

Company Name: WilmerHale
Industry: Legal
Company CEO: Anjan Sahni
Company Headquarters Location: Boston, MA & Washington DC
Number of Employees: 2,000



Vinita Ferrera, Partner

Education (degrees & institutions): JD, New York University School of Law; BA, University of Colorado

Your Location: Boston, MA

Words you live by: "Failure is a part of the process. You just learn to pick yourself back up." – Michelle Obama

Personal Philosophy: Stay curious, and view every experience as an opportunity to learn.

What book are you reading? *The Great Railway Bazaar* by Paul Theroux

What was your first job? Cashier at a small retail store

Favorite charity: MSPCA

Interests: Traveling with family, playing with my family's new golden retriever puppy

Family: I live with my husband, daughter, and puppy.

What can be done to increase diversity in STEM fields?

We should be developing and supporting initiatives to increase interest in and comfort with STEM among underrepresented populations at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. I read an article recently discussing a study which found that when STEM classes (math, in particular) involved more collaborative learning and demonstration of the social and practical relevance of the subject matter, students of color, in particular, saw higher grades, as well as increased motivation and confidence. To me, studies like this demonstrate the importance of providing more opportunities for team-based and hands-on STEM learning for underrepresented populations starting in elementary school. I would love to see companies and other organizations partnering with schools and other community groups to create such opportunities.

What barriers do you see to closing the gender gap in STEM?

Bias (either explicit or implicit) continues to be a significant factor in the disparity between the number of men and number of women in STEM fields. Girls are told they are better than boys at reading and writing. The implication of that (even if not stated expressly) is that boys are better at math and science. Studies have shown that when you ask girls and boys with equal math skills whether they are good at math, the girls tend to have a lower assessment of their math abilities than the boys. Believing that such skills are necessary for a career in STEM, girls are less likely to believe they will succeed in STEM fields and therefore less likely to pursue them. In addition, research has shown that girls and women gravitate to careers that they perceive as having more of a benefit for society, and that they do not view certain STEM careers (such as in mechanical or electrical engineering or computer science) as serving a social purpose. Changing these sorts of attitudes and biases is critical in order to increase the number of women in STEM.

How is the world changing with respect to STEM?

Emerging technologies – such as AI, virtual reality, and other digital tools – are impacting STEM, just as they are impacting every other area of our lives. It is going to be critical for students to be facile with these technologies. They hold great potential to transform the learning process, foster greater collaboration, and increase opportunities for students to gain greater exposure to STEM. At the same time, differences in access to these technologies has the potential to increase the digital divide between more and less affluent communities, undermining efforts to improve diversity in STEM. Similarly, to the extent that boys may be encouraged to experiment with these technologies more than girls, there is the risk that they may further increase the gender gap in STEM.