

# Serena Williams Accepts a New Challenge – in Silicon Valley

## Williams joins SurveyMonkey board hoping to push tech industry in a more diverse direction

By Michael Liedtke  
AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — Tennis star Serena Williams has 39 Grand Slam titles, four Olympic medals, major endorsement deals and her own line of clothing and accessories. Now she is embarking on a new mission: She says she wants to help tech companies diversify their workforces and solve one of the industry's most vexing problems.

Williams, 35, will get her chance as she joins a Silicon Valley boardroom. Online survey service SurveyMonkey announced Williams' appointment to its board on Wednesday, along with Intuit CEO Brad Smith.

"I feel like diversity is something I speak to," Williams said in an interview with The Associated Press. "Change is always happening; change is always building. What is important to me is to be at the forefront of the change and to make it easier for the next person that comes behind me."

Williams didn't offer specifics about her goals as a corporate director. She implied that her very presence can help push the company — and, by extension, the industry as a

whole — in a more diverse direction.

Individual board members don't usually exert great influence over the companies they oversee, although they are often compensated handsomely in cash and stock for their part-time work. SurveyMonkey, a private company, didn't say how much Williams will be compensated.

### Valley Diversity

Silicon Valley's lack of diversity has become a recurring source of embarrassment in a region that has long sought to position itself as an egalitarian place that doesn't favor one gender, ethnicity or race over another. Yet that philosophy hasn't been reflected in high-tech workforces, despite the efforts of companies such as Google, Apple and Facebook to fix the problem.

Williams has been hanging around Silicon Valley more frequently now that she is engaged to high-tech entrepreneur, Alexis Ohanian, the co-founder of the online forum Reddit. Like many other African-Americans, she says she's disappointed that the vast majority of high-paying technology jobs are filled by white and Asian men.

At SurveyMonkey, which

employs about 650 workers, only 27 percent of technology jobs are filled by women. Just 14 percent of its total payroll consists of African-Americans, Latinos or people identifying themselves with at least two races, according to numbers the company provided to the AP.

### What She Can Do

Williams' appointment is part of the solution, according to SurveyMonkey CEO Zander Lurie. "My focus is to bring in change agents around the table who can open our eyes," he said.

Diversity advocates say women and minorities add value to corporate boards — as well as companies' executive ranks — by offering new perspectives and advocating for a broader range of a company's stakeholders, whether that's customers, shareholders or employees.

In a report on France's quota requirements for corporate boards, the business research group Conference Board found that the real value of adding women came from the fact that they were more likely to be outsiders. They were more likely to be foreigners, have expertise in more diverse business issues than men



AP PHOTO/AARON FAVILA, FILE

In this Jan. 28, 2017, file photo, Serena Williams holds up a finger and her trophy after defeating her sister, Venus, in the women's singles final at the Australian Open tennis championships in Melbourne, Australia. Williams wants to help diversify the tech industry now that she is joining a Silicon Valley boardroom for the first time. Online poll taking service SurveyMonkey announced Williams' appointment to its board on Wednesday, May 24, along with Intuit CEO Brad Smith.

and more likely to have risen through the ranks outside traditional networks, such as elite universities. This, in itself, can "substantively" improve the collective decision-making of a board, according to the report.

Williams' celebrity may help draw attention to the lack of diversity on corporate boards themselves, said Brande Stelling, vice president of corporate board services for Catalyst, a group focused on

fighting for women's rights at work. For instance, African-American women occupy only 122 of the more than 5,000 board seats among Fortune 500 companies, based on Catalyst's analysis.

"This is an opportunity to show you don't want a board full of people with the same backgrounds and experiences as everyone else," Stelling

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