Laura Zarrow: Welcome to Women@Work and our ongoing conversation about how we can help more women join, stay, succeed and lead in the workplace. I’m Laura Zarrow, Senior Director of Wharton People Analytics, looking forward to celebrating Women’s Equality Day on the show today with two extraordinary women, each of whom are working to advance diversity and inclusion on a global scale in different parts of the STEM and business community.

The first one is Ellyn Shook. She is the Chief Leadership and Human Resources Officer for Accenture. Ellyn is known as a determined advocate for inclusion and diversity in the workplace and was named by Forbes as one of the top 100 CHROs in 2015. So with all of that, Ellyn, thank you so much for joining us on Women@Work. We’re thrilled to have you today.

This is an organization larger than many cities, larger than some states. It’s truly extraordinary what they’re doing there, and Ellyn has made it her mission to transform the way that we run businesses and conceptualize work-life integration. She and her team are focused on really rethinking leadership and talent practices, specifically in the digital age.
Ellyn Shook: Thanks, Laura. I’m really thrilled to be here, especially since we’re honoring Women’s Equality Day.

Laura Zarrow: Over the years that you’ve been at Accenture, the number of women has, it looks like it has almost tripled, if not more.

Ellyn Shook: Oh my gosh, it’s more than tripled. We have more than 140,000 women now at Accenture.

Laura Zarrow: And that’s huge, huge progress. That says to me that it’s some combination of leadership, culture and policy. Could you talk about how that’s happened over time and where you see those relationships?

Ellyn Shook: Well first of all, we have an unwavering belief that our rich diversity, so gender diversity, but also all forms of diversity, make us smarter and more innovative, and as a business, it’s essential to have that because that’s how we serve our clients and help them solve their complex business challenges. And in order to be able to have that richness, it has to start at the top. For us, it starts with our CEO, Pierre Nanterme, and our Board of Directors. And we have five women directors on our board, which I’m very proud of.

But also, not just gender diversity, but geographical diversity and ethnic diversity on our board as well. That’s where it all begins because once you have the commitment from the top, it starts to create a culture of inclusiveness. And you do need policies and programs, you absolutely do. You have to break down the barriers, you have to remove structural barriers that are preventing women from being hired or progressing in their careers, but it’s not just that.

That just simply lays the groundwork and the foundation. What really has to happen is that there needs to be a hyper-personalized approach to really ensuring that we’re attracting women, helping them advance and inspiring them to reach their aspirations.

Laura Zarrow: That term struck me in something else that I read about getting hyper-personal, and I think the quote was, “Because people are at the height of the digital revolution, we need to get hyper-personal in how we face these challenges and unlock potential, one human being at a time.”

Ellyn Shook: If you think of how consumer companies are really interacting with their customers – in a very hyper-personalized way. We’ve taken those concepts and brought them into Accenture to create hyper-personalized employee experiences. And we do that by ensuring that our people have a lot of input and that we’re listening to them. So we’ve done things like crowdsourcing to make sure that we are not overgeneralizing generational issues.

It’s not a one-size fits all approach, so really understanding what is important to each individual and then really ensuring that each person can work at the intersection of their strengths and their passions is how you really unlock that human potential and create hyper-personalized experiences.

Laura Zarrow: One of the things I was also really impressed by was the efforts you making to leverage digital technology to help close the gender gap. I was wondering if you could talk about the forms that takes and what that looks like specifically within Accenture?

Ellyn Shook: Being a digital business really has enabled us to enhance our gender diversity. And why is that? Frankly, we’re all on planes less frequently.

We have an amazing CIO Andrew Wilson who has put in this incredible infrastructure. We all have desk-to-desk video; we put in something called Accenture Connected Learning for our training programs— we can bring world-class faculty, internal and external faculty, into a classroom, a literal classroom, without people having to get on airplanes. So all of those experiences of using digital technology to become a digital organization just allows people to be more successful professionally and personally.

Laura Zarrow: Ellyn this is really striking the way that you’re bringing innovation into your human resources practices.

One of the things that you were talking about before that also comes is at the heart of really working with people and caring about them, is you talked about that intersection of strengths and passion. How do you find those things out? How do you get that information from your employees?

Ellyn Shook: Well two ways…at the heart of our whole performance culture is Performance Achievement, and so single every person at Accenture takes a strength-based assessment so that they know what their strengths are and that the team that they’re working with knows each other’s strengths. And then, in order to know what they’re passionate about, we simply ask them.

Laura Zarrow: Well Ellyn, we are enormously grateful for all the work you’re doing to help women join, stay, succeed and lead in the workplace, and I’m terribly grateful for you joining us today on Women@Work.

Ellyn Shook: Well thank you very much Laura, and happy Women’s Equality Day!

Laura Zarrow: Same to you! Keep up the wonderful work.