

ICT Executive Profile

Diane Fernley-Jones: CIO Leighton Contractors



What is your current role and what is your scope?

My role is CIO of Leighton Contractors, and I'm responsible for all things IT strategy, from architecture blueprints to business as usual operational delivery across all of our geographies including Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Africa.

We also provide IT for onsite projects such as mining sites in WA, IT for the M2, which brings a whole new dimension to the provision of IT outside of standard offices in the CBD, and a much greater challenge.

What attracted you to a career in ICT?

Well it was over 30 years ago, I did an aptitude test to see where I scored on logical thinking and I scored pretty high, I identified that IT could be a good career for me. At the time I had a friend who lectured in IT at Leeds University, I asked if should I do a degree, he said don't be ridiculous get out there and do it, so I made my way into the industry as a trainee programmer, it appealed because I knew I could be good at it. Plus it was a new industry at the time and therefore had more modern practices and culture than say the legal profession. My management skills were recognised quickly so within 4 years I was running programming teams, and lucky enough to be moved from UK to Sydney!

Tell us about the highpoints and lowpoints of your career?

One of the highpoints was getting my first global CIO role with ICI, which was based in Gouda in NL. I'd had IT management roles before but this was my first global! I managed to mobilise and move to Holland in between accepting the offer in mid-November and started the role in January. I had to leave my poor mother to pack up my house.

Another highpoint was completing my MBA, I left school without a degree and just my O levels, so achieving an MBA whilst working full time was a real highpoint for me

The low point – after The Netherlands, I moved to London, around this time ICI went into free-fall, I was made redundant, I knew it was coming but it was still hard, I'd worked there for 10 years in 3 countries, it seemed at the time that my global wonderings were over. So I moved back to Sydney moved back and spent 10 months living in a friend's granny flat while I looked for a new place.

Whilst it was very hard, I had to remember that no matter how good or experienced you are, some things are just beyond your control.

What does work life balance mean to you?

I think keeping it real, totally accept there are times when business requires exceptional levels of work from me and my team, equally there are times when the pressure isn't there, we handle it by being mature and have flexibility to mix the two things. There's no way you can travel and maintain a 9-5 existence, but that doesn't mean I can't get in a Pilates class and carry on working.

I do try to preserve weekends, you need downtime over the weekend to allow your creative thinking to kick in, if you try to work 7 days and long hours lose your effectiveness, you set bad example for your people, there is nothing worse than seeing your boss at their desk when you arrive and still there when you leave. If needs be go home and log on from there to finish off the day which encourages others to do so.

What attracted and kept you in the ICT industry throughout your career?

Once I got into it I progressed very quickly so that kept me interested, I never ever, saw a glass ceiling, probably because I refuse to accept that there is one, my advice if there is a glass ceiling and you can't progress, move!

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I'm still intrigued by the industry but interested less with technology and more in change management and human behaviour, how new ways of working are made possible by technology. Human beings continue to fascinate, technology fascinates in how it helps people to interact.

What ambitions personal or professional do you still want to achieve?

I recently studied and completed a qualification with the Australian Institute of Company Directors, and would love to become a member of a board in non-executive position, I hold a genuine belief that many boards have not recognised fully the importance of IT in their business, yes managing IT projects but also the other aspects the impacts of technology in business process and people changes/impacts. I'd really like to give back to business.

What's the one piece of advice you'd give to yourself starting out on your career?

Probably the piece of advice I've taken myself; if an opportunity presents itself grab it with both hands because it might not come around again, if I look at successful changes and progression I've made, they have come out of small conversations initially. How does Holland sound? I'm sending you a global CIO role JD, by January I was on the ground and my whole world had changed.

NB: As appeared on FITT e-newsletter October 2013.

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