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# WOMEN GROUNDING IT

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A degree in technology opens doors to companies and provides opportunities in today's job market. However, to this day, few women make technology a preferred field of study or career choice. In fact, women comprise less than 20 percent of the total number of professionals in IT-related fields in the United States and Western countries. Yerevan magazine's Joanna Buickians met with Zorina Ohanian, Marietta Pashayan, and Pamela Markarian, three successful professionals, to seek advice on how to succeed in a male-dominated, but rapidly developing field.

**Joanna:** Some people choose technology, others fall into it. How did you end up where you are in your careers?

**Pamela:** When I was at school, like everybody else I was dreaming at first to become a lawyer, doctor or FBI agent because I wanted to do something cool. But I like computer graphics, so I started taking classes and stuck to it ever since. It fits my personality because I like talking to people, and I like doodling when I'm talking or in a meeting. That's why I don't know what to do with my hands right now - usually I'm drawing or sketching, analyzing colors, pictures.

**Zorina:** We should give you something to draw on!

**Marietta:** I love engineering - numbers were my friend because I guess both my left and right sides of the brain are

going to be in IT, I would definitely have majored in engineering or computer science. I actually got a psychology degree.

**Marietta:** (Laughing) How close is that?

**Zorina:** Not very useful to do anything with. I was in human resources for a brief time, and then I ended up going back to get my MBA. When I graduated with an MBA, I took a job for a software company doing project management. Funny enough, I was the lowest paid person, in spite that I went to Emory. It was a great school, but almost all my colleagues ended up getting really high paying jobs, and I think I ended up getting the lowest paid job out of that school. But I think it was probably the best thing because I moved to Nashville all by myself. It was a good thing for me - I kind of grew up and fell into project management, and that pretty much kept me in IT.

family; but my mom led us into things. That pushed me to become a leader in a field that is dominated by men. It was taking what I've learned, not doing it with my family, but with my job.

**Zorina:** It's the exact same thing for me. The men in our family were definitely the men, whatever they said pretty much was the deal, but there were always strong women. I was surrounded by my aunts, my mom and both grandmothers. We learned to be assertive, to take charge and also to be persistent. As Armenian women, we don't take no for an answer.

**Pamela:** Or not very lightly. We definitely fight it when it's a no.

**Marietta:** We do like to show our own personalities, and we will do it exactly how we feel. If I have 500 people reporting to me, it's not like I

Technology is more than robots, gadgets, and Google eye glasses, it is a promising career, opening doors to leadership positions, working for Fortune 500 companies, and being a tour de force for innovation.

equally developed. I was born and grew up in Armenia. I went to school there and started my college years, graduating in manufacturing engineering. I came here with zero English and wasn't sure what to do, so I went to community college and ended up taking computer science as a major. When I graduated, it was out of nowhere an agency told me, "There is a position available. It's a temporary job, but it's something to start with. Would you like to take it?" I said 'yes' just to keep busy. So I applied for the position without knowing what I was applying for. It ended up being testing video games, and I thought, "Really? You're getting paid for playing games?" I just started with the testing process and ended up finding more jobs and decided software engineering is what I like to do. I graduated, got an additional degree from the university, and went back and started working in software development, not the quality assurance side.

**Zorina:** I very much fell into this. I was not looking to be in IT. If I knew I was

**Joanna:** Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, coined the term "leaning in," meaning women need to be more courageous and assertive in their careers and you're all in a career where it's predominately men, so how you did make yourself stand out?

**Marietta:** Ninety percent of where I work or anytime I go to a meeting, I will stand out because I'm the only woman in the room. Any kind of off-site meeting or outsourcing teams that I visit, I can barely count any female presence. I think Armenian women especially are strong. I take after my grandmother and mother who are the core, the intricate part of our family. They managed to go through many different experiences. My grandmother escaped from the Genocide and moved to Lebanon and from there to Yerevan, and my mom took us to the United States. Every time, they made the choices, leading the family. My father is a strong man, a typical Armenian man who has his own beliefs and needs to be the strong personality in the

need to know what all 500 of them are doing. But I do need to understand the project so I can be ready when I'm being questioned about any of them. So that's really something that creates a strong leader - the fact that you understand the operation and are taking charge.

**Pamela:** When I worked for Technicolor, the women were pretty strong in their positions, even though the men were still dominant. The men would be hovering over the women because they had to fix a problem, but it was pretty cool to see women being assertive. For me, it's a creative field, so I have to blend in with the guys. I can't fight with them, but I can't let them undermine me either. Guys naturally have some sort of creative vision - they know what doesn't look good, but they don't know how to get there, so I end up knowing all the paths to get there.

**Joanna:** What advice do you have for women to move into technology as a career option?

**Pamela:** Definitely in 2015 you should have some technical knowledge. ▶



**Marietta:** Wherever you go, women in technology are generally overwhelmed by being surrounded by men. If they see one or two successful women around, they definitely want to take after them. I can't tell you the number of places, including Sony, where two girls were reporting to me, and when I left they sent me e-mails telling me, "I would have given up a long time ago, if I didn't have a chance to meet you and take some of the key points from you." The other place I worked, at Electronic Arts, this nice African-American lady told me, "I would have failed terribly, and I wasn't actually confident that I had skills, but you brought all my skills to life, and now I am continually going to pursue and be successful like you are." People need some sort of role model, we're not talking about celebrity role models either. I never

considered myself a role model for anyone. I teach my kids to take the good stuff, you don't need everything. Give them the right direction, and if they can take that direction, you know you had an impact on that person and guided them based on your experience.

**Joanna:** When women want to pursue technology, for some reason or another, they often change their minds and get out of it. What do you think about studying technology?

**Zorina:** It has helped me to understand business from end to end - all of the processes and all the data related to it. They say information is power. I have more information about how the business operates, and I have valued having this job in IT because it has exposed me to every part of the TV business. Because of that I have the flexibility of moving into a

business role. I think you can get some of those technical skills, for example, if you join Accenture, Cap Gemini or Deloitte where they usually take you through programming so you have the basics of SQL queries. To me that would have been a sufficient path, as opposed to having majored in computer science. I would probably steer away from that, unless you want to be an architect, a field that requires a lot of experience in coding. That's probably one of the most important resources for me as a project manager - to have an architect who has the vision to build things that are technically correct. To do that, you have to have experience. Project management tends to be more flexible and even creative since you can apply it to a lot of different jobs. I did want to have the technical background. I see a



trend of not having a lot of value in that, but I don't agree with the thinking. Having some kind of technical background and business experience are transferrable skills to have. Kids today who have some basic understanding of Excel or PowerPoint, just being able to do pivot tables, are hard to find, but those people are really critical to the business because they can take data and create all kinds of views for that information. Today you can't make anything without a presentation. My point is, if you understand the business and apply some technology skills, you can move up. I see these young kids in the business who have moved up quickly because of that.

**Pamela:** Right now in my field, because I've been through the ringer as far as jobs go, you can't be just a designer anymore. You have to have some sort of technical side

**Pamela:** Some people are good at their jobs, but they can't manage people.

**Marietta:** There are leaders, managers and solo contributors. I've seen people who think they are ready for a promotion just because they've been in a field for a while. I never consider 10 years qualifying you for the next step. I've seen people in my field who've been around the same company for 15 years, and they feel they should have been ahead of you when it comes to positions. They have just been sitting there and milking the position, not improving their skills, not adjusting to change, and still expecting that they deserve this. It's not that you deserve it, you have to earn it, you have to show that you are able to go to the next step. I am dealing with mostly the younger generations in my group. Most of the test groups and leads that I deal

you're just the average person. You have to go the extra mile.

**Pamela:** Sometimes you get in trouble for it, but it's worth it.

**Marietta:** I think if you end up getting in trouble, then there is something wrong with the management. Most of the time, every good leader understands that going the extra mile takes them apart from the others. No company will grow if they're never striving for the extra mile.

**Pamela:** You definitely have to push the limits especially creatively, because some companies are pretty set in their ways. I have to wiggle my way through changing their style, updating, and I have to blend in, but at the same time I have to be assertive.

**Zorina:** I don't have time to stop and talk to anyone. I think it's a cultural thing.

"Wherever you go, women in technology are generally overwhelmed by being surrounded by men. If they see one or two successful women around, they definitely want to take after them," says Markarian.

also. Before, being a graphic web designer was just a creative thing, but now, you have to know some of the back-end, so it's blending two different jobs into one person.

**Marietta:** Even though I do have a computer technology background, I don't use those skills any more. It's more about becoming a leader of the group, instead of becoming a developer. Whatever you have, software development skills and a degree, and you know exactly what to do, just be sure you understand the basics. And if you do want to take it to the next step, which is management and how to implement software in the right places, those are the skills that you have to learn from school. But, you don't have to stick to that; you can take the next step toward something that is closer to your heart and you are passionate about.

**Zorina:** I think someone who would read that, might think, "Okay, I'll get a computer science degree and I'll learn programming, and then I want to become a manager." But it's not just that. You really do have to have experience. You never want to be promoted sooner than you are ready

with are young, some of them are right out of high school. You have to teach them that they have to do more than the job requirement to show that they are ready for the next level. If you do just what is given to you and never separate yourself from the pack, then you are always going to stay where you are. I always promote healthy competition. Even when I talk to big teams and hold quarterly meetings, I tell them the only way you can get to the next level is to separate yourself. You must do something that makes you stand out and see yourself as not doing just what is given to you but going the extra mile and showing you are capable of doing a bit more. That makes you ready for next position.

**Zorina:** There are a lot of people who come into large companies like Sony expecting sophisticated career planning and they're like, what's next for me? They're expecting someone to give them the direction, but you just basically need to step in, cross the line, take some risks and do more than what you want to do. If you just do what you're doing, then

There are people who have time to take a chair and start a conversation, but I am always going. People tell me I have fire off the back of my heels because I am constantly in motion, doing something, going somewhere. I'm on a mission, and I'm trying to get something done.

**Joanna:** Do you think more women should go into technology?

**Marietta:** One thing that I know, I would still encourage them, because opportunities are ample in the software industry.

**Pamela:** I don't know if I would or would not agree with that. Women become catty, and technology is not catty. One, I want them to excel in a male-dominated field, but at the same time, I enjoy working with men because it's easier.

**Zorina:** I would definitely encourage it. Information technology gives you a lot of different skill sets that become transferrable, and there are a lot of jobs and opportunities with the economy being the way it is, you can always find technology jobs. ■