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Susan Fowler and the Workplace Revolution

Chloe Bishop

Arcadia University

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Abstract:

Susan Fowler is one of the many women and men who came out with a sexual assault story during the #MeToo Movement. But Fowler was not a celebrity, she was an employee for Uber at the time. This paper goes into detail about sexual assault and harassment in the workplace, how Susan Fowler changed the company by writing a post for her blog, and how she can be seen as a role model for many other survivors.

Susan Fowler and the Workplace Revolution

My choice to use Susan Fowler as my topic for my research paper was on-going, and the idea to have her as my topic started with a homework assignment. Up to the point of the assignment given, I didn't know much about the #MeToo Movement, and everything it entailed, especially when it came to the women involved. I was on my computer searching for "women that are a part of the #MeToo Movement," I clicked on the first link that popped up. The list included people like Alyssa Milano and Taylor Swift as the first few people mentioned. I wasn't interested in researching someone that was such a well-known celebrity. Further down the page, Susan Fowler popped up with a selfie of her in front of an Uber Logo. I learned in those few minutes that Fowler was a former engineer for the Uber company, and she was the woman who brought down the former CEO of Uber. My immediate thought about her was "What a badass!" I chose Fowler as my woman of choice because before her coming out story, she felt like the most "common folk" person. She wasn't a celebrity, and that stuck out to me.

Susan Fowler was born in 1991 on a farm in Yarnell, Arizona. She is one of seven children and was raised very religiously because her father's career growing up was an Evangelical Preacher. She had little education since she was homeschooled throughout her life by her mother. At the age of 18, she was accepted into the University of Arizona on a full-ride scholarship. She had a lot of trouble studying with her astronomy major, as she had never studied that material. This forced her to withdraw from the institution. Fowler then transferred to the University of Pennsylvania, where she faced the same struggles. This time she decided to go to the president, Amy Gutmann, for help. It ultimately paid off for her, as she worked as a physics research assistant and graduated with a degree in physics. Her career as an engineer began in 2015 where she started as a Platform Engineer for the financial technology company Plaid. She

Susan Fowler and the Workplace Revolution

had a few other jobs before starting at Uber in November of 2015. In February of 2017, Fowler released an article on her blog page about her year's worth of experience she had at Uber. And in that time of her releasing the blog post, she was coming out as a sexual harassment survivor. Unbeknownst to her at the time, Fowler would become one of the "Silence Breakers" for the #MeToo movement. Fowler spoke out about sexual harassment and assault in the workplace and has carved the road for companies, much like Uber, to change the way they run, and what their focus is. Currently, Fowler is an op-ed writer for the New York Times.

Fowler came out by publishing an article found on her blog page (susanjfowler.com) titled "Reflecting On One Very, Very Strange Year at Uber." Her post went viral almost immediately and began to receive comments with support, hate, and personal harassment/assault stories (comments have been turned off since). She told Time Magazine that "when other women came out they received backlash and retaliation, so when writing the article she wanted to seem detached. She didn't immediately go to the press because she didn't want it to seem like she was doing it for attention (Zacharek, Dockterman, & Sweetland-Edwards, 2017)." Fowler wanted to tell her story and make a change. Her letter was not a cry for help. By detaching herself it was almost like she was telling a story from another person's shoes. I think she can be seen as a role model for many young girls and women. Because of her story, how she handled the situation, her dedication, and hard work to achieve her dreams. When she was photographed for the cover of Time Magazine she was eight months pregnant and newly married. To me, that says a lot about her character, and it gives me another reason to look up to her. It shows that she didn't let her

Susan Fowler and the Workplace Revolution

sexual harassment push her down into a corner and that she didn't hide behind it. She still went on with life, which proves that she is incredibly strong and knows what she needs to do to thrive.

Fowler is known as one of the “Silence Breakers” of the #MeToo movement because of her story. In the Time Person of the Year 2017 video, Fowler states that “it was an honor to be the person that spoke up about this, and [she] took the risk.” In the Financial Times, Hook spoke about how by releasing this information to the public, she unveiled what working at Uber was really like, and “generated a crisis that has raised questions about the very viability of the company. They also formed an early part of the growing backlash against the power and influence of the Big Tech companies (Hook, 2017).”

In the Strategic Finance article, “Uber Culture Causes Big Losses”, Verschoor discusses the major effects that Fowler's blog post had on the company. Verschoor goes into detail of the timeline of events following the post, including the huge investigation that was held. Which led to the resignation of the former CEO, Travis Kalanick, along with roughly 20 other employees. The company was forced to reevaluate its beliefs and mottos after being in such deep turmoil. As for Fowler, she is seen as a superstar for coming out and speaking about the truth of sexual harassment, in and around Silicon Valley. The Financial Times article states that “Susan Fowler's letter was the tipping point for us,” says one Uber investor, Freeda Kapor Klein, a partner at Kapor Capital. “We had been trying to get the company to address this behind the scenes. But with Susan's blog post, it was — that is enough, it has crossed the line, it is time for drastic action. (Hook, 2017)”

Susan Fowler and the Workplace Revolution

In her post, Fowler spoke about the many other women that also went to HR, but were turned away with the same outcome she had (Fowler, 2017). Mirande Valbrune analyzed a case study similar to Susan Fowler's in her book. In a subhead, she talks about other associates complaining to HR about sexual assault or harassment, and Valbrune states that "if one or more employees had been lodged in the past, then HR would have the absolute duty to [run] an investigation (Valbrune 2019). Uber's HR disregarded all complaints of former CEO Travis Kalanick, which ended up causing a negative ripple effect. Covington and Burling's Law Firm was the firm that ended up running the investigation on the company's "culture". It took months to complete, and when it was all said and done, Kalanick, along with other leaders in the company, was forced to resign. A twelve-page report from the law firm was released following. Many of the pages consisted of "recommendations on how to contribute to a "positive ethical culture" (Verschoor, 2017)."

Susan Fowler's coming-out story not only affected her life but also the people she worked with. By detaching herself from the situation and making sure there was plenty of evidence to back up her claims (Zacharek, Dockterman, & Sweetland-Edwards, 2017), Fowler sparked a revolution, not just inside of Uber. Her story made companies across the world rethink the way they handle sexual assault and harassment cases, and the way they run their companies. Employer law expert, Mirande Valbrune, writes that "the floodgates of conversation and shared experiences opened as the #MeToo movement continues to transform the conversation about sexual assault and harassment in the workplace (Valbrune, 2019)." But it wasn't just Fowler's doing. The movement is based on all of the women and men coming out at once. What's special about Fowler is that she wasn't a celebrity. She was an engineer at a company. I believe that

Susan Fowler and the Workplace Revolution

Fowler proved to the world that sexual assault and harassment can happen anywhere. It's not just something that happens in Hollywood.

For the women that are beginning careers at Uber, they have a completely different environment to work in. One where hopefully they feel safer than the women prior. In Fowler's blog, she spoke about the percentage of women that worked at Uber throughout her time there, she wrote "When I joined Uber, the organization I was part of was over 25% women.... On my last day at Uber, I calculated the percentage of women who were still in the [organization], only 3% were women (Fowler, 2017)." By stating this she seems to explain what happened inside the companies walls throughout her time there. Although Fowler's organizations were only one of the many in Uber, if the percentage of women working dropped from 25% to 3% in every single division, that should have said something to the CEO. Something like, "you should stop what you're doing." When I looked at the statistics of the percentage of women working in Uber in 2019, it is more close to a 1:1 ratio than it was in 2017. Based on a survey conducted by Uber this year, the company is made up approximately 59.1% of men, while women total to 40.9%. In 2017 the totals of men to women were 63.9% to 36.1% (Uber, 2019). To me, that proves that changes were made. And the company can prove to the women employed there that it is safe for them to work.

Before the #MeToo Movement, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), received 7,609 sexual assault and or harassment charges in 2015. In 2017, after the #MeToo Movement began, the EEOC's number of charges received was raised to 84,254 (Branigan, Nowicki, Buza, & Allen, 2019). This proves that by the strong women and men

Susan Fowler and the Workplace Revolution

coming out and sharing their story, it empowered others all across the globe to speak up and not let themselves be shoved into the corner of sexual assault and harassment. I believe that Susan Fowler proves that assault happens everywhere, and I also believe that she can be seen as a role model for not letting it beat her down.

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