# Acknowledging the value of soft skills in the IT sector

Understanding the essential need, and creating an enabling environment, for so-called 'soft skills' such as marketing, communications and client and customer relationship management would go a long way to addressing skills shortages and gender imbalances in the IT sector whilst above all ensuring the strongest possible business outcome for any company, say the executives of digital on-demand solutions provider, Discover Digital.



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Taryn Uhlmann, executive head of Marketing & Content and Leigh Watson, executive head of Projects at the company say that softer skills have long been undervalued in the IT sector, where advanced technical skills are highly sought-after and those in possession of them are paid top dollar.

"But the fact remains that you can be in possession of the best software or business idea, but without the ability to market and communicate the product and manage the clients effectively, your product will remain quietly in-house," says Watson.

"There is a growing realisation across the industry that technical skills are important but that industry leaders must also be in possession of communication skills, negotiating skills, management experience and an understanding of marketing in order to monetise those technical skills. Currently, we're seeing significant shortages in the market of people who both understand IT and can effectively take it to market or turn harness it to the benefit of the business."

## Hindering female progression

Uhlmann notes that the undervaluing of soft skills may have contributed to gender imbalances in the IT sector. "Women in tech businesses are often referred to as non-tech if they aren't programmers or coders, despite having granular, holistic knowledge and understanding of the tech business. Traditionally, more women have gravitated to the softer skills and relationship building areas, while more men have gravitated to the highly technical fields.

"Because more of the company soft skills tend to reside with women and because soft skills have been undervalued, women have found themselves at a disadvantage in terms of career progression and remuneration. This may be due in part to women in soft skill roles, in the sector, undervaluing themselves and their role in the overall business," says Uhlmann. "We have to stop qualifying ourselves as 'not technical' and so excluding ourselves from the deeper IT business discussions."

## Inspiring innovation

Recognising the value of soft skills demands a mindset change. "Forward-thinking companies are starting to do so, and they are seeing the benefits," says Watson.

"Our company is an example of this. We regard soft skills as crucial to our success, we have a 50-50 male-female split on our exco team and traditional gender roles are not entrenched. So all our executives have a say in technical and marketing issues, we share equal responsibility in negotiations and workloads, salaries are on par, and both male and female employees feel confident asking for time off to care for their children. This supports work-life balance in a fair way, enhances job satisfaction for all, and allows all employees to contribute soft and technical skills for the overall good of the company."

"Once all skills are valued and traditional gender roles are set aside, old-school thinking is eliminated and innovation can flourish," says Uhlmann.