

Bring IT On News

8 March, 2019

International Women's Day

Patricia O'Hagan - Chief Executive Officer (CEO) - Core Systems

Tell us a bit about your current job role?

As CEO I am responsible for setting the vision for the company and leading the development of strategies for business success and growth. In a software company such as Core Systems that extends to leading product strategy, and communications strategy.

What does a normal day look like in your job?

There is no normal day. I can be either here in Belfast or on the other side of the world presenting at a conference or meeting customers or partners. I enjoy the creative part of my job, such as meeting end users and coming up with new ideas for the product. We develop software that's used by prisoners and Prison staff. So, I also get to visit Prisons – I have been in many different Prisons around the world and always find it a very moving experience to meet the Prisoners and staff and hear about their experiences.

What was your first job?

Working in Lord Hamills – the first burger outlet in Belfast. I worked in the kitchen preparing food, then moved onto the tills selling the food. I also helped maintain the equipment, such as cleaning and servicing the milkshake maker. I did this job on a part time basis while I was at College studying for my A levels.

How did you get to where you are now from school?

It's a long journey from school to my current role. I left school at 16 and went to College (Belfast Met) to study for my A levels. After college I went to university to study engineering in England. After a brief time in an electronics lab during my work experience, I decided it wasn't for me. I came back to Belfast and retrained in software development, by doing a City and Guilds course in applications programming (back at Belfast Met) and got a job as an analyst programmer in the ship yard. I brought along a printout of the project I did as part of my course to the interview and I managed to convince them that I could code. From there I had several jobs in different industries, including IT Consultant for a contract catering company, IT Manager for a large college and IT Services Manager for a local Computer Services company. Then I made the leap and joined a start-up Software company – Core Systems. I joined Core on the basis that I would get paid a percentage of new business that I brought in and delivered. By that stage I had gained skills in product design, project management, implementation, training and support. That practical learning helped prepare me for the various roles I had in Core. Within a few years I took on the role of Managing Director, which led to my current role as CEO.



What was your favourite subject at school?

At school I enjoyed lots of subjects; Maths, Physics and Chemistry, English and Art too. I was disappointed that I couldn't keep up art subjects as I went in the STEM direction.

I love learning and continue to do classes and projects to learn new things such as a new language or how to play a musical instrument, or simply reading about new ideas and developments.

What has been your favourite job to date and why?

My current job at Core Systems is my favourite – I get to do what I love doing, creating software that helps make people's lives better and I get to travel and meet some very interesting people. I also enjoy working with our own team and our customers on developing solutions to their problems. Our customers are from all over the world. It's so interesting working with people from different cultures and hearing their perspectives and ideas.

I prefer to work as part of a team and the IT industry is great for this. I love the agile methodology as it is based on autonomous teams – in which the team decides how it will approach the task at hand and who does what. It's very motivating to have that level of input and control in your work.

What has been your favourite job to date and why?

My least favourite was my time as a student electronics engineer. I had to work alone on a very prescribed

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project. There was no opportunity to interact with other people or bounce ideas of anyone. I guess I am happier in an environment where you are more directly connected to the customer or end user of what you are working on.

What is the best piece of advice you have received?

"You can do anything you set your mind to – have confidence in what you can achieve."

This advice came from an American friend. Her confidence in me has helped me break through the limits I created for myself and let me see the many opportunities that were available to me.

What are your top tips for getting into the IT industry?

Work out what you want to do, get a plan in place and do it. Get out and network with people in the industry, like Women Who Code. There are lots of tech industry meetups in Belfast. There you can make friends who will help you on your journey. Also get practical experience through hackathons, online forums and work experience if you can. Don't be afraid to ask for help. People like to help others on their journey. If you find someone you think can help, simply contact them and ask for a meeting, offering to buy them a coffee is a good tactic.

IT is such a fast moving industry, are there any jobs/roles that don't exist now that you are excited to see in the future?

As virtual reality and augmented reality develop there will be roles relating to designing authentic virtual experiences. I would love that job, working on understanding what creates believable virtual realities for people, something like a combination of a movie director / psychologist and games developer.

Who is your role model and why?

Marie Curie is my role model. She was a very talented and courageous woman, who worked both as a scientist and a humanitarian. Despite the widespread discrimination of that time she didn't allow her gender to hamper her in a male-dominated world.

During World War 1 she had to put her scientific work on hold and needed something else to do. Rather than flee to safety, she decided to join in the fight. But just how could a middle-aged woman do that? She decided to redirect her scientific skills toward the war effort; not to make weapons, but to save lives. Marie put her X-ray machines in vans and took them to the front line. She mobilized a small army of



Above: Patricia was named winner in the Entrepreneur of the Year category in the FDM Everywoman in Technology Awards in 2015

women to drive and operate the machines, helping surgeons treat the horrific shrapnel wounds of the soldiers. Through her efforts, it is estimated that the total number of wounded soldiers receiving X-ray exams during the war exceeded one million.

She was also a great scientist; the first woman to win a Nobel Prize, the first person and only woman to win twice, and the only person to win a Nobel Prize in two different sciences.

What would you say to a young female who is contemplating pursuing a career in IT?

Go for it. It's a great industry with lots of opportunity. It's such a varied and wide-ranging industry you can easily find a niche that fits your personal talents and preferences. As a relatively new industry the IT industry doesn't have a lot of the constraints and practices of other industries. So, in general you can progress according to your talent and the effort you put in.

The IT industry is at the forefront of flexible working practice, so you can fit in your personal life too. Things change throughout life and you will have different needs over time. Being in such a flexible industry will mean you can change your work life situation to balance whatever is going on in your personal life.