

## "I've always had a mind of my own"



In an interview, editor Aline Prigge and Vida Brychcy (Director Product & Engineering *Chip*) talked about why role models are so important for women in technical management positions © M. Wilhelm for Hubert Burda Media

The best way to start your career? Learning from role models who are already successful at their job. In our interview series, volunteers and young journalists have the chance to do so. This time, editor Aline Prigge meets Vida Brychcy, Director Product & Engineering Test and Consumer Consulting at *Chip*. She talks to her about her career entry in Iran and her move to Germany, that you should make yourself dispensable as an executive manager and why it is good to sometimes reject a career leap.

### **What does your daily routine at work look like?**

I am responsible for product development in the areas of testing and consumer consulting and lead various teams. In addition to developers, product owners - who are responsible for the business side of the product, UX - who design it from the user's point of view, the SEO department, BI and of course operations, who provide us with the server landscape on which we host our products, are also involved in the products. As the manager, I basically make sure that the work with the departments runs smoothly. That means 80 percent of my day consists of meetings. The remaining 20 percent are conversations with the employees.

It is very important to me that all employees, starting with the developers who often only perform tasks, find their voice and are heard. Because the development of a product can only be good if everyone is at eye level.

**Today is your first day back at work after a vacation. Were you able to switch off from work as an executive manager?**

Yes, a lot! For a second, I thought about working through my e-mails during vacation. That wasn't an option after all. But my mantra is to promote my employees to such an extent that they become so good they can actually do it without me. That sounds a bit paradoxical - I make my job superfluous. But I want my employees to take responsibility.

**And how do you do that?**

I am a very social type and love to communicate. I find that communication can make a big difference and help discover things. Our job as executive managers is about seeing exactly how each individual is doing. I try to let my employees decide as much as possible for themselves and accompany them through the process. Of course, there are always situations in which employees believe that I have to make a decision. But often I only ask the right questions so that they can find the answer themselves. With the decision which they then make themselves, comes the responsibility and so my employees know that I support them. If something goes wrong, I also take responsibility.

**You started as a developer yourself, however in Iran. Why did you decide to come to Germany?**

In Iran I worked as a developer for four years after studying computer science. I thought that because computer science is a mathematical course of study there and chosen by many women, I would also encounter a more open industry in my professional life. But I realized pretty quickly that this is not the case. There are in fact a lot of women, but the men set the tone and it's very hierarchical. If you've been there for three years, you might be allowed to say something and throw in ideas, but otherwise you always do exactly what you're told. But I've always had my own head and also rebelled against my Iranian father. I didn't just want to "do" but to "think along". In Iran, the only choice I had was to become self-employed or to go to another company where things were the same. That's when I decided to go.

**And how did it go on for you in Germany?**

The first year was difficult. I still had the mentality from Iran: I didn't speak out on a lot of things and waited how things would unfold. In Germany, however, everyone is much more aggressive and my reserved manner didn't work. So I laid down the Iranian way a bit and retrieved the German one, which I had known through my German mother. Suddenly I was noticed. That's also something I always give all my foreign colleagues to take along: Let yourself go and say what you think - in a nice and diplomatic way, of course.

## **But when you were offered a position as a technical director for the first time, you refused.**

Yes, I was with "Tomorrow Focus" at the time and after six months as a developer, I also took on a technical project management role. Suddenly I was asked if I wanted to take over the technical management - without any management experience. But I didn't feel ready yet and only took over the management on an interim basis. Sometimes it's not necessarily good to climb the career ladder quickly because you're thrown into positions where you don't know how to deal with the situations yet. That's why everyone should ask themselves: Am I doing something because I want it myself and feel ready for it or just because someone else has already achieved it at my age? Back then I asked for a position as a team leader. Shortly afterwards I got pregnant.

## **For many women that would be the end of their career...**

For my new boss at the time, a leading role and children were also incompatible. But I fought back and after eight months of parental leave I came back with 30 hours, a 75 percent position. As a mother you are well organized, you know what has to be done first and what can wait. But also, the company really stood by me and supported me.

## **How should you deal with it if you're not the first choice for an open position?**

It's about convincing the person responsible. When I returned from my second parental leave as a team leader, we had a new managing director, the old technical director was gone and the new one died. Of course, I was very affected, but the position also appealed to me a lot. And I knew that they wouldn't ask me because I said No years ago. So I had an appointment with the managing director and convinced him with a good concept and self-confidence. That's exactly what it's all about: making visible what you can do, where you have proven it, how you assess the situation and what kind of solutions you have. Unfortunately, it is still the case that you have to convince more as a woman.

## **That made you one of the first women in a technical leadership position at Burda. What has changed in recent years?**

A lot has changed. I have always held the opinion that more women belong in management positions. Back then at the "Tomorrow Focus AG" we had female heads of department at *Focus Online* and women in management positions in advertising, but that was it. With Tanja zu Waldeck we now have a female board member at *BurdaForward* and at the levels below there are many women in management positions. Unfortunately, there are still not a lot of women in Germany who study computer science, for example. Thus, the selection of women who are suitable for technical management positions is also limited. The number of female applicants is in fact growing but many of them are from abroad. However, these women do not yet feel comfortable as managers in German-speaking countries. It is important to rethink in Germany, too and to inspire the young female employees.

## Which opportunities do you see there?

At *BurdaForward*, for example, we are already doing this specifically with the [Hacker School](#). I also go to abitur exhibitions at schools and introduce the computer science profession and encourage young girls to an apprenticeship or studies at a university. Girls and women have to build up the self-confidence that they are just as good in technical subjects as men. That's why it's so important that we women are role models and are also committed to supporting the next generation of women. I very much welcome the fact that there are many women's initiatives, such as BayFiD (Bavaria's Women in Digital Professions) and many more, which support women in technology. Women new to the profession or young people should also learn from young people what it looks like in everyday working life.

**I think so too. Nevertheless, I missed a few special coaching sessions for my career entry. That's why I founded Business Crush, a coaching format for women, together with two volunteer colleagues as a final project at the BJS. With five great coaches, including Kerstin Weng from Instyle and Christina Burkhardt, founder of the Shiftschool, we held a workshop day for young professionals on topics such as visibility, self-confidence and one's own strengths. The workshop event clearly showed us that this desire is very strong.**

That's what I think. I always ask myself what it was like with me. This reflection helps me to help young women. At *BurdaForward* we have a mentoring program for everyone which is very important in my opinion. I would've also wished for a female role model who works in a technical environment. We have super female developers working for the company and they should also serve as role models.

*Vida Brychcy has been Director Product & Engineering at Chip Digital GmbH since 2014 and is responsible for various development teams. She studied Software Engineering at the Islamic Azad University in Tehran. After working as a software developer for Namaad Iran and Mercateo, she joined the "Tomorrow Focus AG" in 2004, where she held positions as team leader and Director Solutions.*

*Aline Prigge is an editor in the Food & Lifestyle division at Hubert Burda Media. She studied Comparative Literature and Theatre Studies at the Ruhr University Bochum and the Université Charles de Gaulle in Lille. During her traineeship at the Burda School of Journalism she worked at Lust auf Genuss, Focus, "Huffpost" and the Burda Video Factory. As a final project she launched Business Crush, a workshop format for young women at the beginning of their career.*

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