VAAHINI CONNECT PODCAST: BUSTING THE STATE OF 'SO FEW WOMEN IN TECH' AND HOW!

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

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Hi, and welcome to the Accenture Vaahini podcast. Sitara. It's a pleasure to have you here today with us. Thank you for joining.

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Thank you Savita. The pleasure is mine too

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Right with that I want to get started right off with your career. And my first question for you there, as you began your career in, in a core engineering role, and since then, have evolved to grow as a business leader now leading services in the healthcare space. Over this journey, you've perhaps seen some women succeed and grow, but others also leave paid work. What according to you, are the top two three factors or reasons or challenges that have contributed to the still prevalent state of so few women in tech?

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Yeah. So, you know, women, as you mentioned, right, they're pretty well represented in the support functions. But men are in dominance, when we talk about core technical, strategic, or, you know, roles that require P&L responsibility. Now, I've been thinking, right is this gap due to a gap in ambition, to the gap in confidence? Maybe technical skills, business or negotiation skills, networking, or even sponsorship? Right. And in my mind, it's a combination. Right? And let me share why I think so.

Studies indicate that, you know, men and women have equal levels of ambition, while beginning their careers. But ambition levels of women diminish over time, due to their early experiences, and the career support that they receive. So women are unconsciously held to higher standards, which means that then they lack confidence in many cases to apply for a job, even when they're at 80% or more ready. And, and this is all statistics speaking, right? So what happens because of this is that women do not apply for those elusive, you know, critical experiences, which are crucial precursors to top jobs. And this causes a cyclical effect. So you don't apply. And hence, you don't have enough role models, because you don't have enough role models. And people think, oh, it's probably difficult for me to apply for a job like that. And that cycle just continues. So that's one

observation that I've had, in terms of hey, why so many, so few women in tech.

The second one I think I want to talk about a little bit is, we have now taken mentoring to another level. So we have continued to pay a lot of focus and attention on mentoring women, but when you start having conversations with women, these will feel that, you know, hey, women's mentors, have helped them understand themselves, the probably the preferred ways of operating, how they need to change and adapt as they progress to senior roles. When you have the same conversation with men. They have described how their mentors have helped them take charge of their careers, plan their next move and how they got backing in public, which means men till date are receiving more sponsorship than women.
And then all of this aside, you add the societal angle as well, which is, I feel the burden of a second shift. Now, if you look at many households, even till date, even the progressive households, women continue to do the lion's share of the domestic tasks, right? Even just planning and organizing, forget everything else. Right, that takes up a lot of their mind space and time. And again, statistics say that women spent twice as much time as men on domestic responsibilities. Now, what that means is that as your work demands grow, many working women are unable to take on those additional responsibilities because there is lack of gender equality at home. And to that you add things like excessive childcare costs, excessive eldercare costs. And yes, it's a fact that women then say, okay, maybe I should drop off the workforce and take care of my family. So it's a combination of multiple factors, you know, that have resulted, in your own words, right? So few women in technology,

Savitha - right, that's bang on. And I think it's really insightful. Because you've really pointed out the specific things that people women in the workplace are facing today. And you know, it doesn't matter whether it's in the corporate world or outside. So yeah, thank you for sharing that.

So be it family member, a colleague, a business leader or a committed ally? What are some ways in which a person can enable greater inclusion and gender parity in terms of STEM careers in specific Sitara

Sitara
So inclusion and diversity, in my mind needs to be an integral part of our business strategy. It should not be a standalone initiative. So that's, that's key, right? Many of us in organizations, we drive it as a standalone initiative and expect the results to be different, right. And the attention definitely, you know, goes down if it is done that way. The second thing is we have to engage men in the dialogue, He for She and it's not just around women's day, that you have this kind of a dialogue, it has to be a continuous ongoing conversation. Now, men also need, you know, role models, like women do, right? We always talk about women needing role models, but in this case, stories of men contributing to make a visible difference to gender equality, be it at home, or in the workplace needs to be celebrated. So that's something that we could all do, you know, in our own ways, right.

The next one that I will talk about is building a strong pipeline of women in the workforce consciously now, we talked a lot about unconscious biases. And these unconscious biases, underpin hiring decisions. And hence, we need to create that awareness across all levels in the organization. Right and say that, okay, here's what's happening. So be aware, be mindful, you know, when you look at resumes, when you look at your slate of candidates, you know, these are things to keep in mind. And then finally, we need to encourage qualified Women to apply again to increase that, you know, opportunity of pool of women to first apply. And then of course, you know, if they get selected, then that's a different story in terms of what you need to do next. And then finally, sponsor women more, you know, consciously again, right? These all needs to be conscious decisions.

Savitha: Yeah, that makes sense. And I'm so glad you pointed out about, you know, making it an ongoing feature versus just doing it around Women's Day. And like you said, Yes, sponsoring, yes, encouraging more women to apply.

And with that, as a mentor, you have been part of enabling the careers of many women. If you could share with us here, is there a particular story of transformation? One way we can learn from the experiences of a woman in STEM? Who is able to overcome some of these challenges? Would you have a story or an example to share?

Sitara - So um, so I like to share a story of a colleague, she's in technology, and she is senior executive now. And she challenged society myths on gender stereotyping, right. So now, during the pandemic, she relocated twice. Now, both as part of her career moves, one was inter country, and another was intra country. Now, on the first occasion, she asked her husband to take both girls on vacation, while wrapping up her work, you know, taking care of all the move logistics, settling down in the new place, and setting up their new home, etc.

And then on the second occasion, again, what she did was okay, he has her husband at that time, had to wrap up his work. But she asked him to keep the key kids with him while wrapping up his work. And this gave my colleague the opportunity to jump start a new job, which had a steep learning curve. Now, why do I talk about, you know, this particular example? Now, that couple needs to be commended on breaking the bias. Now, she, in her own words, she tells me that, okay, hey, it was she who had all of these biases in her mind, that, hey, moms need to stay back at home, take care of children, we should let the men or the dads do all the logistic planning. And the concept of a trailing spouse only applies to women, because women generally follow men and their partners, you know, to while they take on new roles. So, you know, we talk about a lot of biases, myths, etc.

And it's due to probably the conditioning, etc. But many of these exist within us women as well. And unless we break these myths, transformation cannot happen.

Savitha - that's a great point. And it applies to every one of us. And with that, I want to bring it over to you and your career. Right? Finally, since we're talking about women in STEM and career growth, you moved from core engineering to business leadership. What do you need to do to make that transition happen? What are some learnings that you'd like to share with us from your own experience?

Sitara

So during the initial, I would say, eight to nine years of my career, I was in core engineering, and program management roles. Now, in addition to my technical responsibilities at work, I was an active member of the Women's Network, I could even call myself one of the founding members of the network in Hyderabad. This helped me actually build connections in businesses and cities outside of where I worked on a day to day basis. So when I started looking for roles outside my domain, I said, okay, hey, you know, I'm trying to do a lot of things at one go, I need something to anchor me. And that was my functional expertise. So I had zero experience in healthcare, when I joined, you know, services, but my experience and expertise in handling complex programs in the energy sector, helping get that break. So so that was how I landed the job, I used an anchor. And as you know, I was able to convince my interview panel that okay, while I have no experience in healthcare domain, I can bring that functional expertise. So so that was step one.

And I also consciously chose a role, which was an individual contributor role. Again, it was difficult to make that move, because people were like, Hey, are you crazy? Are you out of your mind? Why are you giving up all your people responsibilities and taking something like this, I said, Hey, you know what, for me,

right now, I want to make this shift to a industry that I can correlate with. And I think it's going to be very meaningful for me to, you know, spend some time to understand the industry and learn more. So I need to build that domain knowledge. So I felt that an individual contributor role will help me do that much faster. So that was the second thing. Then what I did was I tapped into my network. Because it's a highly matrixed organization, I needed them to actually help me build some new connections help me learn about the role, and get ramped up quickly. So that was the third thing that happened. And then I signed up for stretch assignments, which was to get more hands on experience in areas that I've never worked on before. And what that helped with indirectly, I didn't know it at that point in time. But that increased my sponsorship network. So many leaders then saw me operate in extremely challenging situations that they were like, okay, you know, what, you give a problem to Sitara she'll solve it for you. And that gave them the confidence to say that,hey what I vouch for her, and I'm ready to give her a commercial role, in which she doesn't have experience and expertise. And that actually helped me make that next jump, you know, from an operations role into a commercial and business role. In summary, like, I would say, like a few things, right? That I would call out. One is, you know, taking time and effort to build connections. And it's not just enough to, okay, say hi, hello, and build that connection. But you need to take the time and effort, again, to maintain that connection. And it goes both ways. So sometimes they're going to tap into you, sometimes you have the ability to tap into that network, to then actually make things happen, right.

Next is raise your hand for roles, even when you think you're not ready. In my mind, if you are left in the water, you are going to learn how to swim, and you know, come back to the show. So you know, take that take that risk on yourself. And then last, right, I've always looked at as career as a marathon and not a sprint, which means that you know, hey, there might be times where you want to take a pause, do that, recharge

yourself do that, you want to take a detour and then come back do that right. All of these things actually enable you to actually look at career in the long run and not look at okay, this immediate milestone I've not achieved and so let me be deterred, and then you know, give up right? That is a different story also. So that's what I've learned from my experience,

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wow your story and the way you have intentionally taken steps, risks, and consciously taken those risks. I think that's really inspiring how you've gone about this and you're able to like really look back, hindsight is a great thing. Of course, you're able to look back and identify, these were the things that I did that actually helped move the needle forward for me. And I think that's going to be a great example for other women and other people who come behind you, as a role model. Thank you for joining us today. With that, we come to the end of interviews. So thank you for your time this evening with us.

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Thank you so much for the opportunity, and I hope that you have been able to inspire at least a few women. And if at any point in time, anybody who's listening to this podcast wants to reach out I'm always available.