

A Question for Google's CEO

In Sundar Pichai's letter to employees, an important piece of information about the company's response to a memo on diversity is inaccessible.



Stephen Lam / Reuters

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TECHNOLOGY

When CEO Sundar Pichai addressed a controversial [memo](#) about diversity that circulated inside Google, culminating in the termination of its author, James Damore, he began by [telling the company's 72,053 employees](#) that “we strongly support the right of Googlers to express themselves, and much of what was in that memo is fair to debate, regardless of whether a vast majority of Googlers disagree with it.”

“However,” he added, “portions of the memo violate our Code of Conduct and cross the line by advancing harmful gender stereotypes in our workplace. Our job is to build great products for users that make a difference in their lives. To suggest a

group of our colleagues have traits that make them less biologically suited to that work is offensive and not okay. It is contrary to our basic values and our Code of Conduct.”

I have a question for the CEO.

Given that the full text of the memo is public, that it is the subject of a national debate on an important subject, that many educated people disagree with one another about what claims it made, and that clarity can only help Google employees adhere to the company’s rules going forward, would you be willing to highlight the memo using green to indicate the “much” that you identified as “fair to debate” and red to flag the “portions” that you deemed Code-of-Conduct violations?

Absent that, it seems to me that Google employees will remain as uncertain as ever about what they can and cannot say at the company. As an illustration, consider [Alan Jacobs](#), an English professor at Baylor University who [declares himself](#) confused about your meaning:

Google’s position could be:

- All [studies suggesting that men-taken-as-a-group and women-taken-as-a-group have measurably different interests or abilities](#) are so evidently wrong that any attempt to invoke them can only be indicative of malice, bad faith, gross insensitivity, or other moral flaws so severe that the person invoking them must be fired.
- At least some of those studies are sound, but the suggestion that such differences could even partly account for gender imbalance in tech companies like Google is so evidently wrong that any attempt to invoke them can only be etc. etc.
- At least some of those studies are sound, and very well may help to account for gender imbalance in tech companies like Google, but saying so inflicts so much emotional harm on some employees, and

creates so much internal dissension, that any attempt to invoke them can only be etc. etc.

- We take no position on any of those studies, but fired James Damore because of other things he said.

I think those are the chief options.

Actually, I can think of still more options—especially if only tiny “portions” of the memo crossed Google’s line—which only underscores the dearth of clarity available to your employees. As a general matter, for example, I wonder if you believe the truth of a proposition is relevant to whether it violates the Code of Conduct. Can something be both the scientific consensus on a subject and unmentionable?

Jacobs adds, “I seriously doubt that Google will get much more specific. Their goal will be to create a climate of maximal fear-of-offending, and that is best done by never allowing employees to know where the uncrossable lines are. That is, after all, corporate SOP.” I’d guess legal incentives are a more powerful motivator of strategic vagueness. Are we being too cynical? Over the course of its history Google has often struck me as a unique company. And surely elevating clarity here would fulfill the mission of making all pertinent information universally accessible and useful.

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