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As one of few senior women in technology, Janice Diner pays it forward



Janice Diner at her Horizn headquarters in Toronto

Peter J. Thompson, National Post

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Years ago, if someone had told Janice Diner that one day she would be ringing the bell for the start of trading at the London Stock Exchange and posing for a group photo in front of 10 Downing Street, the unassuming Montreal native would likely have rolled her eyes and let out her signature boisterous laugh.

But that's just what happened in early December when the founder and CEO of Toronto-based fintech company Horizn Studios Inc. stood alongside 11 other Canadian CEOs in what has now become one of the highlights of her career.

"It was not on my bucket list but, hell, was that fun!" recalls Diner of the invite-only trip organized by the U.K.'s Department for International Trade's Canadian Fintech Mission. "... Everyone we met was into helping us settle and put down roots and put people on the ground in London."

Earlier this month, Diner returned to London and took the stage at the prestigious FinovateEurope conference to pitch Horizn's mobile enterprise SaaS platform to 1,300 potential financial services buyers from around the world. While there, she visited as many banks and innovation centres as possible and participated in an Ontario government mission for fintech companies, which opened additional doors. It was a whirlwind trip but for Diner it was the opportunity of a lifetime.

"I've never met a CEO that's not working really, really hard," says the self-described "career entrepreneur" of the incredible energy she devotes to her burgeoning software business each and every day. "I'm very obsessed and very driven. It's not about the end destination. It's very much about the journey. I like to build anything, everything — software, business, people. It's like a hunger. It becomes your life, but then your life becomes very interesting."

Lately, Diner has been racking up air miles travelling around North America and across the Atlantic to visit Horizn's global client base and drum up new business for the Toronto-based company's software platform that combines micro learning, gameplay and social technology with robust analytics "to teach people new things." Banks use it online, in-branch or at kiosks to get employees, partners, call centres and customers up to speed on new products. Technology companies use it to share knowledge with global sales teams and increase sales. The platform is operational in more than 40 countries in 15 languages to improve product knowledge, adoption, loyalty or sales.

"'Build it and they will come' is a myth," Diner says. "No matter how good your global banking app is, there are features inside that app that your employers and your customers might not understand. ... Age is not a barrier. The methodology is usually the problem."

Diner, 54, didn't set out to develop and market software. Rather, she studied marketing at York University's Schulich School of Business and was soon snapped up by one of the country's top ad agencies as creative director. When the firm received the Canadian advertising and media rights to what she calls "a little-known company called Facebook," Diner was front and centre as they took it to market. They launched PlayStation Canada as the first Canadian Facebook group, followed by Facebook TD Canada Trust Moneylounge and then went on to launch PlayStation 3 and the PlayStation website to Canadians.

As the team built the first Facebook apps in Canada and the first financial app in North America, Diner became obsessed with the innovation of Facebook and fell in love with building software and interacting with customers (“I traded artists and writers for developers and architects and QA — creative people with a different set of tools!” she quips). So after a decade at the agency, she and some colleagues quit to form a social media startup that attracted BlackBerry as a client.



Janice Diner in her office in Toronto's financial district

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Diner then branched out as Horizn Studios and became a sought-after speaker on startups and social media. A talk she gave on a BlackBerry Facebook app caught the attention of Motorola Canada, which commissioned a similar product. It proved a hit, so she pitched Motorola's U.S. operation and won that business, too. When Motorola was bought by Google, Diner and her team snagged a three-year, multi-million-dollar global contract. With just a handful of people in the office at the time, “we spent the next three years catching up,” she says. When Lenovo acquired Motorola from Google, it cemented Horizn on the world stage. Today, the company has 40 employees from 10 countries working out of an office in Toronto's financial district.

“One of the things that makes Janice a great mentor to me is that she can sense the ups and downs I'm experiencing a mile away, and seems to have a sixth sense about when to check in because of her extensive experience,” says Vicki Saunders, founder of Toronto-

based SheEO, a global initiative encouraging one million women to contribute \$1-billion and support 10,000 ventures with zero-interest loans. “She has generated revenue since Day 1 as a startup, which is unusual these days, and it’s incredible to have a mentor that is doing things differently that fit with my vision and values. She’s a fierce leader with a big vision grounded in practical execution who gets the global marketplace, which is invaluable to me.”

Of course, it hasn’t been easy being female in the software industry, a place where she’s often the only woman in the room. In fact, the mother of a son and a daughter in their 20s still cringes years later as she recalls the time she was advised to put a male CEO in place if she wanted to close deals and raise capital. What would she tell her kids — especially her daughter — were she to have done that, she wondered. Not one to conform to stereotypes, she diligently sought out clients and fuelled her business that way, turning it into a profitable business. As little as four per cent of raised capital goes to women, she says, and that’s not OK. It’s one of the reasons she gave space in her office to SheEO and why she sits on its board.

“I represent a generation,” says Diner. “When you stand up and get counted, there’s a very low representation of senior women in technology roles globally. So if you’re in one, you have a responsibility to the other women that follow you. What you do matters because other women need role models to follow. We didn’t have any.”

One day, she hopes the female card won’t even be part of the conversation. As she puts it: “I want to be remembered for my business, not for being a woman. When I’m working with clients, I don’t feel like a woman. I feel like a business leader.”