each other a song. Some danced it out. But every meeting we reminded each other how much we saw each other and will continue to see each other. We hope this report illuminates important truths and inspires the need to act on behalf of a more inclusive, diverse, and welcoming Portland tech industry.

“For me, to be in space with this group of folks of color in tech was one of the most powerful conversations I’ve experienced professionally. The conversation felt sacred, as if we got to shut the door on white supremacy for a few hours and finally hear the hum of our collective experience.”

As a queer indigenous gender-non-conforming facilitator of this space, I sought to hold these truths in a respectful and humble way. I want their voices to come out loud and be heard around our city and beyond, and I ask that every reader honors their vulnerability and resilience by taking action.”

**Group facilitator and
report author:**

COURT MORSE

Traded Sector Business Equity
and Inclusion Program Manager
at Prosper Portland

Sault Ste Marie tribe of
Chippewa, Anishinaabe
(They/them)



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