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It's all about connections for Cisco Systems Canada president Bernadette Wightman



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By Suzanne Wintrob
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Bernadette Wightman isn't one to sit back and wait for things to happen. Rather, the petite and soft-spoken Brit with the signature stilettos goes after what she wants and wishes more people would do the same. In fact, it's become her rallying cry as a mentor to young people looking for that first big career break.

“I call it ‘lurking around corners and building networks’,” says the president of Cisco Systems Canada Co., flashing a smile. “Don’t just build networks in the obvious places. Whether me in Cisco or [those] coming out of university, the broader you can get those networks, the better. Development and opportunity is about opening doors; the more you can open, the better.”

That’s precisely why Wightman, a self-confessed social media junkie, accepts LinkedIn requests from people she doesn’t know and makes room in her demanding schedule to meet them for coffee to chat about their career path or big ideas. She inherited this “attitude over aptitude” outlook from her father, she says, looking beyond education and experience to people’s tenacity and passion. As she puts it: “What’s their energy? What’s their ambition? How open are they to new ideas? What experiences have they had? That’s so important as we move into this digital age where everything is changing around us – that ability to process that change and to move with that change.”

Wightman, 55, practises what she preaches, having had to adapt to many different situations as she embraced new opportunities since landing her first job in telecom 30 years ago. At the time, she was working as an accountant in her native Manchester, U.K. Mobile phones had just gone mainstream and Wightman was desperate for one. They were expensive, though, so she decided to look for a job that paid more money. She found it at Racal Telecom (now Vodafone Group PLC), where she not only bought her own cellphone but also sold them to CEOs. She was good at her job and quickly moved through the ranks. By the time Cisco plucked her up a dozen years later to run their British Telecom account, she was Racal’s sales director for southeast England.

“There were some smart people working at Cisco and the reflection of glory made me feel smarter,” Wightman jokes of those early days.

Since Cisco’s inception in 1984 by a husband-and-wife team of computer scientists at California’s Stanford University who created a multi-protocol router so they could email each other from different buildings, the company has become a leader in networking to transform how people connect, communicate and collaborate. For the past 15 years, Wightman has travelled the world as a senior executive plugging the company’s “There’s Never Been a Better Time...” tagline. She held leadership roles in the United Kingdom and Ireland before heading abroad to serve as Cisco’s general manager for the company’s partner and commercial organization in Africa, Russia (“I’ve visited all the ‘stan’ countries,” she quips) and the Middle East. Her three years in Dubai covering business in Saudi Arabia were particularly gratifying for the difference they made in women’s lives.

“One of things I’m proud about is that Cisco as a company really ramped up our female representation there,” says Wightman, who flies back to London often to be with her financier husband and businessman son. “When I first landed, we only had one female. Last count we had 22. That’s huge for Saudi Arabia, [where] there are separate divided offices [for men and women], where I wore an abaya, where I wasn’t allowed to get in a taxi with my boss because he wasn’t my husband or brother or father, where I wasn’t

allowed to go into the executive breakfast room at the hotel. You have to respect those rules. ... It's purely about gender there."

Indeed, Wightman is passionate about helping women rise through the ranks. Seven years ago, she and a Cisco colleague created a program called JUMP to help advance women to senior manager roles and higher. Twelve women signed up that first year but now 1,100 around the world have benefitted from its workshops, mentoring, peer networking and group support.

Since arriving at Cisco Canada's Toronto office two and a half years ago to oversee everything from sales and marketing to finance, distribution and 2,000 employees, Wightman has seen the 17-member senior leadership team increase from one woman to seven (Cisco's global executive team has a 50:50 split). She serves on the province's Women in Business Steering Committee to encourage more female representation on corporate boards and tries to be a role model to young female entrepreneurs.

One way she does it is through the Cisco Women Entrepreneurs' Circle, which helps female-run small and medium businesses in Canada with more than 90 hours of virtual training from the Cisco Networking Academy, at no cost. Plus, through a partnership with Communitech and Business Development Bank of Canada, University of Waterloo interns funded by Cisco are paired with female entrepreneurs and a Cisco engineer to help build the entrepreneur's digital strategy and expand their market.

"Bernadette is the kind of leader that wants to make a real difference — and she gets it done," says Stephania Varallico, CEO of Toronto-based Women of Influence, a media and event firm focused on women's career advancement. "She's been a real inspiration to me. I asked her about the source of her confidence once, and she assured me that she wasn't confident, she was courageous, and anyone can find courage. Her advice has stuck with me and helped me through some of the challenges in my own journey as an entrepreneur. I think of it before every big speaking engagement, every important sponsor meeting and any other moment of uncertainty and doubt."

Industry Canada statistics show that more than half of all Canadian businesses are owned, managed or controlled by women. They stay in business longer and profit quicker than their male counterparts, too, so Wightman finds it frustrating that female entrepreneurs can only access a minuscule amount of capital compared to men. Still, she's adamant about hiring the best person, not the best gender, for any job. Some of her best mentors, sponsors and role models throughout her interesting career have been men.

Wightman, an avid runner and architecture enthusiast, feels fortunate to have had a prime perch from which to watch technology evolve. Cisco, for example, is now selling total solutions to numerous lines of business rather than just selling to IT departments — something that's simply a sign of the times. She recently heard Starbucks's CEO describe his company as a tech firm because so much its business comes through the customer app. In other words, it's not just about the speeds and feeds but what they do for the

customer. And at the end of the day, that's what makes Wightman's three decades in the industry as exciting as the day she bought that very first cellphone.

"We live in a time where it is for us to change things, not about waiting for other people to change things," she says. "We can, as a company, connect the unconnected. Anyone can partake in this new society as long as they can get connected. That's exciting!"