**OPINION ARTICLE FOR MEDIA USE WITHOUT EMBARGO
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**Closing the gender gap in the ICT industry through mentorship**

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**JOHANNESBURG - Over the past decade, transformative technological advancements, such as smartphones, e-commerce, artificial intelligence, and 5G, have revolutionised our daily lives. These innovations have opened up a world of possibilities beyond what we could have imagined a mere ten years ago. However, this technological progress has also highlighted a significant gender gap. Women remain vastly underrepresented in the ICT sector, particularly in technical roles.**

The root causes of this disparity are multifaceted. A survey conducted by [Fortune.com](http://fortune.com/2014/10/02/women-leave-tech-culture/) in the United States found that women often leave the tech industry due to discomfort in environments that feel explicitly or implicitly discriminatory. Many women report facing discrimination based on age, race, sexuality, gender, and motherhood. Although the U.S. is geographically distant from South Africa, women's challenges in the ICT sector are strikingly similar.

According to the 2024 ICT Skills Survey by the Institute of Information Technology Professionals South Africa (IITPSA), women make up only 13% of STEM graduates in South Africa, significantly lower than the global average of 35%. The survey identifies numerous challenges contributing to this gender gap, including misconceptions about women's technical abilities, discrimination, and harassment. These issues perpetuate negative stereotypes, create hostile work environments, and foster unconscious bias against women.

Notably, the survey highlights the absence of strong role models and mentors who understand women's unique experiences in ICT. Having been on both sides of the mentoring process during my over 25 years in the ICT industry, I can attest to the profound impact of mentorship. As a mentor, I have had the opportunity to share my knowledge and experience while learning from others. As a mentee, I have gained invaluable insights that have shaped my career and personal life.

I clearly remember my first experience with mentorship. After I started working in the ICT industry as a marketing and communications specialist, I was filled with noble career aspirations and a desire to excel in my field. However, I lacked a clear plan to achieve these ambitions. Fortunately, a colleague agreed to mentor me during my second work week. With her extensive knowledge of ICT and years of experience, she became an invaluable guide.

The first thing my mentor did was instil self-belief in me. Newly minted into the ICT sector and lacking industry knowledge and work experience in this field, I initially struggled with self-confidence, especially when working alongside seasoned professionals. Over time, she taught me the importance of continuous learning, effective communication, and networking. Her insights challenged my perspectives and motivated me to strive for excellence consistently. These skills have proven invaluable throughout my career.

Conversely, I have also had the privilege of mentoring others. One of my most rewarding experiences involved guiding junior colleagues struggling with confidence and gaining their footing in the workplace. I helped them recognise their potential and develop a growth mindset by offering encouragement, personalised advice, and sharing my journey. Witnessing their transformation into a confident and motivated professionals reaffirmed the significant impact of mentorship on personal growth and resilience.

The power of mentorship in career development cannot be overstated. It provides essential guidance, support, and insights that help individuals navigate challenges, overcome obstacles, and accelerate personal and professional growth. Mentoring can occur in various settings, from workplaces to educational institutions, and can be a crucial tool for fostering a learning culture, promoting diversity and inclusion, and driving innovation within the ICT industry.

To effectively address the gender imbalance in ICT, engaging mentors at every level is vital. Experienced professionals can guide and support newer employees, while schools and colleges can inspire young females to pursue careers in ICT. Importantly, mentorship should begin early in a girl's life, long before she reaches the age where societal pressures might lead her to believe that technology isn't for women.

**We have many professionals who can mentor, and this could be as simple as working with schools and colleges to inspire and educate young females to choose a career in ICT.**

It's crucial to note, as Monika Mueller points out in Forbes magazine, that while women role models at the top of their careers can be inspiring, they may seem unattainable to young girls just beginning to consider a career in technology. Women earlier in their careers can offer a more relatable and attainable vision of success.

Whether through mentoring or creating networking opportunities, various strategies can be implemented to address the gender imbalance in the ICT sector. Additionally, today's technology allows mentoring to be conducted remotely, expanding accessibility.

In conclusion, the benefits of mentorship are vast, and a concerted effort is required to unlock its full potential. Through mentorship, we can work towards closing the gender gap in the ICT industry and fostering a more inclusive and innovative future.

The benefits of mentorship are endless; we must make a concerted effort to realise them.

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**EDITORS' NOTES:**

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