

Tech Reimagined – S03E29 – WOMEN LEADING IN STEM WITH HELENA NIMMO

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Speaker 1: Tech Reimagined. Redefining the relationship between people and technology. Brought to you by Endava. This is Tech Reimagined.

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Bradley Howard: Hello and welcome back to Tech Reimagined. I'm Bradley Howard.

I'm glad to welcome you to the latest episode of our show. We're now full steam into season three in which we explore how technology is influencing the fabric of our society, how we live, and the way that we work and how we do business. Each Thursday we talk to interesting people who share their stories with us.

Speaking of interesting people, I'm glad to introduce you today to Endava's CIO, that's Chief Information Officer, Helena Nimmo. She's a motorcycling fan, a grandmother (which she still can't believe) and an overall amazing colleague to work with.

Thank you so much for coming back on the show, Helena. It's your the first person to come up back into a second podcast. So thank you very much. Can you tell us what's the longest motorbike ride you've been on recently?

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Helena Nimmo: Thank you, Bradley, for having me back. What is the longest motorbike ride I've been on recently? Well, I'm going to openly confess, I'm a fair weather rider. And this winter has been freezing. But spring is now on its way so I suspect I'll be getting on the bike fairly soon again. Last time I wrote would've been October, probably about 50 miles or so to go to my favorite cheese shed in Oxfordshire where you get these amazing toasties.

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Bradley Howard: Wow, that sounds fantastic. So yeah, when it warms up, maybe I'll head off there on my motorbike as well.

So the subject of today's episode is Women in STEM, that science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. So Helena, you've had many technology roles over the years, such as technology director at Thompson Reuters and COI and CTO of Euromonitor International. Was there a turning point or a certain moment when you realized that you wanted to work in technology?

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Helena Nimmo: No, not really. I like many others, I got sucked into technology. And I openly admit I do not have a background in STEM. I've studied economics and business at university. I came into technology from a perspective that, wow, look at this. This is a fantastic tool to be able to help people do more interesting work. To take away the mundane, to automate the repetitive tasks. So that was my introduction into technology. And I started working in technology in Nokia in the nineties. And to be honest, Bradley, I never looked back.

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Bradley Howard: What was the turning point in your career where you were able to go into a CIO role?

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Helena Nimmo: It was the Thompson Reuters experience. So for a number of roles, I'd either reported into CIO or just been on that cusp. And Thompson Reuters, it was one of those where I joined and I joined as a CIO very specifically for content technology. And that was my first taste of this is what it looks like to be a CIO. Now, if somebody would've told me when I was 18 that I would be a CIO, I would've run for the hills, quite frankly. I would've thought it was a really, really funny idea. So it wasn't until you actually start getting the taste of the decision making and going, yes, I can do this. I actually really enjoy making these decisions to help other people. That was my turning point for me.

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Bradley Howard: Wow. What do you think you'd have been if you weren't a CIO?

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Helena Nimmo: I love gardening. I absolutely love gardening and I wanted to be a florist when I was younger. But if you want to be a florist, you need to have a flare for design and you have to be able to draw and I cannot draw.

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Bradley Howard: Right. Okay.

Back onto the serious points about women in STEM. So in the UK there's only eight female chief executives in the (inaudible) 100. There's only 15 female CFOs. In the US there's pretty much the same ratio. There's 43 female chief execs in the S&P500 and 78 CFOs. So in terms of female CIOs, the most recent statistic points out that only 27% of CIOs in the Fortune 500 companies are female. So why do you think it is in 2023 that we have so few women in those top roles and what can we do about it as a society?

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Helena Nimmo: It's quite interesting because everybody always has had a significant focus on bringing women up into technology through the STEM path. We've emphasized it so much but what we've forgotten is actually there's many other paths to come into technology. Technology as an industry over the past 20 years has generated more job descriptions, more roles, than any other sector ever. So the fact that we are focusing on STEM being the route to becoming a senior leader sometimes feels a little bit misguided. There's also another really interesting fact, which is people, and this is very common for women in particular, people who have got strong linguistic skills also often make fantastic technologists because they have got a similar pattern recognition as you have with individuals who've got a really good mathematical head. But when we're not looking at those in par with each other. Maybe we should be looking at those skills. So it's the pattern piece, not the numbers piece that makes you a really, really, really strong technologist, especially in the development space.

So for me, women in tech and women in senior leaderships, especially in technology, is really important because we create technology for users. And if half the world's population is female, that means half of our users are female. And it's quite critical to focus it from that perspective because only by taking everybody into account can we develop good solutions.

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Bradley Howard: Yeah, that diversity is really important when it comes to designing more applications. Definitely.

So in McKinsey & Company's latest edition of Women in the Workplace 2022, 48% of respondents cited "the opportunity to advance" as the reason for them changing their jobs.

Do you have any advice for leadership groups as to how they might address the situation in case they're also facing similar numbers?

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Helena Nimmo: Okay. So most people want to advance in their careers. What I think is not quite understood enough and not taken into account enough is how men and women perceive value that they bring to the workplace differently. For example, if a woman looks to advance and looks at a job spec, they will often only apply for it if they hit every single bullet point perfectly. It's a hundred percent match. Whereas a man might look at it and I'll tell you what, I'm 60% there, I will develop the rest. And I think it's really important when we look at advancement in the workplace for senior male leaders to understand the difference, to be able to push women forward into roles that women think they might not be quite ready for, but actually they are. So helping that advancement and having that conversation as in, "Of course you can do this, and by the way, I'm going to be here with you. I'm not going to expect you to fly this solo." Because that's just normal coaching and mentoring that you would expect. So definitely I would give advice to any senior leader, which is take a look on how people perceive advancement and how you can promote it in the right way.

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Bradley Howard: That's really good advice there. As of 2022, around 36% of Endava staff are women. We started our own women's mentorship project called Endava Rise Mentoring which has recently completed second cohort in November. There were about 27 mentees paired with 23 mentors for six months to provide support and opportunity and to build their readiness for senior management and leadership roles. Have you been part of the initiative? Can you say anything else if you have?

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Helena Nimmo: Yes, I have. So I've had the privilege to mentor four women, so two from each of the cohorts. And I find it quite a humbling experience. And I would say that anybody and everybody in a senior leadership position should do it. Because actually you as a mentor learn as much as the mentee hopefully takes away too. And for the mentor, it's more of the, oh my goodness, I forgot. I felt like that once it's a healthy reminder that just because you as a mentor have gained more seniority and you're more experienced and you've worked through the emotions over the years, that they're still not there for the next generation. So having that relationship and having been reminded of it helps you then be much better manager and coach and a senior leader in general for anybody in the business.

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Bradley Howard: Yeah, it's so true. I'm also a mentor for some people and you learn so much about people coming onto their management career and the feedback you get straight away is just enlightening, isn't it? It's amazing. And stemming from that, there's plenty of advice in the business world around finding a mentor to help build a career. So do you have a mentor yourself?

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Helena Nimmo: I have a number of mentors. So I have a group of individuals who I tap into when I want to talk something specific over. And it's not just a one-on-one relationship but it's more about want to discuss a specific topic. Sometimes it might be a technology piece, sometimes it might be a person piece. Sometimes it might just be a business challenge that you're facing. So I do have those group of individuals, trusted

individuals, that I do use as a sounding board. I don't have a single mentor at the moment. I have had in the past.

And I do think mentors are, especially when you're starting out, they're brilliance. And it's a good way to create that rapport that then takes you into more of that space where you have got those sounding boards. So it's about creating relationships with individuals. Do I like this person enough? Do I trust this person enough to have a longer term relationship with them where I can bounce ideas off them? Not necessarily on a monthly basis, but literally on a, maybe I need to talk to you once a year. But that's a really important thing to have.

Mentors are also really important just for a very short burst. So sometimes you can have a brilliant mentor conversation in just one session because something was burning and you needed it right there, right then. Others, you have it for six months or three months or a year. But I guess what is the important bit about mentoring relationships for both the mentee and the mentor is to stop it when it's the right time to stop. That's the power of mentoring.

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Bradley Howard: I heard a really good tip quite recently which was whenever you start a mentor relationship, agree on how long to do it for because you don't want to get stuck into doing it years after years and then both of you don't really want to terminate the mental relationship cause no one wants to upset either, especially after going into a lot of personal detail about certain situations. So I thought that was a really good one as well.

And lastly, do you have any female role models that you look up to? They don't need to be celebrities or known people. They can be family members or anyone within the business.

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Helena Nimmo: Right. So no, not really. And that is not because I don't admire a lot of women. I admire an awful lot of women. But what I look at is I don't want to put a individual on a pedestal and say, "I want to be like you." What I admire most are certain traits about individuals. So the women that I'm drawn to have got a certain trait of tenacity. The kind of sheer, 'Yes, we will get this done, we will keep this moving, we will keep this going.' And that is a trait I admire a lot in women and it's very prevalent also in senior professional women. Others are around empathy and being able to engage with a wide diverse audience. And another one which often isn't associated with women, and I think this is something we should be changing, is a woman standing up in front of an audience and absolutely being able to hold them. That tends to be associated much more with a man. So a great public speaker, a female public speaker, is another trait I really admire.

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Bradley Howard: Oh, excellent.

Helena, thank you so much for taking the time to discuss these really important topics around gender equality and balance in today's working environment. If anyone wants to get hold of you, what's the best way?

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Helena Nimmo: You can find me on LinkedIn, Helena Nimmo.

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Bradley Howard: Great, thank you very much. And we'll make sure that we spell your name in the title of today's podcast.



I'm Bradley Howard. Until next week. Please don't forget to share and subscribe.