

0:00 Mercedes:

The next instalment in the FMAA podcast is Gail Pemberton, who has recently been made an Officer of the Order of Australia. She's an outstanding leader in the technology, finance, and banking industry, but more notably an incredible role model for any woman or man who is willing to work hard to succeed. Thank you so much for taking the time out of your day Gail to talk with us. I guess we'll start with asking where your passion for technology comes from, and whether there were any other career paths you were considering.

0:32 Gail:

Well it's an interesting story - it goes back quite a long way. In my early career, I was a strong believer in equal pay and equal opportunity and I think that probably comes from the fact that my mother was a headmistress and my grandmother ran her own newspaper and one of the things I often talk about is the importance of role model. So therefore, I saw a whole list of professions when I was doing my career research at high school and there was a pay differential between male and females and I thought "This isn't right." So, I actually looked at two career paths that had equal pay and both seemed new and exciting and one of them you'd be surprised - that was radiography - and I did a work experience thing and I went to a radiography clinic and I thought this is very depressing! I'm sure it's very good work but I don't think this is something that's going to energize me. With technology, I couldn't really find any work experience with technology, but I read a lot about it. That's where I decided I wanted to have a career - so I started exploring what tertiary education options were available at the time. Now as I said this was quite some time ago - you won't find this hard to believe but there was not a computer science program at any university at the time so there was science, accounting, commerce and they all had computing subjects but there wasn't a full computer science at that stage. So I enrolled in accounting and in the mean time I took a holiday job as a filing clerk at some Alliance insurance and when my HSC results came out they asked me what I wanted to do because they thought I was much brighter than the average filing clerk and I told them I wanted to go into computer programming they asked me would I be interested in doing an internship with them and bang there you go I sort of got a job as a computer programmer before it even started a day in tertiary studies! But why I chose technology - it wasn't just because of equal pay - it was because I saw it as being something new and exciting and futuristic - something that might shape the future of work. I can't say I had well-formed ideas because I was in high school, but I think I was right in that it was a good choice to choose something new and evolving and growing and that's certainly a piece of advice that I give a lot of young people today.

3:34 Mercedes:

How do you think your diversity has played a role in shaping your leadership experience?

3:42 Gail:

Hopefully it has given me empathy for diversity in all backgrounds. I think there's two elements of diversity in terms of my leadership experience - one because I was a chief technology officer for Macquarie Bank and I had a thousand staff. As I grew that team, the team came from parts of the world, particularly Asia and all sorts of Asian countries and I think I grew as a result of having the experience of working with people from all different ethnicities and I saw how valuable and much more interesting a workplace it was to have people from different ethnic backgrounds. Because of my empathy for females, I had a very high proportion of my workforce when I was at the city at Macquarie were females, which was quite unusual at the time - I had about 40% of the technology area that I led were females so it gave me empathy and I think I was a role model so I think it had a conscious effect and it had an unconscious fact in that I think females felt comfortable and like the idea of coming and working in a very large part of the organization that was run by a female. In terms of other aspects of my leadership experience I suppose I'm attuned to discrimination in the workplace and sexist behaviour - I've learnt different techniques for dealing with it.

5:48 Mercedes:

Drawing upon that, how do you challenge stereotypes in continuing to promote sensitivity and inclusion?

5:55 Gail:

I think it's important to not - and this is my particular style - be overly sensitive and call everything out and create a somewhat adversarial or polarized attitude between males and females. Men behave differently to women in social situations and in the workplace and women similarly. I don't think we actually are seeking a world where people are exactly the same, but what we do want to do is promote sensitivity so I think when there are challenges in the workplace then one approach is with sensitivity so it's not, "One strike - you're out!" It's about having conversations that are sensitive. I'll give you an example - one of the boards that I'm on there was a new director came on the board and the CEO is female and she's particularly sensitive about swearing and this guy who came on the board is actually a New Age man and very much treats women as peers but he hadn't picked up that this was a particular behaviour that this female CEO thought was 'blokey'. So I just took him aside and "I think you just need to understand different companies, different cultures, different CEOs - and this behaviour is getting in the way of you forming a relationship a good working-relationship so think about how you approach when you're annoyed and you want to use an expletive. Perhaps think about in this situation that's not appropriate." And he did - he now has a terrific rapport. I think approaching these things sensitively because people just don't necessarily pick up on vibes and I think that's okay - it's when behaviour is consistent and conscious that you need to take further action.

8:32 Mercedes:

Why do you think inclusion has been such a challenge - particularly in the technology industry?

I'll give you a real example - I don't know if you saw the article when I was given the award of the AO. One of the things I talked about in that article was that we've got to do something to encourage more women into technology. In newspapers, you can now make comments online, and there was a whole series of comments from males saying "Why should I make women want to do something they don't want to do?" and "Maybe women aren't good at it." There was a whole series of comments like that - so clearly there are stereotypes and defensiveness. I started as a programmer, I cut code, and I moved into a management and a board director role. I think I was a pretty good programmer. I don't think that there's anything genetically that says women can't be good at doing technical stuff and, of course,

sensible people know that. But it's about attracting women. There's a couple of things - I think there's not enough promotion of technology careers generally in Australia. There is a shortage of talent - both male and female talent - and I think that that behaves the government, the education system, all the actors in trying to determine what are the skill sets that Australia needs to be successful in the 21st century need to deal with this issue. You would have Atlassian's CEO in the press yesterday saying this country's got to wake up and start investing and building in technology skills. It's not just a female problem, but females are 50% of the population and they're not participating in technologies so we've got to solve that one too. I think it needs to start from the government. I think the education system plays a large role here. I had a friend of mine said that their daughter was passionate about doing technology and her teachers talked her out of it because she should do history because it would maximise her ATAR. I think there are workplace stereotypes - I don't think that's the major part of the problem - I think it starts in high school and I think it's on campus and I think the industry and employers like Atlassian need to get out there and promote the industry and their workplaces to females.

11:47 Mercedes:

What do you believe is the most challenging aspect of a diverse environment?

Generally, a diverse environment has many advantages rather than disadvantages, but I suppose some of the challenges can be related to sensitivity. I'll give you an example which is not an Australian example, but I'm a director of PayPal Australia and we visited the Malaysian customer service centre. They are putting PayPal's values of diversity in action - part of its corporate goals and values is diversity and inclusion such that in the state of Carolina last year you might have seen that that state rolled back the rights of the LGBT community, and PayPal's Managing Director said that we're not going to go ahead with the Operations Centre we're going to build in Carolina because this state is not consistent with our values of diversity and inclusion. So, I think that's a real-life example and following on that one we were in Malaysia as directors of PayPal Australia and because the part of the call centre operations are outsourced to Malaysia and meeting the team there. They talked to us about how they live the values of diversity and inclusion, and it's quite challenging for them because it's a Muslim environment. So, that's a particular challenge because to some extent we're inflicting Western values on cultures where there is a disconnect. In a global, outsourced world within a corporate environment- as a regulated Australian entity, PayPal Australia outsources operations to different parts of the globe and they're owned by PayPal. However, because it's such a highly networked and global organization, its westernized values are required to be upheld in different parts of the world but it requires sensitivity. That's a very long way of explaining some of the challenges but I think personally I think that the positives far outweigh the challenges. But people need to be sensitive and not just assume that everybody is going to understand or embrace, or have the skills to it to embrace diversity, so the organisation is to invest in ways of communicating the benefits and the values of diversity.

15:07 Mercedes:

Thank you very much Gail it has been a pleasure to sit down with you – it is refreshing and promising to see such an inspiring individual advocate the empowerment of women in technology but moreover inspiring diversity and people to follow their passions so thank you very much!

15:22 Gail:

Thank you Mercedes!