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Thinx: A Company Culture Gone Wrong, Employees Allege



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Just weeks after Uber's sexism scandal, yet another company has joined the ranks of young, hip companies that are secretly exploiting and abusing employees; this time, though, the scandal is more A Million Little Pieces than The Marines— Thinx, the feminist period underwear creators, famous for their grapefruits-that-resemble-vaginas subway ads, is facing allegations of exploiting and verbally abusing employees. While outwardly the company is a force of relentlessly positive feminism, the internal culture is apparently a much different story. Thinx is rife with office politics, inconsistent HR policies, and even name calling (CEO Miki Agrawal allegedly called one of her employees a "bitch"), making it part of the long, long list of startups sans HR that foster abusive internal company cultures.

Thinx joins #uber as having a notoriously bad workplace culture

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This is not an issue that starts or ends with Thinx; it is an issue of egomaniacal, bombastic, volatile leaders who cannot draw lines between their personal and professional lives. It's an issue of startups not implementing HR policies to protect their employees under the guise of promoting "growth". It is an issue of privileged leaders appropriating movements for marketing purposes while not embodying them in their company's internal cultures.

Company Culture Starts With The CEO

Let's start with the first: the CEO. A few days after Uber's initial scandal in which a former employee laid out the myriad ways in which the company had allowed sexism and sexual harassment to occur, the CEO of Uber (Travis Kalanick) was caught on video loudly arguing with a driver over wages. And insulting his employees is the least of what Kalanick is known for: he also famously referred to his increased success with women post-Uber as "Boob-er" and "women on demand."

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Did this bring the company down? No. But while many talented, qualified women think twice before applying to Uber? Absolutely. When reports of toxic workplace culture surface, applicants start to look elsewhere. After all, if you're qualified to work at a place like Uber, you're probably qualified to work at a similar-level company that has great corporate culture.

Although Miki Agrawal's indiscretions were much more private than Kalanick's, they are perhaps even worse. She allegedly fostered a culture in which women were fired without even being told (their emails would simply stop working), employees were paid far below industry standards, and parental leave was practically nonexistent— all of which has resulted in what one employee referred to as the Glassdoor wars (wherein employees would leave scathing reviews of Thinx, and then Kalanick would bully other employees into responding with positive ones).

Employees Need HR

Google had 63 employees before its first HR hire in 1999. And as in so many other respects, Google proved to be the golden standard that other startups turned to. As a result, implementing HR early on has been seen by some as "old", "stodgy", a symbol of "cube life"— a life that startups espouse to reject in favor of disruption and innovation.

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The problem with a lack of HR is that more often than not women get left behind. In fact, 40% of women in tech are afraid to even mention their families at work. Without protective policies in place, women are scared to start families, to complain about sexism in the workplace, or to fight against malpractice. Couple that with the fact that the tech world is claustrophobically tight knit, and it's pretty obvious why Silicon Valley has had so many issues with gender inequality.

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External Culture Should Match Internal Employee Experience

As this year's Super Bowl commercials exemplified, "resistance-washing" has successfully infiltrated mainstream marketing. From The New York Times, to Hyatt, to GE, massive corporations have hopped onto the "cause" train. This is certainly not a bad thing— when causes go mainstream they are more likely to head into lawmakers' offices. However, when a company purports to care about women, trans people, underserved populations, health care, or freedom of speech (among others), it's vitally important that they espouse these same values internally.

As Uber and Thinx have proven, in this day and age things don't stay quiet for long. You may be able to temper the rise of your employees' voices through fake Glassdoor reviews for a while, but sooner or later someone will go public, and the revelation often snowballs into a series of accusations against your organization. The results are not just bad press and a maelstrom of online hate; it's also a reduction in the quality and diversity of applicants that you will see. And at the end of the day, your company is only as good as its employees.

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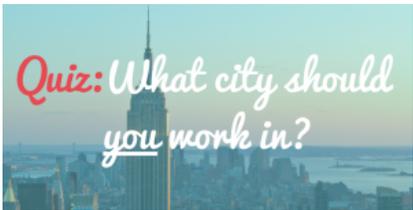
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