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Strength in numbers: Getting more women into tech

By John Pletz   June 18, 2014

Before Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg said to lean in and Yahoo's Marissa Mayer showed she could have a baby and the corner office, too, a trio of Chicago women were taking aim at dismantling the boys' club that is tech.

Attract, Retain, Advance (ARA) now has more than 1,000 women who have participated in networking or other events since early last year.

A Chicago-based group is hosting a **discussion tonight** about breakthroughs by women in tech, as well as ways to advance and retain female talent, featuring **Sandee Kastrul**, president of i.c. Stars; **Harper Reed** of Modest Inc., **Sharon Schneider**, CEO of Moxie Jean; and **Nancy Sullivan**, CEO of Illinois Ventures. The event is from 5:30 to 8:30 at **Studio Paris Club** in River North.

The group traces its roots to a dinner eight years ago attended by three women who were working in tech: Jane Gilligan Hamner, now managing director at tech-recruiting firm Harvey Nash USA; Megan McCann, president of recruiting firm McCann Partners; and Leslie Vickrey, CEO of ClearEdge Marketing.

"We recognized a need to attract more women to the field," Ms. McCann said. "It just kind of grew. One of the first dinners was 10 of us. Now we have to find restaurants that can hold 60."

The dinners, now held quarterly as the Chicago Executive Women Networking Group, attract women mainly in roles of director, vice president or C-suite.

ARA, which features the mentoring program, is largely focused on tech, with about 40 percent of the members in technical jobs. It has made more than 100 matches between mentors and proteges. Chicago-based ARA has launched chapters in Seattle and New York.

"We've come a long way," says Ms. McCann. "I still believe there's a deficit. We're still not on a level playing field."

The recent controversy surrounding a pre-party connected to the **Techweek conference** was seen as an example of attitudes toward women in tech that still need to change.

"These are issues that have been here all along," Ms. McCann said. "They need to be addressed."

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