

Deloitte TECHTalks | EPISODE 12 | Inclusive Tech

With [Shelley Zalis](#), *Founder and CEO, The Female Quotient* and [Deborah Golden](#), *US Chief Innovation Officer, Deloitte Consulting LLP*

Raquel Buscaino: Welcome to Deloitte TECHTalks. I'm your host for Raquel Buscaino, and I lead the Deloitte U.S. Novel and Exponential Technologies Team, where we sense and make sense of emerging tech. In today's world, it often feels like tech is advancing at an exponential rate, but how do we make sure that amidst this change, we're designing a tech future that is created by all, for all? I'm thrilled to welcome two incredible leaders to the podcast, Shelley Zalis, the founder and CEO of The Female Quotient, and Deb Golden, Deloitte's U.S. Chief Innovation Officer. We're going to chat broadly about how we can create a more inclusive tech ecosystem.

So, Shelley, Deb, welcome to the podcast. It is so great to have you both here.

Deborah Golden: Thank you. Great.

Shelley Zalis: Best conversation to possibly have. Inclusive tech, it doesn't get better than that.

Raquel Buscaino: Yes. Yes, absolutely. Well, why don't we dive right in? I mean, both of you have incredibly interesting backgrounds, so why don't we start there with a little bit of what's been your journey to current and how have you found yourself in the role you're in right now? And Shelly, we'll start with you.

Shelley Zalis: Listen, my whole journey has been by accident. I have to say, it's definitely not textbook. So I started in tech by pioneering online research. Have you ever taken any of those horrible surveys on online?

Raquel Buscaino: A couple of them.

Shelley Zalis: I created the first online survey in probably 2000, when we had 14.4 modems. So that was quite a long time ago and that was truly by accident. I was in market research for over 40 something years, and then one day I thought, gosh, why don't we migrate research from offline to online. So that's really what got me into technology and I always built for the lowest common denominator because I wanted it to be something that everyone, when you're doing research, it has to be something that everyone can take surveys to have a representative population.

Shelley Zalis: And then the rest is history. You know, I was the only female CEO top 25 in market research my entire career. So that's how I got into tech.

Raquel Buscaino: Wow. And then your work with the Female Quotient, how did that begin?

Shelley Zalis

So after I sold my company a couple of times, once again I was an only and lonely on a board of 24 people, two women out of 24. And it was finally when I was told there was no room for emotion in the boardroom, once again, I realized it was time to give back with generosity, what I wish I had my entire career, which was women supporting women. And so I started something called the "Girls Lounge"

and I just want to women to support women. I was tired of being an only and lonely at conferences that were predominantly men.

And I wanted to go to CES (Consumer Electronics Show): 150,000 people, less than 3% women. I invited five girlfriends to walk the floor of CES with me, and I said: "If you know other women, please invite them". 24 hours later, 50 women showed up and two things happened: One, every single guy's head turned. And that's when I coined the phrase "power of the pack"; a woman alone has power collectively, we have impact.

And the second was I was surrounded by women that all talked about imposter syndrome, work life balance things that I never talked about, by day two women told other women we had 100 women, by day three, 300 women. I had a huge suite and we were all like being women, not afraid to be ourselves and bring emotion to the boardroom. I mean, it was really remarkable.

And from that day on, Girls Lounge is once we had 3 million women across 100 countries supporting one another, I then evolved to an equality lounge, bringing conscious leaders together to change equation and close the gap.

Raquel Buscaino: The power of community really is so impactful to the story of tech. It's so central to the theme overall.

Shelley Zalis: I mean, there is nothing more important where the collective minority becomes greater than the current majority, and someone has to start to create a new pattern

Raquel Buscaino: Incredible journey to current. I mean, Deb, I feel like your background probably overlaps with Shelly's in many ways. Probably is different in some ways, too.

Deborah Golden: I mean, also certainly not linear. I mean, and also, candidly, a little bit happenstance and also probably one of a kind very much based in curiosity and creativity. I actually grew up tinkering with toys that were not actually toys, but first generation computers.

So thanks to my father, who was an engineer by background, we would always actually bring home what I didn't know at the time, were first generation computers. But what he also didn't do was he didn't bring home manuals, so there was never a manual that came home. And so I would just be like, what are these things? And I was curious by nature, and I would just play with them and I didn't know what they were doing and they were always make sound.

And the more that I play with them, the more that I thought they were intriguing. And what I was actually doing was teaching myself first generation coding. And the more I played with them, and even more I was teaching myself code, the more that I actually learned how to use them, and the more my dad actually just kept bringing more and more computers home. And this is when I was in elementary school and middle school.

So as I was learning and teaching myself code, I just kept getting to be more and more curious. And at a time when I was in technology, I also learned just to create things. And so when I would go into school, some early, I wanted to go build things. So I was the only girl in shop class. I wanted to go build shop. I did want to figure out how you will build that treehouse. Everyone was building the treehouse. I wanted to be the one working in shop and that's what I did. So I just was curious about the world, and I just hope that every person has the ability to ask about the world, and I hope that we never stop asking about the world.

And for me, that's what technology is, and I think if we think about that, and how we want to solve what technology is, we will keep solving for the problems that we continue to see.

Raquel Buscaino: I love the central pieces of hands-on experimentation, curiosity at the world, and I think sometimes when we're younger, we have this childlike sense of imagination, and then it almost gets phased out a little bit, or it's less common, and I think re-instilling that and always keeping that central to your identity is such a powerful thing.

Deborah Golden: For me, there was just there was never the question of "why can't it be?" Like, I just I never and I didn't see other women doing these things. I just, no one ever told me I couldn't do it. You know, my dad never said, "here's a manual that showed you otherwise". I just was like, I didn't see anything different. I didn't see it could be and I didn't see it couldn't be. I just was like, well, I can keep asking questions. I'm going to keep figuring it out. So I just feel like I continue to approach life asking questions. "Well, why can't it be that way and why I can't resolve for these things?"

Shelley Zalis: You know, I just have to say that, you know, I hire for passion, train for skill. Unless you want to be a doctor, lawyer or an accountant, you know, other than that and everything Deb, that you're talking about is it comes down to curiosity. And that to me is everything. And I would say there's two types of people, those that see status quo, and those that can see what's possible. And I think that that's what the world is all about, is possibilities and openness, and it's all about that curiosity. So I just love that it is not in a textbook.

So many people talk about failures, you know, they're so afraid of failure. And that's why they don't take risk. And to me, I think my failures I turned that into they were just "firsts". They were things I tried that no one's ever done.

Raquel Buscaino: I love that mindset,

Shelley Zalis: It's just a different mindset.

Deborah Golden: It really is. And I do particularly think in today's day and age when there's so much unknown, and I look at just the art of the possible with, again, just technology and AI and let alone quantum, and just the ability to have so much unforeseen potential. You have to have curiosity, because you know what, we could find the next cure for cancer and we could find the next cure for this, and we could find the next cure for that, and just the ability to keep asking those questions are going to be what gets us to tomorrow.

Raquel Buscaino: I think sometimes people forget how much agency they have in creating the future. So the future is coming, whether you like it or not. So are you curious enough to build the future that you want to build and stir it in that direction?

Shelley Zalis: I love that word "agency". Keep using agency, I'm writing this article about the re-imagination of power that we have to move past the hierarchical system of command and control, and hierarchical power of telling someone what to do and how to do it, because it holds back this whole concept of what if, what if, and possibility, and imagination.

I gave myself permission to break every rule that made no sense and create new ones so I could color out of the lines. I was held back by these lines! Let me be free to think, and build, and ask and do!

And, you know, if I had stayed in these lines, you know, I never would have created the online business that I did because I was always told that it wasn't the right time. Well, gosh, well, when is the right time? Until I finally broke free and went and started something.

Deborah Golden: One of the things that I've been super focused on is just because you want a color outside the lines is really the way that we both teach and the way that we learn. I mean, historically, when we teach and learn with two senses, there are five senses. And if you think about mean neuro-inclusivity, if you think about the way that we learn and teach, we should be teaching and learning outside the lines. I'm not sure who told somebody that drawing inside the lines is the "quote unquote" right way to color. And I think it's a huge fallacy that we have to break, because think about all the young minds, let alone all the old minds that, had they learn to color with no lines, what the world would look like?

So you have to actually really fundamentally think about that because even the way you draw a house, why does the chimney have to go up?

I watched children chimney go to the right. And if you actually stop and ask, well, you know, can you explain to me, don't say why, because then it infers it's negative. Why does the chimney go to the right? I had a child who's seven tell me that the chimney goes to the right because the smoke then can't go into the sky. And that's outside the line.

Raquel Buscaino

It totally is. And so if we think about like tech inclusivity, are we now at a point where we can say, actually, we can remove the lines? Do you think we're removing the lines?

Shelley Zalis: To go back to that question and just repeat, repeat, repeat what Deb just said about neuro divergence. Neurodivergency is part of inclusivity. And when we talk about inclusive tech, including representation matters across the board without all aspects in innovation, including neurodivergent individuals, we would not have inclusive tech.

Shelley Zalis: And that is exactly why having the chimneys that go up, that go to the left, that go to the right is exactly why we need inclusive tech. And that comment was just so spot on. And the same thing with seatbelts, and the same thing with airbags. Airbags. The number one fatality in cars is women. Why? Because airbags were designed by men on male dummies, and women's bones are smaller. And so, the number one fatality, because they were not designed inclusively with everyone at the table.

And the same thing with seatbelts. They are not made anatomically comfortable. I mean are they just aren't or the brakes I mean, I am wearing little booties with high heels, they go under the brakes. And that is really dangerous. Escalators! When I wear skinny little heels. Do you how dangerous that is, that my shoe is left in the escalator and my foot, when it comes to getting off, that is really dangerous!

Raquel Buscaino: And even hearing you say all these examples, it's there are so commonplace to that we almost don't think about it. And I think you put women in the equation at the beginning, right, and top of funnel, let's talk about, you know, venture capital, funding landscape, all that stuff throughout the development process itself, right?

And then also making sure that we're designing the output for the end user. We're not just assuming we think we know what people want with the technology, with any product, but we're actually making

sure that because we've incorporated different voices throughout the entire process, we know we're serving our intended audience too. So it's throughout the entire lifecycle.

Deborah Golden: I have another example with another child, because again, I think the future is with our children who are so brilliant. I was with a group of children who were in a design boot camp. It was a four week boot camp. It was great. I'm like, "oh my Gosh, great minds solving great problems, right?" And a group of is a 13 year-old, a 12 year-old, and a 14 year old, all from different backgrounds, all girls super fabulous. And in four weeks they came up with an app design and they were presenting out to me, it was great. And it was a recipe App. And now, you may be thinking: "well, there's plenty of recipe apps" like what was so great about this recipe app? What made it. What made it so different? What made it different was it was an inclusive recipe app. Well, what was it so inclusive for?

Well, think about a recipe app. It assumes you have all your senses. So when a recipe app tells you to cook until golden brown, it also assumes that you have eyesight, and so the 13 year old was doing this because her mother died during childbirth and her father was blind. And so this recipe app actually used GenAI, and you can actually put the front of the recipe app what appendage or what sense you actually didn't have, and using GenAI, it actually automatically updated the app, so instead of cook until golden brown, you could actually it would actually tell you how the sound of the hash brown is so the app actually updated and you would actually hear it.

Shelley Zalis: Genius.

Deborah Golden: And so when you hear the whole story come around and you watch and why are we now solving for an app that's inclusivity, because that's how we're going to solve for people who don't have the technology to be able to do things that we take for granted.

We take cooking a hash brown on a Sunday afternoon for brunch for granted. And who came up to solve for that problem? A 13 year old. And when you think about that boot camp, no one came up with that problem for them to solve. A teacher didn't tell them to come up with that. The class monitor didn't tell them to come up with that. It wasn't written in a book. Those four young women, sat down and came up with what problem to solve for, and they did it in four weeks. And so that to me is the power of curiosity. That to me has the power of code. That to me is the power of tech, and that is the power of young minds.

Shelley Zalis: And by the way, that is the power of inclusive everything. It is about representation that reflects society so that we are all seen, heard, and reflected in everything from the design to that data that is being input will reflect what is the output. So all of this matters in the conversation when we talk about inclusive technology.

Deborah Golden: It was super eye opening because again, you would have never thought about "cook until golden brown".

Raquel Buscaino: And you know, sometimes when you design for everyone, the benefits are for all people too, so maybe I as someone who can see, though, maybe I would actually prefer to have my recipe instructions in that format?

Shelley Zalis: Yeah, and you know, it's funny because whenever I used to design, I wasn't a tech person, but because I'm not tech, I designed for someone like me so that it would work for even people that

were sophisticated, you know? So, just have different options so that everyone has options to choose from.

Raquel Buscaino: Yeah. I just really like the examples we're chatting about because I think they show how inclusive design can really benefit all. Well I know we've covered so much ground on the podcast so far, but as we wrap I do have one final question for you both: As you think about the future, what gets you most excited about where we're heading?"

Deborah Golden: What gets me most excited about the future is truly the convergence of everything. And that sounds really motherhood and apple pie. But it is the fact that there will be so many new capabilities that we don't know yet and everybody is so focused on generative AI, and that is one piece of AI, and that is one part of emerging tech, and when you put quantum on top of that, which is just supercharged AI, you put all that together. The art of the possible is truly, truly fascinating. So for me it is that, just the unknown.

Shelley Zalis: I think for me, equality is possible if you want it. And, you know, the World Economic Forum says it'll take 131 years, we can bridge the gap in five. And that just requires priority, conscious leadership and choice. And, you know, when we think about the future, the future is now, and with conscious leadership, we can we can do it together. And it really does require collaboration. And that's what it takes.

Raquel Buscaino: Well, Shelley, Deb, thank you so much for what is an incredible conversation. And to all our tech savvy listeners out there, to all our tech savvy listeners out there, if you enjoyed this episode, please share and subscribe. And if you'd like to learn more about inclusive tech, you can follow myself, Shelley and Deb to stay up to date. Our socials are listed in the episode description. Thanks for tuning in and I will see you on our next episode. And until then, stay savvy

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