

# Why the IT industry needs more women – and what it can do to attract them

## Byline article

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*There's plenty of evidence that drawing on multiple perspectives and experiences allows us to innovate more effectively. We also know that diverse companies perform better, are more successful at recruiting and retaining employees, and have more engaged workforces. But despite this, women are still underrepresented across IT – an industry driven by innovation.*

### **I recently sat down with four strong women from different parts of Fujitsu to discuss what it means to be a woman in the IT industry.**

We covered ongoing misperceptions of who might be suitable for a career in technology and shared advice for women who may be considering working in this field. I was joined by Ruth Miller, a data transformation consultant – recently recognized by CRN as technical employee of the year, Grana Nawabi, lead domain architect, and two recent graduates – system design expert Franziska Staudinger and product manager Paloma Aparicio Escuder.

#### **The key challenges faced by women**

Representation was one of the significant topics. It's a circular problem: If women don't see themselves represented in the industry, it's hard to imagine how they fit in. This is particularly true of technical positions. Today, few people still expect technical experts to be female. This means many women in the field face even more significant challenges. For example, Grana shared that when she started her career 35 years ago, multiple factors counted against her. She was female, young, and a refugee in Germany. Consequently, she wasn't taken seriously as a technical person but proved herself over time simply by doing a great job. She earned an excellent reputation for her technical work, but this took time and required dedication and persistence.

That experience of being viewed as a woman first and a technical expert second was echoed by Ruth – who turned this negative experience into a positive. She used this perception as motivation to learn constantly and get better at her job. Starting before employment quotas for minority groups, she knew she deserved her place on her team – but was sometimes less confident than her male coworkers. While they would be more likely to say, "yes, we can do this, no problem", she always wanted to cross-check her understanding of things before proceeding. Often, her coworkers wouldn't help her. Nevertheless, the more often she asked questions to understand better or had to figure it out herself, the more competent she became, eventually overtaking her colleagues. Now, when she encounters others who don't want to engage with her because of her gender, her approach is to smile sweetly and let them discover their mistake!

Women often fight harder and need to prove themselves more than their male counterparts. As a result, when Ruth sees women in meetings, she's confident they are likely to be better prepared and better skilled than their male coworkers. She thinks women also tend

to be more honest about both any given situation and the potential outcomes. And Ruth finds that all-women meetings, still a rarity in this industry, reach a better resolution and do this faster.

Others in the discussion also highlighted the issue of representation. As a relatively recent entrant to the industry, Franziska notes that it still feels like women are a strange 'other' being in the industry and need special treatment. This is slowly changing because the more women there are, the more their role in IT is normalized.

However, the lack of strong female role models extends beyond different treatment. Paloma, the other recent grad who participated in the panel, shared that she initially found it hard to imagine how she might progress in the industry since there are so few women in leadership positions to inspire her. However, she has found that inspiration in a growing number of coworkers.

#### **Critical advice for women interested in joining the tech industry, but without a relevant technology background**

We also discussed the perception that working in technical roles requires significant formal technology training. Of course, there are countless non-technical roles available in IT, but there are multiple routes to numerous technical positions. Grana raised a great point – that ultimately, work is about solving challenges. Therefore, anyone who enjoys puzzles or who likes fixing things fits in well. Often, having a curious mind and an open approach to problem-solving is more important than a hard-core technical background. And of course, there's a wide variety of jobs available – and in many cases, having diverse previous experiences and bringing unique perspectives to the table can be a real benefit.

Ruth is one highly respected technologist who has no formal IT training. Her background was in the medical field as a microbiologist researching antibiotics. Her research required using IT equipment in the labs, where she gradually built her skills and interest in technology until she eventually transferred entirely to IT.

It's also important to highlight that the IT industry continues to evolve, creating new opportunities all the time – and solving ever-changing problems. There is much scope for individuals to pursue their unique areas of interest. My path was not based on formal training but on gaining experience in multiple fields – starting as a sales assistant

then progressing through product management, business development, and account management. These different positions helped enrich my understanding of a broad cross-section of the industry and provide unique insight.

In terms of advice from our panel to others planning to enter the industry, Paloma has benefited from taking every opportunity to meet people across the company – either virtually or in-person – which helped her better understand how the company works. She’s also learned that most people are willing to explain things when asked. This helped build her confidence, as she recognizes that everything she needs to know to progress can be learned, from technical know-how to business skills.

### It’s about confidence

Our discussion turned to the theme of confidence multiple times. Something all of us have learned is that confidence builds on itself. Franziska highlighted a project where she made a substantial contribution despite being the youngest member of the team. Initially, she was somewhat intimidated as many colleagues worked in technology infrastructure for her entire lifetime. The project in question required her to support her colleagues in her area of expertise, and seasoned coworkers looked to her for guidance. Her input helped secure a significant customer deal, and this boosted her confidence. Wins like these help women speak up and gain the confidence to put themselves forward.

Having the support of coworkers and managers also makes a huge difference. Our panel highlighted how some managers helped build their self-confidence and encouraged them to take risks. When women put themselves forward, they often find they are more capable than they imagined. The group also emphasized that women shouldn’t hold back from stepping up to take leadership roles, as there’s absolutely no reason why they can’t be highly effective. One great piece of advice was to pay attention to their male colleagues – and how they push themselves forward, promote themselves, or ask for more money in a straightforward way that women sometimes don’t.

### What does it take to attract and retain more women to tech?

In many respects – the technology industry is an excellent place for women, who are more likely to require flexibility in managing their working hours. It’s an industry with countless opportunities to get involved in new things and stay relevant. There’s also often a greater capacity to, for example, work part-time when caring duties take priority, then return to full-time work later. There are multiple changes to pursue professional interests and keep things fresh with new challenges or positions.

We’ve talked about representation – I believe that raising the visibility of female role models is crucial to fight stereotypes and encourage a new generation of women to succeed in an industry that men have long dominated. But women in senior positions must be honest and transparent. It may look like they have perfect lives, but the reality is that everyone is trying to balance work and personal lives. That can be a struggle sometimes for men and women alike. None of us are superhuman, and it’s important to acknowledge this.

Our panel highlighted the benefits of diversity, mixing women of different ages, backgrounds, and nationalities, all of whom have a unique perspective. It demonstrated how each makes a difference every day. It was an excellent opportunity to celebrate these differences and the value they bring.

As we all know, the IT industry offers fantastic opportunities for all genders and technical and non-technical people alike. It provides opportunities to travel, meet people, get involved in different fields, and develop personal interests. But the real magic happens when we start inspiring each other. That’s when our worlds become more and more inclusive, and people from different backgrounds, like our panelists, become motivated to smash the glass ceiling and push themselves into exciting new areas. That applies to everyone – not just women.

At Fujitsu, we’re working hard to ensure diversity and inclusion. We have a robust diversity and inclusion strategy and a mission to close the gender pay gap. These factors have contributed to Fujitsu in the UK’s recognition as a Times Top 50 Employer for Women. However, we seek opportunities to extend to the entire industry. We promote diversity across our ecosystem, to customers, partners and suppliers. We showcase female role models and establish mentoring programs. Ultimately, what will make a difference in extending more opportunities to women? If you are a hiring manager, look at your female coworkers, recognize their accomplishments and encourage more women to take on new challenges. For women who are considering entering the industry or contemplating their next move – have confidence in your abilities. You’ve got this! I’m sure you won’t regret it.

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London-based Fernanda Catarino is responsible for driving the digitalization of Fujitsu’s channel business, which includes developing a broad ecosystem of partners, xSPs and ISVs. As head of channel strategy for Fujitsu’s 27,000 partners in Europe, Fernanda leads the development of best practices and tools to support partner-led growth in sales.