

Judith Rothrock

Vice President, Special Projects
– TME & HiTech
HCL Technologies



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#SheInspires

Judith is a veteran IT leader with over 30 years of experience in IT and currently working on special projects as Vice President. She is a cross-functional expert in managing global teams and implementing transformational change. She believes that it is important for women to stay in the workforce while not compromising on their personal lives.

In this conversation with the editorial team, Judith talks about how she happened to get into technology, the challenges of being a woman in STEM field, and what it takes to get ahead as a female tech manager.

Hello Judith! You have been working in technology for many years now. Could you tell us a little bit about your background, your interests, and your career journey?

I am a native New Yorker – born and raised in a very beautiful small village on the Hudson River. Though I've primarily lived in the NY Metro area, my career has been all over the world... and I've loved it. I studied theoretical math and applied that training in my career from coding and designing systems, managing the integration and implementation of them, to managing people, teams, groups, and business units. Through this journey I found my love in working with clients. I credit my ability to easily see root cause to complex problems and their solutions, from a data and design perspective, as a result of my mathematical training and its application.

I think, sometimes, we let our careers be dictated by that which we're good at, but that which we're good at isn't necessarily that which we love. And so, there was a moment when I realized I needed to own my career. I didn't love what I was doing, I actually hated it, and so I took a step away from it all to gain perspective and get back in touch with what I personally valued. I know that I want to stay close to clients and the work that's meaningful to them.

In your opinion, how are the contributions of women unique in Business and technology?

I'm not sure our logic is any different than someone else's. But we bring a diversity of thought, a diversity of communication style, expression that can trigger creativity, and I think it's all about creativity and innovation. I just think that women bring so much into that.

What is the one maxim that you live by in your line of work?

I have a mantra: Learn something new every day. If you're in this field, it changes so rapidly you can very quickly fall behind if you don't stay on top of it. As an example and on a personal note, I recently took an M.I.T. class in AI on my own, because I see it as one of the things that will transform our future. I knew that I didn't know all the different forms of it—IoT and ML, DL, robotics, where/how each should be applied - and I was curious about the underlying techniques that were being used....so, I stepped out and did it... and loved seeing the connectedness that each has to development techniques that have been evolving over the last 30 years.

We each own our careers and continuous learning has been a cornerstone of mine.

What is your philosophy about balancing between your personal life and your professional life?

I think that sometimes work gets more of my time and it deserves to get my commitment. Does my family get my time? Of course. But do they always get an equal amount? Absolutely not. But then there are other times that it will balance out. And so, over time, we find a balance. Do I think women should not pursue a family? There used to be women I would meet and they would say 'I'm not going to have children because I would have to give up my career'. I completely disagree. I felt badly for them if that was the reason they weren't having children. I had a very demanding career and I made a decision to continue to work... and I've never regretted it. Then and now I believe that I was a better role model to my daughter by working, and I didn't have that growing up. I think it was very meaningful to continue to work and it's important for women to stay in the workforce.

How important is ambition for women leaders in technology today?

I think ambition is one of those words that is sort of tinged, isn't it? It's used as a negative if used toward women, and an incredible positive if it's used toward men. But I also think that when you look at leadership and you talk about the great leaders of the world, the words that they use to describe them are feminine qualities: their ability to inspire; their ability to care for people; and their ability to nurture. There are so many words that are necessary for women to grow into and be comfortable with. Ambition is one of them.

What is your message to inspire women to make their mark in technology?

Lean in. Be uncomfortable. Because that means you're learning. If you're comfortable in what you're doing, if you're comfortable in your next job, then you're not stretching yourself enough. So, take something that is challenging you. And push yourself into it.

While working with P&G, it was wonderful (and rare) to work in an environment that is 50 percent female at the management level across the board, not just in IT. They break the mold. That's why I love them so much... sitting across from women who are normal, healthy, fun and highly achieving. There are a lot of women that you work with who have sort of an angst and an anxiety and an attitude because they had to go through so much to get to where they are. And I feel for them, but they're not fun to work with. But at P&G, these are women who have stuck together, supported one another, and it's the culture from the top down to support them. Which is lovely. We need to nurture more of that!.

How important is having fun to the creative process?

I think fun is a fundamental element that brings creativity. It's just that simple. I can have a wicked sense of humor, so I can't help myself. You know, there was a time when I was very serious at work and cracking a joke almost felt as though you were denigrating yourself and that you were losing power. Now I don't care. I think it's really important to be natural, to have fun, and to encourage other people to have fun... so, they'll say that crazy idea or whatever needs to be said out loud and trigger new ideas. Fun makes that a bit safer. And I think that safety in open thought is also where we get that new thinking and creativity. So, I want and encourage that open thinking to come in.

What is the best advice you have been given in your career?

It predates my career and probably overarches my life. And it was my dad. And it was, "You can be whoever you want to be." So, it predates 'women's lib', though I was actually in that time frame. When you ask about women in STEM, I don't think it starts with work. I think it starts when they're little. When my daughter was in second grade, we went for a parent-teacher meeting and her teacher said to me, "She's kind of good at math but you know it doesn't really matter because she's a girl." I said, "Excuse me?" "Well, we don't really expect a lot." I said, "Excuse me. I do."

I was absolutely blown away that anyone would expect less of a child because they are male or female. I just really could not understand that. These things start so much earlier and that's what I think we need to change. It starts with reinforcing that they have all of these options available to them, and nurturing all of that confidence in them. Like my dad did for me.

What is the one piece of advice you would give young women aspiring to your level of success?

I think it's important for you to know that in this industry, you need to be audacious, tenacious, and fearless—and that's the one thing I never want you to forget.



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