Equality Talks Podcast - Transcript

Episode 7: Women in STEM, the Girls' Programming Network and Unconscious Bias

Renee Noble is the executive director of the Girls' Programming Network, a software engineer at ed tech company, Grok Learning and was recently named in the Australian Financial Review 100 Women of Influence. Having had no exposure to programming until stumbling upon it while studying at Sydney University, she was quick to add a computer science major to her chemical engineering and chemistry pursuits.

Given her late introduction to tech, Renee's passion is making coding education exciting and accessible to everyone. She strives to create scalable content and methods for including girls, women, and people from other underrepresented gender groups. In her time at the home of GPN, Renee has taken what was a small single site operation to providing 500 girls per quarter with free programming workshops. Having already spread the program to six sites around Australia, more cities are lining up to join the GPN community. I'm so excited to be talking to you today, Renee. Thank you so much for joining me.

Renee Noble:

Absolutely. Amazing to be here. Thank you very much.

Samantha Sutherland:

I was hoping you could start by telling us a little bit about your journey from discovering programming, enjoying it so much you decided to add it to your major and then all the way through to where you are. Now you're the executive director of the Girls' Programming Network.

Renee Noble:

Definitely. So it's been an interesting and trying at times journey. I joined this class at the university, and it felt like everybody else already knew what was going on, and it was very male dominated. Many times I was the only woman in the room or one of two or three in a classroom. There was both a cultural and a knowledge difference feeding into the classroom.

So, getting started was hard especially because I didn't know any other women involved in tech at the time. So I'd come at it from a place where I'd been introduced to it by people who had been coding since they were little kids. They all go onto this computer camp together and that this the friendship group that I was closest to. So I could only see the people at the top of the food chain who really knew what was going on.

Renee Noble:

And in the classrooms, you could see people who were trying to fit into the nerdy culture, and I didn't really fit in there either. And just, trying to catch up was one thing and then not really having all the people around you that were playing the game that they've talked a big game in tech a lot of the time, especially when they're all awkward teenage boys really trying to fit into the room.

So, getting started was hard and eventually I just was like, "I'll just buckle down and I'll just learn all the things." I'm great at learning, and programming quite came naturally to me. And eventually I caught up and learned all the computer science stuff and I'm good at maths and algorithms and all those ideas came easily to me, and I went to the top of the class eventually, but it was a hard slog getting there.

And I definitely didn't feel confident along the way, especially with other things that they didn't really teach you in university and going out into industry, those things are the kinds of things you rely on. So, while I was at the top of the class for a lot of things that were theoretical and academic, actually having these skills that people just assume you know and don't ever teach you.

Renee Noble:

I was hired when I moved out into industry or when people would talk about projects they'd done at home just for fun. I always felt like I was behind the eight ball in regards to that. So going out into industry was difficult and there was a lot of things I had to pick up along the way. And I always felt that I was the person who didn't know things. But in tech there's just so many things to possibly know and no one will ever know them all.

So, coming to terms with that took a long time. And also coming to terms with a lot of people don't really know what they're talking about even in industry took a long time. So being involved with the Girls' Programming Network, which I joined near the end of university, it really gave me a chance to meet other women who don't talk such a big game, which was a really valuable experience.

Renee Noble:

So I could work with them in the classrooms and they would encourage me to do lectures or get involved in other leadership roles when I started out from the very beginning, even before I turned up, they had already signed me up to a bunch of different jobs just because they were excited to have someone to be there and who wants to jump in, who's competent with these kinds of skills. And having people believe in you like that just from the outset that's really valuable and just helping you out along the way, it was a great experience and really I jumped at the chance when the leadership position opened up because it was such a valuable experience that I wanted to make sure I could share that to other women getting involved as tutors as well as all the girls who come through the program who don't have to be behind the eight ball when they start university.

They can be the head of the class from the very start and hopefully come and tutor with us and develop their leadership skills. So I took over the leadership about years ago and it's because I really wanted to give more women and girls the chance to be involved and get the same kind of experience I did as a woman volunteering for the program as one part, giving them a chance and really encouraging people to get involved and showing them that they already have the skills that they don't really know that they have as well as getting more girls involved so they don't have to be behind the eight ball when they start university.

They can enrol in a computer science degree from the very start. They didn't have to, find a weird path to end up in tech and they can feel like they're just as good as the boys in the class room as well. So I took over the leadership. It's just been an exciting journey. At the time actually thought I was just taking over for one term, because I felt the person was going to be away for a little while. But turns out that

they were not coming back, which by the time I'd run my first workshop, there was no chance I really wanted to give it back. So it just turned out well for everybody.

Samantha Sutherland:

They would have had to wrestle you for it anyway.

Renee Noble:

Pretty much, yes!

We already had started implementing all the parts of the program that we'd been saying we wanted to do for a long time bringing in more mentorship ideas and things to do with like algorithms and showing how they work in real life and solve real problems, like giving people the girls that real world experience. So bringing these other parts of the program and the program really started to grow, this time it was, when I took over it was about 40 girls doing this program every term.

Renee Noble:

And then girls started to come and come and I had to find more tutors from around Sydney to come and volunteer for the program. And then we were kept on just trying to get more women to come in and eventually we ran out of space. Once we'd found a lot of women to volunteer, we ran out of space. We just didn't have more than 180 computers that we could use in the day in one building. And then I went, "Ah, this program is really popular. I have this problem with too many girls want to learn to program." It's not something you hear often.

Renee Noble:

So I was like, "What are we going to do?" When some people came to me and they were like, "This is a really great program and we'd love to run it in Canberra." I was like, "Okay, well, I could make that happen." And that's where it all started. We took it to Canberra and then we extended to Perth and we've done Cairns and Mackay and Queensland. And this year we've just started out our Adelaide workshops as well. So that's taking us from the 40 girls it was five years ago to our six locations, 500 girls a quarter, 2,000 enrolments a year which is really exciting.

Samantha Sutherland:

That's amazing. It's amazing growth and such an amazing thing that you're giving to the girls who come along. And so while you've been talking about, your back story and your time at university and stuff, I have some questions that I wanted to ask you about that. So one of the things is, you said you found it really hard when you first got there and you didn't fit in with the geeky people and you didn't fit in with the people who really knew what they had been doing that kind of stuff for years, and then there was the people who were coding for fun at home and stuff. What made you stick with it? was it about it that you liked enough that despite all of those difficulties you just wanted to stay and keep learning?

Renee Noble:

I think as like a student in high school, I'd always really liked maths, but I'd never really seen how it worked as part of a job, especially these kinds of maths that is involved with computer science. So when I could see that I could do this kind of maths and solve real problems and also do it in a way in which I could provide instructions and like scaffold this whole creative idea out and I could have the computer

just run it a bunch of times and do a bunch of things and really like tap to the power of that, I could see the potential for solving so many different kinds of problems.

Renee Noble:

So I actually got involved through like a computational science aspect, which takes, this methodology and programming and puts it into more of a scientific basis for solving scientific problems, which was like my area of interest at the time. And I involved like machine learning and things like that from my honours in chemical engineering, to combine it with photo retake power and those different kinds of things.

Renee Noble:

So just the breadth of the application for solving different kinds of problems is what really attracted me to it as an exciting field to be in where you're capturing more power. It's not just you anymore, it's whatever you can provide instructions to do to a computer. It's kind of like the power of delegating. I like being involved in with teams and seeing how teams can work and get massive projects done and that's kind of the same thing you can do with computers if you just learn how to talk to them.

Samantha Sutherland:

I love that. It's like the power of delegating but times a billion because you can actually get a computer to do so much for you, can't you?

Renee Noble:

Yeah.

Samantha Sutherland:

One of the other things you said a couple of times is that they teach you all the technical stuff at university, but then you go out into industry and there's all this stuff they don't teach you. And you said there was a lot of things you had to pick up along the way once you went out into workforce. What were some of those things?

Renee Noble:

I guess things like version control software or how to host on the cloud somewhere. There's a million different bits and pieces. A lot of the work that you do as a software engineer is what I call glue work. And it's actually writing code, which is like what you would imagine to be the large chunk of work as a coder, but really writing code and making it be good code and what is in line with the kind of things you learn in university where they don't take too long to run or they don't take up too much memory, is not a huge part of the job. A lot of the time it's figuring out like how do these different bits and pieces connect? How do we use the software that manages the versions of code so we don't lose track of it? There's lots of different languages as well.

Samantha Sutherland:

That's so interesting, I was just going to say because, things like version control and also I used to do a lot of macros coding. So that's not really coding but in Excel and like doing massive financial models and stuff. And, there was some people who I found could do like really elegant spreadsheets and they're pretty simple and they worked well and they didn't take half an hour to open. And that's what you were

talking about is this; how do you make it so that it works easily and seamlessly and doesn't take too long, it doesn't take up all the space in a computer?

Renee Noble:

The parts that you learn at university are all about memory management, good algorithms to make things operate quickly. Those were the kinds of things you can read in a textbook. It's like this algorithm will run in this amount of time. But this number of items, if you are sorting a list of things or trying to find the biggest thing or arrange something in some way. And those are the kinds of things you learn, especially when I looked into algorithms at university.

Renee Noble:

But the technical field is always progressing. So there's always a new technology on the scene that you're trying to pick up or whether you work at one place or another, they'll use a different tool for managing their code or for managing how they host something. So it's just the breadth of things that you need to know that they couldn't possibly teach at a university because you could learn it, but you just learn something that only a selection of the world use, and you couldn't possibly learn them all.

So yes, being able to learn quickly is really a key part of the industry I think. And feeling okay just being like, I don't know how this works, but I guess I'll have to figure it out, which is a bit scary I find. I think a lot of women and girls find it scary to be like, I don't know and I have to just be okay with it that I don't know, and just go on and try and figure it out and not feel too ashamed of not knowing.

Samantha Sutherland:

This is actually a topic that's come up a lot within the conversations that I'm having with women, but just amongst our WORK180 community, which is imposter syndrome - the fear of looking like you don't know what you're doing or feeling like you should know when you don't know.

And one of the things that one of our community members suggested recently is the idea that we only worry that we don't know enough when we do actually know something. And people who really literally know nothing, they don't even really think about having imposter syndrome or the fear their gap in the knowledge because it doesn't even enter their mind. It's actually called the Dunning–Kruger effect where you know nothing and you feel really confident, then you know stuff and you feel less confident and then you feel really un-confident when you know a lot. And then you start to feel a bit more confident when you know more than most people. But even then, you still know how much there is that you don't know. So that's an interesting thing; with how quickly technology changes we have to just be okay with not knowing things.

Renee Noble:

I think, and it's really hard because it goes against the fibre of a lot of people's being is you need to know what you're doing, but turns out like you just have to know how to figure out what you're going to do next. So how does someone develop that skill?

Renee Noble:

I think as you get more experience, you see different kinds of things and you go, oh, this is like that tool or this works like this. I kind of understand these parts of it. And a lot of the time you just have to ask a lot of questions and to be okay with confronting that fear that other people would judge you for not knowing something and you just have to ask. And a lot of the time they'll be like, "Oh yeah, I remember

it's finding that menu or finding the commands for that was tricky and you've got to have this, that or the other to make it work.

Renee Noble:

And there's just a lot of things out there because we're always making new technology it's always growing so quickly, that the documentation isn't always there or it's like, Oh yeah, we've decided to use a niche version of this because we need to for some reason. But no, there's not a lot of things out there on the internet you can't just Google it necessarily.

Samantha Sutherland:

Right. So, there's no way to be ahead of how that's going to work.

Renee Noble:

You can't be ahead of the crowd. You've just got to try and stay in the pack and if you're not in the pack, ask somebody who is and get them to give you a hand up. I think there's a lot more teamwork involved in programming than people realize. There's the whole hacker in a hoodie in a basement idea. And realistically that's the complete opposite. Having this living creation that is any code base, any website, any platform, you can't possibly have it all in one person's head.

So, you need to talk to other people and you need to share knowledge because it's built up of so many different pieces of things, technologies that to know all of them is too hard. So you just have to work with other people, which I think is really exciting part of the industry, but also confronting it first because you can see what everybody else knows, but it's hard to realize what they don't know because no one's going around advertising that.

Samantha Sutherland:

Exactly. Even though everybody has heaps of stuff they don't know, that's not the bit we talk about. It's interesting that you said that, you have to go and ask people and there's a lot more collaboration than people expect in software development. And that's definitely something I've had through conversations that I've had with women who are working at work when it is endorsed employers, is that I think I've interviewed a lot of people who work in tech in some form in software development or whatever.

Samantha Sutherland:

And almost all of them have said at some point during our conversation about the fact that people are so helpful. So if you go and ask questions, people know that no one knows everything and are really happy to help and support you and want people to learn and grow. And that seems to be a real feature of the industry.

Renee Noble:

I definitely agree. I can't speak to all the industries that much in terms of all the parts of the tech industry because I work in the ed tech space, so everyone there cares about teaching and learning. So I didn't know if it was specific to that or if it's everybody, but really everybody in tech loves learning because that's what you have to do to be there. Otherwise you're never going to keep up. You're going to be stuck on last year's technology, or last decade's technology and you're not going to pick up on what the hot, new thing we're using is. So people need to ask questions to learn. And I think people are

really proud and excited when they've learned new things and they'd want to pass that on as, because they love learning.

Samantha Sutherland:

That's interesting that it makes sense that link between the fact that software and technology is an area that does develop really quickly. Like things become obsolete so quickly. Like I'm not very technical and honestly I have no chance of keeping up, but of course people who are in the industry want to learn and grow and so then they're excited to share that knowledge with other people too.

Renee Noble:

Definitely. And I think, because there's so many neat things and it turns out people in tech are nerds and they get really invested in different things, whether it's like a specific new technology or way of doing things, they go in deep on anything. And when you go deep, you just want to explain why you've gone so deep into learning and thinking about this. And you want to get people on your side, on your team and get people involved because it is collaborative. And if you're the only person using this sharing tool or something, you're not sharing with anybody. So people, when they tell people about their most exciting new features of any one camp they're sitting in, basically.

Samantha Sutherland:

So, I want to talk a bit more about the Girls' Programming Network. And what the GPN, what you do and who comes along to the workshops and what they learn there and how people get involved as to either volunteer or to take part in the workshops and what's it all about?

Renee Noble:

So GPN is a program for high school girls and gender diverse kids. And we basically teach programming but also the things around programming as well. So, we get them in regardless of how much experience they have, whether they've never done any coding before or they've been coming to GPN for five years, we can create a project in a day.

The projects range from anything from making a tic tac toe game that you can play with a friend, or if you're more advanced, we'll teach you how to make a computer player or we do cryptography and crack ciphers and make you able to send coded messages to your friends. Or we do things with creating games that you can click on things and have like a flappy bird game, if you remember that silly phone game from a few years ago. We just recently did one with some electronics where if you remember that game from the '90s, Bop It, you have to twist and boink things and hit things. We did that with little chip boards and you can add your own foil buttons and stuff to make different circuits and rubber bands and all kinds of crafty things to hook up to your circuit that you can program to do whatever you like, but integrate it with this craft element.

Renee Noble:

So we do all our projects that we design to be suitable for the whole age range of high school girls. And we take some upper primary girls as well if they're already involved in programming and we make it accessible to them all, but also make it challenging for them all by doing the differentiated learning structure that we've come up with for GPN that fits our demographic.

Renee Noble:

We've been teaching all of our content writers how to work within this framework so we can deliver content that is accessible, fun, challenging, exciting, social, so they can work with their friends, but all of the girls in all the different regions across Australia, regardless of who we have leading those nodes. So our volunteers are of diverse range of people, they're all women or gender diverse people, and they didn't have to be from the tech industry necessary.

Renee Noble:

We have a lot of people who do work in tech or are studying IT at university. But we also have a lot of school teachers come along who teach technology at school or are just passionate about technology. A lot of IT enthusiasts and even some people who are just like, I want to get involved and get girls coding. I'm an accountant, I'd love to come and help out and teach the girls how to code. Teach me how to code so I can show them how to do it on the day and help out too.

Renee Noble:

So, we have a diverse range of ability levels within our tutoring team across the country, especially in places where we don't have as much industry representation. We have fewer people who code for daily basis for their job, and we have more people who are teachers who might have teaching skills but less technical abilities. So we're working with our different teams across Australia to give these resources in the best way to make the day as exciting as possible for the girls.

Renee Noble:

So we got our projects happening over there which is the bulk of our stuff on the day. But we also have our other parts of the day. We have our computerless games. She's like an unplugged game where we might do things like creating circuits with play dough and light bulbs and batteries or we might do some algorithms and ask them out with people playing different numbers in the algorithm to show how to sort something using a specific algorithm.

Renee Noble:

So basically recreating computer science concepts with your bodies with a whole like using a whole room rather than just try to draw it on paper or trying to code it because it's really gives girls the chance to see real life algorithms that we use for solving problems. And we can summarize something like this is how we would map out an area if we wanted to break it down into finding the nearest hospital near any given point in a place.

Renee Noble:

We have an algorithm for that. Here's how you do it on paper or with your friends on the ground with masking tape and streamers for instance. And it's things you wouldn't be able to learn how to code in a day because they take a lot more knowledge than we can give a beginner coder in four hours in the classroom I guess. So we get them to do it with string and paper and pens and friends instead.

Renee Noble:

And it really shows them the breadth of things you can solve with programming and the difference you can make if you stick with it. And finally we have our mentoring aspect of the program where we have the tutors come along and they just have conversations with the older girls about what you should be doing at school if you're interested in IT. How would you go about enrolling at a university? How would you find scholarships? So what's it like to live away from home?

Renee Noble:

It's just really a great way to get out all the girls to see the different range of women that are involved in IT and how you get there rather than just being like, yeah, you could be an astronauts. Just stick with it and you'll do it. It's actually about giving people tangible steps to get from where they are now like year nine, year 10 at school, and then being like, well, there's this person, she's 19, she's at university, this is how she got there. These are the subjects she did. After you strive to be her, here's this person, she's 23, she's on her first internship at Google or another exciting company. And then here's this other person. She's been working for the CSI Royce for 15 years. So this whole stream of different women that can show you the different steps to take to get from where you are now to an exciting career in tech.

Samantha Sutherland:

It's so amazing because it's such a comprehensive set of programs that you do for women and girls and you make it so interesting. Like the thing is, I was really good at maths when I was at school, that was really my strong point. But I could never think of an application for it that wasn't boring, and now the world of technology and STEM is changing so that people are really making it obvious how you can do really exciting stuff in those careers.

Renee Noble:

Definitely. And that's the thing that I believe strongly in is I'm not about being in the tech industry for a tech for tech's sake. I don't just love programming. Programming is fun, but a lot of the time it's really hard and fiddly and you're like, why isn't it working? I've been looking at this for hours and it's just a lot about gluing bits and pieces together and understanding a very large system.

Renee Noble:

But the fun isn't in understanding a very large system. It's about solving a problem or helping somebody out, satisfying someone's needs and yes, showing girls that it's not just about writing code in a dark room alone. It's actually about talking to people, whether you're interested in biology and you want to do bioinformatics to check out some genes and see how map to each other so you can cure a disease or you care about the environment and using algorithms to determine the layout of the land or water structures.

Renee Noble:

There's just the whole breadth of different applications all across the whole science and engineering area that you can use tech for to make it faster and easier. And it's a really broad overview of the whole thing. It's like, well, I can create a model for this or I can program something that will help in this area. You don't have to be on the ground outside digging up dirt samples. You can be here in your own lab writing code that has an impact as well, if that's the kind of job you want.

Samantha Sutherland:

And what are the types of people that do best in careers in technology? What do you think? Is there a type of person?

Renee Noble:

I don't want to say there is a type of person. I would just say-

Samantha Sutherland:

Because you know what when you're talking about the workshops and what you do at GPN, it's really exciting in lots of different hands on applications and really fun. And then when you say, you could be sitting in your lab writing code that's making something happen, then my mind goes straight back to me sitting in front of a computer doing coding, which doesn't sound fun. So break that down to me because obviously I have this like preconceived idea and I don't think it's probably correct.

Renee Noble:

So part of your day would be sitting at your computer, at your desk doing some coding. But a lot of the time at my job, I spend it in meetings, we are talking about ideas and solutions because you have an existing code base and you're like, well, how could we make it better? So in the future we could add these features and thinking about structuring your code to plan for the things you want to do now and solve problems you have now, but also looking to the future to what you might want to do in the future.

Renee Noble:

So it's very creative, it's very strategic and there's a lot of trade off decisions to be made. It's like, well, we could do this now, but we don't know if that's the direction we're going to take. Or maybe we'll use a new technology in the future. So there's a lot of different interesting decisions to be made along the way. I don't want to say there's a specific kind of person who does well because I think we need all kinds of people in the industry. I think that's what we're lacking at the moment and that's how we end up with cars, with air bags that only work for men and not for other people.

Samantha Sutherland:

I know what you're talking about there, but can you explain that a little bit more just if someone is listening and they don't get that reference point?

Renee Noble:

Yes. So if we have labs that are filled with the same kind of person, we end up with technology that's built for that kind of person because I really don't consider that everybody's use case and everybody's life style and everybody as individuals, they just think about people like them and their friends and the product that they'll use will work for them and their friends because that's who it's built for. But they won't get a chance to see other people using it.

Renee Noble:

So for instance, if you're building a car and everybody on your safety team is designing air bags and all the people on your team are men who are in their 30s maybe, then you don't consider women who are shorter and needed a differently placed airbag or children because that might not be, that's not the part of your life you're thinking about right now is having a young kid sitting in the front seat maybe or having a side airbag coming towards a baby in a capsule.

Renee Noble:

So having different people with different life experiences is a really important part of being there. And other projects that have these kinds of problems is like facial recognition programs. We've had a lot of things that only recognize young white guys but can't distinguish between two different Asian people at all.

Samantha Sutherland:

Oh no. Oh my gosh. I can absolutely understand how that happened because they didn't pay attention properly a bit. Oh my God, that's so appalling. Because it's like the technology version of saying 'all those people look the same anyway'. That's terrible.

Renee Noble:

It is that. Exactly. And when you have your training data, if you're using machine learning and all your training data comes from one kind of source because that's really the only one you thought to include, then you have a problem like that and these kinds of things occur everywhere where you don't think about how the technology you are creating impacts on people's lives and you're like, this is a cool gadget that I made and you don't think about how it excludes people, especially if you're part of the included crowd.

Renee Noble:

And there's a lot of things with machine learning where they have the artificial intelligence judges where they try to see if they can make sentence people for their crimes based on the evidence and what kind of crime that's been committed. And the data that goes in is all skewed because the world's data is skewed and racist and has a lot of like classes problems with it. So when you run this algorithm and you give it two people with the same crime, but one is black and one is white, it will sentence the black person to more time in jail than it would the white person just because that's how it's been trained. So if we don't think about these kinds of problems and the data that we're feeding in from our bias world, we end up with algorithms that have the same problems. But we just didn't stop seeing it because we just believe the computer's always right.

Samantha Sutherland:

But of course if there's biased input then it will still be biased. That is so fascinating. And on the flip side, I met a guy probably a year ago now who was working at a startup where they were doing virtual reality stuff and it was basically to give people the experience of being someone different to them. So you have a CEO of an ASX 200 company and he's likely to be a middle-aged man called John and like six feet tall.

He would walk into a room and everybody makes space for him in that room. Circles open up so he can come into the circles. He is the same height or taller than most of the people in the room so he's kind of looking down and above the experience. If he talks, everyone listens, no one interrupts him. People validate what he's saying. And so you can have someone who doesn't have that experience put on their goggles and see what it's like to be that person.

Samantha Sutherland:

But then the CEO can put on the goggles and see what it's like to be a five foot four woman of colour who works as some support role, who gets interrupted all the time and nobody pays attention to her and she's looking up like she's below the conversation at five foot four, and see what the real world experience is like for someone who is totally different from you and I find that a fascinating application of it because I think bias is not usually malicious. It's usually just a total lack of any kind of understanding of the experience of someone who's not you.

Renee Noble:

Definitely. That sounds incredible. I'd be so interested to see that and like to hear what people, especially privileged people find from having that experience.

Samantha Sutherland:

Like how they respond to it. I imagine it would be quite a shock. But one of the things I think that's hard about confronting really ingrained and systemic biases is that facing the bias can be so confronting to us and our belief and our experience of the world that I think they would definitely be quite shocked by it and I'd be interested to know how many people then take that and change things because of it. But I suppose even one is still a change.

Renee Noble:

It'd be easy to be quite defensive about it because you didn't mean to do it and you didn't mean to exclude people and make people feel bad, but you're still guilty of it in one way or another whether you intended it.

Samantha Sutherland:

Yes. And I think with bias, intent doesn't really come into it when it's unconscious bias. Obviously it does if you're just overtly racist or something. But we all live with bias all the time and so intent doesn't come into it so much. It's more being aware of like the areas where we might be biased and looking at those areas and how they affect people around us and what it means.

So for example, when you're looking at things like bias in the pipeline or bias in hiring practices, we know because of what the makeup of our corporate world looks like, we know there is bias through the recruitment process all the way up to senior leadership. And because of that, it's an area of risk. It's an area that bias is likely and has a potential to turn up. And so it's not like we're saying to everybody, don't be biased, go remove all of that conditioning from your brand. You can't do that.

It's about putting checks and balances in place to address the areas of risk of bias. But so maybe things like the VR would give people the chance to see like, oh I see this is a different experience and then be more inclined maybe to put those checks and balances in place.

Renee Noble:

It'd be very interesting to do all of your job interviews in VR, but people appear to be the same person or something. That would be very interesting.

Samantha Sutherland:

Oh, that would be amazing! I wonder what the difference would happen from that. That's such an interesting idea, because you would have heard about blind auditions in orchestras and things, right?

Renee Noble:

No.

Samantha Sutherland:

So, in symphony orchestras, historically they were about 5% women. I'm talking about Sydney Symphony Orchestra or New York Philharmonic Orchestra, that kind of stuff. There were historically 5% women and eventually a group of female musicians came forward and they said that the hiring process

here is biased. And of course, all the conductors got quite defensive and all the people who are doing the hiring and were saying, "We're not biased. We're just hiring on merit. We're hiring the best people."

And so eventually they agreed that they would do auditions behind a curtain so you couldn't see the people who were coming in to audition. And initially it actually didn't make a whole lot of difference. And then someone who is involved in putting together this experiment said, "Oh I think we need to carpet the floor and tell women not to wear high heels and not to put on any perfume before they come in."

And once they made those changes, it was a ridiculous increase, like 50% more women got through to the next round immediately. And then the same thing happened with Tropfest, which is a short film festival in Sydney where it used to be something like, I don't know the exact numbers, but around 90% male directors. And the very first year they did blind directorships, so they didn't have the name of the director on the film, it went to 50-50.

Renee Noble:

Amazing.

Samantha Sutherland:

And no one who's watching the films or running the auditions. None of those people think they're been biased, but it's so ingrained just in everything culturally. So the idea of like VR so that everybody just looks like a middle aged white male or whatever you choose would be such a fascinating experiment.

Renee Noble:

Yes, I hope someone does that now.

Samantha Sutherland:

Yes! Who is listening?

So I wanted to ask you about some other things now where, you talked about when you joined GPN you straight away had all these opportunities for leadership and there were people who had a lot of confidence in you and you've got lots of opportunities. And, something that I've talked to women about before is the idea of volunteering to get experience and the impact of volunteering on career opportunities later on and things like that. And so I wonder if you could talk a bit about that.

Renee Noble:

Certainly. I would definitely say that volunteering has given me so many more skills that I wouldn't have ever been able to get confidently if I hadn't done it. Because I think if women have a lot of trouble applying for jobs when they don't feel like they fully have all of the skills that they require, and if you don't go and do the job that needs the skills, you're not going to learn the skills.

Renee Noble:

So a great way to get around that is by volunteering and people always need more volunteers. But if your interest is there'll be some way that needs people to volunteer and there's always leadership positions that need to do more. If anything wants to grow and affect more people, there's always a to do list that says toll is any building I can think of. It's just there's always more to do and people who can be competent and step up and commit to something, there's always space for those people.

Renee Noble:

And people will help you get to be the person you need to be to take on those roles because there's always going to be, well, if I want to do something more, I'm going to need to delegate the things that I'm doing now. So I'm happily train somebody to do those things so I can do something better. I had somebody else can help me get a leg up to do the hardest thing. So it's just a whole string of women in GPN just giving someone a hand up so you can get more people on board because people joined around a common goal and like in the tech industry, people are very keen to teach people, especially in these circles.

So, this is how I got so much experience in leadership or communication because with unpaid work it sounds bad because it's unpaid and people always go, "Ah, unpaid work is bad and every organization should pay for everything." But I'm not sure I believe in that and I really feel that volunteering is a huge part of growing as a person, and helping our society out because you can do things that you don't feel like you're qualified to be paid for yet whether you are or aren't qualified to be paid for them in another place where they pay people to do those things is one thing.

Renee Noble:

But developing the confidence in yourself by just doing it and doing something small and then incrementing on that next time and just doing it a bit better, doing something a bit bigger, a bit harder or seeing how it could impact more people or get more out there. So I think volunteering is a huge way to improve yourself. Whether it's improving your skills or your confidence, your networking or anything you're working on, just giving it a go and seeing yourself doing something and then you can tell somebody else that you can do that and that you could teach them to do that, which is a huge part of GPN as well.

Renee Noble:

Which is I've learnt to do something and then you can see people around you who don't have the confidence to do that thing yet and you're like, we need more people to do this job. You should step up and you should get involved. It's not that hard. I'll tell you all about it. And when you tell somebody else that they can do something and explain the reasons that they are just as qualified as they need to be to do something, you're telling yourself at the same time that this is all you need to know you to do this. You don't have to be a superstar at everything. You could do this one job great and really firms in your own brain that you're doing a great job and it gives you the confidence to do even harder things next time.

Samantha Sutherland:

Amazing. I mean, I agree with you and I think there is something around making sure that you get paid what you're worth. But I think there's a space for volunteering and as you said, whether you can do it or not, the confidence is the issue really isn't it? And so volunteering can give you the confidence that you are capable of doing things you might feel like you're not ready to do.

Renee Noble:

Yes, definitely. And yeah, just having people around you who you believe in you is like a huge step I think.

Samantha Sutherland:

So, we're nearing the end of our time together. And so I wanted to ask a question which is, that if you could go back in time and talk to young Renee, say 10 or 15 years ago, what would you say to her knowing what you know now and what you've accomplished and where the sliding doors moments were, and things, what would you say to younger Renee?

Renee Noble:

What a good question. I have to think about it for a second. I think I'd say that not everybody is as smart as they are trying to pretend to be. Not everyone knows everything and you really have to just believe in the things that you know and realize when you do know things because it always feels like everyone in the room knows everything you know plus the thing they're talking about right now, or the thing they told you about yesterday.

Renee Noble:

But really you only see the parts that you assume everybody knows what you have and that everyone is just as qualified as you in this industry especially. So just believing that your skills are valuable and that not everybody has the skills that you have and that even besides the skills, you bring a valuable person to the team regardless of how much code you can write or what technologies you know, you have your own independent view and opinions about the world and these are a valuable thing to bring to any team in any industry to bring your own perspective and make the team more diverse and solve bigger and better problems.

Samantha Sutherland:

I really hope you enjoyed today's chat. If you can help us spread the word by giving us a review on iTunes, that helps even more people find Equality Talks. To find out more about our mission, check out current opportunities with WORK180's endorsed employers, and to read and listen to more inspiring stories, please head over to work180.co. See you next time!