



Empowering Women in the Public Sector



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In April 2021, *Government Technology*, in partnership with Microsoft, produced a historic event focused on empowering women in the public sector. While we knew this conversation was needed, we were incredibly impressed by the enthusiastic reception and attendance from both women and men around the United States.

The last two years have undoubtedly been difficult for women's career trajectories.

According to a recent analysis by the National Women's Law Center, by January 2022 male workers gained back all jobs they had lost due to the public health crisis. However, 1.1 million women left the workforce during that time span, accounting for 63% of all jobs lost. It is more important than ever to support women in their career advancement, enhancement and growth.

To that end, in April 2022 *Government Technology* and Microsoft partnered once again to provide thought leadership, inspiration and real-world solutions for women in the public sector as they navigate new realities of a post-pandemic workforce. The event featured more than 20 women who shared their lessons learned around topics like achieving work-life balance; leading during crisis;

being a mentor; driving diversity, equity and inclusion; and succeeding in traditionally male-dominated fields like STEM.

Leading up to this event, *Government Technology* interviewed six public sector women who have made a difference in their organizations and for the constituents they serve. Those conversations are highlighted in this compendium. We hope they can serve as inspiration for other women who may be starting in their careers, considering the next path in their journey or struggling with how to approach a professional challenge.

As the female CEO of an organization that is composed of 68% women and whose mission is to make government better for everyone, I am incredibly passionate about helping public sector leaders achieve a more representative workforce.

I hope the women in this guide serve as proof that we are all better when diverse individuals are empowered to share their voices.



Cathilea Robinett

CEO, eRepublic
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“*Your career is more than just a linear progression. There are so many partnerships, opportunities and experiences to be had if you are interested and engaged with the world.*”

I often joke that I am a bit of an accidental executive. When I was little, it never occurred to me to go into business. At five years old, women executives were few and far between. But what I did know clearly was that I wanted to have a positive impact on the world.

As a participant in the 2022 *Government Technology Women in Public Sector* event, I was inspired by all the strong female leaders across government and education who are dynamic forces of change, transforming the way we operate and look at the world. They, and the women featured in this compendium, represent the diversity of perspective, opinions and experiences that is so critical in bringing people together to drive powerful change for the communities we serve.

The advice I often give to younger women is to focus on what you love and care about and not worry about what comes next. Your career is more than just a linear progression. There are so many partnerships, opportunities and experiences to be had if you are interested and engaged with the world. Being focused on just moving up each rung of the career ladder is a conventionally male-defined way of looking at aspiration and one that often takes you further from doing what you love. In reading the interviews that follow, it is so apparent that this advice rings true – the passion

these women have and the way they have followed their interests throughout their professional journeys is undoubtedly a key to their success.

As I look back on my own career, I am struck not only by how much ground women have gained, but also how much further we still need to go. The allyship of events like Women in Public Sector, as well as the advice from women like those featured in this compendium, are so important in achieving our goals.

Women are critical to government and education achieving their missions. We need all women in the public sector to lend their voice and make sure services are accessible, personalized and relevant to everyone. I hope the women in this guide inspire you as they have me and that their experiences and advice serve as a catalyst for the impact you want to have on the world.



Dr. Julia Glidden

Corporate Vice President,
Worldwide Public Sector
Microsoft



Being Prepared to Pivot When Opportunity Knocks



Lydia Payne-Johnson

Lydia Payne-Johnson has an extensive background in both the private and public sectors as an executive with experience in compliance, cybersecurity risk, data governance and consumer marketing. In this Q&A, Payne-Johnson, who is currently the director of IT security, identity management and risk for The George Washington University, shares her strategies for being prepared and staying on track in career and life.

Q You were a senior vice president and the director of global advertising at Dean Witter Reynolds for 18 years before becoming a chief privacy officer. What prompted that career shift?

Sometimes it's being in the right place at the right time. I had just graduated from law school and I was working in advertising. Lo and behold, there was this thing called privacy compliance that financial institutions suddenly had to adhere to. It was 1999, and no one knew anything about it. I was approached by the firm's associate general counsel. He said, "We have to send out this privacy notice and give our clients an opportunity to see how we collect their information and who we share it with. We also have to give them the opportunity to

opt out. Given your years heading up the firm's ad campaigns, you know how we communicate with our clients. We also need someone with a legal background to help understand these new privacy requirements. You have both. So you're the new chief privacy officer." That was the conversation.

Q That's quite a shift. How did you manage that transition?

There wasn't a road map for a chief privacy officer. This was a brand new role, and firms thought of this more as a marketing issue and less as a legal or compliance issue. Over the next 20 years, it has morphed into something very different. For women who are looking to make a shift, I would say the

“ For women who are looking to make a shift, I would say the ability to pivot in your career comes from that willingness to learn something new, make a leap of faith and take that risk.”

ability to pivot in your career comes from that willingness to learn something new, make a leap of faith and take that risk. If you are a good problem solver, you don't necessarily have to be a subject matter expert. It's about determining how you can leverage what you're already bringing to the table to help create this new role or to help spur you on to that next level.

Q What skills did you leverage as you expanded your portfolio?

One skill I leveraged is the ability to really read regulations and interpret them. I also leveraged my business relationships within Dean Witter and other companies. That was critical. I think women can do a really good job at relationship-building and getting buy-in. It's not a sales job, but rather how can you help distill what needs to be done, show that you also understand what the business needs, and then help strike that balance and negotiate that.

For me, it was also going to a lot of privacy conferences, meeting people in the security space and getting certified in the security space. It was also talking to the IT people in the company because they are very important to the equation – whether it's privacy, compliance or cyber risk. It's about reaching out and making those contacts. They'll teach you if you ask them. It's a proactive approach of gathering all that information – reading articles, signing up for organizations that put out materials, and getting buy-in from your company to pay for you to take courses

and get certified. It's a win-win for them and for you.

Q What career advice do you give other women?

First of all, I always tell them to do their homework. As women, we always have to come to the table with just a little bit more in terms of what we know. Then, find your voice. That's not easy for a lot of women. You don't have to find your voice in a large conference room. Find a senior person you can latch on to – someone you can talk with, share your skills and plans with, or even go to for input and practice on presentations. Along the same lines, don't be afraid to just be you, to show up as your authentic self.

I also advise women to get their own “board of directors.” These are people from different walks of life who you trust to give you good advice. You might have people who help you in terms of how you dress, project or speak. You may have someone who advises you when you run into an issue at work. Nobody else needs to know who these individuals are, but strategically, that's what you need to do if you want to get ahead.

Q What advice would you give women as they try to fulfill commitments in their home life but also move forward in their careers?

The first thing is don't get caught up in the idea of work-life balance. You're already doing it. Find outlets to relieve stress and turn off the noise. You have to always

pull back to yourself. As women it's so easy to lose ourselves because we're going in so many different directions. A lot of pressure has fallen on us to be caregivers, career women, mothers and more. As a single mother, I made sure that I spent time with my son and that we had fun together. But then I also found things for me – like playing the piano – and I made sure that I took time to do that.

The other big challenge is advancing your career. Don't be deterred by the fact that we're doing virtual meetings. Nothing has really changed. You still have to deliver on time and connect with your manager. You still have to educate yourself, know what your personal value proposition is and identify your goals. It's a great time to write an inventory of what you're bringing to the table. It will help you determine your next move, whether you can do it and whose help you need.

Q What is your proudest accomplishment?

Going to law school at night and working during the day. I was head of advertising at the time, and it wasn't easy. I always say you're allowed one moment of insanity in your lifetime, and that was my moment. It was literally 18-hour days for four years straight. But I got through it, and it served as a springboard to my career. It has more than paid off for me because I've been able to apply it in so many things, particularly in the cybersecurity space.

Lessons Learned on the Ladder to Success



Ann Dunkin

As a tech leader with a wide-ranging career in the public and private sector, Ann Dunkin, Chief Information Officer, U.S. Department of Energy, has served in roles that others have only dreamed of. In this Q&A, she provides a window into the mindset, qualities and support that have helped her succeed.

Q How have you navigated the different roles you've served in throughout your career?

I spent a long time at Hewlett Packard, and at a certain point, I decided it was time to do something else. I had the opportunity to work for Palo Alto School District, and that's where the public service bug bit me. I was there for five years and during that time, I was nominated for a position in the Obama administration. That's how I wound up at the EPA. At the end of that administration, I took the opportunity to work at the local level as the CIO for the County of Santa Clara, California. When I got a call from President Biden's transition team, it was hard to say no. When they say, "We want you to serve if you're so inclined," you tend to do that.

In moving toward all these roles, it has been important to be open to the

opportunities that show up. I thought I was going to be at HP for my entire career. HP was a great company and I did some great things there, but I've had a much more interesting career by being open to change and taking those chances. I came to the EPA halfway through the second term of the Obama administration, so I had a very short period of time to get things done. And I didn't know what would happen when the administration ended. You have to take that leap of faith that says, "I'll have another job when this is over. Something good will happen." Being willing to take those risks and try new things is part of what's enabled me to make all these moves.

Q When you go into a new role, how do you get started and how do you get comfortable with it?

“It’s really hard for women to stay in the workforce through their entire career without taking a break, so they often get derailed. If they take a break, they find themselves unable to get back in because their skills get rusty.”

Going into a new role can be a little daunting. The DOE has a \$42 billion budget, and \$62 billion more is coming in from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). There’s \$4 billion in IT spend when you add super-computing to that. That’s a lot as a CIO. When I start any new role, I go talk to lots of people. I listen to them, and I figure out what’s going on. It’s important to ensure that employees understand you want their input and care about what they think. Leaders often come in with their agenda and thinking “I know what needs to happen for this organization.” It’s important to make sure that what you want to do is what the organization needs. Our goal with the administration as a whole, and certainly my goal at DOE, is to leave it in a better place than I found it.

Q You’re a licensed professional engineer. What barriers keep women out of the STEM workforce and what should we be doing to attract more young women into technical fields?

My experience in K-12 education really enlightens my thoughts on this process. We see girls being socialized out of math and science at very young ages, and if they don’t study math and science, it’s very hard for them to go into STEM fields. Getting girls to stay interested in math and science through elementary school, middle school and high school is hugely important. To do that, educators today build maker spaces and labs and places where kids can go and play with technology and learn things. They make a concerted effort to ensure the girls

are participating just like the boys. They also make sure there are good mentors, leaders and teachers who will keep girls engaged at every grade level.

Once girls get to be adults, you have another problem. It’s really hard for women to stay in the workforce through their entire career without taking a break, so they often get derailed. If they take a break, they find themselves unable to get back in because their skills get rusty or people see them as someone who’s had a break. We need to be more supportive of women in the workforce to keep women in STEM careers. But first we’ve got to get them there, and we don’t get them there if we don’t keep them interested in math and science throughout their K-12 education.

Q Who has been influential in your career and why were they important to you?

I have to start with my parents. My mother got her undergraduate and master’s degrees as a single parent. She was one of three women in her graduating class at Wharton in 1960. My father believed that his kids – he had four girls and one boy – could be successful at anything they wanted to do. So, I had good role models who showed me or told me I could go do whatever I wanted to do.

There have also been lots of great people throughout my career – whether they gave me one piece of advice, an act of friendship or simply the opportunity to watch them work. Stan Meiburg, who was the acting deputy administrator when

I was at the EPA, is one of the best leaders I’ve ever worked for. I think I was a pretty good leader by the time I got to the EPA, but I learned a lot of really pragmatic things from Stan about how to lead in government because he had spent his entire career in government.

It has also been a tremendous opportunity to work for Secretary [Jennifer] Granholm, as I do now, and people like Gina McCarthy [first White House National Climate Advisor and former EPA Administrator]. They’re not mentoring you, but seeing up close how those people work is incredibly enlightening to learn how to grow to that next level of political savvy and understanding of how things work and how to get things done.

Q What advice would you give yourself if you were in the first few years of your career?

Don’t get too comfortable. I think I got way too comfortable at HP, and I stayed there too long. Not that it wasn’t a great company, but it had gotten too easy. It had stopped being as challenging as it could be in terms of my growth as a manager and a leader. That’s what led me to then take the risk of working for the Obama administration even though it was late in the administration. If you don’t get too comfortable with things, that can translate to taking some risks and trying something else. I’m very happy where I landed now, so maybe it all worked out for the best that I stayed so long at HP, but I definitely think people need to get out and take a risk.



Leadership as a Mindset



Amanda Crawford

Amanda Crawford is the CIO for the state of Texas and the executive director of the Department of Information Resources (DIR). In this Q&A, she shares her insights and strategies for leading successfully throughout life and career.

Q You began your public sector career at the Office of the Attorney General in Texas and rose to Deputy Attorney General for Administration. What intrigued you about transitioning to technology as executive director for Texas DIR in 2019?

The commitment to public service has been part of me for as long as I can remember. The main thing that drew me was the opportunity to lead an agency with such a strong mission and the ability to empower other agencies to accomplish their goals through technology. What has surprised me is that – like my role at the Attorney General’s office – problem-solving and people skills are

at the heart everything we do here. The similarities made the transition a lot easier because I could apply the experience I already had.

Q You are one of a handful of women state CIOs. What needs to happen for more women to see themselves in technology leadership roles?

A leader is not necessarily someone who has a command-and-control mentality. There’s a larger skill set that goes into being a leader, and folks can develop those skills in whatever role they’re in right now. Critical leadership skills like communication, problem-solving



and relationship-building are all transferable to any industry. In addition, leadership is a mindset, not just a position. No matter what role you're in, be a leader. Own your role and reflect leadership values. People will pick up on that, and more positional leadership roles will follow.

Q What has helped you work through internal and external barriers?

We're often our own worst critic. You can work through self-doubt by setting a goal and understanding you'll get there if you set your mind to it. Instead of focusing on specific titles, reflect on what makes you happy, and then look

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for opportunities that align with that. You'll be your best self, and good things will flow from there. As for external barriers, people's perceptions can influence our confidence. Sometimes there's the idea that women can't handle both a family and a career. Be prepared to say, "This is what I'm ready to do, and I can do it."

Q How do you help other women as they move forward?

I've always tried to have one-on-one conversations and ask employees where they are and where they see themselves going. I also try to be myself – to be authentic. I am the mother of triplets, a wife, a lawyer, an executive director and a CIO. I'm all kinds of things, and I don't try to hide that. I talk about my kids and I take time to go to their activities because I want other people to realize it's possible for them to do both, too.

Q The pandemic has dramatically impacted women in the workforce, and many are leaving or downshifting their careers. How can agencies support women in staying?

Now more than ever, it's important to make time for one-on-one conversations. That includes having regular "stay" interviews to address issues proactively instead of waiting until it's too late and having an exit interview. Agencies can also be more flexible with work hours, and by

granting extended leave and offering people the option to take a break from their current job. By allowing them to shift to other roles for a while, they learn new skill sets and we don't lose that tremendous talent.

Q You've led the successful response to a massive ransomware attack and a pandemic. What guidance would you give about preparing to lead through crisis?

Develop a growth mindset that's open to new ideas and be able to pivot to new ways of doing things. In crisis, be authentic. Have the vulnerability to say, "I'm not sure what's going to happen either, but we're going to tackle this together, give it our best and move through it." Lead from within the team so you can learn their struggles and help guide them out of those problems.

Q Any closing thoughts for women who are thinking about what's next in their career?

You probably know more than you think you do. Don't be afraid to get out there and take risks and let folks see who you are. It goes back to knowing yourself and being authentic. It's not frivolous to spend time reflecting on what you really want to do. Once you have a vision of what success looks like for you, go for it. Work hard and be kind, and good things will happen. That's the secret to success right there.



Anushree Bag

Women are underrepresented in STEM careers, especially in engineering fields. Anushree Bag started with a master's degree in electrical engineering and has risen in her career to currently serve as executive director, Enterprise GRC and Resiliency Services for the Indiana Office of Technology. She also founded Government Women in Technology (GWIT), a platform to support women in their technology careers. In this Q&A, she shares her thoughts and experiences on creating an inclusive culture where women can thrive.

Creating Fertile Ground for Women in STEM

Q In 2020, you founded Government Women in Technology in Indiana. What inspired you to create this first-of-its-kind state initiative?

There are so few of us in this field, so I wanted us to have a safe space where we could find each other – a place that gives us identity, a community and a common purpose to help each other be successful. I wanted a platform where we can get inspired by each other's successes and also learn from each other's mistakes. I wanted a thriving, supportive and uplifting environment where women feel enabled, empowered and elevated. Last but not least, I'm a big fan of Seth Godin, who wrote *Purple Cow: Transform Your Business by Being Remarkable*. Seth says the key to success is to find a way to stand

out – to be the purple cow in a field of monochrome Holsteins. Women have served in technology roles in state government for years, sometimes decades, but no one thought of starting a group like this. I was absolutely new to state government, but I thought creating our own platform would be a great way for us to stand out.

Q Over the past two years, what have you learned from women in the group about the power of networking?

I realized early on that government employees have very limited representation at industry events, so I wanted to bring networking to the women right here at the state. We've brought in several high-

profile local speakers, a few national speakers and even one international speaker. We've created forums for meaningful conversations around microaggressions, how to deal with imposter syndrome, the different paths to STEM that we have taken, tokenism, male allies, work-life balance since COVID and many other topics. These topics and the speakers have also created opportunities for professional networking, because just as we've had external speakers, we've had our own women employees serve on panels and talk about their experiences. All of this has created many opportunities to learn from each other. It's also a very positive forum. That's how networking works. If it's only a place where you talk about problems and nothing else, then it doesn't sustain. It has been two years since I founded GWIT, and I think it has grown because there's always a positivity around it.

Q What has surprised you about the group?

One thing that has surprised me is a lot of women still like to remain in the background. They'll show up at every meeting, but they're not in the habit of turning on their cameras or taking active roles. Clearly, we have more work to do, but we have seen a few breakthroughs. One very young engineer used to stay in the background. In her own words, she was very shy. Now she's leading a committee called STEM Empowerment. She's working with high school students, advising on STEM and giving presentations. Her work life has changed, and she is much more confident. Another surprise is I haven't seen a lot of women being receptive to formal mentoring programs. We started a few different things that didn't take hold as well as I had expected. It's part of the process. You think of going in one direction and you have some ideas, but not everything becomes successful. On a larger scale,

Meredith Ward, director of policy and research at NASCIO, has been very gracious about giving us credit for inspiring her to start a group at the NASCIO level. But I'd really like to see women in technology groups start in other states – that would complete my vision with GWIT.

Q What should governments and individuals be doing to motivate more women to enter technical fields?

First, we have to help build STEM capital when girls are young. The mental conditioning starts early. We need to show young women and also nonbinary people a broader view of what STEM employees can look like.

Second, we need to remove bias from job listings and hiring. Many job descriptions have masculine-coded words like "fearless" or "aggressive." Women see those words and think those jobs aren't for them. Regarding hiring, people often do a mental calculation with a woman candidate. They might wonder if she can prioritize her work when a child is sick, for example. But does that thought cross their mind when hiring a man with a young family?

Third, after you've hired a woman, give her adequate support [for relationship-building]. I know of a minority woman who was hired as an application development manager, and all six direct reports were white males. They like to meet after work for a beer and discuss NFL, but she doesn't drink beer or watch football, so how would she bond with them? We have to support women in getting access to like-minded people they can synergize with. Perhaps that means connecting them to women at the top levels, even if they're not in her direct line of command.

Fourth, we need to give women employees the same permission to fail that we give men. There's such a stigma about the notion of a woman crying at work. But I've seen men use expletives, leave meetings in a huff, slam their hands on the table, even throw papers on the

floor – and I've been told they just need a moment to cool down. Give the same level of permission to fail to a woman who may have cried at the meeting. Everyone has a bad day at work. Give all your colleagues a moment to pull themselves together.

Last, we need more visible and vocal support from people who say they're allies. An ally can't necessarily promote all the women working for them, but they can take other steps to support and uplift, such as enabling an environment where more women apply and get hired. They can publicly congratulate them if they've done something wonderful, nominate them for things like industry awards and bring up their name when there's a leadership opportunity.

Q Who has been a source of inspiration as you've worked toward all you've achieved?

The first is my father. I call him Baba. He's going to be 87 years old soon. He has a PhD in physics and he grew up in poverty. If my father didn't have his PhD and become a college professor, I would have had a very different life. I've learned to be gritty, to value education and to understand the power of hard work from my dad.

Another influence is Indra Nooyi. She's former chair and CEO of PepsiCo. She doesn't know me, but I'm a huge fan girl. She's a fellow immigrant from India and also a woman of color. She has inspired me to be both a very kind person and a tough leader. Women are said to not be tough leaders. I think I can play both roles because I am inspired to be that way, I have the courage of conviction and I come prepared. Not every judgment call I've made was right, but I have definitely put thought into it. I like to be a good listener and put myself in the shoes of other people before making a decision. I've mostly learned from Indra Nooyi to be authentic. I'm not afraid to show my real self. Also, a mantra that I try to live by: Speak in such a way that others love to listen to you. And listen in a way that others love to speak to you.



Leading with Vision



Lindsey Parker

Lindsey Parker is the assistant city administrator and chief technology officer for Washington, D.C., where she leads technology work for more than 90 internal agencies. In this Q&A, she shares how her life and work experiences have helped shape a vision for technology that builds constituent trust in government services and helps ensure U.S. cities and the nation as a whole remain competitive globally.

Q You were recently appointed to the position of assistant city administrator for Washington, D.C., and you continue to serve as a chief technology officer. What excites you most about having this dual role?

I'm really excited about the new role. Mayor [Muriel] Bowser has taken a chance on me, and I have the opportunity to work for a visionary woman leader. The past two years have shown us how dependent we all are on technology. Customers, constituents and other folks who depend on government are overwhelmingly demanding that more services be digital, easily accessible, reliable and secure.

Our Office of the Chief Technology Officer is an independent department. The job the mayor has laid out entails thinking about how technology enables everything we do. Our internal services – our HR department, procurement shop, facilities team, risk management office, disability services and so on – are critical to making sure we're delivering those external services at an even better, fairer, faster clip.

It's as if my CTO job is an enabler to my overall responsibility as the assistant city administrator, and I'm excited and thrilled about the possibilities to come.

Q You've worked in the Bowser administration for the last eight years. What are some of the accomplishments you're most proud of?

I'm going to pivot a little and then I'll address your question. I'm a product of a number of generations of public servants. My grandparents were teachers, and my dad became a foreign service officer. I lived in six different cities before I turned 16 and had the opportunity to see how other cities function. I recognized that a number of other countries are very clear that making sure their urban centers function and utilize technology sets the stage to remain competitive.

Upon returning to Washington, D.C., after college, I figured out quickly that for America to stay competitive, we need to focus on how our urban policy sets the course for our ability to remain

“ We must recognize that we’re being asked to be more productive than ever, and then we’ve got to figure out a different way. We’ve got to clarify what we’re expecting of people, and we have to be honest about what is sustainable.”

competitive. I’ve found that in Europe, constituents trust government; they don’t trust corporations. In the U.S., people inherently trust corporations, but they don’t necessarily trust government. So my time in government has really been about how we measure and then restore trust in government. The mayor’s charge for me as her deputy chief of staff was to rethink community engagement. The question was, how do we spark interest among our community constituents in the budget process and in other programs? Those are the bigger projects that I worked on when I took the first job in her administration. I’m super proud of changing the way we do budget engagement and rethinking a customer relationship management system to measure trust among constituents. It turns out that’s pretty important in preparing for a pandemic.

In her second term, the mayor appointed me to be the chief technology officer. I applied that same thought process to what we needed to do with our technology – making sure we were building trust among the CIOs to better deliver user experiences. Now, as the assistant city administrator, I get to think about that from an even wider perspective. It’s about utilizing technology, thinking about the data and continuously improving to make sure we’re building the next government workforce and restoring and attracting trust in government. It’s a big deal, and I think it’s the only thing that stands

between our country maintaining competitiveness going forward.

Q Work-life balance has been a challenge during the pandemic, especially for women. What are you thinking about in terms of supporting your employees as we move ahead?

We must recognize that we’re being asked to be more productive than ever, and then we’ve got to figure out a different way. We’ve got to clarify what we’re expecting of people, and we have to be honest about what is sustainable. The biggest question is, how do we make sure that it’s an equitable experience for everyone? During the pandemic, we all saw that working moms had it hard. I lost one of my best managers because she couldn’t handle all the workload and take care of two little people. I don’t ever want to be in a position again where I have to lose an employee to that choice.

This is the biggest challenge that managers have ever seen, and we have to do a much better job of investing in them. Traditionally, a lot of IT managers became managers because they were the subject matter expert and they were the longest-serving employee. However, they might not be the right person for the job, and that’s okay. We need to find a different way to retain managers. We also need to think about what the next generation of IT management looks like. It’s about

rethinking our investment in managers, our training of managers, who we’re recruiting and how we’re getting them ready for the challenges that lie ahead.

Q What’s your advice for women who are starting their career?

Finding a way to intern for strong women leaders and observing how they function and navigate is paramount. Two of my first bosses in D.C. were incredibly thoughtful and strategic women, and that was probably the best foundation I had for my current career. I’ve also surrounded myself with tremendous women on my teams and among my peers. I would tell any young woman who is starting out that women think differently. I’m not saying that men aren’t thoughtful, but women have a remarkable ability to bring different stakeholders together and navigate a path that will not necessarily make everybody happy, but will strike the right balance to move everyone forward. The only specific advice I give is, regardless of what field you choose, take some time to learn project management. We need project managers, especially as government organizations think about transformation. The project managers who have impressed me most have all been women. It doesn’t really matter what type of process you’re interested in. Take a course and take an internship where you’re working with a project management team or a product management team. It’s a career changer.

Bringing New Voices to Cybersecurity



Deborah Snyder

Deb Snyder is a senior fellow with the Center for Digital Government and the former chief information security officer (CISO) for New York State. In this Q&A, she discusses the importance of bringing new voices to cybersecurity and describes how she has done so in her role as a technology leader.

Q Early in your career, you served as director of human services modernization for New York State's Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA). Tell us about your journey to the role of CISO.

I began my public service career in the counties. After watching staff struggle with outdated systems and manual processes, I moved to the state where I helped overhaul programs through legislation reform, systems modernization and so on. Safeguarding confidentiality and data was a key requirement for federally funded projects and became part of my skillset. When the state directed agencies to appoint a chief information security officer, my hand went up, and I became OTDA's first CISO. I had the opportunity to build

its cybersecurity program from the ground up. Over time, I found I was good at translating the value of technology into business terms, so I stepped up to serve as deputy CISO, and then as state CISO.

Q Who were important mentors on your path, and what did you learn from them?

I'd have to start with my grandmother. I was raised to believe I could do anything that I set my mind to doing. She worked outside the home, and she raised her children and ran a family farm through the depression. So I had a strong female role model and a work ethic. I've been privileged to work with some of the most inspiring leaders of our time. When I accepted the acting CISO position,



the female CIO encouraged me to find my voice at the table. She used to say, “If you’re in the room, you’re in there for a reason.” She constantly made sure that I was confident in speaking up. I’ve also had invaluable male mentors and peer mentors.

Q More women than ever are entering the security workforce, but they’re still a small percentage of the cyber workforce overall. Why is that?

When I was New York’s state CISO, I was one of only four female state CISOs in the nation. We’ve made significant strides, but the gender gap still manifests itself in employment opportunities, pay equity and compensation, leadership opportunities, and perceptions and

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biases in the workplace. Many women don’t consider STEM careers because they’re not exposed to them as an option at an early age. They don’t have female role models who they can talk to, be mentored by or emulate. Once in the workplace, they’re likely to encounter stereotypes and barriers. Good leaders are typically assertive, strong, direct and vocal. Yet women in leadership roles are often labeled strong-minded, aggressive, intimidating and insensitive. Women also need to unlearn some things – like getting stuck in perfectionism, second-guessing ourselves and listening to the negative voices in our head.

Q How did you approach recruiting women as part of your role in New York? How did you create a culture that celebrates diversity?

We worked hard at that. Diversity is more than just meeting a quota. It’s an important business differentiator and is essential to solving innovation and productivity issues. By bringing together different cultures, races, genders, generations and backgrounds, diverse organizations have as many options and viewpoints on the table as possible in terms of problem solving and getting things done. To shift the culture internally, we became very intentional. We recruited beyond traditional conferences and job fairs;

made our hiring panels more diverse by pulling in female managers from other units; and ensured that training, career paths and opportunities existed equally for all. It was also important to look beyond degrees and certifications. Organizations can build on a solid base of business and soft skills to train up security internally. I’m proof of that.

Q Working mothers and women in leadership roles are dropping out of the workforce at higher rates than ever. What would you say to women who are struggling to make everything work?

Women juggle a lot of balls every day. Some balls can be dropped, passed or allowed to sit without significant repercussions. But three crystal balls must always be kept in play: family, spirituality and personal health. If you drop one of those balls, it will shatter irrevocably. I suggest that women look for options that fit their life and family. In addition, organizations have to enable a better work-life balance. That includes updating policies and providing meaningful development opportunities. Women need to feel they can take advantage of flexible working options without risk of career penalties. With organizations starting to rebuild the workplace of the future, there’s never been a better time to build with gender equity and women in mind.

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