Mariya Gabriel calls for more gender balance in IT industry

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Speaking at a conference in Brussels on Thursday, the European Commissioner said, “This is a question of fairness.”

Addressing the DIGITALEUROPE conference on digitalisation, Gabriel declared, “This must change. We have to close the gender gap because this is a question of fairness.”

She pointed out that women make up 52 percent of the general population but, in the IT sector, only 15 percent are female.

The official, who is responsible for innovation, research, culture, education and youth, said the emergence of “role models” for young women would be one way of addressing the issue.
“We need role models in the sector to inspire young girls to consider a job and a career in IT.”

She praised Cecilia Bonefeld-Dahl, Director General of Brussels-based DIGITALEUROPE, as one such “wonderful role model” for girls.

DIGITALEUROPE represents the digital technology industry and digitally-transforming industries. Its members are in 35,000 companies in Europe.

The conference in Brussels on Thursday, “Masters of Digital”, attracted over 300 experts and EU officials and emphasised the importance of digital technologies, innovation and Artificial Intelligence in boosting Europe’s competitiveness and economic growth.

“We need role models in the sector to inspire young girls to consider a job and a career in IT” Mariya Gabriel

In a keynote address at the close of the conference, Gabriel said, “The focus of my portfolio has shifted in this past year but digital is and remains a crucial ingredient of it.”

“Innovation, research and education are about preparing for the future, a future which is, without doubt, digital.”

The Commissioner told the packed audience the digital sector had to “help come up with effective solutions” in addressing a range of issues such as climate change.

But she also noted that the IT and digital industry itself had to “innovate” and take action to reduce its own carbon footprint in places like data centres.

Europe, she said, wants to become a “green continent” and the Commission “supports innovation every step of the way.”

The next Horizon programme, starting in 2021, aims to “improve what did not work so well in Horizon 2020.”

She added, “We must do more and achieve higher impact and we will do this by targeting our resources.”
“Funding is crucial but the digital transition is also a societal change and that is why we will need well-equipped people and a workforce fit for the digital age” Mariya Gabriel

The official, an MEP from 2009-2017, said, “This is a chance to show our mission-oriented approach can be tangible for citizens but there is a lot of work to do and we must decide where we want to invest.”

“Industry and civil society each has a role to play and I also hope that the European Innovation Council can become the EU’s ‘unicorn factory’ supporting high risk innovation.”

The conference heard that it will cost some €9.2bn to digitalise all sectors in Europe and to invest in digital infrastructure and re-skilling.

DIGITALEUROPE has urged Member States to “prioritise” this and allocate a “significantly” higher budget for the Digital Europe programme.

It says Internet of Things, 5G and Cloud are “turning point technologies” that could deliver socio-economic benefits worth more than €110bn and create 2.3m jobs in Europe.

In her speech Gabriel said, “It is clear Europe needs to accelerate the pace on this and that is why a major increase is proposed for the next Horizon programme budget.”

But she added that this still hinges on the outcome of current negotiations for the EU’s next long-term budget, the MMF.

“We need to invest in innovation in Europe more than ever, and I am not just talking about money but about investment so the next six months will be crucial in making this a reality.”

“Funding is crucial but the digital transition is also a societal change and that is why we will need well-equipped people and a workforce fit for the digital age.”

The event was told that it is estimated that 52 percent of the current European workforce in the manufacturing sector needs retraining before 2022.

Gabriel added “There will be substantial changes in the way we work in next few years but we also need to make sure no one is left behind.”

“It makes me proud that for the first time research, innovation and education are now under the same Commission portfolio.”

“It is now important to build on this momentum and also the updated Digital Action Plan. Going forward we will need to upgrade the current level of digital skills. I do not have to tell you how alarming the figure on re-skilling are in Europe.”

She said that a new “skills agenda” would be published by the Commission in March.

“This is not just about basic digital skills but also about the need for people with more advanced digital skills.”

She added, “We can only deliver on all these things if we act together. But I am confident that the future is promising. We know the challenges we face but we should also see the opportunities.”

Her closing message, she said, was that “digital innovators” will be the “key agents of change" in the
future.

About the author

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