

Women in Tech are game-changers

The all-female line-up at the first Women in Tech and Digital Conference packed a powerful punch.



Samantha Perry and Lynette Hundermark are co-founders of the Women in Tech and Digital Conference

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Defying the status quo and pursuing careers traditionally considered for 'men only' were some of the key themes explored at the 'Moving to Mastery: Women in Tech and Digital Conference'.

The inaugural event took place on 12 June in Cape Town, with the Gauteng edition following a month later.

Pioneered by Lynette Hundermark, co-founder and CPO of Useful & Beautiful, and Samantha Perry, Women in Tech ZA co-founder, both tech enthusiasts and veterans in the industry, the events gave a group of women – the majority of whom had the word 'founder' somewhere in their titles – a platform to share their insights

and advice based on their careers in the start-up and tech space.

Recounting her journey to becoming one of the few female CIOs in the country, the Development Bank of Southern Africa's (DBSA) Kholeka Tsotsotso said she got into the IT space by accident. She described her journey as being wonderful so far, adding she can't imagine herself behind a desk doing debits and credits as required by the degree she had enrolled for.

Soweto-born Tsotsotso was at the University of Limpopo studying for a bachelor degree in accounting, but in her final year, much to the dismay of her parents, she ditched the accounting studies to pursue a career many defined as traditionally reserved for men.

In her more than 20 years in the industry, she has been a programmer, a systems analyst, business analyst, project manager, portfolio manager, business IT relationship manager and IT infrastructure head, to name a few.

For Tsotsotso, the journey to becoming a C-suite executive in tech was not easy, especially because it's not seen as a space where women can thrive and succeed. However, she has found relief in having solid networks. These are people who can help you and vice versa, she said.

Talking about the leadership lessons she learnt over the years, the DBSA CIO highlighted four key components: experience, networking, learning and authenticity. "You always need to make sure you go out there, seek your own networks – you can't wait for anyone else to come and mentor you. That is one of the lessons I've learnt in my life."

Problem-solving skills

Hundermark, who has been involved in the tech space for 22 years, also started off her career in programming. "Computers and problem-solving just made sense to me and that's how I got into the industry."

Over the last 10 years, her focus has shifted to product development,

something she is very passionate about. "My company was established because of a passion for digital and mobile, which is why its mantra focuses on making memorable mobile experiences.

"Digital apps or even anything tech these days has to be functional and also look good because nobody likes using ugly stuff."

Hundermark noted she likes creating tech solutions, but the reasoning has to be purpose-driven. "You have to put yourself in the customer's shoes and understand how they are experiencing it. Everybody's needs are different."

Anna Collard, founder and MD of Popcorn Training, a KnowBe4 company, said she hoped attendees can come up with ideas on how to excite young girls to participate and find joy in STEM areas. "We need those girls for the future. I don't think it's true that girls are not into maths; we just need to find interesting ways of getting them motivated to play and have fun with the subject."

Collard noted having empathy is a huge advantage for women, and if it can be combined with coding, for example, it can be super-enriching and powerful.

Impact Hub Johannesburg's Thandi Dyani said she believes the 'future is female' and the many jobs that won't exist in the future are the men's jobs

When having conversations about 'women in tech', one can easily moan about what is lacking, but Collard believes this can actually undermine the many amazing women already working in digital and tech.

Rather than focusing on what is not there, she suggested the women in the industry should be coming up with strategies to encourage and inspire young girls to join this space too. "Don't be intimidated by the fact that you might be the only woman in a room. Own it.

"Obviously, I've come across sexism during my 20-year career, but, in general, I think that if you focus your lens on the negative, you'll always find it. Rather focus on the positive and only let the negative in when it really becomes a problem."

Discussing her experiences over the course of her 30 years running KRS, Lorraine Steyn, founder and CEO of the

local software development company, said that when she started her business, there actually was parity in the tech space. In fact, she cited the invention of the home PC as being somewhat of a catalyst to the decline of women working in science and technology.

When people started buying PCs for their homes, these gadgets were seen as a more masculine tool and were given to sons, not daughters. "By the time these children headed to college, boys had a huge advantage over girls simply because they'd been more exposed to tech."

But as more and more women enter the industry, Bongekile Mabaso, co-founder of Uplift Youth in Africa, believes that workplaces must adapt. Mothers need to be given the support they need to be both a businesswoman and a mom, she said. When our needs as women are supported, we will be happier and more productive and, unfortunately, it's still up to us, as women, to demand this support, Mabaso noted.

Finding business success

Obami founder and CEO Barbara Mallinson shared the eight lessons she has learnt in starting and building her business, now in its 10th year: knowing the narrative, fieldwork, leveraging the new way of working, not being fooled by vanity metrics, thinking outside the box, investing in the right activities, marketing, and being the most valuable player.

Today, perhaps more so than ever, it's critical to have our say and to not let the male voices dominate ours, she noted.

Everyone in your teams should feel comfortable to share, and be given the chance to share, their ideas, added KRS' Steyn. "When I was younger, I played the male game. I was one of the boys: I drank with the boys, I went out with the boys, I wore the shoulder pads. But I've really turned against that. I think there is so much power in women being women, standing together and working together.

"Women are really good at tech and development and we shouldn't let anyone tell us anything else. Done."



Kholeka Tsotsotso, CIO of the Development Bank of Southern Africa



Anna Collard, founder and MD of Popcorn Training



Barbara Mallinson, founder and CEO of Obami