## The technology gender gap reimagined with Anna Barsby and Helena Nimmo
## - Part 2

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BRADLEY HOWARD (BH): Welcome back to the Tech Reimagined podcast with Anna Barsby and Helena Nimmo. In part one, we had an interesting discussion around women in technology and the benefits that overall diversity brings to organisations. Now I want to make things a little bit more personal with our guests to get to know them better and take a trip down memory lane with them back to the year 2000. Anna, your LinkedIn profile is amazing, including a few consulting roles: Sainsbury's, Aviva, the Financial Services Authority, Whitbread, TUI, Halfords, Morrisons, all in senior IT positions, and all started with a degree in art. Tell us more about that journey.

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ANNA BARSBY (AB): So, I did art history because I love old buildings and I majored in architectural history. And one of the other reasons I did it was because you have to spend 10 weeks in Venice as part of the degree or you couldn't pass, which was a bit of a bummer, really. So, amazing. So, absolutely loved those years. And then all I wanted to do was work for English Heritage. That was the dream. And I managed to do that in my second job. I was managing the list of buildings database that we had just created in my first job. Literally it was all paper based and 30 of us sat there typing in this database. I think there's a bit of compute that can do that nowadays. Back then, that was what happened, and I absolutely loved it. But what I found was it was the change management and the project side of it and the tech side that I loved rather than the slower academic pace of the English Heritage organisation. So, I then got headhunted by PA Consulting, went to work there, and I absolutely loved it, and sort of got the change bug, I suppose, and got to go into lots of organisations, find out how they worked and run projects for them. So that was really the change. And when you're at PA, unless you were an engineer, you got put on IT projects. So, I kind of learnt my craft and learnt my trade at PA and in my early 20s, which was brilliant.

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BH: And did you intentionally want to focus on retail and consumer?

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AB: No, but what I found is going into different industries, what I love about retail and consumer, is that it's technology all very close to the customer. Now, obviously, it's a lot of pressure because you can mess up that journey for customers, but you can also make it amazing and you can make it brilliant. And when you are in certainly some of the larger financial organisations where they've got 3000 people in their IT departments, it's very hard to even get close to the businesspeople, let alone your consumer. So, I have found it more satisfying as a technologist to be in that retail consumer area, for sure.

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BH: And tell us more about being a finalist in the European CIO of the Year in 2015, ranked number one in the CIO list in 2014, winner of the CIO of the Year 2014 as well. Women in IT Awards ranked in the top 15 innovative influencers in retail today in 2018. How did you get yourself nominated and how do you focus on those awards?

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AB: Well, most of them somebody else nominates you. The CIO 100, you have to self-nominate. I guess when you go in to become a CIO, it's just something that you want to support and you want to go into because all your peers are there, all your bosses are there. It's just something that is good to be in, something that's very well known in the industry. I had absolutely no idea that I would even get in the top 50. So, it was quite a shock. Amazing. And they were lovely and gave me some brilliant comments, because they were focusing quite a lot that year on transformational change, which we were doing by the bucketload at Halfords at the time. So, incredible to be thought of that way. But it's more about–it's more about the team and making sure the team get the recognition because they're the ones doing the real work. I'm just the sort of air-traffic control at the top, really. [Laughter]

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BH: And Helena, you've also worked at some big companies including Thomson Reuters, Fujitsu, Symbian, and Nokia, which is very unsurprising for a Finnish, but it all started at the University of Strathclyde. How did that happen?

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HELENA NIMMO (HN): Strathclyde came after the University of Oulo in Finland. Half of my family is Scottish, and we had this constant debate at home: Which education system is better? Is it the Finnish education system or is it the British education system? So, I was very privileged to be able to go to both systems by attending Strathclyde University for a year. So, after that, I went back to Finland. Like any true Finn, landed on the doorstep of Nokia in the '90s when Nokia was going high and we were being promoted left, right and centre into increasingly bigger and bigger roles. So, I had the opportunity at that point to move from factory logistics, which is where I started, into the technology space in Nokia and absolutely loved it. I thought it was the best thing since sliced bread being able to work with technology and really see technology taking a shape in improving what we were doing in each of the factories and how it improved everybody's work. And then the next logical step was obviously moving into Symbian, which Nokia was a big part of at that point. So, moved back to the UK and caught the 'Millennium bug' as it was. I was at Symbian at the time, so we were all watching our screens and wondering what all of the old computers will do when we turn them on at midnight. That was the kind of real bug that I had with technology. Got into it. Absolutely loved it.

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BH: And after Symbian, how did you then stop moving around after that?

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HN: I stayed with Nokia and Symbian for a number of years. And then I started to look around and what different things I could do. I enjoyed change an awful lot. And it was the what does the world look like outside of Symbian? And we worked very closely at that point and we worked very closely with Fujitsu. And there were some fantastic technology ideas coming out of the Japanese markets. So that was a logical jump into that. Now, I've moved around a lot of different sectors and I get a lot of questions about that. How do you maintain or how do you kind of create that depth of knowledge? And I think moving around different sectors is really beneficial in technology, because some of the basic challenges around change and people remain the same. Often the technologies remain the same as well. It's just the process and what you're defining is different.

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BH: When you both think back to the beginning of your careers, what things stand out to you both about how things have changed?

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AB: The way that technology is positioned in organisations has changed hugely. So, I think there used to be IT departments off on the side and there still are in some organisations. But I think businesses are wising up to the fact that unless they have tech spread across the whole organisation and properly embedded, they are not going to succeed. They are not going to grow, turn around, do whatever it is that they need to do. So, I think there's a lot of work going on right now to make sure that that is happening a lot, a lot more widespread. But that's the biggest change I've seen. So, IT's gone from a function to being, you know, omnipresent across the whole organisation.

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HN: Yes. No, I would definitely, definitely second that statement. Technology, when it started out in a true department in the '60s and '70s, they had that similar status and it went down into that back-office function. And now we're really, truly understanding the impact of technology. And the reality is that we are effectively pretty much the only department in any organisation right now that can take the lights out. We have got that huge responsibility and with that huge responsibility comes also the fact that we do need to have the right conversations in the right places.

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BH: What advice do you have for women working in technology today who feel like they need to go above and beyond in order to be recognised?

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AB: I think firstly, I'd say I get it. We've all had to do it. It shouldn't be that way. However, I think anyone that is doing it today needs to be talking about it, needs to be making others aware of what's going on and also mainly be the role model for the next people coming through and break those barriers. Have those conversations that you might normally be afraid to have but do it on behalf of everybody coming behind you. Because it is–there are times where it's tough and there still will be for this generation–it has been for our generation. But unless you face into it and you have those conversations, and you're open and honest and realistic with everyone that you talk to, then nothing's going to change. So be bold. I think that's what I'd say.

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HN: Yes, it is a challenge. It's–everybody always wants to go above and beyond and deliver what they want to deliver. And as part of that, we often forget that we do need to have the downtime to be able to think and recharge our batteries. And I think that's the bit where we have got the responsibility to make sure that when we observe an individual who are not quite taking that downtime to make sure that they do that. It's okay not to be switched on all the time, every day. That's a very key point.

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BH: So, what's the best piece of advice that you've ever been given yourself and any advice from any particular mentors? Have you had mentors?

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HN: Yes, I've been very lucky in having mentors throughout my career in various different guises. You know, sometimes it hasn't been a formal relationship, but it's been a really important relationship. And I still do have a mentor. And I also mentor others. The thing is, you get an awful lot of really good advice and you completely ignore it, because you can't actually truly accept it and acknowledge it until you've lived through it. So, I guess the best advice is the–there are

people with experience who do actually know better and they're seeing what you are doing. So, I think that's the best advice. And it's been given to me so many times and I've ignored it every time.

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AB: I think the best advice I've had, although it was through role modelling first and then it, sort of, I recognised what it was later on in life. It was being yourself. I had a mentor when I was at PA–a lady called Nuala, and she was phenomenal. She was the only female partner in our practise at PA. And she was just brilliant because she was so authentic and slightly crazy, but in a brilliant way. And to grow up really quite young in my career with somebody that strong and powerful as a mentor who just didn't care what she was supposed to do. She just did the right thing. And she was such a strong character. It was amazing. So, it's advice I give to other people that actually– you will be the best leader if you're yourself first and you're authentic. And I know authenticity has become quite a buzzword lately, but I still think it's a phenomenal piece of advice that I had a long time ago. Like, say, didn't listen early enough. But I'm still telling people about today.

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BH: It's amazing how there's definitely a theme when I asked that question to all of our podcast guests. Doing the right thing is a consistent theme that goes all the way through everybody's advice. What's the best business or technology book that you've ever read? And do you read those business and technology books?

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AB: I have to say, I'm a real fiction fan. I've got always about two books on the go all the time, and it's usually fiction because I find I like the escapism. So, I'm not big on reading technology books. There was one recently that I read which was *The Art of Not Giving an F\*\*\**, which I just thought was brilliant from a bit of a just a self-life kind of piece of advice. But no, I tend to read–I'll read online articles, I'll dip in and out. I can't sit and read a whole IT book, I'm afraid. [Laughs]

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HN: No, I would have to agree with that. It's a–it brings back the kind of sweats and the memories of sitting down with a schoolbook. There is an escapism to it. I read a lot of Sci-Fi. So, I guess that could be classified as a technology book. But that's a little bit beyond what we currently can deliver with technology. But there's loads of great articles out there. You know, just to be able to get what you need when you need it rather than kind of trawl through for a big heavyweight book.

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BH: Both of you, when you talked about your career background, talked about how you started off in a number of different roles. And you're both CIOs now. So, what was your lucky break? What was the inflection curve that really made you much more senior?

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HN: To be honest, I'm very fortunate. I consider every change of job, every change of role, every change of organisation, every change of boss, I consider that a lucky break because I have learned something from every position and every person I have worked with. I think that's it. It's just the making sure that you're true to yourself, making sure that you have got something in your mind. So, I was always told, 'Oh, Helena, you need to specialise in certain things.' And, and I'm sitting there going, 'But I don't want to specialise. I'm a generalist.' And I guess the lucky break for me is when I was recognised as that generalist and that it's okay to be a generalist. And what you can bring to the table.

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AB: I guess for me, it's–I've just gone with things where I can keep learning. I get intellectually quite bored quite quickly. So, I have to just have something that's a big challenge and want to keep learning. So, I've tended to just run bigger and bigger change programmes throughout my career. And actually, I see my two CIO roles as big change programmes because they were both in turnaround organisations that needed to do things very differently. So, I tend to just look at places and think, 'Brilliant, what can I add? But what can I learn in every role?' And as long as they're both there, then I'll go for it. It doesn't really matter about the title or the, you know, the organisation culture has become more important to me as I've gone through my career because that's absolutely–you've got to have the right fit. You've got to have the same values as the organisation. So that becomes more and more important as I go through my career.

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BH: How have you worked out what that culture is going to be of the organisation before you join there?

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AB: It is hard, but you have to do your research. You have to talk to as many people as you can who not only work there now, but also have worked and left because it's really good to get that understanding of why they left. Did they leave under a cloud or not? So, it is just about talking to people, using your network, listening and just grilling as much as you can about the culture. And I think people are quite surprised when I am being interviewed. I ask a lot of cultural questions. And for a technologist, I think they find that bit strange. But it's important to me.

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BH: What advice do you have for the next generation that's entering the workforce, particularly females?

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AB: Mine would be be authentic, be yourself, be your best self. Do a lot of listening. A lot of really understanding. A bit like I've just said, you know, what value are you giving in your role, but also, what are you getting? Make sure you are selfish to the extent that you know what you're getting, the value you're getting from the organisation. And then when you know your job at 80 percent, make sure you've planned the next step. Whether that's inside the organisation or outside. Don't wait till you can do that job 100 percent because there's a process and it takes time. And there are too many people I know who just stay in a job too long because they're unselfish and they're thinking, 'Oh, well, it's good for everybody else that I stay here.' Well, think about yourself a bit more. Think about your career and do a little bit more planning and a bit more working out what's the next step and why. Is it because you want to keep learning? Is it because actually you like a particular area and you want to go into it? Is it because you want to be a CIO one day and you need to get some of the experience across the organisation? But just be a bit more well-planned, a bit more deliberate.

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BH: So, when you started your senior roles in technology, did you specifically have your mind set on, 'I want to be a CIO one day'?

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AB: Not at all until I had that conversation when I was an interim. I think it was at Whitbread. It was Andrew Brothers who said to me, 'You can do all the roles underneath. Why aren't you thinking about becoming a CIO?' And it hadn't occurred to me at all. I was just doing, as I say, bigger and

bigger change roles. But I was incredibly fortunate then Halfords came up, which was the best advice because it was a CIO, but it was also a big change programme.

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BH: And how soon between that conversation with Andrew and the Halfords role?

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AB: Because the conversation with Andrew, I then took a job at TUI as a permanent head of programmes and business change. And then within two years of being at TUI, the Halfords job came up. So, it was probably a couple of years after.

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HN: I can kind of echo what Anna is saying there, so, but to also take it a little bit further. It's about being who you are. Being authentic and being yourself in the workforce, in the workplace. And I think it's actually really scary because it's–and I think that's the big thing–it's the being brave to be yourself. It takes an awful lot of courage not to put on a role and the armour when you walk into a workplace, especially when you're a younger person starting up in your career. So, it does take an awful lot of courage. Also following your gut feeling. If it doesn't feel right, don't be afraid to analyse why it's not feeling right. Because your instincts are usually quite good. And I think that's another thing I would definitely say for those starting out in their career.

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AB: I do, on that theme, I do quite a lot of work with my mentees on values and to that point on self-awareness, try and break down their values for them so they can think that–for me, values are your gut instincts. So, if you've got your 10 values or your six values in front of you, which one isn't sync with that decision? And it really helps you break down your gut instinct, I think.

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BH: And Helena, have you got any advice for female members of your team that are midway through their career and want to climb the management ladder?

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HN: Yes. So, as the first piece of advice I would give is, don't be afraid to think about climbing that management ladder. So, it's that whole point going back to Anna was saying about being selfless. I think it's really important for people to think about themselves as well, not just their workplace and their colleagues. So, don't be afraid to think about your ambitions. Don't be afraid to share your ambitions. I'm not saying you're going to shout it from the rooftops, but find a confidante, find that mentor to talk to them about the ambitions that you have. That's something I encourage everybody. Also, there's nothing stopping you. If you set your mind on it, there's absolutely nothing stopping you.

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BH: And in terms of finding mentors, something that I think is also very important in today's world, do you recommend people find mentors inside their organisation or external?

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HN: Both. Internal will give you always the capability to be able to navigate the company, the relationships, the politics that you have with when you have a situation with more than two people in the room. It is all about relationships, after all. But external, because that gives you a different context, gives you an opportunity to hear it from somebody else as very objective, only knowing half of the story point of view.

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BH: Do you have mentors today?

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HN: Yes, I do. Yes. Yes, I have external mentors. They're basically longstanding relationships that I've had for a number of years.

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BH: Can ask if they're female or male?

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HN: They are both male.

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BH: Why do you think that is?

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HN: Oh, that's an interesting question. I think it's probably more because there wasn't a female mentor available when I picked my mentors at that stage. And I think it's because they're longstanding relationships, you know, and I haven't really looked at changing it. So, I think that's probably the reason.

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BH: Do you have particular advice for people in your team to try and find those mentors then? And do you think that they should try and find female mentors?

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HN: Absolutely. I would say there's something very different now to what there was, say, five, 10 years ago. The mentoring networks, the unofficial mentoring networks are much stronger than they used to be. So, it's actually much easier to find a mentor than it was. So definitely, but I think regardless of the gender of the mentor, it's about how you click. If you click, the gender shouldn't matter. That's more important in that space.

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BH: My last question for both of you is the CIO role. What do you think that it will look like in 2040 in 20 years' time?

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AB: I think it's already morphing into a more enterprise-wide role from where an IT director used to sit. I think it's a lot more commercially focused or it certainly should be. And it is growing that way. More people focused, more commercially focused, much more business focused than it was. And it is about how technology enables a business. It's not about keeping the lights on, running tin and wires because you can buy those services in. So, it is much more front and centre of a business. And I think that's coming now. And it will come very, very quickly.

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HN: And I guess my dream is that in 2040, we do not have the conversation of IT and the business. That is, it is so prevalent still. You don't have the same conversation about finance and the business. It happens to be our discipline. It happens to be our expertise. But we are business leaders. And I cannot wait for the day when we stop saying IT and business.

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BH: Absolutely. Thank you both for joining me and sharing such great insight both into your careers and also into where you see the relationship between the technology industry and diversity and inclusion going in the next two decades. Don't forget to like this podcast and hit the subscribe button to stay up to date with all of our shows.