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# Salesforce CEO combs through 16,000 workers' salaries to make sure women are paid fairly

By Jena McGregor April 27

Salesforce.com CEO Marc Benioff is tackling yet another social issue: the gender pay gap.

[Benioff](#), who grabbed headlines recently for his opposition to the controversial "[religious freedom](#)" law in Indiana, says he's methodically combing through the pay of all 16,000 employees of his cloud-based software company to make sure his male and female employees are compensated fairly, according to a [report](#) in the Huffington Post Thursday.

He's already given some women raises after finding differences in their pay, and he expects to hand out more. While Benioff said he didn't know what the current pay divide was at the company, "when I'm done there will be no gap," he [told the Web site](#). "My job is to make sure that women are treated 100 percent equally at Salesforce in pay, opportunity and advancement."

Benioff's move has been called a "[radical step](#)" and a "[brilliantly simple](#)" way to close the gap. Yet [research](#) has also shown that it's likely quite effective at improving the overall ranks of women at the company, too — perhaps even more so than traditional benefits designed to attract and retain women.

Here's the evidence showing why Benioff is on to something. In a [study](#) released in November, the consulting firm Mercer asked 164 companies about their benefits and human resources tactics. One of the big findings from its results, which I [wrote](#) about at the time, was that companies with flexible work policies or maternity leave benefits were actually linked with a slower promotion of women into top ranks (though in many cases had higher current numbers of women). The explanation: Such benefits can lead to a check-the-box mentality, in which companies think they've done enough to help women along.

The report also found, however, two variables that appeared to have a positive impact on both current and future gender diversity — and they're just what Benioff is doing. One was the involvement of company leaders and men in

diversity programs; the other was having a team responsible for pay equity and a process that statistically examines any wage gaps they discover.

Benioff's pay initiative is [reportedly](#) part of a program called Women's Surge, designed to help improve the ranks of women at the company, where 85 percent of leaders and 71 percent of the overall workforce are men, according to [Salesforce data](#). The program includes efforts to ensure that women make up at least 30 percent of all meetings and that female candidates are evaluated for new hires and promotions.

A team at Salesforce is also using its own analytics software to examine the salary data, determine whether there is a gap and surface the factors influencing it, according to [Business Insider](#).

Salesforce isn't alone in methodically reviewing the company's potential gender pay gap. Mercer's [study](#) found that 52 percent of the 164 companies that responded said they have a dedicated team for analyzing any salary differences between men and women.

Still, the combined punch — having not only a rigorous process for analyzing gender pay data, but an involved CEO who is willing to talk openly about the issue — could end up being very powerful.

That, after all, is what makes Benioff stand out here. It's one thing for HR teams to comb through pay data (perhaps partly out of fear of lawsuits), and quite another for a chief executive to commit his time and attention to the issue and publicly hold himself accountable for ending any pay inequities on his watch.

Other companies are increasingly speaking out as well on how they're addressing pay equity, such as [Reddit's](#) decision to take negotiating out of the hiring process and [Google's focus](#) on removing unconscious bias. Yet Benioff's public leadership on this from the CEO perch sets the highest bar yet for more companies to reach.

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Jena McGregor writes a daily column analyzing leadership in the news for the Washington Post's On Leadership section.

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