Women in tech closing gender gap at LexisNexis South Africa

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South Africa's tech scene paints a bleak picture of gender inclusivity, with women representing only 13% of South African graduates in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields. This is according to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report. In addition, only 23% of tech jobs are held by women in South Africa, representing only 56,000 of 236,000 ICT (tech) roles.

But while men still dominate the field both in South Africa and internationally, local companies are making strides in boosting their intake of female tech specialists.

One of these is global legal technology company, LexisNexis South Africa, which has its head office in Durban and offices in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth and East London. The company has created opportunities for a growing number of women to shine within its tech department.

Karen Bosch – Product Owner

Born-and-bred Capetonian Karen Bosch is responsible for ensuring that LexisNexis crafts tech solutions suited to client needs and that her development team knows what they are developing and why.

"Most of my time is spent refining and prioritising the backlog so that we deliver the most valuable product features to optimise return on investment. Besides working very closely with the development team, the Product Owner is also responsible for communicating with business stakeholders regarding progress and managing expectations," she explains.

With no exposure to computers, her initial plan was to pursue a Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting. But she went on to achieve a National Diploma in Information Technology from Cape Peninsula University of Technology, a Diploma in Business and Systems Analysis from Faculty Training Institute and other certifications.

"The reason I stuck with my decision was the satisfaction of being able to get a computer to do what I wanted it to with just a few lines of code. I don't code anymore, but I still love being involved in producing something that started out as an idea, and seeing it develop into a fully-fledged solution," she says.

Bosch credits her manager at her first job, Cheryll Smith, as her first and long-time mentor, for her professional and personal support and guidance. She also finds inspiration in the journey of Marissa Mayer, who was one of the first female software engineers at Google and enjoyed a long and successful career there including the development of Google Search, before becoming the CEO and president of Yahoo!.

She reflects: "There are times when it can be challenging being the only the woman in the room – when I feel I need to work harder to gain respect and be seen as an equal. However, I am fortunate to have had supportive colleagues and friends throughout my career. There is a definite change in the gender balance from when I first started out in my career, but there is room for improvement. It is great seeing more female software engineers coming in and being successful in the industry."

Lavinia Goburdhan - Technical Support Engineer

"Being a woman in the ICT industry can be very challenging but being a part of the 4th Industrial Revolution is truly exciting," says Technical Support Engineer, Lavinia Goburdhan. She adds: "While this industry has been dominated by males, it is truly a proud moment to witness so many intelligent and capable females challenging this status quo."

Born and raised in Durban, Goburdhan joined LexisNexis in 2014 as part of the content fabrication team for an online solution called Lexis Practical Guidance. "The solution was being built from the ground up and it provided me with a unique opportunity to help shape systems, processes and workflows. Seeing my projects reach fruition was hugely fulfilling," she recalls.

She adds: "Being a part of the Legal Tech field is challenging and offers variety daily, which I thoroughly enjoy. The knowledge and experience I have gained in these few years have been invaluable, from both a legal and technical perspective."

Her days are now spent working in a DevOps position, offering internal and external users product support across some of LexisNexis' leading online solutions. She also works on the deployment of software releases with Software Engineers and Electronic Publishing departments, as well as managing the development and virtual machine environments.

Goburdhan holds a Diploma in Information Technology from Durban University of Technology.

She counts the famous creator of programming, Ada Lovelace, as her ultimate female tech mentor, for overcoming societal expectations and adversity in the 1800s to become the first computer programmer and making an immense contribution to many computer concepts.

Annelle Hodgkinson – Lexis Convey Product Owner

Annelle Hodgkinson is based in Cape Town and is Product Owner for one of LexisNexis' flagship products, Lexis Convey, with overall responsibility for its product roadmap and vision. Her role requires her to work together with the product team to efficiently create and deliver intuitive and innovative software that adds value for LexisNexis and its customers.

"I have an affinity for science, innovation and design, so a career in applying those skills seemed like a natural fit. I find working in tech very rewarding. I have the opportunity to work with incredible people from all different walks of life, all working together to create and design intuitive software to make our customers happy, rising to every challenge, learning valuable lessons and making a positive impact," she says.

Hodgkinson holds a Master's Degree in Physics from the University of Stellenbosch. She admires Ginni Rometty, who is chairman, president and CEO of IBM. Closer to home, she believes Mari van Wyk, LexisNexis' Executive Manager: Strategic Alliances and Partnerships, is an inspiration to all, having recently summited Mount Kilimanjaro in the Trek4Mandela Thuli Madonsela Women's Day Executive Climb for Dignity & Social Justice.

Leigh-Anne Webster - Product Manager of Business Software Solutions

Leigh-Anne Webster joined the then Korbitec in 2003. The business was acquired by LexisNexis in 2015. Along with a team of Product Owners and Analysts, she is responsible for product management of the business software solutions portfolio of products within LexisNexis.

She currently lives in Cape Town but grew up in the small seaside village of Seaview, about 20km outside of Port Elizabeth.

"My father's best friend was an Engineering and Mathematics professor, and in those days (early 1980s) ComSci fell under
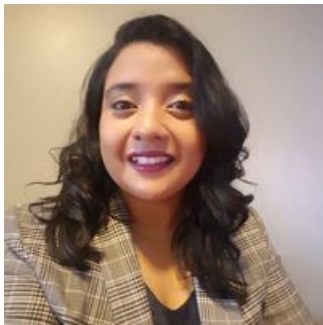
he Mathematics faculty. When he was babysitting my sister and me, or we were visiting his home, he would teach me very basic programming to entertain me. I wasn't even in school yet when I started," she recalls.

"My junior school was very progressive (considering it was the 80's) and started with computer classes from pre-school. Unfortunately, my high school did not have computer science, it was only offered at our brother's school, so it fell off my radar until I attended a presentation in my matric year from our local university specifically aimed at trying to recruit more women into the computer science program. It piqued my interest and reminded me of the passion I used to have for computers when they were available to me, so I decided to pursue a degree in ComSci."

Webster holds a Bachelor of Commerce Honours in Computer Science from the University of Port Elizabeth, now Nelson Mandela University.

Nerissa Chetty - Product Owner – Lexis Library

With a less conventional entry into the tech field, Nerissa Chetty started out at LexisNexis in 2008 working in the Editorial department for 10 years before taking the leap into the Project Manager role in the Tech Dev department. Her qualification is also not in IT, as she holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, majoring in English, Media and Communication and isiZulu.

It was her role as Project Co-ordinator in the Editorial department, assisting the New Business Development department in the release of online solutions, that eventually opened the door to Chetty joining the Technical Development team. She had the opportunity to fully immerse herself in Agile project methodology and also took on the role of Scrum Master in the team working on LexisNexis' Legal Information and Compliance (LIC) solutions.

She says: "My knowledge and experience in both the content and project sides of the business pushed me towards IT. Being a woman in a largely male-dominant environment is both challenging and rewarding. I do believe that I add a different perspective and angle. My communication skills have also been beneficial in bridging the gap between the Tech and Business/Content worlds."

Internally, she views colleague Leigh-Anne Webster, Product Manager of Business Software Solutions, as an inspiration. Externally she admires Barbara Mallinson, the Founder and CEO of Obami, a digital learning solutions company that is aimed at the upliftment of South African schools. Obami has been recognised by the likes of Forbes, CNN and Business Insider as one of the most innovative technologies in the world, as well as one of the best start-ups to come out of Africa.

LexisNexis CEO, Billy Last, said: "Technology is built into the fabric of all we do at LexisNexis and has been central to our evolution from print to technology-based content solutions. We're optimistic about seeing more women bringing their unique attributes to this exciting field."

He continued to say, "We're looking for go-getters, people who have a passion for winning. Those who are crafting innovative ways of work and serving our customers."

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