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Fall 12-13-2019

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Not just yet: Despite grinding it out in Silicon Valley, Asians are least likely to lead big tech companies

By [Karishma Vanjani](#)

Eight of Silicon Valley’s most prominent tech companies employ more Asians than workers from any other minority group. But that overwhelming presence in these companies has not translated into management jobs for Asians.

At [Facebook](#) about half of its engineers, analysts, designers and data scientists are Asian, but only a third of its managers are Asian. In contrast, white mid-managers and executives occupy 57 percent of management positions.

[Uber](#) is not much different. The company employs almost an equal share of white and Asian technical professionals, but data shows majority of executives and mid-managers – 58 percent of them – in Uber are white. There are two times as many white managers than Asian.

The biggest disparity is at [eBay](#). While the company’s technical team is 63 percent Asian – a percentage surpassing all the other companies’ – only one-third or 33 percent of all managers in the company are Asian. White executives outnumber Asian ones by 5 to 1.

But [Adobe’s](#) managerial table is the least diverse among all eight tech companies. Almost 70 percent of all managers in the company are white – largest share among all companies. Adobe employs almost three times as many white first or mid-managers than Asian, while Asian engineers and analysts account for about 36 percent of the company’s entry-level workforce.

These proportions have remained largely unchanged from 2016 to 2018 under the leadership of Shantanu Narayen, Adobe’s Indian-American CEO.

The findings come from an analysis of the latest employment data filed by eBay, Facebook, Adobe, Uber, Intel, Slack, Apple and Microsoft – the only eight U.S. tech giants that have released federally mandated 2018 diversity statistics.

“There is an implicit bias that Asians are not good leaders,” said Buck Gee, a Chinese-American who was promoted to vice president and general manager of Cisco’s Data Center Business Unit in 2008. Soon after, Gee realized he was the only Chinese-American executive in that department of Cisco - a company that was mostly Asian.

[Want to see how these percentages were derived? Find detailed numbers on tech giants here.](#)

Silicon Valley has long been known for the paucity of African-Americans and Hispanics in its ranks, but equally telling is the fact that the vast majority of Asians hired for non-managerial jobs are not moving up to management. The lack of diversity in the upper echelons of the companies is due in part to the maddening stereotype that Asians are too passive. White managers mentoring and supervising Asian employees face a wide gap in understanding cultural disparities. For the companies, though, tightening immigration policies can become barriers when they consider promoting Asians in the country on work visas.

Recognizing the lack of Asian leaders at Cisco, Gee joined Ascend, a non-profit organization created to advance Asian American and Pacific Islander leadership in companies.

But how many Asian executives work in Silicon Valley? The exact number appears on a U.S. government-mandated one-page form called the Employer Information Report EEO-1, which most tech companies submit every May. The form details employment information of companies with 100 or more employees by race, gender and job roles, such as professionals, first or mid-managers, and senior managers or executives.

Instead of sharing this basic data, many companies have charted out their own diversity reports, which differ from government standards in both reporting timelines and job categories. Google's diversity report adds multi-racial employees to each racial category they identify with, effectively increasing the diversity count at the company. Twitter, and Netflix are among the companies that do not release the hard stats but publish selective data on their websites under photos of diverse grinning employees.

"We feel our I&D report provides the best insights into our workforce," said a Twitter spokesman, referring to the company's Inclusion and Diversity report.

Netflix, like many others, reports employment information in the form of simplistic pie charts without any raw statistics making it difficult to validate.

"It's going to be an uphill battle to get this more granular data," said Iris Kuo, Asian-American founder of LedBetter, a research group that looks at female leadership representation across sectors. She believes companies don't report more exhaustive data because it won't reflect well on them.

But the latest EEO-1 reports of some tech mammoths, like Facebook and Microsoft, can be found buried in their webpages.

Based on these reports, Ascend introduced Management Parity Index (MPI), an indicator of the advancement of Asians from entry-level to managerial positions. This quotient is nothing but the percentage of mid-level Asian managers over the percentage of Asian professionals.

[Apple](#) has the second-highest share of Asian professionals. The reverse is true for its MPI value – second-lowest among all eight companies. MPI for Asians at Apple is 0.61. Because a value of 1 means that the representation of Asians at mid-management is 'at par' with representation at the lower level, Apple's below parity MPI points to underrepresentation at the upper hierarchical level.

Both [Microsoft](#) and [Slack](#) have an MPI of 0.77. Of all eight companies, these two come closest to striking a realistic balance.

But Slack's number for executives were particularly surprising. Data reveals that 18 of 20 top executives at Slack are white and 15 are male. There are no female executives at Slack – Asian or otherwise. Slack refused to comment at this point.

Asian women are not being promoted to management, and these companies overall employ far fewer women than men.

Netflix's diversity page does include photos of Indian women in sarees but neither Slack nor Netflix includes numbers on women of color on the company's web page.

According to EEO-1 data, four of the seven companies have more Asian than white women on their technical teams, but all seven have at least three times as many white women in their executive workforce as Asian women.

[Intel](#), a multibillion-dollar company, has the second-highest share of Asian women working as data scientists, analysts, designers, and engineers, but only one at its executive table.

Every company that has released EEO-1 data has a higher share of white men in its management ranks than women – Asian or white.

Minorities like black and Latino workers are underrepresented at each level in all seven companies. But these groups have a higher chance of being promoted to the upper ranks than Asians.

Facebook, which has the highest share of Asians, at 38 percent, has just 9 percent black and Latino workers in the entire company. But proportionally, black and Latino employees make up the same share in mid-management teams as they do in technical teams.

At eBay, Uber and Apple, percentage of black and Latino employees on mid-management seats exceed the percentage in the technical workforce.

Like Facebook, Microsoft and Intel also have almost similar representation of these minorities in the first-level management as they do in the technical workforce. But not many black and Latino workers get hired as engineers or analysts in the first place. They make up less than 10 percent of the total workforce in five of the seven companies.

So, while none of these companies hire black and Latino minorities at the rate of Asians, the minority group almost always ascends the corporate ladder to become a first-level manager or gets hired as a manager.

Asians are the least likely minority professionals to be promoted to management roles in Silicon Valley companies, as per EEO-1 figures and Ascend Foundation research.

Most Asian-Americans don't know about this problem says Gee and blames the employees. "The bigger problem is they don't complain about it."

Overcoming racial stereotypes

For Asians to challenge the status quo, they first need to battle general perceptions about their group's non-assertiveness, even those who don't display that trait.

"A lot of Asian executives have identified leadership as lacking within the community," said an Asian-American department head at Facebook. Speaking more personally, he said, "I was told by several mentors that I need to speak up."

However, he is convinced the perceived lack of leadership traits among Asians are not the only cause of the problem.

“There is no way it could be 100 percent due to a skill gap,” he adds.

When asked about Facebook, he pointed to its female C-suite pool - among them Sheryl Sandberg and Deborah Liu - as a good example of diversity. Liu, daughter of Chinese immigrants, is the vice president of Marketplace at Facebook.

Among all the other seven companies, Facebook reported the highest number of Asian female executives - 89 of them. Yet, they still remain only 8 percent of the entire board.

Even in companies such as Adobe where an Asian CEO is at the helm of it all, the numbers up top aren't commensurate with the Asian talent jammed at the bottom.

“When we go to these HR meetings, they talk about diversity as a whole; they don't talk about C-suite level,” said Amy Lee, an Asian-American senior engineering program manager at Adobe. She quickly added, “But Adobe is different.” Asian women make up less than 1/15th of Adobe's senior management – 8 out of 126 seats.

No spokesperson from Adobe commented even after repeated requests.

Immigration as a factor

While Asians tackle perceived notions on their capabilities to be future managers, Trump's tightening U.S. immigration process aggravates the problem.

Most foreign workers recruited need an employer-sponsored H-1B visa to work legally in the U.S. Since the government awards those visas through a lottery system, the fate of tech employees is based on the three chances they get to file.

EEOC considers both Asian immigrant workers and Americans of Asian ancestry, otherwise known as Asian-Americans, in the same category. However, for employers, the two groups are mutually exclusive. A visa-dependent employee is a short-term asset who in many cases is excluded from long-term plans.

“You have to first be identified as someone who can get promoted,” said Donald Tomaskovic-Devey, a professor of sociology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst who studies workplace inequality.

With H-1B visas, he said, “if you are an employee under that program, you are not looked at as permanent, so you are less likely to be promoted.”

In the third quarter of fiscal year 2019, the U.S. approved 75 percent of H-1B applications – the lowest percentage since 2015.

But immigration does not sufficiently explain the lack of Asian-Americans in leadership. Because the uncertainty around work visa rejections is a burden only carried by the immigrant worker and not an Asian-American.

Need for awareness and a mutual understanding

Much like “glass ceiling” for women, the phrase “bamboo ceiling” describes the barriers specific to Asian-Americans that contribute to the disconnect between Asian-Americans and management in the U.S.

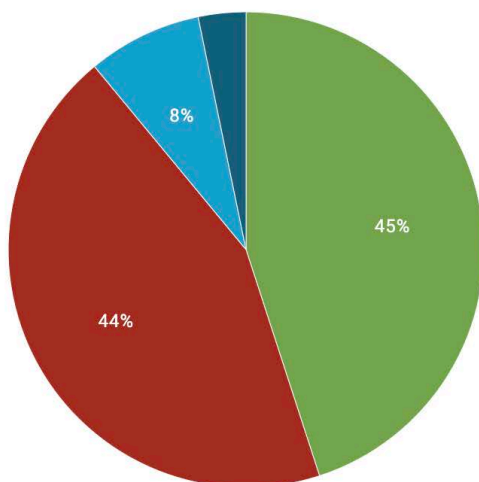
Select a company from the dropdown list to see its workforce composition

Each of the eight individual companies have a large disparity in the number of Asian employed in non-managerial vs managerial.

Uber

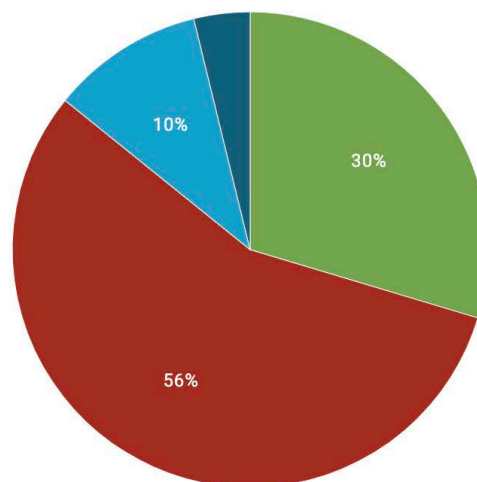
Presence of groups in non-leadership vs leadership positions in 2018

Asian white Latino and black Others



Professionals

Asian:
45%

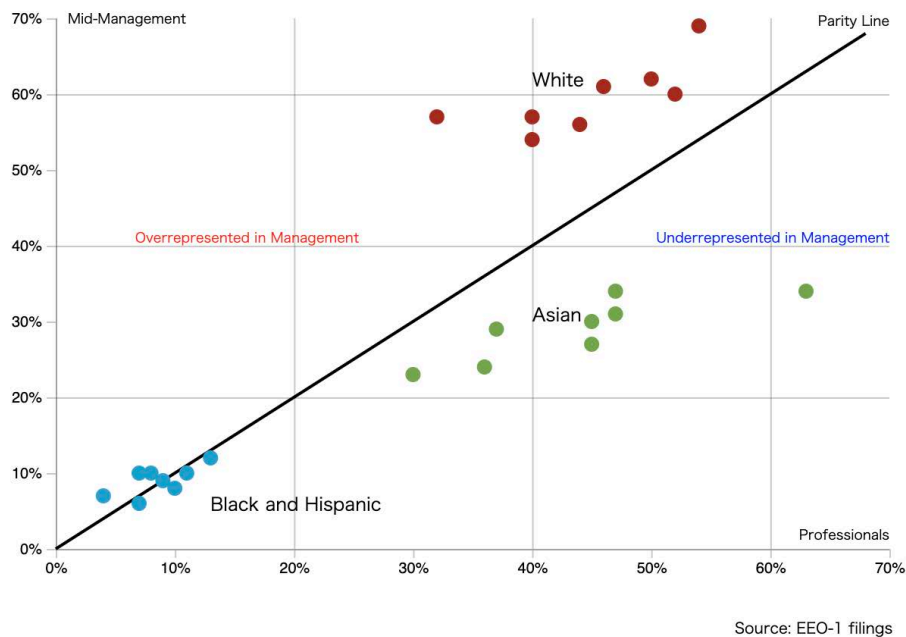


Middle Management

Asian:
30%

Asians are least likely to lead big tech companies

Asians make up a greater share of Silicon Valley's technical workforce but their representation at managerial levels is low. Move your mouse over individual dots to find the share of managerial vs non-managerial workforce at each company.



Source: EEO-1 filings

When Jane Hyun coined the phrase in her book “Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians” (Harper Business, 2006), she believed the change should come within the minority group, she said, and if its members learned how to network and manage the differences, they could succeed.

Thirteen years later, Hyun says she realizes that it is just not enough when only Asian-Americans are trying to bring about systemic change.

While the group feels the pressure to escape their cultural norms and blend in with American corporate practices, Hyun said, solving inequalities is not a one-way street.

“At the very senior management ranks, you need to be invited to the club,” she said. “At that point, it's no longer so much what you have done. You can't force yourself in. You can't bust down the door and break down the ceiling. That's where the onus has to shift.”

So as the ranks below management become increasingly diverse, managers need to develop the fluency to understand a culturally different team if its members are to progress.

Silicon Valley technology companies frequently cite a lack of qualified minority candidates as a reason for a staff that is not diverse. In 2016 Maxine Williams, global director of diversity at Facebook, wrote on the [company's website](#), “appropriate representation in technology or any other industry will depend upon more people having the opportunity to gain necessary skills through the public education system.”

But that's not the case in the group often stereotyped as the “model minority.”

Often potential employers would tell me ‘I can tell, you work really hard’ at our very first meeting says Iris Kuo, founder, LedBetter, a group advocating for gender equity at leadership level.

Asians are the fastest-growing, highest-income and best-educated racial group in the U.S., according to the Pew Research Center. In 2015, 72 percent of immigrants from India had a bachelor's degree or higher.

Hyun said she believes the burden of change is on individual managers.

It's more helpful if they create a “feedback culture where the individual on the team who is culturally different can feel safe and speak up,” she said.

Today, [Facebook's diversity page](#) has a quote from CEO Mark Zuckerberg in large letters: “Frankly, I think [diversity is] our problem to figure out. I think that responsibility rests on us and our companies in the industry to make sure that we get to that.”

Yet Facebook, half of whose Bay Area workforce is Asian, has been far from making that change. From 2016 to 2018, Facebook increased Asians in its technical workforce by 3 percent - or over 6000 employees - but Asians in its mid-management level went up by 1 percent.

While managerial training and mentoring can help employees understand the disparity, enough internal push can't be expected unless there is more noise around the issue of diversity at every level.

“I just don't think it's on the radar,” said Sharla Elegria, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Toronto, who examines inequality in the tech workforce. “Asian men are getting paid quite well,” she added, “in a sort of aggregated way.”

Asians stuck in the ranks, continue undeterred

After four years of thinking about moving home, Hemant Mohapatra, originally from India, decided he wanted out.

Mohapatra, who formerly worked at Google and Andreessen Horowitz, a top venture capital firm in the Silicon Valley, had spent 15 fruitful years in the U.S. coding and investing in coders. Yet in 2018 he bought his ticket out the door to build a future in Bengaluru, India's IT hub.

Before he flew out, he used LinkedIn to call on industry veterans and engineers residing in California who were looking to move back to India for a meetup. More than 160 showed up.

Top talent from teams like Google Brain, which consists of AI researchers to Uber's autonomous driving team, showed interest. "I was surprised by the quality," Mohapatra said.

"Many had a master's degree and a Ph.D.," he said. "One-third were willing to move within six months." He said he believed the high turnout was due mostly to the general unhappiness the workers felt about their American lifestyles rather than concerns about professional growth.

Like Mohapatra, Kallappa Pattada, who held a senior management role in an Arizona company, moved back to India a decade ago for personal reasons. Now, Pattada also recruits talent for an aerospace company in India.

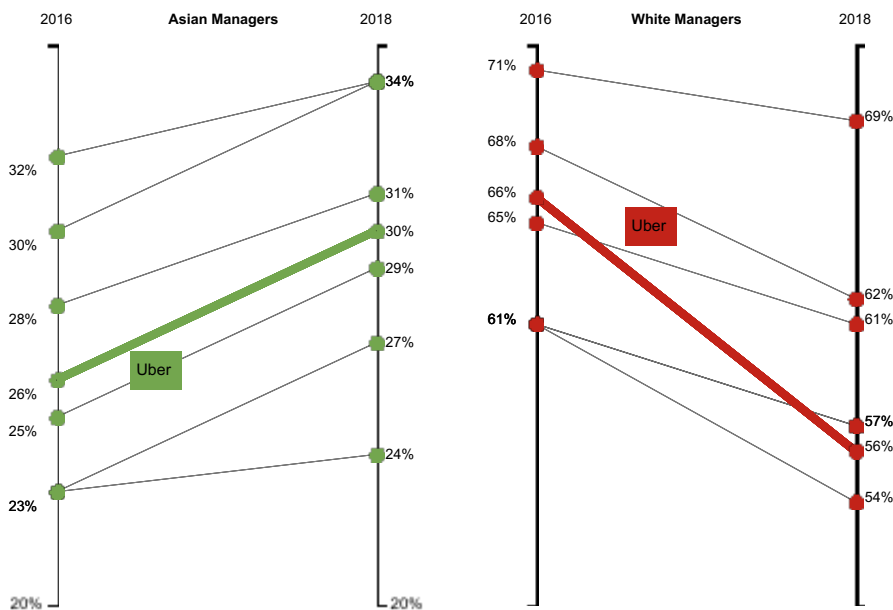
Many people from the U.S. apply for positions that he advertises, but rarely does anyone cite stalled professional growth as a reason for the move. "People come to India for a variety of reasons," Pattada said, "but professional reasons are rarely one."

Changing the future of leadership

Ultimately, immigrants or not, Asians will continue fueling the economy and in the coming years companies will just have to make room for them in the upper ranks.

Percentage of first-level managers in 2016 vs 2018

Asian managers have steadily increased, while white managers have been relatively flat in the past 2 years. Move your mouse over individual lines to find out the incremental change in leadership at each company.



Tech giants attempt to narrow the gap through employee resource groups and other diversity Initiatives. Adobe, for instance, runs an Asian Employee Network and Intel's Chinese Employee Network (ICEN) is just one of many Asian support groups chartered by the company.

But what gets measured gets done.

Much like Ledbetter, there are activists, news organisations, investors and even employees pushing for granular diversity data. With more scrutiny around this issue, more companies will have to release employment details in the near future.

That said, EEO-1 reports fail to include numbers on workers that are disabled, not conforming to the male, female gender identity or sexual orientation. While they don't provide the complete picture, these federal reports are still the most regulated and standardized way to compare progress, if any.

"Unfortunately, the data is so scarce that we are grasping for every crumb we can get," said Kuo commenting on the limited data found on EEO-1 reports.

The data - albeit slowly - shows some improvement,

While diversity for Asians at the upper hierarchical level remained poor, it's evident that white managers in tech companies were slowly decreasing.

Seven out of eight companies dropped the percentage of white managers, from 2016 to 2018. eBay and Facebook decreased white managers by nearly 25 percent during the same period - the largest share among all.

"I think that the long but slow and uneven march of history is towards less bias [based on] race and ethnicity," said Donald Tomaskovic-Devey, a professor of sociology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Disclosing raw diversity numbers is still just one-step toward accountability and there's a long way to go.

It's difficult to take action if diversity is not part of your quarterly goals says Amy Westmoreland, who studied the influence of race on workplace advancement at the University of Michigan.

Suggesting the need for internal accountability, she added, "Diversity in companies and universities is treated as side projects."