

The future of women in tech

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BRADLEY HOWARD, ENDAVA HOST (BH): Hello, everyone, and welcome to the latest episode of Tech Reimagined. Today, I'm happy to say that we have Viola Llewellyn on the show. Currently, Viola is the president of Ovamba Solutions, and she's won several awards for her contributions to the industry. She's been recognised in the Women in Fintech Power List by Innovate Finance, The Top 100 Women In Fintech and is also on several boards as an expert advisor. That includes the European Women's Payment Network, African Women in Fintech and the Women's Economic Imperative Initiative. Viola, welcome to our podcast. How are you today?

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VIOLA LLEWELLYN, PRESIDENT & CO-FOUNDER OF OVAMBA SOLUTIONS, INC. (VL): I'm very groovy. Thank you, Bradley. It's good to be here.

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BH: So that was a super impressive introduction. Can you tell us a bit more about how your career developed?

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VL: My career developed through sheer ignorance. It was never what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a genetic engineer. I was the kid that had the microscope in her bedroom from the age of nine. I was always reading Newsweek and anything to do with recombinant DNA and genetics was always what I wanted to do. But as a young woman in the 70s in London, not a lot of outlets other than hanging out in the library, reading and dreaming all day, and my dad, who had a psychiatry background, was constantly encouraging me, and he is the reason I am where I am today.

He and my mum. I didn't have a traditional route to my career. I never got to go to university. I did a BTEC in lab technology. Lots of things happened to me that often happen to women to derail the most glittering careers - and for women, especially in tech. Reinventing yourself on a consistent basis isn't just about aligning yourself with the next innovation. It's about having to plumb the depth of your skill - soft skills, real skills, personality, your deepest fears in order to come out on top. That's the journey that I've had. I had started out with a scientific mindset from my dad and through school, and I carried it through to where I am today.

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BH: I'm really looking forward to talking a bit more about each of those elements through today's podcast. So today we're going to be talking about the topic that's near and dear to all of us at Endava, and that's the future of influence of women in technology. So you're clearly an advocate for women in technology, and especially with your latest accolade reflecting and making the top 100 women in fintech. First of all, a big congratulations in that. But can you tell us who was your mentor into where you've ended up here today? Where they male or female, can you tell us a bit more about them?

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VL: You know, Bradley, now that I think about it... the women who influenced me were either close friends or in my family, but not career-wise. Career-wise, I stole and siphoned mentorship of men here in the United States and in England a little bit - because I left England when I was twenty six - without them knowing. So it's almost self-guiding. People don't always realize they're offering mentorship, sometimes after all what exactly is mentorship? If somebody comes to me and says, Oh, can you be my mentor? First thing going to say is, no, you're scaring me. You're asking me now to commit to do something that I already feel overwhelmed with.

But if a friendship and an alliance naturally and organically develops, then there is a natural interest in seeing that person do well - and that's what helped me. Here in the United States, I worked for a lobbyist who ended up going to prison, quite famously, who had a huge impact and influence on me as it relates to learning how to negotiate and understanding what it means to consolidate power and have individuals want to do favours for you. That was really, really important. Then the boss I had when I worked in advertising, Greg, was a stickler for communication and perfection. When I left England, I had been in hardware sales and marketing. That's what I knew. I came to America and I learned account management, customers and communication. I was a really bad writer back then. I'm much, much better now. And then subsequent to that, the individual who head hunted me gave me a platinum card and said, hey, go and build this investment company while I'm in Saint-Tropez. Everything I learned about what not to do stood me in great stead. So it's been a great blending of happenstance from places and having - and I'm going to say it - the sheer bloody mindedness to want to do as well as I possibly could. That's the thing that a lot of women may not feel comfortable saying - I wanted to be the greatest thing that ever walked the Earth. We're not actually trained to say those things, but I secretly used to want that and I actually still do - and so do many others, both male and female. So, stealing mentorship has gotten me where I am.

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BH: Oh, well, congratulations for a start. It's really interesting for us that we interview lots of very senior people within the industry and ask them about their mentors through their career, from the very beginning to modern day. It's amazing how many of them reply with I've got lots of mentors, but they don't know that they're my mentor. It's just - observing people is just phenomenal, isn't it? That includes positive mentors about, I just want to, you know, talk in the way that they talk and their other skills - and also, I don't want to be like that other person over there as well. I will do everything to avoid that.

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VL: That actually has a very powerful impact on me. Human beings are wired to be responsive to what feels good, and not feeling bad feels good as well. I know that's a bit of a twisted comment, but I've watched bosses and individuals, including the one that went to prison, do horrific things that gave me wonderful guideposts along the way. Don't do X, Y and Z. That's a bad idea. So I'm grateful to all of it. Good and bad.

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BH: Oh, definitely. Part of the tapestry of life, isn't it? So do you see women's economic empowerment linked to women's access to knowledge of technology? We're moving on to more of an education perspective here.

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VL: Yes, most definitely and the controller of disposable income - marrying later, choosing not to be married, choosing to not be traditionally aligned in relationships the way that we have been used to in the past, means that women are driven not just by the circumstances that they find themselves in, but the fact that we're growing up with a sense of independence and power. It's being congratulated now from the African perspective, which is my favourite perspective because that's who I can't stop being. We are trained from a very early age that you must be good at everything. And my dad was the one that always said, as a black woman, you're going to have to always be three times better than everybody else because it's going to be that much harder for you. So if you understand that achieving that metric means that your worst day is probably somebody else's best day – means you can't fail at anything. Not because you're not allowed to. You're just not going to fail. It's a wonderful safety net that is laced with fear of failure to a degree, but also the certainty that I'm that good. It takes you a while to step into those shoes psychologically and actually believe it and stop allowing imposter syndrome to derail you. But the thing that happens after that, beyond just running around saying I'm absolutely brilliant is you must have the chops to deliver extraordinary results, to do things that are globally recognised as, yeah, that's the bomb, actually. If you don't do that, to be at least able to have a large group of individuals absolutely dislike you, that means you've done something right.

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BH: Why are we still talking about gender imbalance in 2021? Why hasn't it just disappeared by now? You know, we're all working from home. We're all in exactly the same position. We're all connected to the internet, launching businesses, etc. Why are we still talking about gender?

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VL: I think it's like looking at a swing or a seesaw. The extremes have us cantilevering on a fulcrum. I don't think that is natural in nature to have complete stasis. It's not going to happen. As long as human beings continue to evolve and society continues to respond to our evolutions, we will always be an imbalance, and all growth requires imbalance and the uncertainty related to failure. We are not going to have gender parity the way we keep imagining it. We all have moments of it. We all have outcomes that see men and women working together on an equal footing to produce a particular result. But I think it's just the nature of human beings to want to win to the point that we create loss for other people.

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BH: It's a competitive element, you think?

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VL: It's very binary. No matter how much we think we're diversifying, much of the human race is a binary contract – win, lose black, white, tall, short, male, female, rich, poor. There is a continuum in the middle, but we tend to seek the extremes in order to just be seen, to be noticed, whatever the case may be. That's been my experience and the way I frame the world to understand it

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BH: So your business focuses on the African continent, what's the gender diversification like over there in business?

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VL: It's deceptive. The World Bank and other groups keep on producing numbers that I don't think really make sense. They produce these numbers and reports around gender diversity and all the rest of it, so that groups like governments, policymakers, regulators and other start-ups will take that information that data and say, Aal right, this is what the World Bank and IMF have said.

So therefore, we'll go and build our businesses and our start-up idea and thesis on this. But when I spoke with the World Bank, I told them, you need to stop producing these reports that don't have anything to do with you sitting down and having a conversation with the individuals who are affected by these statements that you make and are sitting in the hands of large organisations that start to make arbitrary decisions, based on the fact that they've got your green stamp on it, that's just not going to work.

So in Africa, the gender parity is actually, I think, more sophisticated than in the rest of the world. Take Nigeria, Rwanda, Mali, Sierra Leone, Liberia. These countries have had female leadership. Even Angola, and we've got countries like Rwanda where the government has finally hit, I think, a 50 - almost a 50/50 parity in terms of female leadership. The next level that needs to be seen more visibly is banks creating products and stating, this has been developed for women and here's the data that proves that it works, and here are the indicators of the scales that show that women's wealth has increased.

We don't have enough of that yet, but Africa doesn't have the same perspective societally on male and female. We still have areas where it's a matriarchal group. Ovambas done a lot of investigation into tribal and ethnic data to embed it into our risk models, to understand these things in their reality versus what's imported in to be comfortably understood and not make people feel bad. From our own portfolios and the data that we've done, it shows what everybody else knows. Put money in the hands of women - higher repayability, way more impacts. Children are educated better. All of those things are true.

But I want us to start looking at a slightly more uncomfortable fact around women and empowerment. That is the size of her bank account. The things that she's buying and vacations that she's taking, what wealth markers are we seeing? What luxury good consumption - especially if she's single versus in a marital group. From the African perspective, what happens to women in polygamous situations? How is their wealth affected? We're still talking about female gender and wealth from a western perspective. What's the African reality around that? It's got bits and pieces in there that might make other people uncomfortable or they're embarrassed or they don't want to see it, or African themselves don't want to be identified that way because they're very busy trying to make sure that they look globally inclusive as a female or as a woman in a world economy. But I've often said, this ain't your granddaddy's Africa. We need to take a look at this, especially from a gender perspective, very, very differently. First of all, who's asking African women, how do you see yourself within the gender equality story? I don't know if there are any reports asking people about that, especially if that person may not write a postcolonial language. Let's find a way to ask people these questions and get better understanding.

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BH: So I found it really interesting when you said that when you have female customers, which are small / medium enterprises for Ovamba. Are there any other patterns that you see for organisations that have been founded by women?

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VL: Yeah, let's take them - away from even our sector in standard careers. I am noticing women congregating to have more conversations about how to improve their careers, how to grow in traditional 9-5 careers. I am seeing more female organisations being put together to discuss female health. I just recently joined the Board of Generosity Global, and I noticed that there are more men willing to have uncomfortable conversations around women's health and sanitation, reproductive health and all of those things. That actually is related to fintech, because the finance and the technology and the innovation required to address those challenges in women's lives, whether it's menstruation, pregnancy, health, education, the digital divide all go together to make it possible for women to extend their ambition through finance into other areas of fulfilment. So I'm seeing a pattern where there are more men wanting to engage and help and be part of the development and the growth of their daughters, their mothers, their sisters, or just women in general, or wanting to change how they operate and manage women in the workplace - and I should really say work together with, because that's also another tendency and a pattern I'm seeing. Women are wanting to come out from under the underneath. They're looking to be either equal and they're becoming comfortable with saying - and I want to be the boss in charge of absolutely freaking everything. These are trends - they're not scientific trends, but the conversations that are taking place.

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BH: Yeah, I can definitely recognise some of that behaviour. So finally, Viola, can you tell us what is your golden nugget of advice to girls of today that are either at school or just graduating from university and are going to be joining the workplaces of the future?

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VL: Oh, what a delicious question. Yes. Let me explain, and let me tell you, young women, what you need to know. Changing your mind is scientifically and economically smart. If you buy an asset that is failing in its return on investment, you would drop it. The same with ideas. We are often told that we are finicky, we are fickle, we are flaky. And so therefore women, they will say things like, oh, you're changing your mind just like a woman. Actually, it's a powerful thing to do - to be able to say, I have revised my opinion based on current learnings and I've changed my mind. But when you change your mind, ensure that it's followed up with, this is what I think we ought to do, and if I'm wrong, this is my next step. So frequently when you change your mind. Have two or three steps that are involved in that mind changing. Not I changed my mind and I dunno what to do. Next thing - you must seek power. Power is where the money is.

The closer you get to the money, the faster you get your hands on money, the more power and control and decisions you make, the more you're perceived as the boss. Being perceived as a boss is a powerful move. This is why sometimes ridiculously stupid people are in charge. It's because they have their hands on the money, not because they know better. Then the other thing that I would also say to women that is incredibly important is, do not allow the things that happened to you that caused doubt to be a reason to stop. Do it anyway. Fail forward. Make lots of mistakes. Assume leadership whenever you can by offering to do the things that are difficult and be comfortable failing.

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BH: Yes, there's loads of examples throughout history of exactly that - about learning through failure and trying and trying again and getting up again. Definitely. And your point on imposter syndrome. Everybody in the industry, no matter how senior and how junior, they are - everybody has the same. I think it's just how you how you internalise that, that's the difference. Thank you, Viola. Thank you so much for joining us again. It was a really powerful and insightful conversation that we had today.

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VL: I'm so honored. Thank you so much for having me on here, guys. So all of our

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BH: To all of our listeners, thank you for tuning in today. Don't forget to like, share and subscribe to our podcast, or contact us if you have any questions or comments. Please use the contact form on the Endava website, at endava.com. Until next time, have a great weekend.