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Why Aren't There More Women in IT?

By Vera Alves (/author/Vera-Alves/), New-Zealand-Reseller-News   Aug 15, 2012 3:30 PM

Liz Coulter is used to having big shoes to fill - men sized ones, usually. The director of IT Services at the University of Auckland started her IT career in Australia before moving to England, then back to Australia and finally to New Zealand where she settled last year. And yes, the main motivator for the move across the ditch was a man. Her father was one of the first programmers in Australia who brought Ethernet down under and created AusCERT. Her IT career was almost decided at birth.

Coulter was the guest speaker at the Women in IT forum organised by VMware in Auckland late last month, as part of the VMware Solutions Symposium. "In 2010, the VP of VMware APAC realised the percentage of women in the company was really low, so he created the Diversity Council," explains Rhody Burton, who now leads the council, along with her channel manager ANZ role. "When I joined, there was only one other woman in the business. I am very passionate about this," she added at the event.

[5 Women Leaders Who Are Shaping IT (http://www.pcworld.com/businesscenter/article /221632/5_women_leaders_who_are_shaping_it.html)]

Addressing a mostly female crowd, Coulter said she has always held jobs where she was mostly the only woman among men and it was her education and technical knowledge that helped her progress into more senior roles. Coulter says it is very important to look at the numbers and figure out what is stopping more women from entering the industry (http://www.pcworld.com/businesscenter/article/259844 /women_in_it_the_system_is_broken_author_warns.html). "This is really important and something we should all embrace," says Coulter. At the moment, about 26 percent of staff in her area at the university are females. "Women are being encouraged to play different roles," she adds.

Coulter says the gender gap may have something to do with the nature of the industry and its characteristics but points out that soft skills are just as important as technical skills. "It's important to be a people person. One thing women have is compassion. Sometimes they don't realise it's more than just the technology. It's the services, the customer service. What is missing in IT are these softer skills and they are in demand," she adds.

About the people, not their gender

The same opinion is shared by Dale Campbell, Motion Computing business development manager at Simms International. "There is this idea that you have to be technical but it's not true. There are sales roles, marketing roles, and others," points out Campbell.

About a year and a half ago, Campbell started the "Women in IT NZ" LinkedIn group. To date, the group has brought together a total of 150 members and Campbell says the number continues to grow every week. The idea behind it is to create a social environment where women can share stories and ask questions. It is also an online platform to organise real meet ups. She says the group does not exist based on any kind of discrimination that she might have ever felt. In fact, Campbell says that her 15 years in the industry have been free from any sort of exclusion and she has always felt "just like another person".

"There has never been a problem, I have never even thought about that," she says.

Simms currently employs a total of nine staff in New Zealand and the ratio is five males to four females, according to the company's managing director Paul Johnston.

"I take the view that companies must ensure the best candidates are given the jobs, irrespective of gender," he says. "As a father of three girls I want them to have absolute equality but do not want them to be given a job ahead of someone, just because they are

a woman (http://www.pcworld.com/businesscenter/article/251152
/women_entrepreneurs_dont_want_any_special_treatment_in_asian_startup_scene.html).
If people have to 'actively think' about attracting women I think there could be some sort
of underlying problem with them in the first place."

It might be this sort of workplace environment that makes Campbell say the gender ratio
in IT is not an issue. "Is that even really a problem?" she asks. She says more women in
IT would improve business but disagrees that the current numbers are an issue
(http://www.pcworld.com/article/253338
/feminist_group_pushes_facebook_to_appoint_female_board_member.html). She points
out that some professions have bigger representation of one gender rather than the
other (citing teaching as an example). Campbell has, however, noticed a lot more media
coverage on the subject, particularly following Yahoo's recent CEO appointment, with
Marissa Mayer taking on the role while pregnant, a move that some defined as a
"landmark" for closing the gender gap in the industry. Prior to joining Yahoo, Mayer was
also Google's first female engineer.

Breaking the boundaries

Dell runs a variety of different programmes, both internally and
externally, with the final goal of growing the number of women in
the IT industry, across all sectors. Deborah Harrigan's full-time job
is overseeing Dell's small and medium business division in the
ANZ region but she also finds the time to work in a number of

these programmes.

One of those, WITEM (Women in IT Executive Mentoring), is an external programme
that was started in 2005 by Dell's managing director ANZ, Joe Kremer, after he identified
a "real gap for women in the industry", as Harrigan recalls. The programme has been
running since then and marries up a CEO with a key female executive to receive
mentoring for 12 months. The programme has been running in Australia and Harrigan
says Dell is "looking to expand into New Zealand with it this year". Alongside that, other
programmes target females in different levels of the business to help them move further
up the hierarchy. The DWEN (Dell Women Entrepreneur Network) targets females in
small and medium businesses and brings them together in a think thank where they can
share stories and discuss views. Harrigan attended one of the annual events in New
Delhi this year. "The energy in the room was palpable, it was very inspiring to see
women breaking down the boundaries," she says.

But what are those boundaries? Harrigan says "women can have a great idea but reach
a point when, to go from a small to a medium business, they need a framework that
multinational companies take for granted". She says women tend to "undervalue"
themselves and are "not known for being good at pitching themselves". This programme
aims to help with those pitches and mentors women on a number of business key points
such as the preparation of business plans.

The company is also launching a new programme this month called "IT is not for geeks"
which it will take to schools to encourage teenage girls to choose technology as an area
of study. "It's an hour and a half programme on why they should consider technology, to
bust the myth that IT is purely technology, to really show that technology is pervasive in
every sector of our life today," says Harrigan. Dell is kicking off the programme in Sydney
this month and Harrigan says the next step is to start it in New Zealand as well.

On an internal level, the company also runs a number of programmes to help women
move up in the chain, including the WISE (Women in Search of Excellence) and the
"Taking the stage" programmes, which aim to "give women a voice". In ANZ, Dell has
about 30 percent female staff across different areas of the business.