

TECH

A Multimillion-Dollar Startup Hid A Sexual Harassment Incident By Its CEO — Then A Community of Outsiders Dragged It Into the Light

“Sexual misconduct happens everywhere. But DataCamp was dealing with a community with abnormally high standards and support for each other.”

By Davey Alba

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Molly Snee for BuzzFeed News

In October 2017, the employees of DataCamp, an online data science

learning platform, flew to Ponta Delgada, Portugal, for a weeklong

company offsite. The charming European city in the Azores Islands was an ideal location for the DataCamp staff to strategize by day and drink, dance, and unwind at night.

You may not have heard of it, but DataCamp is not just another anonymous tech startup. It's a kind of paid, specialized Coursera for data scientists with 3.9 million users in over 190 countries, and a flashy roster of business customers that includes the likes of Uber, Whole Foods, eBay, and Harvard University.

One evening that week at an after-hours bar with a live band playing, DataCamp CEO Jonathan Cornelissen groped 27-year-old Kara Woo, a DataCamp curriculum lead. According to Woo, as other DataCamp employees milled about, a drunken Cornelissen pressed his crotch into Woo's behind, fondling her hips and thighs. Woo said she extracted herself quickly and danced off in another direction. But Cornelissen followed her — and he kept putting his hands on her body.

“I felt humiliated in the moment — or moments, since it happened multiple times that night,” Woo told BuzzFeed News. “And the feeling of humiliation really lingered. I kept thinking about whether I should quit.”

Three months later she did, reporting the Ponta Delgada incident to DataCamp as part of her departure. And then: nothing. The company did not make a statement, issue an apology, or say there would be consequences for Cornelissen. Woo's story simply disappeared — for a time.

“The feeling of humiliation really lingered. I kept thinking about whether I should quit.”

In early April 2019, it resurfaced with an updated narrative — one that included details of DataCamp’s efforts to minimize and cover up Cornelissen’s behavior, and a data science community appalled by them. Only then, more than a year later, were there consequences — but they still left many frustrated and unsatisfied.

Woo’s story and its overlong path to a resolution is, in many ways, a telling example of the entrenched problems of the tech industry when it comes to mishandling sexual misconduct. It is further evidence that for many companies, the *perception* of accountability is more important than accountability itself, and it suggests that perhaps Silicon Valley’s #MeToo moment wasn’t one of momentous cultural change, but of the crisis PR infrastructure on which it’s built working as it always has. As BuzzFeed News recently reported, there have been few consequences for the Silicon Valley men who were accused of or admitted to sexual misconduct.

So after #MeToo, what now? And then, what next? The data science community may have an answer.

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After the Ponta Delgada offsite, Woo returned to Seattle where she worked remotely for DataCamp. She told her partner what Cornelissen had done to her. (In an interview, her partner confirmed that Woo told him about the incident.) Then Woo did her best to put it behind her. “My plan was to try to just do my work,” Woo said. “But I kept asking myself: ‘Why am I dealing with this job to make money for a CEO who treated me this way?’ I hoped that I could put it behind me... but that turned out to be impossible.”

In January 2018, Woo decided to resign her position and report Cornelissen’s misconduct, but she fretted about how best to do it.

Though DataCamp was 5 years old, it had no HR department.

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“I was worried it would not be taken seriously, because of the usual victim-blaming stuff,” she said. “We were drinking, we were dancing — he put his hands on me, but it wasn’t anything incredibly violent.”

Woo called her boss to resign, and as she explained her reasons for doing so she described her experience with Cornelissen.

“I was worried it would not be taken seriously, because of the usual victim-blaming stuff.”

Her boss, Woo told BuzzFeed News, said he was sad to hear about the harassment. “His response was that he was very sorry to hear it, and he also said something like, ‘I can’t speak for Jonathan, but I’ve known him for a long time. I know him to be an ethical person,’” she said. According to Woo, her boss explained that he really didn’t “think [Jonathan] meant anything by it,” and “maybe there are some cultural differences at play here” (Cornelissen is Belgian).

Kara’s former boss did not respond to multiple requests for comment. A DataCamp spokesperson said the company does not accept cultural differences as an excuse for inappropriate behavior, and that when Woo’s manager was notified, he immediately reported it.



Jonathan Cornelissen

Later that day, Cornelissen, who'd not had a meaningful conversation with Woo after the Ponta Delgada incident, sent her a Slack message saying he wanted to apologize. Contemporaneous notes that she took at the time, read by Woo over the phone, back this up. "He said he didn't remember that evening; if he did, he would have wanted to apologize sooner," Woo said. "And he asked if I wanted to have a call to discuss it."

Woo demurred, but a few days later, she agreed to have a conversation with Cornelissen over a video call. "He apologized again for what happened. He asked me about my experience and what I remembered," Woo said. Then he asked her what she thought the company should do in response, and whether she thought he should resign.

"I said it wasn't necessarily called for at the time," Woo said. But she was discomfited by the question.

The conversation ended without any specific resolution. Cornelissen told Woo that he wanted to make a formal statement to the whole company. She told him she thought it was a good move. But Cornelissen did not follow through at the time. He declined to speak to BuzzFeed News' questions, referring us to DataCamp. The company said, through a spokesperson it decided against making an internal announcement because of privacy concerns.

"We are taking significant and appropriate actions to make things right, and we will continue to work to demonstrate our commitment to rebuilding trust and to treating all members of our community with dignity and respect," a company spokesperson said in a statement responding to a detailed list of questions from BuzzFeed News. "As a company, we are committed to the process we outlined in our prior [statement](#). The way the incident is described today presents

new information to us and contains differences relative to the

“We take these differences very seriously and expect Anurima Bhargava [the company’s third-party reviewer] to take this new information into consideration as part of her investigation.”

Shortly before Woo’s last day at DataCamp in February 2018, Cornelissen told her the company intended to hire an investigator to look into what had happened during the company off-site the previous fall. That person turned out to be Jeff Fagnan, founder of the early-stage venture firm Accomplice. In a company blog post that appeared suddenly in April 2019, in which DataCamp gave the first public acknowledgment of harassment at the company, Fagnan was described as a “third party not involved in DataCamp’s day-to-day business.” He was unnamed in the post.

But Fagnan wasn’t a neutral third party. He was an early investor in DataCamp’s business. In July 2015, his VC firm Accomplice invested \$1 million in the company; it added another million-dollar investment in February 2016. As recently as December 2018, Accomplice joined yet another round of investment led by another equity firm, totaling \$25 million. Though the financial terms of the deal were not disclosed, this latest round brought the company’s valuation to \$184 million. In total, throughout its history, DataCamp has raised over \$30 million.

Fagnan asserted that he was not neutral, arguing that investors aren’t involved in the everyday business of a company. “We invest and provide high-level guidance; they [the DataCamp executive team] run the company,” Fagnan said in an emailed response.

Asked what qualifications he had to investigate a sexual harassment incident at the company, Fagnan responded, “I am not an expert, but I do have experience with lots of early-stage companies with a variety of people issues, including sexual harassment. It wasn’t clear that the company was going to do a third-party investigation, so I

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statement that said an additional independent third party review would be conducted.)

“It wasn’t clear that the company was going to do a third-party investigation, so I volunteered.”

At the investigation’s conclusion, DataCamp’s April post said the company “immediately took a number of corrective actions,” including, for the executive, “extensive sensitivity training, personal coaching, and a strong warning that the company will not tolerate any such behavior in the future.” It noted, too, that DataCamp had hired a chief people officer, updated its anti-harassment policy and that, after the incident, all employees of DataCamp would be required to have sexual harassment training.

Some of this was in line with what Fagnan had described to Woo in a March 2018 email, sent a month after she’d left DataCamp. But while the blog post mentioned the career coach, sensitivity training, and a new human resources head, it left out a number of other recommendations. Some of the bullet points in the email, which was reviewed by BuzzFeed News, included: “Jonathan to limit himself to two drinks at all company functions that involve alcohol”; “At the next company retreat, use a professional moderator to discuss (1) cultural differences between Europe and US around gender in the workplace; (2) goals and plans for further gender diversification at the company”; “Make a company donation or sponsor an event for Girls Who Code.”

The final recommendation read: “Do not make a formal larger company announcement on the situation or the incident.”

“I asked Fagnan about the last recommendation, and he said it was originally the opposite,” Woo said. “But he had shown the

recommendation to the company lawyers, who said DataCamp should do the opposite.

“Do not make a formal larger company announcement on the situation or the incident.”

Fagnan said in an email that he carried out the investigation after input from DataCamp’s outside counsel and its HR partners, who helped advise him on the scope of the investigation, and how to best communicate with the people he interviewed. He added that he discussed the recommendations internally at Accomplice, before he shared the recommendations with Woo and DataCamp’s executive team.

“Part of the reason for no public or internal message was to protect Kara herself,” Fagnan said. “Kara never pushed back on any of the recommendations or suggested more work was needed; she at the time, said she hoped the company adopted any recommendations and that Jonathan would change his behavior. She said she thought he was apologetic, contrite, and wanted to do better.”

Woo told BuzzFeed News that Fagnan had already made the recommendations to the company when they spoke. “I wanted to move on, so I left it there,” she said. “I did hope the company would take some of these steps and make positive changes. At the same time, in my view there was a gap in terms of accountability.”

It’s unclear to what extent DataCamp did end up implementing its diversity initiatives, but in February 2019, DataCamp published several pieces discussing [women in data science](#) and [people of color and underrepresented groups in data science](#).

To Woo, the company’s actions were “window dressing.” “I didn’t think these were all that compelling,” she said. “But since I’d already left the company, I hoped I could just put it behind me.”

But she couldn't. Over the next year, Woo was filled with anxiety at the prospect of running into Cornelissen and turned down professional opportunities if it meant she could avoid seeing him. What's more, when she saw her former DataCamp colleagues at conferences, it was uncomfortable. "Lots of DataCamp instructors are my friends," Woo said. Many of them didn't know what had happened to her, and Woo agonized over whether to tell them or not.

"Do I tell them what happened ... [and] put them in the awkward position of deciding what to do next, plus risk the possibility that DataCamp would retaliate if it thought I was interfering with its business?" she asked. "Or do I keep quiet and watch my friends invest their time and expertise in the company, which is painful for me and *also* puts them in an awkward position if they heard the story later on, through the rumor mill?"

"This has caused a lot of privately sad moments," Woo said.

Julia Silge, a data scientist with a published course on DataCamp, said she first heard about the harassment Woo had experienced through a mutual friend. "Kara did not talk to people about it for a while," Silge said in an interview. "Then she started talking about it more." Woo would tell people she trusted about the incident, Silge said, if they asked her about it.

When Silge and Woo started organizing a data science conference last year, she got firsthand confirmation of Woo's experience. "My heart just sank," Silge said. "The company needed to know that what it had done so far was not good enough."

"The company needed to know that what it had done so far was not good enough."

She wasn't the only DataCamp instructor who felt the company's public accounting for the incident was nonexistent. As she quickly discovered, other instructors and employees had raised concerns about the incident with the company too, and they were all getting unsatisfactory responses. Many felt they were being stonewalled.

So Silge began organizing them. "We started pulling people in," she said. There were several instructors who had heard just some parts of the story, and they began to talk to each other in emails and eventually, a small, private Slack group. They collectively pieced together Woo's story which had largely been a mystery.

After about six months, Silge said the instructors decided to approach DataCamp as a group. "We said, 'Okay, let's try to engage in this conversation, and ask why the company's answers had been so unsatisfactory,'" she said.

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In October 2018, one year after Woo's encounter with Cornelissen, ecologist Noam Ross published a new data science course on DataCamp. He quickly heard from other data scientists that there was an allegation of sexual misconduct at the company — but he wasn't sure what to do with the information. Then in early 2019, Heather Turner, a freelance statistical consultant and member of R-Ladies, a global group that promotes gender diversity in the data science community, reached out to him. She told him about a group of data scientists thinking of collectively confronting DataCamp over the allegations; she invited him to join.

Turner told BuzzFeed News that in September, DataCamp wanted to partner with R-Ladies to promote three-month scholarships for women and gender minorities. As part of its due diligence, the R-Ladies Global team discovered DataCamp's sexual misconduct

incident. R-Ladies then told DataCamp it would suspend all partnerships and promotion of DataCamp activities as an

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organization; individual members were free to make their own decisions about their relationship with DataCamp.

After Turner's note to Ross, he joined the private Slack group with a couple dozen or so members, including Julia Silge. Most had their names listed on DataCamp's website as course instructors; others had DataCamp courses in development. They brainstormed strategies for applying more pressure on the company.

By the end of the month, there was one concrete development. On the private Slack group, Silge sent around a link to a Google form to sign up for a February 27 conference call that DataCamp told her it would be holding. The goal, ostensibly, was to let instructors ask the company questions about the sexual misconduct issue, and clear the air.

"The primary objective of the call is to address the concerns of our instructors and to communicate the actions DataCamp has taken to correct the issue," the conference invitation email, which was viewed by BuzzFeed News, said. "Please ... submit specific questions or concerns and we will do our best to address them during the call."

The call turned out to be a one-way webinar. Silge, Ross, and the other participants couldn't speak on the line; they couldn't even see who else had dialed in. The DataCamp representatives included Martijn Theuwissen, the company's cofounder; Juliane Horton, its chief people officer; Jelle Carcan, VP of finance and operations; Brooks Crichlow, VP of marketing; and Mari Nazary, head of curriculum. Silge said that she remembered only Theuwissen and Nazary speaking.

Ross, for one, had submitted a question ahead of the call about what the company could say to reassure instructors that DataCamp could be trusted with handling sexual misconduct issues. The company

sent him its corporate anti-harassment policy in an emailed response.

Silge was sent the same document after the call, and was similarly frustrated. She demanded that DataCamp remove her name and photo from its online ads and other marketing materials. The company eventually agreed, according to a March 2019 email exchange between Silge and Nazary.

“I want you to know that people in the data science community literally do ask me about what happened at DataCamp, because they have heard rumors or half the story. I am in an untenable situation,” Silge wrote to DataCamp in the email, viewed by BuzzFeed News.

“Telling me to send these people who I have relationships with, share trust with, know, etc, to an EEO policy or a blog post focusing on diversity is, frankly, insulting.”

A DataCamp spokesperson told BuzzFeed News the company now feels it was a mistake not to have a more open dialogue during this call with instructors.

For Ross, the company’s actions were yet another disappointment.

“We were frustrated that DataCamp was continuing to try to minimize the situation and avoid really engaging with us,” Ross said.

“It felt like continued gaslighting on their part, which had been many instructors’ experience until then.”

Silge, along with two other instructors, penned a letter to the company’s leadership detailing their concerns. “As current and prospective instructors and contributors to DataCamp who have spent extensive time and energy in creating content for the DataCamp platform and promoting the DataCamp brand, we are writing to express our disappointment at DataCamp’s mishandling of sexual misconduct,” the letter explained.

“Because we care deeply about fairness and safety, the data science community, and DataCamp itself, we are unable to cooperate with

BuzzFeed News **A Sexual Harassment Incident**

On April 3, Silge and her fellow organizers sent the letter — which now boasted 107 signatories — “to the email addresses of everyone we knew at DataCamp.”

The next day, without warning, and without reaching out to Woo first, DataCamp published a “[note to our community](#).”

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The note, with its intended-to-mitigate-liability tone, was not well received by the community that had been looking for answers for so long. As one instructor wrote, “This was a chance to do so much better. I’m disappointed in DataCamp. They have let me down. I really wanted them to do the right thing. Instead, they are doing the ‘legal’ thing.”

The DataCamp post reads, in part: “At an informal employee gathering at a bar after a week-long company offsite, one of DataCamp’s executives danced inappropriately and made uninvited physical contact with another employee while on the dance floor. The employee raised a concern with a manager a few months later ... at which time the executive apologized to the employee.”

A flurry of blog posts and reactions from the data science community voiced other pointed criticism: Ross noticed that DataCamp’s post had a “noindex” tag to prevent search engines from showing it in their results. (The tag was later removed; a DataCamp spokesperson said it had been a mistake to include it.) Mara Averick, a developer advocate for RStudio, pointed out, “All the extra detail is on the behalf of the perpetrator. I don't care if it was at a Bull Fight in Cuba at 4pm, or at 8am in the copy room.”



Noam Ross @ NYR Conference
@noamross

engines would index it. I don't see it anywhere else on their blog. #rstats #python #datasci
#metoo

02:29 PM - 12 Apr 2019

Reply Retweet Favorite

Noam Ross / Via Twitter: @noamross

Another Twitter user said, “Look at the inclusion of detail about timing. Why was this included? The *only* reason to include this detail in a post is to downplay the severity of the event.” Around this time, Woo stepped forward and outed herself, and also tweeted: “I’m sure I don’t need to explain the reasons people don’t report things like this immediately.”

“The letter was a big breaking point for a lot of people,” Averick told BuzzFeed News.



JD Long
@CMastication

I've supported D.C. publicly, been on their podcast & pay for their service. I'm VERY displeased with how this was handled. This blog post is bullshit. The post spins a bunch of detail that casts shade / doubt on the victim. This is wrong. Do better, y'all. <https://t.co/NpR9G6aKQG>

11:42 AM - 05 Apr 2019

Reply Retweet Favorite

CMastication / Via Twitter: @CMastication

After the “noindex” tag was discovered on DataCamp’s blog post, Turner said, “It was clear the main objective of the post was to appease the instructors, rather than demonstrate transparency and accountability.”

The backlash was swift. Instructors could not demand that the company take their courses down because the company shares

Intellectual property rights with them, but they started to urge the
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public not to take their DataCamp courses. That included several graduate students for whom a DataCamp course could provide a nontrivial, added source of income. Data science organizations, including R-Ladies, RStudio, and satRdays, among others, cut ties with the company.

“Sexual misconduct happens everywhere,” Ross said. “But DataCamp was dealing with a community with abnormally high standards and support for each other.”

“The letter was a big breaking point for a lot of people.”

Soon word got out that two former DataCamp employees who knew about Woo’s harassment — Dhavide Aruliah and Greg Wilson — had been fired in June 2018. Each said, in respective blog posts, that they had voiced concerns about DataCamp’s handling of sexual misconduct allegations. Each said that DataCamp offered them an extra month of pay as part of a separation agreement that included a non-disparagement clause.

In its April blog post, DataCamp took issue with the assertion: “As standard practice, DataCamp offered these departing individuals separation packages that contained non-disparagement provisions which specifically and expressly would have permitted them to raise concerns about the company.”

Wilson said in a post that when he pressed the company about whether such a clause would prevent him from speaking about harassment at DataCamp, the company replied, “Nothing limits non-disparagement and it would be at your own peril.” At a later point, the company told him, “The non-disparagement provision would prohibit such public statements ... That said, the Company takes all

concerns about potential sexual harassment and/or sexual assault

In a post Wilson had written earlier that month, he clarified, “Full disclosure: DataCamp fired me in June 2018 for poor performance.” He also said: “People say that the culture of an organization is defined by the worst behavior its leaders are willing to tolerate. I think it’s also defined by the worst behavior by the leaders that the rank and file are willing to tolerate. DataCamp’s statement only appeared after considerable pressure from the community, and its half-heartedness and deflection just make me sad.”

Aruliah said in his blog post that DataCamp told him he was being fired "for performance"; he added in an interview that the company told him it “categorically refuted” that he had been dismissed because he’d raised concerns about DataCamp mishandling the sexual misconduct incident. But, he said, the company spent eight months trying to recruit him, and that his courses were not only still up on DataCamp — they were extremely successful, with a quarter of a million people having completed them. Aruliah said the business decision “didn’t make sense.”

Wilson, meanwhile, told BuzzFeed News, “I got a glowing review from my boss in February. Four months later I was canned, without notice and without an offer of any sort of improvement plan.”

“But I’m not the story here,” Wilson said in the interview. “Kara’s experience and the company’s repeated attempts to smother it is the story.”

A DataCamp spokesperson told BuzzFeed News the company does not tolerate retaliation against any employees.

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For Woo, who was still trying to move on with her life, watching all of this unfold inspired mixed feelings. At times, I felt like I kept getting

dragged back into it,” she said. “But I was glad people were taking it seriously.”

A DataCamp employee, who did not want to be named, said that before the company’s April 2019 blog post, “there was no written communication, and no formal letter that I can recall” that was sent out to the company addressing the incident.

“I can’t speak for everyone, but many of us are just devastated, frustrated, and hurt,” the employee said. “So much of this wouldn’t have needed to happen if [DataCamp leadership] took the right steps back in 2018. We are where we are now, and it’s difficult to see whether leadership will lead us out of this and make it better.”

On April 24, after much public pressure, Cornelissen posted a personal apology to DataCamp’s website titled “I am deeply sorry.” DataCamp also issued a statement, this time from the company board. It said Cornelissen would step down as CEO for an “indefinite” leave of absence without pay beginning in May. A new investigation would be conducted by outside counsel, and an instructor review board would be created.

“Our public response and this first official statement from the Board regarding this incident is long overdue. We are sorry for this delay,” DataCamp’s statement reads. “... We have learned a lot from the community over the last several weeks and recognize that the company hasn’t listened nearly enough to you over the last 18 months.”

“We have learned a lot from the community over the last several weeks and recognize that the company hasn’t listened nearly enough to you over the last 18 months.”

For Woo, the company's response was too little, too late. “This has been a big ordeal for me in the last year and a half,” she said. “I watched DataCamp leadership repeatedly fail to address the issue, or take it seriously. I’ve watched former colleagues of mine — friends in the community, who are employees of DataCamp — be complicit in keeping this under wraps. I’ve watched the company roll out diversity initiatives that I thought were disingenuous. ... I never wanted this to happen to me.”

Meanwhile, DataCamp's community of instructors remain wary of the company's “indefinite” removal of Cornelissen as CEO. Two told BuzzFeed News they feel the careful wording of the company's latest announcement seemingly allows for Cornelissen to return to DataCamp in the future.

A company spokesperson said Cornelissen's future at the company will be determined by the findings of its independent third-party review and its soon-to-be-formed Instructor Advisory Board.

According to [tech startup database Pitchbook](#), the board is made up of Cornelissen's cofounders and a recent investor.

“The company turned in the right direction, but I still want to see if they move that way,” Ross said. “We [the instructors] don't think that the core issues that the company as a whole — and not just one individual — were dealt with.”

“I'm keeping an open mind, depending on what comes out of this investigation, and potential changes in leadership,” Ross continued. “It can still go either way. In the meantime, I'm not ready to rush back.”

In his [last blog post](#) on the subject, Ross stated, “An investigation into the management missteps that have led to this point is

necessary.” He raised several more questions for the company to

BuzzFeed News [DataCamp, a multi-million-dollar startup, hid a sexual harassment incident](#)

posted Cornelissen's apology and the announcement of his resignation, asking for feedback on its actions. Ross sent the ideas in an email back, and copied Cornelissen.

"I haven't heard back from DataCamp since," Ross said. ●



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