

maxwellbond

EMPOWERING DIVERSITY

A Discussion with Caz Farrell



Between balancing home schooling, work, and a pandemic, Caz kindly found the time to sit with our Senior Consultant Riana Butler to share her experiences of working within the tech industry over the past fifteen years, including adversity, challenges, solutions, and hopes for the future.

After inspiration from her techie Girl Guide leader, Caz knew her passion was within technology. She too wanted a job that she loved and enjoyed, and therefore began researching what she needed to do next. After a phone call with the University of Manchester, she knew which degree she wanted to take, and was advised to take A Level Math and Science and then something she enjoyed.

The first day of university wasn't what she expected, there was only 5-6 women in an auditorium of men. This was her first experience of being in a male-dominated environment, and at the end of her degree she was the only female from that first day that graduated the course.

Her degree was a sandwich degree, and she spent her placement year gaining good experience across a variety of disciplines in a banking firm. Caz discovered that it was Project Management she loved and was asked to apply again after she graduated, which she did. However, this was only a temporary position which didn't offer the kind of stability Caz felt she needed and therefore caused stress and uncertainty.

When it became clear a permanent role wasn't coming up any time soon she moved to a new company as a project coordinator where her work ethic was quickly noticed and she was given more responsibility. During her initial project there was some missing user documentation so in her lunch breaks Caz rolled up her sleeves to work out how the system worked, writing a user guide for the marketing team so that they could use the new system. This was another instance of Caz going above and beyond the role and got her noticed again – this time she was offered a junior business analyst role on a permanent basis within the same company. She loved it completely, always worked hard, keen to learn and improve, and it paid off. Additionally, she started attending meetups and events, which is where she found her passion for agile, which would later become the favourite part of her journey; "I got it from day one, it just made sense. It's given me so much freedom with my career and I can cross over in different areas."

"In every role I have strived to always add value, by working hard, and filling gaps within companies, even when the tasks were outside of my role. This played a huge part in my success – showing versatility and making myself indispensable"

On her first day in another new role, she was asked to help testing, again to fill a skill gap in the business while a project was being set up for her elsewhere. Caz went on to write a detailed test plan and implemented it. The senior tester took her spec to the boss and gave her outstanding feedback and recognition for something outside of her initial role, telling her that Caz would be welcome in a testing role any time.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN IN TECH

Caz's awareness of the gender divide increased in her earlier roles in particular, where there was often up to a 75:25 ratio of men to women. Whilst this alone caused no offense, the sexist environments in which she sometimes found herself in became very problematic and only enhanced the feeling of being a minority within tech.

Throughout her career, she has faced inappropriate objectification, stereotyping, comments and behaviour from people in a variety of positions, including a boss who put a shot glass in her cleavage and removed it with his mouth in front of colleagues at a Christmas party. At the time, Caz didn't realise the severity of this incident, nor did she feel confident enough to bring attention to the matter. She was unsure of how to deal with this professionally in such an unprofessional environment. However, if this was to happen now, Caz would not shrug this off as something she should be embarrassed by, but put the ownership of the incident back on the colleague, starting by raising the incident with her manager and would encourage any person in the same situation to do that.

Additionally, there have been double standards where tears were seen as "too emotional" but when male employees stomp and swear in anger it's not seen as "too emotional", it's seen as a display of genuine care about the business outcomes.

There are companies who do value D&I, have strong female leadership, and who improve their working environment very naturally, but unfortunately more negative, and often common, experiences prove there is still a long way to go.



ADVICE FOR IT PROFESSIONALS

Despite the current issues, Caz suggests that there are ways for business leaders to really make impactful change to create diverse and inclusive workspaces for everybody. Caz personally ensures to acknowledge all feedback, use her social media presence to raise awareness and share experiences. She argues that all change boils down to a few key foundation blocks. The most important lessons to learn when trying to improve gender diversity in the tech workspace are summarised overleaf.

Education

Be willing to learn about diversity and inclusion, by listening and learning from other people's experiences, and by reading material such as *Rebel Ideas* by Matthew Syed and following a wide variety of diversity accounts on social media. It's so important to understand the issues, how it affects staff and business, and how you can find solutions. Diversity is a huge topic – be aware of the many different biases and seek to educate yourself.

Accepting Feedback

Seek feedback, be receptive to it and give feedback yourself. Apologise when wrong – if someone tells you they were hurt by something you did start with saying “sorry” and genuinely mean it. Explore feedback thoroughly and then translate into the workplace. The most useful tool is feedback if you're open to learning.

Avoid Lip Service

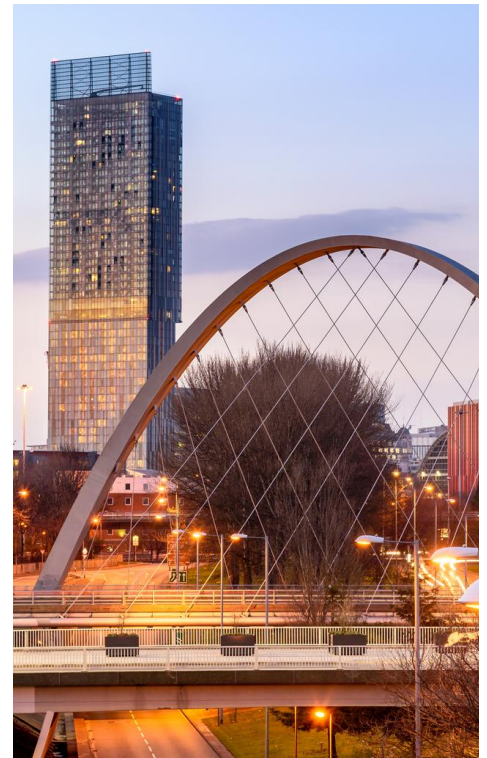
D&I is becoming a buzzword, a fashion – we must avoid it becoming so. To really make a difference you have to have a genuine intent and commitment to changing things. Lip services will kill all D&I efforts if your intentions are nothing except performative. You must take it seriously and make it a business priority.

MANCHESTER TECH SCENE

Caz agrees that Manchester is rising up as the biggest tech city in the North West and adds that there are also lots of positive tech events and meetups that are brilliant for empowering women, although we need to find a way to get more men to these events too.

Caz also shares the following reflections:

- The next generation are going to be very computer literate - we must find ways to engage girls in IT from an early age
- Gender diversity in tech almost always focuses on getting women into development, but there are more roles than just development. We need to open the dialogue for other roles and better showcase our sector.
- Covid has shown businesses that their teams can be trusted to work from home. Smart businesses will build this flexibility into their day to day work offering meaning that a more diverse group of people will consider companies they normally wouldn't, with flexible working removing barriers workers face today.



CAZ'S TOP TIPS

Caz emphasises that the most important part of the life cycle is the learning part and tweaking. Retrospectives is a very useful to analyse what you have done, what worked, and what didn't.

Also humility and open-mindedness is key. No matter how far in your career you are, always be open to learning. Being open to this learning and making it a career goal to have the consistency of learning means the job is never boring. You have to take the time to learn, because if you're learning, you're helping an organisation, which makes them more inclined to help and support you.