

ICT Executive Profile

Based on feedback from the annual survey around having access to more senior women as role models, each month we have an executive profile compiled from 7 questions posed to key executive women in the ICT industry

Hilary Cinis



What is your current role and what is your scope?

I am the first Principal User Experience Designer at NICTA. I manage a team of recently hired designers and we explore connecting emerging deep technology research in machine learning, optimisation and geospatial with commercial and government sectors and design solutions ranging from technology evaluators through to fully realised commercial proto-products as part of a business spin-out. Personally I have worked on 48 projects to date, and this number has increased by another 10 with the extra designers now in-house. I work to evangelise UX to the business, figure out strategic contributions and influence the culture as well as present about ux and coach students and startups.

What attracted you to a career in ICT?

I've never really thought about it in that way. I'm not sure that's even a good idea these days either. Digital and technology are so broad that you can be in any profession now and be working either "with" or "in" ICT. Using words to segment it just aggravates this artificial divide.

But to answer your question, when I first studied design in the 80's, the first mac had only just been released in the US for desktop publishing. I liked the idea of a machine doing all the boring bits like layout and copy fitting so I could focus the creative aspects of design. It was a while though until I got hold of one and found it sadly unable to meet my expectations. In the early 90's I heard about the Internet and we had web access and I saw immense potential to fix the abysmally ugly and unusable interfaces for forums and websites. I also really like how forgiving the web was, unlike print, which is expensive to recover mistakes from. From there I worked in various places freelance and taught myself all the digital stuff, but it wasn't until I was at Yahoo! that we were introduced to and trained in user experience design. That was in about 2004 and I've been one ever since.

Tell us about the highpoints and lowpoints of your career?

High points – being hired by NICTA was such a compliment and my recent promotion was wonderful recognition. The promotion process is gruelling and I work with some formidably intelligent people so knowing I am respected and recognised is incredible.

Lowest point was just after my son was born (1992) and I was doing data entry work. I was very angry that I had natural ability and skills that weren't being put to good use (I really shouldn't have been working at all but we had no money and I was quite young). The other low point was early at Yahoo! when I wasn't really doing the job I was hired for and had drifted away from design and was running the shopping portal. Low points are good because you make clear decisions about what you will never do again and what you really want. Both times I refocussed on my design abilities and found ways to

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inject them into the businesses I was involved with, with positive results. No one will ever rescue you; you have to fix things yourself.

What does work life balance mean to you?

This is of utmost importance to me, I cannot impress that enough. A few years back I found myself attending many after-hours events and I have made some unforgivable mistakes with my family because of buying into this idea that "networking" would further my career prospects. I was full of self-importance and though the world would stop if I didn't do everything perfectly and to a big fan-fare. It destroyed my soul and I lost touch with what was important. And I knew it, because I was so unhappy but couldn't work out why. It all came to a very ugly head and I spent the last 3 years resolving the causes and healing the damage.

These days I keep very strict hours and I have proper friends who I don't work with. And if I were to move positions I wouldn't work somewhere that expected long or inflexible hours. I still meet heaps of interesting people and make connections, all during working hours.

What attracted and kept you in the ICT industry throughout your career?

It's just been where I have always been. For me, it's not been the technology so much as what it delivers to me which were experiences I'd might not have had if I'd gone into a traditional design agency. As mentioned, I like how you can easily fix or change content and styles, how you can test ideas and iterate quickly, I like the exposure to different ways of thinking and the access to information that it provides

What ambitions personal or professional do you still want to achieve?

I believe strongly in the democratisation of user experience design, but this needs to be done with respect to people who have the years of experiences to work direct the processes and provide intuitive insights. I am keen to explore this evolution and love the places it pushes me to. I can't say I have any real plan other than to keep learning and improving. Then other days I want to chuck it all in and take up weaving...

What's the one piece of advice you'd give to yourself starting out on your career?

Say yes and take risks like you are doing but be careful about compromising to gain experience. My most miserable moments in my professional and personal life have been when I've not been true to myself, and tried to make everyone happy but the results were that no-one actually was, least of all me.

NB: As appeared on FITT e-newsletter October 2014 and also features on the website.

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