

A conversation with Margo Leach

Alice Negbenose reports



Can you briefly explain your current role and your career journey?

I'm the Chief Product Officer at AXELOS, which means I'm responsible for our portfolio of frameworks and certifications, and all related propositions. My team designs, tests, and develops the propositions and helps manage their success in-market, with the help of our lovely colleagues across the business.

I started my career in publishing at a time when the industry was going through digital transformation, which led to my interest in digital products and platforms. I was working on a big data agriculture modelling programme and at that point was introduced to one of AXELOS' best practice methods - PRINCE2®.

Have you faced any challenges as a woman in this industry?

Well, I would say I probably have. I've been lucky in that I've worked in industries that tend to be more female dominated, such as publishing and talent management/HR. Although, there was still a noticeable difference with the lack of women in the top leadership positions. As soon as you progressed to that high-level leadership position, it was dominated by white men and that was quite noticeable. This obviously has a huge impact on the pay gap, which I think is one of the biggest challenges many organizations are trying very hard to address. Having women in senior leadership positions allows other women to see that it is achievable; research shows that people hire people like themselves, even if they try not to. So we need more women in leadership positions for that balance.



Do you feel you're expected to act differently than a man in the same role?

Yes. This is about unconscious bias and research has shown that women are judged differently to men in regard to behaviour. I feel I'm expected to be nicer about stuff, aim for consensus instead of somewhat dictating, and smile more. If I don't do that, I am seen as brash, too direct, and aggressive. This affects me more from a management position in terms of the way I manage people. I think women are expected to flex their management style and be more 'nurturing'; if they're not, they can be judged as not a good manager. Yet, when a man is behaving in the same way, they do not receive the same judgment. Here at AXELOS, with my peer group, I'm pleased to say they are very aware of that unconscious bias and I am able to be open, challenging, and as direct as I want to be and it's not held against me at all. I feel quite fortunate in that regard. I think I still flex my management style a little bit more than is natural for me, which can be a bit exhausting, but definitely not as much as I'm sure other people in other industries are experiencing and definitely not in the leadership role that I play.

What are your thoughts on women in technology?

The tech industry needs to be more gender balanced. Women tend not to go into technology even though there are loads of roles that are available to them. I think it's a society issue that starts at a young age where young girls are unconsciously encouraged to do certain things. There's a thing called the stereotype threat, which is basically if you tell a group of people that they're not good at something before they go into a test on that topic, that group of people performs worse than the control group as a direct result of that biased message delivered to them. I don't think many people in the UK are overtly coming out and saying women can't do a particular thing but it's subtle things that are being said that are pushing women in particular directions from a very early stage.

If women aren't in leadership positions, or part of the teams developing these tech products, we're potentially building the wrong things and missing 51% of our customer group!

We need products that represent and highlight the diversity in the world.



As a manager, do you do anything specific and targeted to help promote, encourage, develop women within your team?

I encourage the women in my team to be free when they do speak up without judgement. I try to be very aware if a woman is being spoken over, not speaking up, not listened to, or not talking as much in a meeting. I make sure I hire for competency and skill set so that I'm fighting my unconscious bias all the time.

What advice do you have for young women starting out in their career journey?

Don't be afraid to stand up and be counted. Managing gender split teams all through my career, I've seen that women do work very, very hard in hopes it will be noticed and they will get career progression. Working hard is important, but you also must know your worth, showcase your talents and ask for what you want.

The main thing is to have what I call 'appropriate confidence'. So be confident but have the competency and skills to back it up. Those two things together are the recipe for success. Showcase these things by speaking up, highlighting your ideas, and making sure you're getting credit for your ideas. Another really key thing to learn is delegation! You don't have to do everything yourself!

The theme for International Women's Day this year is choose to challenge. What does that mean to you?

I love that theme, I think it's fantastic. It has so many levels and so many different ways it can be interpreted. For me, it is all about speaking up. So that can mean speaking up if you see unfair treatment but also speaking up if you have an idea about ways to do something better. Don't be shy, speak up in meetings, put yourself forward. The other thing is to speak up when you are being treated differently. For example, if you've said something and people aren't listening, because it does happen where

you have to repeat yourself in meetings or someone says the exact same thing as you did, speak up about that. Call people out because it wastes time and your time is valuable, so you shouldn't have to repeat yourself three times to be heard. I just think if we don't say something, we're not helping the people that are sitting beside us and the people that are coming up behind us, we want to make it better for them.

How can organizations support women to move into leadership roles?

This is another wider society issue. Recent statistics show that women are having a setback because of COVID; often because they are the primary carer in many situations - child care, caring for elderly/sick people, etc. Even if you're in full time employment, you're expected to do everything. Women in general, are expected to carry the mental and emotional labour of a household. Those things are disproportionately put on women. Until that changes it's very hard because it directly impacts their career. This needs to be addressed from a society perspective. What we *can* do as organizations is provide an environment that is helpful and supportive of women who are in that situation. We need to look at how we can provide more flexible working environments for them and make their lives easier so that they can excel in the workplace.



'A challenged world is an alert world'

#ChoosetoChallenge
#AXELOSforEquality

