

News article

Jul 2024

IWD 2023: Refocusing cybersecurity's gender lens to defend the digital realm: CFO Tech

While we all know the benefits of gender equality and diversity across business and society equals better representation and outcomes, there are still some remaining bastions where men continue to outnumber women – one of which is cybersecurity.

As Managing Director of a thriving Sydney-based Technology, Consulting & Cybersecurity firm with offices in 4 states, as well as global headquarters in the UK, my role entails balancing the growth of the business with the demands of a young family.



Charlie Hales, Managing Director, Waterstons Australia

Having worked in tech-related fields my entire life, I've encountered (and overcome) unique challenges as a woman within the space. I'm fortunate to now be in a position where I have a lens that is specifically focused on equality and diversity, which enables me to actively develop a team with a range of perspectives and lived experiences that better reflect our community and which, in turn, lead to better outcomes for us as a business and deliver enhanced results to our clients.

Anything but typical

I have never quite fitted typical feminine constructs. At school, maths and physics came easily to me, and after attending an information session about engineering, I knew that was the path for me. Despite my family's reservations about me choosing what they perceived as a 'man's career', I stayed appropriately stubborn and confidently chose the path that fascinated me.

I completed a degree in Aerospace Engineering in the UK. The course was incredibly male-dominated. However, it didn't stop me from receiving an invitation to complete my Master's degree, the only woman at the time to do so. Fortunately, my friends and peers on the course were wonderful, and I garnered respect rather than scrutiny.

Black Hawk coding

Working with a defence company to develop special head-up displays for Black Hawk helicopters was a game-changer for me. My role was to develop and perfect all coding for landscapes and navigation tools which were to be projected onto the glass display and altered to be displayed inside the helmet. Not only did this require hundreds of hours in a flight simulator and a two-year dissertation, it sparked my absolute love for coding and IT.

But then 9/11 happened, and the shockwaves felt across the world had an immediate impact on the aviation industry. The esteemed graduate program I'd been accepted into was halted, requiring me to refocus my energies into IT.

Banging on the glass ceiling

IT in the early 2000s, and still to this day, was male-dominated. I was fully aware that being a woman in this industry would likely ruffle some suits, but I made a conscious effort not to let my gender define how people saw me. I've always understood the value of communication and lifting up all members of a team so that the team and business as a whole is celebrated as opposed to putting the individual on a pedestal.

As a young and hungry IT professional, I worked hard to prove that I deserved a seat at the table. So it was a significant blow to be conspicuously overlooked for a deserving senior promotion that went to a male counterpart, highlighting to all that my gender was the difference. Realising the glass ceiling at this particular company wasn't going to budge any time soon, I focused on what my next steps would be and what sort of company culture I wanted to be immersed in.

Culture shock

As the saying goes, when a door closes, somewhere, a window opens. And my window was to the business I'm with now. Starting as an Executive Consultant, I was amazed at the company's culture – one which values true equality and diversity, highlighted by the fact that they promoted me while pregnant. Every person reading this should know how incredibly rare that is. If we can instil this mindset in sectors such as technology and manufacturing, businesses will become more agile with differing ideas and thought leadership. Gone are the days when married women aren't hired because they'll be 'trying for a baby soon'. Men have just as much responsibility when it comes to child-rearing, so that narrative just isn't viable or reasonable anymore.

When new staff members start working at this company, they're often pleasantly shocked by the very nature of the culture that has been intrinsic to the business for decades. I've worked here for the past 10 years, seven in the UK and the last three in Australia. The focus on positive culture, equality and diversity is something new for many businesses, and they're still coming to terms with how they implement their strategies. But we've been addressing business culture since inception nearly 30 years ago, as well as many other amazing traits like unlimited holidays, working from anywhere, choosing your own start and finish times and being able to own shares in the business. While this sounds somewhat more familiar today, this culture was unheard of 30 years ago!

Refocussing the lens

Women (and other gender & cultural groups) bring a wide range of ideas, opinions, critical and strategic thinking skills to a business. Women, in particular, need to be encouraged and supported and have the glass ceiling shattered for them to ignite the industry. Despite strict legislation surrounding anti-discrimination in the workplace, women are still not receiving their seats at the table. In this company, we don't look to quotas or diversity targets or for qualifications or prerequisites. Instead, we hire for the person, their passion, critical thinking, and agility they can bring to the business.

The innate skills and attributes that many women possess, such as staying focused and calm under pressure, juggling a multitude of issues, and highly attuned organisational skills and coordination, are key in managing a cyber attack. We need to actively encourage women, and all diversity groups, at High School and University levels to forge their own path within the tech industry and inspire them to join and make waves.

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