

women in TECHNOLOGY

GROW, LEARN, SUCCEED

by Andrea Snyder, STUDIO3TWENTY

In an industry of constant change and evolution, Amanda Regnerus has at times found herself lacking the confidence that she would be able to make the change or learn at the pace that was needed to keep up with the IT industry. Her admission to those fears may come as a surprise, considering Regnerus is the Vice President of Marketing at US Signal Company, a global technology enterprise.

“Each time I had those fears, I realized my apprehension was unnecessary. What I began to do is look at the evolution of technology as a challenge to grow, learn, and take my career to the next level,” said Regnerus.

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It seemed a common theme among each of the women I spoke to. After all, you don't rise to the top, like Regnerus did, without learning valuable lessons and taking advantage of challenges along the way. Regnerus, along with all the women featured are in the field of technology, an industry predominantly filled with males. According to the National Center for Women & Information Technology, in 2012, just 18% of computer-science college graduates were women, down from 37% in 1985. Despite the decline, we're seeing great efforts to encourage young women to jump in head first.

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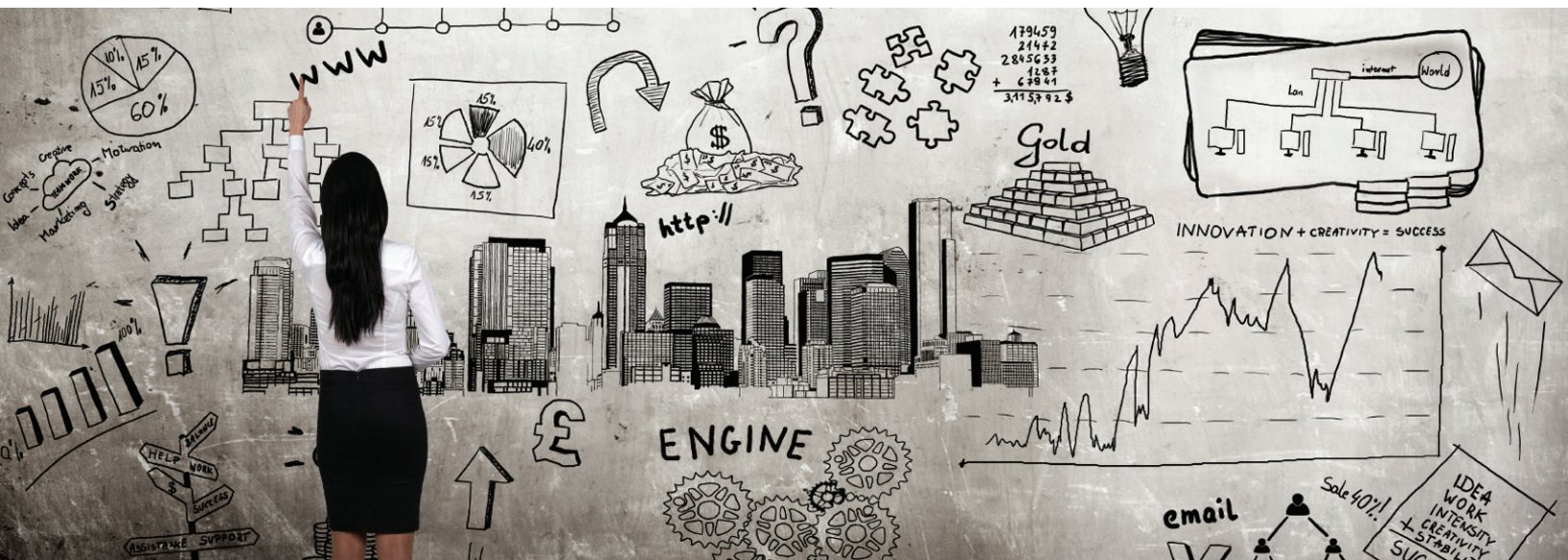
STEM (Science Technology Engineering Math) programs are becoming so popular that even the Girl Scouts have an agenda dedicated specifically to the cause. Nicole Johnson, a Systems Engineer with Cisco, believes in the power of mentorship and focusing on attracting young minds and retaining women in the

industry. She goes on to say that it's never too early to help a young girl see the vast options that STEM fields provide. “By simply speaking about your own successes in a STEM career, you can help open doors. They can't be what they can't see, and this is the first step. You never know what the influence will be,” says Johnson.

Breaking into the technology field at an early age can certainly help eliminate many of the barriers that come along with an ever-changing field, however, that constant evolution is what draws so many people to the industry in the first place. Patti Phillips, Mid Market Account Manager at Cisco, can't imagine doing anything else. “The technology industry is so exciting, it's ever evolving and dynamically expanding, so it keeps me on my toes.”

Aside from the positive efforts that STEM programs and mentoring have created, there is also encouragement for women to consider leadership roles in technology from a financial perspective. Women-led hi-tech startups achieve a 35% higher return on investment, and when venture backed they generate 12% more revenue than male-owned tech companies. However, they represent only 3% of tech start-ups. This is according to the study “Women in Technology: Evolving, Ready to Save the World,” which surveyed 500 women in the technology sector and was conducted by Lesa Mitchell of the Kauffman Foundation and Vivek Wadhwa, who holds titles at both Stanford and Duke University.

Coming off the heels of a recession, it may be assumed that good jobs are still hard to come by, but this is far from the case in the field of IT. “There is a misnomer out there that we have or can quickly find the talent companies are looking for in an ever-changing environment,” said Becky Puckett-Wood, Managing Director with Experis, a division of Manpower that places candidates into IT roles. “With the continuing technical advancement of industries, the talent pool dwindles faster than the colleges can keep up on the current technology trends to



keep the pool full for the market,” she explained.

“Whether you are male or female, the technology industry moves fast. Being relevant takes an investment in listening to IT challenges people are facing and staying educated on the latest technology trends. It’s a moving target and I think people may underestimate the time and investment in continued learning,” says Johnson.

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MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

The perception of technology has come a long way over the last decade. It’s no longer “not cool” to be a female techie, says Deidra McClelland, CEO of The Skye Group, a marketing communications firm. “Science, math, engineering and computers are subjects and industries that young girls and women can definitely handle just as well as their male counterparts.”

Long perceived as a group of “geeks” writing code all day, the scope of technology is so vast it can literally be considered the very heart of a business.

“For many organizations the biggest misconception about IT is that it doesn’t deserve to be in the C Suite. But in reality, IT intersects all of the top business expenses - HR, payroll, inventory, materials, operating expenses, etc.,” explains Carrie Borchers, Director of Sales for IT Resource, a midwest leader of information technology services. “There are manufacturing facilities that have 24 x 7 operations with factories producing goods on machines that cost a million dollars. Yet, they balk at spending less than 1% on their IT infrastructure. What happens if those million dollar machines can’t connect to the network? IT is a key

business driver and it belongs at the board room table.”

While businesses may not understand the importance of a solid IT infrastructure, the realm of technology doesn’t have to be mystifying, says Phillips. “It really involves listening to a customer, understanding their concerns and helping them solve their problems with the right solution and the right resources at the right time.”

RISING TO THE TOP

Working in a field where females are the minority, and overcoming the challenges that come with the territory are just part of the daily grind for these women. At the end of the day they each felt the challenges they faced were no different than woman leaders in other fields and industries. They each make efforts to help other women (and men) succeed, whether it be in technology, or any aspect of business for that matter. Rising to the top of the corporate ladder is never an easy feat, but the lessons learned along the way have been instrumental in getting these women to where they are today, and in supporting and mentoring others throughout the process.

“One of the challenges I’ve turned into an asset is knowing my own weaknesses and building a team around me that complements those. By doing this I’ve been able to build a team that makes me stronger and more well-rounded as a leader, in addition to helping my employees rise to their full potential, all while driving results for the company,” explains Puckett-Wood. “It’s a win, win, win if you can get the right team.”

“Along the way, never forget to stay true to yourself,” explains McClelland. “If something doesn’t feel right, it probably isn’t and this may go into the category of female intuition - it does exist.” But most importantly she reminds us to have fun. “At the end of the day, if you aren’t enjoying what you do, you need to move on and find your passion.”

IT'S A BALANCING ACT

While finding passion in your career is instrumental advice, it often comes with a price. Bringing home stacks of work, getting out the laptop after the kids go to bed, then waking up tired to do it all over again may sound like a familiar situation. That was the life Regnerus led before she learned to be present where she is. By working smarter, not harder, Regnerus was able to separate her work life from her home life and eliminate the overwhelming feeling of trying to be all things to all people all of the time.

This way of life was not unique to Regnerus. Each woman I spoke to indicated that there is a balancing act that needs to take place in order to be your best in each given situation.

The word “guilt” was routinely suggested as one of the feelings that women in general are uniquely good at. “Many of us feel as if no matter how hard we try to balance, we may be paying more attention to one area of our lives at the expense of something else,” says Borchers. “I haven’t figured out the balance yet. This is an area I refer to as the battle I will always fight, but never win. Meaning, I achieve balance when I am intentional. You have to make time for what matters and respect those commitments.”

Phillips makes it a priority to “unplug” on a regular basis, volunteer, and practice yoga which helps keep her centered and

balanced physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. But for McClelland, she feels as though she can never completely “shut it off,” but she is learning. A former boss reminded her that the house wouldn’t burn down if she was gone for a week. It was that vacation that made her realize just how important that little bit of “me time” actually was. You can only do so much in a day’s time. “Impact what you can today, and work on the rest tomorrow,” added Puckett-Wood.

Women do wear many hats when it comes to a career, a home life, and social commitments, but Johnson kindly reminds us that “at the end of the day, we only have one head for all those hats.” She says “I use my calendar and a daily to do “hit list” so I focus on my key activities and I am able to enjoy my home life after.

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Women tend to want to do it all, so it’s important to let go of feeling guilty for some things you couldn’t fit in and let other people share your load when needed. I try to live in the now, but remember that it’s the “life” I have that supports my success in my work.”

PROGRAMS FOR WOMEN

There are a variety of programs available for women who have interests in technology. Cisco has programs to create communities for diversity both internally and for the general public. The internal networks develop a community within Cisco of peer women from all backgrounds. They also hold an annual global event for women which has motivated members to do more local meet-ups together.

The public women’s group, called Cisco Empowered Women’s Network (CEWN), provides a forum for all women in IT to

network, motivate, and empower each other through energizing and engaging events held during Cisco Live and sustained through ongoing events throughout the year. This helps women bring similar events to their workplace, helps build pipelines and retains women in technology.

In addition, the Michigan Council for Women in Technology (MCWT) is a strong statewide group, and Davenport University has led many efforts to facilitate events for women in technology.

A SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Follow them on Twitter to keep up with the latest tech trends.

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