

Perth startup tackles unconscious bias and diversity in the workplace through VR

Diversify VR is looking to tackle 'people issues' one by one through immersive learning.

By [Tas Bindi](#) | July 19, 2017 -- 02:24 GMT (12:24 AEST) | Topic: [Start-Ups](#)

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Scientists and programmers have been investigating the possibilities of virtual reality (VR) since the 1960s, but it's only in the last few years that the technology started to gain mainstream traction, with VR applications spanning industries such as education, healthcare, and real estate.

Two-year-old Australian startup [Diversify VR](#) is betting on VR's potential to deliver workplace training programs to greater effect than traditional modes of delivery, particularly when it comes to soft skills.

Founded by Lucie Hammond, Diversify delivers custom-made workplace training programs via mobile applications that are compatible with Google's Cardboard and Oculus Gear VR headsets. Users are immersed in 360-degree videos of workplace scenarios, so that they can have hands-on learning experiences, virtually.

Diversify's [first program](#) addresses diversity and unconscious bias in the workplace. Users are called into a team meeting with the manager to discuss a mandate from the CEO, and together with the user's virtual team, the user is required to come up with solutions, playing along as the story unfolds.

Users interact and respond in the moments they feel unconscious bias is present and make a call. They are rated at the end of a scene and provided an emoji -- a neutral face, smiley face, or beaming face -- depending on how many biased moments they identified. Users are also provided with explanations around the biased behaviour and its impact in the workplace.

"Diversity training in virtual reality, which enables the participant to actively 'step into another person's shoes', could be a powerful tool for raising awareness and feeling the impact of bias first-hand, before work culture, productivity, and reputation take a hit, as we saw with Susan Fowler's account of her time at Uber," Hammond told ZDNet.

"[The] training also gives individuals the tools to speak out against bias, and sends a clear message to any workforce undergoing training that frank discussion around bias is needed to initiate positive cultural change."

Hammond, who previously worked in corporate communications and change management, said change in workplace diversity has been "epically slow" over the last 30 years, despite growing publicity around the business case for diverse workforces and the economic imperative to better utilise the female half of the population.

Citing predictions from the McKinsey Global Institute, Hammond noted that the global economy could [grow by \\$28 trillion by 2025](#) if women participated in the labor force to the same degree as men.

She did, however, acknowledge the efforts of a number of large corporations that have set themselves "ambitious" diversity targets in a bid to facilitate change. For example, Intel was one of the first companies to make its diversity stats publicly available through its EEO-1 reports filed with the US government. At the 2015 International Consumer Electronics Show, the chip giant's CEO Brian Krzanich proclaimed on stage that the company would achieve full representation by 2020.

To further demonstrate its commitment to the cause, Intel has also pledged [\\$300 million](#) on initiatives to increase diversity.

Earlier this year, GE [announced](#) its intention to hire 20,000 women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) roles by 2020, while Accenture committed to growing its female workforce to [at least 40 percent](#) worldwide by the same year.

On why the startup chose virtual reality as the mode of delivery, Hammond said the four "most compelling" problems solved by learning through virtual reality are cost, access, engagement, and measurement.

She added that VR can "accelerate the learning experience" and "intensify retention in a way that is accessible and measurable for the enterprise".

"It allows learning through doing, so it's a virtual hands-on way to learn, but without the real-world risks or consequences. It's highly engaging and impactful, partially because it's got such realistic imagery that it uses, so it allows the brain to retain the knowledge more and for longer, [while] reducing the cost of learning because less refreshes are needed and less often," Hammond said.

Additionally, she said that users are "enclosed in their headset", so their attention cannot be diverted away while they're "in the zone".

"Also, completion rates are higher and I think that's a result of the medium being engaging, and possibly so novel that it's really holding people's attention right until the end of the 10-minute snap training. They have more of a chance to absorb the learning rather than dropping out halfway through that they might in an e-learning module," Hammond said.

Referring to YouGov's statistics presented at VR & AR World 2017 in London, Hammond said the fourth most popular type of VR applications, or 10 percent, are in the education and training category, which is set for a "sharp rise" as the technology becomes more familiar to enterprises.

"Headsets in the wild are increasing in numbers, particularly as mobile phone companies such as Samsung and Google are now giving them away with their phones in an effort to make them commonplace with the consumer," she added.

Hammond said products like those offered by Diversify would not be difficult for an organisation to roll out internally.

"Almost everybody has a smartphone, so it's not difficult to download an app onto every employee's smartphone and have them watch [Diversify's Unconscious Bias program] in a snap training format. Whether it's in between meetings or at home or wherever they want, it's something that's really easy for all parties. It's very accessible, cost-effective, and powerful in terms of impact," Hammond said.

"Whilst the technology is not the be all or end all -- obviously we come from a training background and we're utilising the technology to get the best outcome -- I think we can take advantage of the fact that it's still a novelty and people are really excited about this new experience."

Hammond is cognisant of the low rate of VR adoption among enterprises, but is not concerned by it. She said mining, oil, and, gas companies could potentially be the early adopters of Diversify, helped by the fact that the startup is based in Spacecubed's coworking space in Australia's mining capital, Perth.

"It might be a bit slower than we might have liked ... if we look at history, it was probably the same with the smartphone and everything else we've taken on board. I think it's only a matter of time before [virtual reality is] commonplace in the big corporates," Hammond said.

"There are some big corporates that have some VR headsets or some training rooms in-house that allow for this technology. The ones I've spoken to tend to be in the construction and mining industry; I think they were the first to get involved in VR in terms of technical skills

stimulation for oil rigs or heavy machinery because it was a huge cost saving and low risk, compared to sending people to do training off-site.

"They've already been exposed to that technology and they may well be the early adopters moving into the people training space."

The development of Diversify's minimum viable product was outsourced to a VR production house in Perth called Virtual Guest, though the startup will eventually bring development in-house.

Moving forward, Hammond said Diversify will also upskill workforces in the "complex soft skills that only humans can excel at" such as problem-solving, negotiating, and having difficult conversations with staff or managers.

"We started in diversity, but we're moving more and more towards ... the soft skillsets needed for the future of work. A lot of organisations are underprepared for the future of work," Hammond said. "We know that robots will be taking a large portion of our technical jobs away from us ... but VR lends itself really well to emotive storytelling and creating empathy. Emotion and empathy is not something robots are capable of."

"We'll be able to produce different modules for grads going through induction, right up to the C-suite level."

She also noted the potential of adding greater measurement capabilities for organisations.

"A lot of organisations are struggling to progress in the diversity field and people skills, because they can't benchmark and track it very effectively. We can build in data points that we can collect and aggregate the data to form a meaningful story for HR departments, so they know where to put their training budget and so they know what their people issues are," Hammond said.

There is also potential for using AI and machine learning to "more tightly tailor" the learning content per individual, Hammond said.

Currently, there are a "healthy handful" of large corporates that have responded favourably to the prospect of doing large-scale trials, though Hammond was not able to disclose any names at this stage.

"At a time when the world is at ends with itself, when Trump is dominating headlines for his lack of awareness, when uncertainty is high; we could all do with upskilling in human interaction, including across key contributors to high-performance such as bias awareness, emotional intelligence, empathy, and conflict resolution, now more than ever as we prepare for the future of work," Hammond said.

Hammond recently brought on Anna Pitman, who has more than seven years of organisation development and learning experience, as a co-founder, as well as organisational psychologist Ryan Ng as Diversifly's human performance specialist.

The startup's plans include expanding its training program library, locking down corporate subscribers, expanding into Europe, and raising capital.

Diversifly's Unconscious Bias application is available on Google Play for AU\$99, and will soon become available on the iOS App Store.

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