

My Experience Raising Money While Pregnant

An Open Letter in response to “Silicon Valley V.C. Firm Can’t Find Any Women,” an article published by Vanity Fair.

By: Caitlin MacGregor

Dear Sir Michael Moritz,

Thank you for your updated statement to VF.com clarifying that “I know there are many remarkable women who would flourish in the venture business. We're working hard to find them and would be ecstatic if more joined Sequoia or other firms.”

How are you working hard to find them? I ask because I believe it is precisely how you are looking that is the problem. I believe you are still falling victim to the same line of thinking that was revealed in the original [article published](#) on VanityFair.com entitled, “Silicon Valley V.C. Firm Can’t Find Any Women.” Sir Moritz, as chairman of venture-capital firm Sequoia Capital, you said, “Oh, we look very hard. In fact we just hired a young woman from Stanford who’s every bit as good as her peers, and if there are more like her, we’ll hire them. What we’re not prepared to do is to lower our standards.”

If that is the criteria you are using to hire, then you are not looking very hard at all and if it’s your job to “field the very best team”, then you are failing.

My Name is Caitlin MacGregor, I am the CEO and co-founder of [Plum.io](#) and matching the right candidates to companies is exactly what my team and I have spent the last four years doing. Unfortunately, the flaws in the hiring system that have lead to the *false* conclusion that there just are not enough women to hire, are the same flaws that were present in my personal struggle of raising capital for my startup. The ultimate flaw is that the criteria used to determine success is being judged by a specific pattern- a pattern that is inherently flawed and one that most women do not mirror.

I ask that you start by defining what the “standards” are that you don’t want “lowered.” If it’s simply “fabulously bright, driven women who are really interested in technology, very hungry to succeed” then I would argue you need to re-evaluate why you specified “Stanford” or vaguely put “can meet our performance standards. I’ll explain why these success measures are problematic.

- 1) “Stanford” Education. Someone who scored a 90% on an academic test does not necessarily reflect how he or she will perform at a job. In fact, what a person studied or how they performed in their post-secondary education does not determine how they will succeed once they enter the workforce. You should be aware of that since you have a History degree and feel you are in a position to speak on women who have graduated with a STEM education. When you walk through the tech companies in NYC you will see a higher concentration of women than in any other tech hub in

North America. Why? Because women were already in the industries that over the last 15 plus years have gone digital. When those businesses went online, those women stayed and grew with the business. My background is in International Development, yet the three businesses that I helped build all had backgrounds that were completely unrelated to what I studied in school. Therefore, it was not our backgrounds that made us successful, it was our work ethic and our determination.

- 2) "... can meet our performance standards..." – how do you know if an employee can or cannot meet performance standards if you do not give them the opportunity to perform? Are you looking at how they performed in their last job? Because how someone performed at another company will vary dramatically based on the role, size and culture of the company, the manager's leadership, etc. It is a false guarantee that may potentially be weeding out the right candidates.
- 3) "...bright, driven women... very hungry to succeed" - here you are talking about a candidates attitude. If 89% of failed hires in the workforce are due to attitude, then why are you so strongly emphasizing the importance of skill first and essentially eliminating a huge percentage of strong candidates? If you are truly looking for "fabulously bright, driven women [who are]very hungry to succeed", then that is an attitude based hiring measurement and resumes can't measure drive or hunger to succeed. We decide within the first 90 seconds if we like the person. We'll decide between two candidates based on what they wear. If you want bright and driven women, then measure it, before the bias takes over!

If you are still uneasy with this argument, then let me ask you this—who is the female equivalent to Mark Zuckerberg? You know the type, the cool entrepreneur in his dark jeans, sneakers and hoodie or the black mock turtle neck a la Steve Jobs. When a woman is pitching on stage she doesn't have a female equivalent, "startup uniform" that signals to the audience that she could be the next Mark Zuckerberg. For a female entrepreneur, what pattern is she to match? How does she know that she is "fitting in" with the industry? Who does she emulate or model her path after? Who does she go to in order to learn by example when overcoming certain biases attributed to being a woman and an entrepreneur?

Marissa Mayer and Sheryl Sandberg are definitely providing a voice of encouragement, but they have not had the global impact that employers or investors can use to recognize success in other women and cause them to think, "you know what? She is worth taking a risk on." This has caused for a major problem in the hiring process because **men may be judged based on potential or gut instinct, whereas women will be judged on absolutely everything else.** For example, a man may be hired or invested in by another man because he is relatable, he reminds the man of himself when he was younger or the employer can see a "young Steve jobs", because he is reflecting a pattern that has proven to be a success and due to that reflection, the employer or investor is willing to take more of a risk on them. Women are rarely given that leap of faith.

I want to show people, like Sir Michael Moritz, that the problem isn't you not being able to find women in Silicon Valley, it's that you are failing to SEE the women in Silicon Valley and I will explain why that is.

Female entrepreneurs (that's right, we are right here Sir Michael) face many challenges when trying to be visible in the tech industry. One of the early challenges that I encountered was learning how to present my team and myself to potential investors. This was a

complicated task for me because 1) I am a female CEO and co-founder of the company and 2) I happen to be married to one of the other co-founders, Neil MacGregor.

In the early days of presenting my company I would introduce myself and my two cofounders. Immediately I would be questioned as to if Neil was my husband or brother and within the first 90 seconds I was judged based on that relationship. People would think about if they could work with their wives (and would comment as to how they could never), or they would have talk about the fear of divorce or reference a past investment with a married couple that didn't go well. If I had simply been a 25-year-old single male, I am sure they wouldn't have brought up every past, failed investment with a 25-year-old male. So I started presenting alone and the difference was night and day. After I had secured a strong impression of myself and the business, I would then introduce them to my cofounders and disclose that I had worked with my husband through two businesses over the last 7 years and how after working together for almost 3 years we decided to go into business together- and that was 4 years ago. By simply framing the situation differently, I removed the problem 90% of the time. The fact that I even had to address my marriage in a business pitch is a prime example of disadvantages that women face in business. Had it been my husband making the pitch, there would have been no need to address his marriage to his co-founder or he could have easily brushed it off and continued on.

I have also experienced the criticism of being "too assertive" or "too emotional," on top of being "too married to one of the co-founders," causing investors to back out before they're even in. Unfortunately, these predisposed biases make female entrepreneurs like myself have to work especially hard and tread very carefully to exist in this industry.

Truth be told, I am actually an award winning presenter and some of the most amazing compliments that I have received in my career have pertained to my presenting skills- *Some people are CEOs because they are founders, but you demonstrate that you are truly meant to be a CEO.*

Despite being awarded for my presenting skills and being acknowledged as a successful CEO, fundraising has been an 18 month long struggle for me. I hear anything from "We like you, we like your business, but call us when you are doing \$5M in revenue," to "How do we know that you are the market leader?" Because of this, it took me over a year to raise \$1.2M. plus 500K from hustling like crazy to get government grants, I had people telling me to just stop fundraising. Obviously something wasn't working and it was truly frustrating. Why was I not being seen? I came across several studies, and I don't have definite proof, but I'm pretty sure I encountered this bias, whether conscious or not, first hand:

[Investors preferred entrepreneurial ventures pitched by a man than an identical pitch from a woman](http://bit.ly/1NVYcUt) by a rate of 68% to 32% in a study conducted jointly by HBS, Wharton, and MIT Sloan. - Rachel Thomas (<http://bit.ly/1NVYcUt>)

[In 248 performance reviews of high-performers in tech](http://bit.ly/1NVYcUt), negative personality criticism (such as abrasive, strident, or irrational) showed up in 85% of reviews for women and just 2% of reviews for men. It is ridiculous to assume that 85% of women have personality problems and that only 2% of men do. - Rachel Thomas (<http://bit.ly/1NVYcUt>)

I fit the pattern on those fronts. Employers will often choose one candidate over another by focusing on trivial aspects (like what she is wearing), and allow these judgments to dismiss

a potential client. In doing so, investors may once again find themselves wondering where all of the women CEOs are, when in fact they are subconsciously overlooking them.

I was fortunate enough to spend some time with [Springboard Enterprise](#), a highly-vetted expert network of innovators, investors and influencers who are dedicated to building high-growth technology-oriented companies led by women” and it was there that I found the answer to the question I asked earlier- who is the female equivalent to Mark Zuckerberg? I now know what she looks like, how she dresses and how she acts. At springboard when my cohort of CEOs entered the Bootcamp to get mentoring from 40 successful women who had run and sold successful businesses, what stood out immediately, that the 10 of us were all wearing black, and yet the 40+ women were all wearing bright colourful dresses. If I hadn't been selected as part of these 700 alumni, I would have had no idea. Because, who was going to show me? This was an important discovery as I was about to venture into another challenging journey in my life and with my company. This particular challenge is another one that contributes to false idea that there are no women CEOs in the tech industry because it causes us to once again be overlooked and disregarded and that challenge is pregnancy.

What was going to happen to my growing company when at 33 years old, I have a three-year-old child, and I realize I can't put off having a second child any longer? This would be another challenge that could make an otherwise cause a valuable investment opportunity in my company by a potential investor, fall to the wayside. Fortunately, thanks to the network of successful women CEOs I met through Springboard Enterprise, I now knew what a female CEO looked like in order to be truly seen in the tech industry but unfortunately men like Sir Michael Moritz still did not; regardless, I took charge. We had enough confidence in the business that we doubled down, putting all of our eggs in one basket and we got pregnant with our second child...and yep, all of this happened while I was in the middle of fundraising. I was now concerned that I would return back to the days when I was only being judged for my gender as a CEO and being part of a married, co-founding team rather than my abilities as a leader and businesswoman. I wanted people to get to know me and my business and the pregnancy to be secondary.

The first thing I did was call up Ally Downey from [WeeSpring](#), who was in the process of writing her book *'Here's the Plan: Your Practical, Tactical Guide to Advancing Your Career Through Pregnancy and Parenthood.'* She was one of the other nine amazing CEOs that were part of my Springboard cohort. Ally had become pregnant with her second child while running her startup and I knew that if anyone would have answers on how to break the news to your investors, fundraise pregnant and every other worry I could have, she would be the one to ask. Ally's advice was this: if I treat it like it's no big deal, so will they. You should not act like it was something to apologize for or justify. When explaining the situation to Ally I would talk about how it is my second child, so we already knew how to run our business with a newborn as we had just started Plum.io when my first was born. How I was confident that the company wouldn't suffer. How I had a plan to make sure I was meeting all my responsibilities. Ally continued to stress that if I try and justify it, it could worry investors. I needed to treat the pregnancy like it was no big deal and others would do the same. And do you know what? She was right!

When it came to dealing with another challenge of being a female CEO in the tech industry who was now pregnant, there are a couple things to note that worked for me. I'm a curvy woman to begin with, so I had options that other women won't have the luxury of repeating.

It was the first time in my life that I was truly grateful for not being a size 6. I was able to dress in black clothing with a brightly coloured sweater that framed my body like two panels and I wore a brightly coloured statement necklace. My stomach was the last place anyone was looking. Often I had the benefit of stepping forward, shaking hands and immediately sitting at a table with my bump nicely concealed below. Being pregnant wasn't part of someone's first impression until I was about seven months pregnant. When I would disclose it, and I always would with serious investors, there was a sign of surprise because they hadn't noticed. By then, they had already gotten through the 90 seconds where they had made up their minds about me. If I saw my investors in person I told them- otherwise they received the news in my quarterly investor update, four days after my son was born in July. We've had enormous growth and success, so instead of justifying that work wouldn't suffer, I just showed them. The pregnancy did wonders for my business- Other than really not fitting the mold of a CEO in the tech industry and being tired from all the travel I did during the fundraising, it was having the baby that actually changed my approach in business and it worked.

I want to leave those of you who think like Sir Michael Moritz with one final thought. If you think that there are no women in the tech industry perhaps what you are really feeling is that there are no women that satisfy *your idea* of a CEO. And, if I have not proven how wrong you are by now, then let me conclude by saying we have a successful business that has seen 2.6x revenue in the last year, so in terms of a *fabulously bright, driven [woman] who [is] really interested in technology [and] very hungry to succeed*, I'm right here. What's more driven than building a business and growing a human being at the same time? Sir Michael Moritz, I don't want you to hire me, but I think you could benefit from Plum.io and oh yeah, if you're looking to fund one of those female run tech businesses, again I'm right here.

Sincerely,

Caitlin MacGregor