

Inclusivity in the tech world

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BRADLEY HOWARD – ENDAVA HOST (BH): Hello, everyone. I'm Bradley Howard and I'm happy to welcome you to the latest episode of Tech Reimagined. I'm thrilled to have Meri Williams with us as our guest today. She's an experienced CTO who has led and scaled technology organisations that build and run brilliant products and services in various sectors, including medtech, neo banking and government, e-commerce, telco manufacturing. Meri, welcome to our podcast.

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MERI WILLIAMS – CTO, GEEK, MANAGER (MW): Thanks for having me. I'm delighted to be here.

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BH: Can you tell us more about your career so far, please?

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MW: Sure. So I'm a, so as you mentioned, a CTO, I've been in a number of different roles. But I started out as a hardware hacker. So I'm South African originally I built my first computer from pieces and then worked my way up from there. So I was a computer scientist with a focus in AI and then ended up in a much more kind of leadership management role relatively early in my career and navigated it that way. I know today we're talking about inclusion, and that's very dear to my heart, partly because I'm, I joke sometimes I'm literally the one the Daily Mail warned you about, right? I'm a woman working in tech, which shouldn't be unusual, but kind of is sometimes. I'm an immigrant with a job, which I think is worse than if I were living off the state. But I've got to check the headlines regularly to be sure. And I'm queer and disabled and neurodiverse and my wife's British, so I'm literally over here stealing our women and your jobs. But I grew up white in Apartheid South Africa, so I'm very aware of what it feels like to be the beneficiary of something that you didn't choose, right? So like the definition of privilege is just having an advantage that you didn't earn. Definitely having this ridiculous paleness growing up in Apartheid South Africa was the absolute embodiment of a accident of birth that then gave me a lot more opportunity and even rights than a lot of other people had. And so I find myself in this situation when this debate is happening and - in tech I've been like, you know, been in arguably much more discriminatory situations, and in many ways, people are, you know, trying to be very nice to each other in the work context. But then sometimes missing out on some of these real conversations that we have to have about what's difficult and what's not and how to make things better for everyone.

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BH: So over the years, what have you seen that's drawn your attention to inclusivity in the tech industry?

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MW: So I moved to the UK to study and then failed to go home, essentially. Obviously, I go back to South Africa fairly regularly, though. But I started work in the UK and actually got fired once for being gay. And so I, you know, people forget that it's only been illegal since 2003 in the UK to fire someone for being gay, and it was only when Ireland made equal marriage available. That was the first time in history that there were more countries I could get married in than would put me to death. And so I think it's easy sometimes to be - tech tends to be very US-centric and UK-centric, particularly if you're based in London, like I am a lot of the time, and it's easy to forget how many countries don't have equal rights for a whole bunch of people. And so I remember one of the

things I did while I was at P&G, I was part of the team that formed the first LGBTQ Plus employee group there, and I remember some of the senior leaders, the directors and so on at the company just being like, I mean, we don't mind, but like, what's this got to do with work? And then we did a poster version of the Wikipedia LGBTQ rights map around the globe, that showed that there were more places that would want to put me to death than let me get married, and they were like, Oh shit, I never thought about. The fact that Singapore is not welcoming the fact that Geneva doesn't have same sex marriage, the fact that Cincinnati, which is where P&G headquarters was, was definitely not a wonderful environment to move to. So I was personally very affected being sexually diverse myself, but also having grown up where I had, I was very worried by the – well, and upset by the different treatment of people of colour that I was working with. And so I wanted to make sure I did what was right to try and combat that to a great extent. You know, I think that's how you achieve the best change when you've got the LGBTQ employee group reminding people that we need to have prayer rooms for their Muslim colleagues and the Muslim colleagues being like, well, we need to make sure that our benefits are available to everyone. When people support and echo each other then you can achieve a lot more than if you're all just individually trying to influence.

[00:04:45] BH: Why do you think that people and organisations still struggle to ensure a culture of inclusivity? I mean, it is 2021 now.

[00:04:52] MW: I think for two main reasons. One is, people think that the job is done. You know, people are like, Oh, you know, people were burning bras 50 years ago. I'm like, yeah, you look at any of the current surveys and in heterosexual marriages still, in most countries, women are doing all of the housework as well as all the child care as well as everything else. I remember when I was at P&G, there was a point where there was like a whole hubbub in response to the 'thank you mum' campaign that was around the Olympics. And it went down really well in the US, in the UK and in Sweden it tanked completely, because in Sweden they went, "parenting is not only mums job, what the hell?" and they really reacted negatively, and I was like, actually, that's a sign of progress.

It's not the, you know, I don't want those moms to be thanked, but the fact that it was not OK to assume that dads were not involved in the parenting and in the success of Olympic athletes just because they were dads, I thought was actually like a really, a really interesting thing. And so one side is just like people read about or hear about stuff in history class or think that it's all in the past and aren't very good at recognizing that it might be a bit more subtle now, might not be legislated the way that it was in earlier times, but we still have real problems. And then I think the other side is people have this very fragile reaction to when they perceive themselves being accused of being - whether it's sexist or racist or homophobic or whatever else, they get so much more worried about how they feel about that accusation than about the reality of the impact it's having on those - on those people who are not well included. I think both of those things matter. But also people just focused on diversity rather than inclusion far too much - like creating the right environment in which a broad range of people can be themselves and be successful. That's the real work, and that is the work of inclusion. You're using exactly the right terms.

But lots of people have diversity programs. Lots of people just focus on hiring a broader range of people and then they're like, oh, well, they don't do well once they're here, that must mean our biases about them not being well suited to tech or not being the right kind of people or not being the right kind of leaders were right, and they don't recognize that actually dropping someone into a hostile environment, it's not super shocking if they don't stay and succeed, you need to do that work on inclusivity in order to – it's like table stakes these days, increasingly you have to do that

work. Otherwise, you're not going to have access to the best talent. And we all know that we're in a war for talent these days. It's just how much people have their eyes open to the reality of that.

[00:07:35] BH: During one of your speeches, I heard you talk about microaggression, which I just thought really hit the nail on the head here, where you said an example of microaggression is little girls are told they're pretty and little boys are told they're smart. Just amazing.

[00:07:50] MW: I'm non-binary, I identify as a non-binary woman. I remember being a kid in South Africa and it being so obvious that being a girl was bad, and like I used to have, like fights for my dad because he called me pretty. And to me, that meant not smart, because that was how I'd that's how I'd absorbed what was around me. And he was just trying to be nice, didn't realize why I was having this, this negative reaction. But yeah, it was, it's very real. My other favorite microaggression you probably also heard me talk about is when people find out I'm not from England. They then compliment my English and I'm like, yeah, yeah, it's my mother tongue, thanks, been speaking it my whole life. Like, not since I was born, I didn't come out some sort of prodigy, you know, immediately, fully, fully fluent. But it's it still my first language. But I think people struggle to imagine how many countries English is already a primary language in, even in the post-Empire days.

[00:08:49] BH: We heard recently in another one of our podcast chats that the tech industry, in the tech industry, that skill set and experience trumps all else. And you just mentioned about the war for talent at the moment. Do you agree that it's one of the most forward-thinking industries at the moment - that's the tech industry?

[00:09:07] MW: So I think it's one of the most self-deluding industries in that respect. So we have this whole thing where we're like, Oh, on the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog, but also on the Internet nobody is assuming that you're a woman, either, and nobody's assuming that you're queer unless you're in certain circles of the internet or a particular subset of the TikTok algorithm. The TikTok algorithm is a fantastic example of how real perception bubbles can be as well. If people haven't experienced that yet, it's genuinely fascinating.

I think actually one of the most harmful things we have in tech is this myth of meritocracy, that we are, you know, dispassionate and logical, and we only consider people's experience and their delivery and their impact. But actually, then you ask most tech leaders, how do they measure impact - their answers aren't fantastic, right? Like the number of people who are like, How do you know that your team is doing better this year than it was last year, and they don't have anything statistical or graphed or like, there's not much that's actually like hard and fast measurement that they're able to point at. And so I think we could be somewhere where your output and your impact could be what we measure.

But actually, we're not great at measuring output impact, we focus a bit too much on how people are doing things and you know, we're pattern matching to what we perceive as successful leadership behaviours or management behaviours or delivery behaviours, even. And actually, whenever your pattern matching, you're risking bias because by pattern matching you can only match to what you've seen.

And so if you've been surrounded by an industry where bluntly, mostly one particular gender and race and orientation and religion and all of these things... the wrong conclusion to draw from that is, oh, that particular subset of people, they're much better at this. It's like, well, only if you mark things in a way that prioritizes all those things that come easily for them. I think Einstein once said, like if you measure a fish by how well it can climb a tree, it will always fail. And I think we risk that,

you know, the number of - we know for sure there's studies that show that if women speak, I think it's 20 percent of the time in a meeting, they are perceived by male participants as having over dominated the meeting and have taken the majority of the airtime. Because 20 percent is already double what the expectation is of how much women will speak in a meeting – they're expected to not contribute very much to push themselves down, to not share.

And so even if you're only talking a fifth of the amount of time, and there's definitely more - that's less than your fair share of airtime if you wanted to think of it that way - the perception is that you're dominating the conversation. And so we know for sure that who you are and what demographic you're from and what culture you're from and what your mother tongue is and all these things, we know people react differently to us, depending on some of these, some of these factors. And so I think it's actually really damaging that in tech we pretend that we're super logical and that we're dispassionate.

But it then can stop us spotting these times where we are biased, where we are stopping there being equality of opportunity, where we're not treating people equitably. And so I want us to get to the point that we really are super forward thinking and able to be a place where you can succeed on your merits. But most places I've seen talking about meritocracy, they're just - they're just hiding, hiding behind that theory. And in many cases, there are real issues with discrimination and bias in many of those organisations.

[00:12:56] BH: Yeah, that's - it's like talking the talk and walking the walk, it's your point about diversity versus inclusion, which I think is a really good takeaway today. So what's your advice to recent graduates? And I say this so many times when we interview female podcast guests - I've got three daughters and they're, two are at university age at the moment, one is about to do her GCSEs, so they're about to go into the workplace in the next few years. What's your advice to them about, about joining the workplace and choosing a career?

[00:13:28] MW: Remember that you are interviewing the organisation and the team that you're going to join just as much as they are interviewing you. And it can damage your career a lot more to join somewhere that turns out to be unsupportive or discriminatory or not willing to protect you if something goes wrong, or not willing to believe you if something goes wrong that can hurt your career, a huge amount more than not immediately walking into something as soon as you graduate or that extra couple of months to find the right opportunity.

So remember that nobody cares about your career more than you, that you're interviewing them as much as they're interviewing you, and making sure that you're joining somewhere where you feel like you can be yourself and be successful is really important. And I, you know, I joke sometimes with people, women in tech, we're like the future. We're here, we're just not evenly distributed. And so it's not that there aren't great teams out there. There are great teams out there. And to be honest, I'm at the point now where I kind of don't care about the teams that are shit at this stuff because I'm like, statistically, the research shows they're going to get out innovated, they're going to get outperformed, they're going to get out delivered.

And so why not invest time in the places that do value difference, that do view these different points of view as a feature rather than a bug that do the work on making their environments inclusive? Make it so a broad range of people can be themselves and be successful, because if we invest in those places, if we gather ourselves together and make sure that we create these good environments, then we'll leave the people who don't care about this stuff in the dust. Like, we've got plenty of evidence to say that that's possible. So, yeah, the final thing I'd say is don't stay somewhere that's really bad for you, be eyes wide open. And I suppose that all sounds a bit

defensive, and I don't like giving sort of, assumed bad things will happen and make sure that you spot when it does kind of advice to new folks. But I've also heard some pretty tough experiences people had earlier in their career and how it affected them. And we certainly still see women leave tech as an industry at a hugely greater rate than we do men, and even more so for non-binary folks, just because there's an additional layer of challenge there. And so I think it's important to recognise that there are some of these challenges and to make it okay for someone to be seeking a genuinely positive environment for themselves rather than just a first job. We're out here, we're making things better. You've just got to find us.

[00:16:00] BH: That's some really good advice. Thank you once again, Meri. Such a compelling and insightful conversation there. To all of our listeners, thank you for tuning in today. Don't forget to like, share and subscribe to the Tech Reimagined podcast, or please contact us if you've got any other questions, if you've got any follow up comments. You can use the contact form on the Endava website or through any of the social media channels. Until next time, have a great week.