

At liberal tech companies, those who disagree on politics are attacked and black-listed

By
Karen Weise



Illustration: 731; Getty

Shashi Ramchandani, who manages a team of engineers at Google, has never been shy about being a conservative working in Silicon Valley. He showed coworkers emails he exchanged with Ivanka Trump after he mailed her photos he took at the Republican convention, and on election night, he texted colleagues snapshots from the floor of Trump’s victory party in New York City. “They saw me first as a Googler, then as a conservative,” Ramchandani said.

In his 14 years at the company, he said he hasn't felt like he had to keep his mouth shut—until last month when Google [fired an engineer](#) who penned a

memo saying biological differences partly explain why more men work in tech than women.

Politics often don't mix easily at work, but it's particularly fraught in tech, where free thinking is prized yet the workforce is predominantly liberal. Now, as President Trump stirs up the culture wars at the same time as Silicon Valley faces a backlash for being so white and so male, conservatives in tech have their guards up like never before.

Ramchandani, whose parents came to the U.S. from India, wasn't a fan of the memo. He particularly objected to its assumption that Google's hiring favors women and minorities, which ran counter to his experience as a hiring manager. But he was also "extremely disappointed" Google fired the engineer. Ramchandani felt, for the first time, that he had to reconcile his love of Google with his conservative support for free speech and distaste for bureaucracy.

Tech has seen ousters for unpopular political or cultural views before, like when the chief technology officer at Business Insider was [forced out](#) in 2013 over old racist and homophobic tweets, and the next year when the CEO of Mozilla stepped down after facing criticism for a \$1,000 donation he'd made to a group that opposed gay marriage. But those were executives. The Google memo, which exposed a rank-and-file engineer exposed in a public way, hit closer to home for many conservatives, who said the current environment is more hostile than ever before. "Before it was, 'I don't agree with you,' but now it has evolved into this new thing that is much more aggressive, 'don't even say something that is counter to what I believe,'" says Aaron Ginn, co-founder of Lincoln Network, which looks to connect conservative techies with government and political work.

Some fear losing their jobs while others worry they'll be ostracized by colleagues. (That's in a sector where [76 percent of technical jobs are held by men](#), and blacks and Latinos make up only 5 percent of the workforce.) Adding to the stress is Silicon Valley's penchant for open floor plans, which make it hard to tune out an officemate on a rant, and the way companies encourage workers to socialize and bring their whole selves to their job.

Several tech workers said they don't post about politics on Facebook, where they're friends with many coworkers. "My wife is very paranoid about me sharing my opinion, even on private WhatsApp groups with my friends," said a former Amazon engineer who now works at Oracle. Most employees who spoke asked not to be identified because they worried about their job security.

An engineer at Microsoft Corp. first realized just how in the minority his political views were back in 2004, when George W. Bush was up for re-election. At lunch one day, his coworkers one by one slammed the Republican candidate. The engineer, just a few years out of college, recalls saying, "I'm probably going to vote for him." He wasn't prepared for the response. "They said, 'You stupid person. How can you think about that?'" Things got so heated, he said, his manager sent a memo to his 100-person team, that said, in essence, "Hey, cool it. We have engineering tasks we have to focus on."

As contentious as 2004 may have been, it's nothing compared to the polarizing election and presidency of Trump. The Microsoft engineer said now it's even harder to have a productive political conversation, as colleagues lump him with a president whom he said doesn't represent his conservative values, threatening the ability to do his job well. "Thirty years ago, there was somebody in their garage doing something amazing," he said. "Now these projects have thousands of people on them. People have to work with you and like you. If you get labeled as a bad person because you voted the wrong way and start getting ostracized, it will impede on your job because most people can't flip modes. They can't have a heated political debate with you and then flip modes and have a heated technical debate with you."

Google's office felt like a funeral the day after Trump was elected, according to an employee who describes himself as libertarian. "A lot of people didn't come," he said. "The people who did were very quiet, almost like their aunt died."

This Google employee believes the now infamous memo was relatively well-reasoned and that Silicon Valley's diversity initiatives ignore data that conflict with their ideology. He's regularly reminded of what he refers to as the company's "social justice agenda," like when he gets corporate email touting a donation to a non-profit that supports minorities, or hears an executive talk about hoping to have half of his leadership team be female, which he believes shows the company prioritizes some groups over others. He worries that the company is under pressure to reach 50-50 gender equity too fast, and it will impede the promotion opportunities for men. "Just do the math," he says.

The Oracle engineer said the bro culture in tech is real and knows of female colleagues who face sexism, but with women making up [fewer than a fifth](#) of computer science graduates, the goal of reaching anything close to a 50-50 split feels "misguided" in the near term. "Some people are better than others, and when I work with a woman who is below average, I always have a thought that maybe she is a diversity hire, and I don't think that's healthy," he said. He bristles slightly when he hears about female colleagues being heavily recruited by top firms.

Some confide in colleagues they consider friends. One liberal Google product manager said a conservative teammate who used to work at Goldman Sachs told him the environment now reminds him of his time in banking during the Occupy Wall Street protests, when he tried to lay low.

Ramchandani, who said he's fiscally conservative but socially liberal, said the pressure on conservatives is "less of a Google thing than a Silicon Valley thing." In the suburban Bay Area at large, he said, "I had more trouble coming out as a conservative than I did with my race or orientation or any other minority status." He believes Google should recognize his fellow conservatives more but is nervous that conservatives are becoming more polarized themselves in recent weeks. He said on internal Google employee email groups for conservatives, he noticed "a few loud voices" stoking an "us versus them" mentality, for example contemplating legal action against the company. "I found that distasteful because it's biting the

hand that feeds you,” he said. “We are here to do a job not expound political values.”

The Oracle engineer, like some others, have opted to lay low during this tense time. “Work is work, and not everything needs to be about politics,” he said. While he sees liberal colleagues who sit nearby don’t seemingly need to filter their comments, he’s decided it’s not worth engaging, adding “I don’t want to be known as that guy who wants to argue with everybody.”