**Highlights from our #IWD2023 event with CIO Claire Priestley**

Transcript

**Zoe Cunningham**: [laughs] All right, let’s kick off. Thank you so much, everyone, for joining. I’m Zoe Cunningham. I’m a director at Softwire and I’m the host of the *Softwire TechTalks* podcast. Thank you for joining us for this special event to celebrate International Women’s Day 2023. As I’m sure you all know, International Women’s Day is an annual celebration to celebrate and explore the achievements of women and how we can support a gender-equal and diverse modern society.

This year’s theme for International Women’s Day is #EmbraceEquality. I am super thrilled to be speaking today with Claire Priestley. Claire’s held senior IT leadership roles for many years across the commercial, public, and higher education sector, including being the Director of IT Services at CIO, at City, University of London, Director of IT at Kaplan International Languages. More recently as Chief Digital and Information Officer for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, where she led the disaggregation of shared IT services with Westminster, which sounds like a massive job. [laughs]

Knowing what I know about IT systems, that sounds like a big job. Claire’s currently working in Singapore and then her next role will be joining the London School of Economics as CIO. Outside of all of this, in 2016, Claire founded CIO+1, a not-for-profit initiative which seeks to improve representation in tech leadership. She then in 2017 initiated the connectivity across London projects.

Claire has been listed for consecutive years in the CIO 100 list, which is the top list, I think, for people in tech. She sits on the UK IT Leaders Board and has been on the judging panel of the women in IT awards for the last four years, as well as being on the UCISA Board of Trustees during her time in higher education. Most important and exciting fact about Claire, Claire also owns a boxing club in London. [laughs] That will be where all my questions are going today.

I’m thrilled to be speaking with such an influential and experienced female tech leader. I’d love to ask everyone watching if you have questions for Claire, I will be putting your questions to Claire at the end of the chat, and please do use the Q&A function to ask questions.

I will try to also keep an eye on the chat if you put your questions there, but if you put them in the Q&A box, that makes it much easier for me to know where, have a nice simple list of all the questions that we will come to later. Please do add your questions early because it helps me know if there’s loads of questions, we could start answering them a little bit early. Ask your questions as you have them.

The event is being recorded and we will send out the recording and highlights in an email next week to the email address that you used to register. Finally, hello, Claire.

**Claire Priestley:** Hi, Zoe. You forgot to mention your amazing side hustle, which I’m just going to drop there and leave it later in the conversation because I think it’s well worth looking at.

**Zoe:** Thank you. I am a director of Softwire, as I mentioned earlier. I do have a second career as an actor and film producer, which could be relevant. I thank you, I don’t often mention it in a tech context because it’s not always relevant. I think perhaps side hustles and what it means to have a side hustle and how that complements and interacts with your day job can be a very interesting topic.

First, Claire, I’d like to-- I think that it can be very daunting particularly if you are staff starting out in your career to look at a CV like yours and feel like, “Oh my goodness how does she do so much? How could I ever achieve that?”

Obviously, for people like us who are maybe slightly older let’s say, it’s been a journey. Actually, everything builds on what you’ve done before. No one’s doing 10 different things all at once it’s actually all about fitting everything around. Maybe could you tell us a bit about your journey and what your journey’s been to get to where you are now?

**Claire:** Sure. You stole my line there I think what I was going to say when you said however you’ve done it. I’m old.

[laughter]

**Claire:** I won’t bore you with all of the details of the journey, but of course, thinking about coming on here today I have thought about some of the pivotal moments, some of the things that really influenced and shaped my career. I think for me it starts way back. I’m the product of a line of very strong northern matriarchs. I’ve got a whole line of Yorkshire women that have preceded me.

I absolutely give thanks that because they gave me, they gifted me resilience and a work ethic that I think is incredible and a real pragmatism, I think. That gives you my start point I was born in Bradford. Back in the days when elephants were still fish [laughs] if you take the aging metaphor further. I didn’t have a standard tertiary education. I didn’t go to university, or at least not at that stage.

I left school at 17 because I went to see a career counselor who said, “You could be a teacher, or you could be a nurse, or you could be a wife.” Those seemed to be the options that were available to me back in Yorkshire in those days. I recognized there and then that wasn’t the place for me and that there was something better. At 17, I literally got on a bus at Bradford Interchange with a suitcase of naivety as I like to describe it.

I moved to London, and I knew one person in London and I had an offer of an administrative job down here. I say here I’m not actually there at the moment but generally I am. I moved to London and I think therein lies lesson number one for me. I was naive, but I was also a little bit brave. I know that I’ve been quoted as saying, “Don’t worry about confidence worry about courage.” Be brave for a moment because that will get you off the starting docket will get you somewhere.

I think at that point, I just knew that the fear that I was experiencing in terms of thinking about moving was far less than the anxiety about becoming a wife [laughs] as my career, as my long-term prospects. I moved to London and one of the first big breaks that I got, I say big breaks it was actually a first decent career move but it was, first of all, C100 company. That was a gift to me because it was a real meritocracy.

They were very, very clear about training people about giving people parameters clear line of sight to the organizational objectives. You knew exactly what you needed to do to be successful. Those rules worked for me they worked really well. I absorbed all of the learning that I could and I embarked upon this career with them. Within months I’d been successful by their standards and I was offered any number of career moves.

Now, not all of them were straight awkward moves. A lot of them were working on projects or working on initiatives of change. I think they’re in lies lesson number two. I’ve always had an open mind to do something because it interests me. I’ve gravitated towards things that just interest me rather than necessarily those things that people would consider to be career advancement. I think what that did very quickly would give me a really sound understanding of the business as a whole. You can move sideways but move laterally in a business.

What you do is really open your mind to end we call them processes now we didn’t at the time. You get a real insight into what’s important within a business and how it operates and therefore it gives you context with which to position things. Whatever your discipline then becomes, you can contextualize it in the overall theme of the business.

From there I moved into a number of roles. I was very lucky in that organization. I worked very hard but I was very lucky. I moved into business change management as a profession. I was also given the opportunity to go to university alongside all of this. I worked in an open learning situation alongside a full-time career.

Through change management at the time, and we’re talking late ‘80s, ‘90s, of course, coming up to the year 2000 when the millennium bug was all the rage, or at least the conversation was all about the millennium bug. All of the big change projects were technical. I very quickly learned that I had to get technical in order to be able to run these massive programs of change.

I got into technical space and slightly equipping myself with knowledge and skills there at the cost of the organization, which was really happy for me. As I say, it was a very lucky time for me. From there, really, it just took off. I realized that people were everything and I know that there’s people on the call that I have worked with, but I think the real trick to understanding how to become whatever it is you want to become is recognizing that you cannot do it on your own.

You are nothing but for the people around you, the team around you. The quicker we realize that and acknowledge that and appreciate that our job is simply about creating the environment in which really talented people, people that know stuff a bit like you, Zoe, can flourish. The more we can recognize that the quicker we are to succeed, because we can’t do things alone. I think those are the nuggets.

There were a couple of things along the way that I learned from. I do remember I worked very hard and I remember there were times I was so exhausted. I remember driving through the Rotherhithe tunnel, I don’t know if you know that for that particular beautiful spot. [chuckles] I remember driving through the Rotherhithe tunnel one night at about nine o’clock coming home from a 12-hour day and just weeping with exhaustion. Those days I clocked up, absolutely.

I remember being in situations – I worked in entirely male dominated environments and they were pretty challenging at times. When I was in my early career and in sales, I’d go in and visit a number of different businesses a day, about six or seven different businesses a day. I’d have to start my meetings by turning around page three calendars, or in one instance, actually asking somebody to turn off the television because he was watching inappropriate material. That was before you even got into a conversation about business.

Times have really changed. I feel as if resilience saw me through that, and that goes back to the northern matriarchy that sits behind me. Absolutely, that was something that I carried with me. I very quickly realized also that people talk about-- now they talk about brands and know your own brand and build your brand and that sort of thing. I’m not sure that I quite labeled it in that way, but I did realize what it was I had to offer.

What I had to offer was energy, positivity, resilience, and a really good work ethic. I tried to build on that because those were the skills that I knew I could rely on really. I think those are some of the patterns that have emerged throughout my career.

**Zoe:** That’s super interesting because there’s actually so much to unpick in terms of the different-- I suppose like you say, the different key aspects or the key points that now looking back you can see the pattern and go, “Oh, yes, okay, that was important.” Actually, that was maybe when I start first started thinking, “Oh, who I work for is important and who I work with is important and who’s on my team is important,” and maybe that’s more important than the exact what tools do we have available or what business are we.

I think those kinds of learnings are very common. I think we are all lucky enough to have those in our job. Also, I think for me, it’s shocking when I hear these kinds of stories of the outright activism that I’m so lucky to not have encountered in my career. For me, it always makes me think, “Gosh, what would I do?”

Would you say it’s because I feel like you can have influence in two different directions from this, obviously, you mentioned you had to say, I can’t have this on the television while I’m having a business meeting. [laughs] In one way, you had to stand up to it because it was so overt. In other ways, did it make more minor instances of maybe being disregarded for your gender or having people talk down to you? Did it make you brush that off a bit more? Do you think you challenged more or you brushed things off more?

**Claire:** I think I probably challenged more. I go back to the point about working in a meritocracy to start with. What I didn’t mention was that my very first career was in sales, and your performance in sales was entirely public. It was really 1980s sales, so there were targets on the walls. You walked in the evenings, you filled out how well you’d done that day.

I was very successful. I was in the top three within the first month of being in the job, and within the first six months, I was top earner within a region of men, 300 men in my region, and I was top earner. The benefit of that was that my results could speak to themselves. Now, of course, with that came a lot of insinuations accusations and so on. I suppose I was so surprised by my successes. [laughs]

Actually, I let that little wave of success carry me through and didn’t allow some of that noise to penetrate. I come from a family of brothers, so I’m pretty used to being quite resilient in the face of men and sexism generally, I think. My natural instinct is probably to speak quite candidly to people. I appreciate that’s not easy for everybody. It’s really not. Which is why I think one of the things that I try and do now is create an environment in which other people can feel comfortable.

Everybody feels included and I look out, I actively look out for those moments that make people feel excluded in order to call it out. Because I appreciate, I’ve probably got a little bit more boldness and candor than some people, and I’ve got a platform that they can use which is really useful. I think there are different ways of dealing with things, of course, and there are times when it utterly didn’t work.

I remember being shouted at and somebody pumping their fist on the table who’s towering over me because I’d said something in a way that he thought was just not appropriate for a woman to say. He was literally slamming his fist down on the table. That was pretty daunting. That was before I took up boxing, mind you. I don’t know.

[laughter]

The one thing that I would say, though, is that you learn to very quickly identify allies and identify people, role models in particular, but also ambassadors and allies. They don’t always come in the shape and size that you expect, but they always exist. There are always people that are quietly looking out for you or quietly working to progress an environment that’s more beneficial for the whole, I think.

I love very quickly to learn from everybody that I encountered. I think also I don’t want to overplay the work ethic, but when people see you working hard, they want to support you. They want you to succeed. These things do put you in good stead, I think.

**Zoe:** Because it benefits them as well. Let’s not forget we’re all working together in an organization. Then your hard work actually pays off for your boss as well as for you and it pays off for your colleagues. It’s very interesting. I think also the fact that you have mentioned this objective standard that there was in sales that perhaps in some other roles is harder to have that same exact numeric. If I have brought in these many leads, it’s twice as many as your leads. That is twice as good as just-- You can’t argue against it.

Where do you think that-- Because I think the whole issue, this is my take on everything but especially with gender, the whole issue is so complex and there are so many different things happening all the time. Actually, back to things that sometimes seem obvious, like an obviously good thing to help. I think that sometimes that cannot be true.

For example, I always try to encourage women speaking more, or certainly, I don’t do it so much now, but when I started in leadership roles, I would almost pick on women in meetings and say, “You, what’s your opinion? Tell me what you think.” Then you gradually realize that actually support, that’s not necessarily what support means.

I think that the whole area is complex. I think individuals are complex and different to each other. Where is it helpful to talk about women and initiatives we need for women and discuss gender explicitly and have explicit gender-based initiatives? Where can that be unhelpful and how can we tell the difference?

**Zoe:** Yes. It’s a really good point because it’s so nuanced, isn’t it? Personally, I’m no longer a fan of affinity groups. Apologies, I know it’s International Women’s Day, but I don’t believe in exclusively women in tech, for example, forums, because I don’t think women are the problem in tech, I think it’s the environment that needs to change. I don’t think the burden should be on women to change it necessarily.

I think in that sense, it can be unhelpful but equally, where there is active bias, where there is inequality, where somebody is made to fake feel unsafe or unfairly treated or when it impacts upon your day-to-day existence, I think it’s absolutely important to bring gender into it if that’s the situation. We know, for example, that right now 26% of the people in tech careers are women. In 2019 that was 19% but in the 1980s it was 34%. Go figure. [chuckles]

Whilst we’ve got those numbers staring us in the face and we’re not learning what it is we did differently beforehand and how we can improve that. I think it’s incumbent upon us to take action certainly. I think it was Cheryl Samberg, but I may be mistaken, it was described as a very long and leaky pipeline of careers into tech by women. I think what we have to do is to look upstream in that pipeline and think, first of all, where are the most dramatic kind of leaks happening and how can we systematically progress by plugging those leaks.

We know that there are certain junctures in that career pipeline where change happens and we start to lose young women from potential choices that would move them into tech careers or engineering careers or STEM careers actually. I think it’s incumbent upon us to do things. We have got good examples, for example, schools that are encouraging far more pragmatic experimentation around technology, around engineering, around physics and science-based subjects for young women.

They’re actually making it a far more participative environment. In order to capture those people that would have strayed off at that point in their careers, we need to learn from it.

**Claire:** Yes. Actually, something that I think crops up for me every time we talk about how you can make things better for one group of people. There are almost always beneficiaries of this that aren’t within that group. Actually, I’m sure there’s plenty of people for whom book learning is not their main way of learning or their best way of learning, and the more options we have for different ways of doing things.

We can start by looking at numbers of people employed in tech split across gender, splits across ethnicity. We can look at gender pay gap. We can look at ethnicity pay gap. Actually, we can use it as a starting point to help everyone.

**Zoe:** Yes, exactly. I’m so glad that you brought up sort of intersectionality and inclusion generally, because that’s, to me, what it’s all about. It’s about representation. It’s about inclusion. It’s about making sure that businesses and organizations recognize that by not being entirely inclusive and what I like to call representative, not necessarily inclusive, but representative. Then your products are going to be weaker. Your bottom line will be weaker, your leadership will be weaker as a result of it.

This is just about sound business decisions, even with that narrow a view. It's about having sound business decisions. Over in Singapore, I'm working for KSG and it's the first time I have ever worked for a leadership team or with a leadership team that is predominantly women. I have to tell you, it's like suddenly realizing you haven't got a headache after years of having a headache.

[laughter]

**Zoe:** There is a difference, a palpable difference in walking into a meeting where there isn't this unspoken tension that-- I've never recognized it because I've never been in this position before where it's not existed. It's fabulous.

**Claire:** Again, having the diversity of different teams and seeing how that works. For example, no one, because I think one of the accusations that people level against diversity initiatives is, oh, so we need to know exactly 50% women and we need exactly X percent of everyone from these different ethnicities and exactly 10 neuro-diverse people or whatever it is. That's obviously not sensible and not how you would run any kind of organization, but it is having that diversity of sometimes the leadership team is more women than men or sometimes the leadership team is a minority of white people which--

Having that against, oh, the leadership team is almost all white men in every single organization and that's people's ubiquitous experience to the point where that's what people think is normal. I think there's a big danger in that subconsciously. It's back to role modeling and if you can't see it, you can't be it. All of these things, they all interact together.

**Zoe:** I completely agree. I completely agree. I think one of the things mentioning role modeling and it's a favorite subjects of mine, one of the things that we can do without carrying too much of a burden as women in technology is know the names of other women that have both preceded us and are currently active within the realm.

There are so many, there are so many successful women in technology and we just need to be able to speak about them and let everybody else see them and then be visible to others. In particular, I think black women in technology actually because there are far fewer black women in technology than white women and men obviously.

I think there are some incredible examples. I mean the CTO of ChatGPT is a woman of color. That's amazing. Who knew that? Who knew that? We've [crosstalk]

**Claire:** Hands up in the audience. [laughs]

**Zoe:** Exactly.

**Claire:** I didn't know that for one. I'm really pleased to know it and I'm definitely going to go and Google her immediately after this call.

**Zoe:** That's right. She's called Mira Murati, I think, if I've got a name right. We need to just start to amplify voices and talk about other women in tech really. I think that's something very easy we can do without being too much of a burden. It's a joy to network with people that have gone through the same experience or similar.

**Claire:** Let's talk maybe a bit about specifically what challenges face women in tech. Are there any that you particularly want to highlight as this is specific to technology?

**Zoe:** I don't like to play to stereotypes, but of course, stereotypes exist for a particular reason. If you look at your classic infrastructure and ops function, you tend to see a certain profile of people within that arena. I would say without exception of all of the IT functions that I've led, there have been, I would say maybe three or four women in the space of infrastructure and operations.

I think what tends to happen there is you get an awful lot of, I'm going to label it as you don't come from a technical background or you are not technical or the kind of patronizing talk about, "Let me talk in such a language that it will bewilder you my love because- [chuckles]

**Claire:** Right. Right.

**Zoe:** "-you don't have access to the network, so you don't understand that." I think for me, one of the gifts that you have as a woman is that you tend to, women generally tend to be better communicators. One of the gifts that you have is to be able to sell, "I'm so sorry could you just run that by me again? Why is that the case?"

To really use your communication skills to play that card to force people to communicate in a better way. That's one of the challenges that we face. As a woman leader, there is always a bit of a challenge somewhere in your organization about whether or not you're technically adept enough, whether or not you're experienced enough.

We have to be a bit more fleet of foot in terms of our responsiveness to people, our ability to read an environment a bit more quickly and responsively. They feel like cliches. I think they feel like cliches because they're recurrent. They exist in a recurrent situation.

**Claire:** I think that interacting in a way that actually makes it a problem for all women, irrespective of your background and your previous job history, because I think you both get this, "Oh you're a woman, you're probably not technical," and you start to think, oh my goodness I haven't been a computer programmer, maybe I don't understand. There's that aspect of it.

Also, then there's the other side of it, where when you do have a background in it, actually, that's disregarded and it seems to not exist. It's almost like, you can't win either way.

**Zoe:** Yes, there's the story isn't there of the woman that used to be a Formula One engineer, or she was lead engineer for a Formula One racing team. Every year, she'd take her car for an MOT with a male friend of hers, and of course, the mechanic would immediately speak to the man who knew nothing at all about racing. I take joy in that. I really do. I take joy in those circumstances.

**Claire:** Although at the same time, like you say, the more we talk about the large number, I think back to when it's helpful to talk about gender versus not being helpful to talk about gender. Something else I started doing early on, was start to talk about the positives of being from technology because I suddenly realized if we need to attract more women to the industry, and anyone only ever talks about how terrible it is to be a woman in tech, I feel like we're shooting ourselves in the foot there.

**Zoe:** That's such a great point.

**Claire:** Yes. Also, rather than saying, oh, there's a small percentage of women in technology, which is true, and is relevant for a number of conversations and for changing that number, like you say, to keep talking about the large absolute number of women who have done the job already and who have achieved amazing things and being extremely senior and made incredibly complex technical decisions to date is an important part of the conversation that we must not leave out.

**Zoe:** I utterly agree. We need to do an awful lot of reframing. Thank you for saying that, because it's just reminded me how important it is. We need to do an awful lot of reframing. The reality is, being in technology these days does not necessarily mean being in networking or infrastructure or coding. There is a wealth of opportunity for people to be involved in technology careers, data and technology careers. You can come with whatever skill set you have and there is a place for you in technology. I invited actually, as a speaker, Alison Davis, who used to be the CIO for the Francis Crick Institute.

If you've never come across the Francis Crick Institute, it is an extraordinary place. I don't have time to go into it now but it's an extraordinary place. She said the reason she loved being a technologist is because she could find any organization where her outfit fit. That was just a metaphor for her style, her values fitting within organizational culture because actually, technology as a discipline or data as a discipline is transferable into literally any type of company these days. That's one of the real gifts of it. There was another point I was going to make and it's promptly gone out of my head. Oh, reframing.

We talk about success and this was something else that occurred to me as I was thinking about today. We talk about success, and I've never really been particularly ambitious in terms of I want that job, that's the next job in my career. I've always been so surprised at getting that next promotion or whatever. I've often thought that's success, isn't it? That's brilliant.

I think what I've also come to realize is if I encounter a situation and it feels like it went wrong, the question to ask myself is, what did I learn from it? Did I learn something? Because going to boxing and building a metaphor for boxing, you only develop, you only improve if you make yourself uncomfortable, and making yourself uncomfortable often feels like a failure. It feels like, "Oh, I didn't win that time. I didn't achieve my best that time."

Actually, if you go away from it learning something-- and this speaks straight to agile methodology, doesn't it? Start with a product, start with anything, learn from it, iterate, move on. If that is success, then you are succeeding every single day and you happen to make a lot of progress and success by other measures on route.

**Claire:** Such a good point and boxing is such a great metaphor for it because obviously, you go into the ring to win. It is a literal fight.

[laughter]

**Zoe:** You really do. You don't want to lose.

**Claire:** As you say, at the same time, you don't just become a champion by deciding one day to go and do it, you become a champion by going into the ring again and again and again and learning and learning and learning and improving your skillset.

**Zoe:** Yes, exactly. My business partner believes that boxing provides a metaphor for literally any [crosstalk] and I actually believe that.

**Claire:** That's really funny because I think the agile software development methodology is a metaphor for literally everything. [laughs]

**Zoe:** We could play with that I think.

**Claire:** Well, following through this idea of positivity and being forward-looking rather than necessarily backward-looking, what can we all do to support each other and to make inclusion a priority? Because I think that one of the challenges is it's easy to see there's a problem and lots of people who can see there's a problem.

Actually, perhaps even people-- I'm lucky enough in Softwire, we have a very open conversation, but I'm sure there are people watching who are like the people senior to me that I report to are not interested in making any changes. What am I going to do? I would imagine even those people will accept there's a problem and it can be demonstrated. It's just what are the concrete steps to take?

**Claire:** Yes, that's a really good point. I don't think the burden should be on women. I think this is applicable to everybody, but I would say actually there are some extraordinary male ambassadors for women in tech at the moment and I will happily name a couple of them. Certainly, **[inaudible]** is one who is at the forefront of data and technology at the moment in London, particularly in local government, and is an absolute ambassador for women in tech.

I think we need more of them and sometimes it's helpful to just have conversations with our male colleagues about what that might look like, how could that be helpful? What could be useful in a particular circumstance? Because very often people want to be positive, they want to be part of something and part of the **[inaudible]** If we can articulate that and share those and I guess role model, but also share with people that we think have platforms if we don't necessarily have that platform and I think that's useful.

I think know people's names, know their names, know the women that are doing things, make sure that we are extending a hand outwards and reaching to help other people come up. Use our own platforms as vehicles to amplify the voices, give opportunities to others and you and I are in privileged positions, aren't we? We've got platforms and we should and do use them.

I think there is something for me about just being a decent human being, you know, recognizing-- it's the point that you were making before about, "Oh, let me ask that person to comment. You there, comment." There is something about just being a sensitive human being and bringing that person into the workplace and making sure that you are emotionally intelligent and sensitive to the needs of others and doing the right thing by people. I think it's really underrated actually. We look for these magic solutions, but actually, it's about decent human behavior.

**Claire:** Yes, definitely. Also, communication, which we've mentioned several times, and how do you communicate things. I suppose for me, that reminded me in terms of how we all support each other, all the things I've learned, I was going to say from other women, but actually from other colleagues, men and women about how to phrase things because I think sometimes if you feel put on the spot and you feel very emotionally affected by something someone's said or done, it can be really hard to know how to explain why it's not okay.

We've had speakers come into Softwire. I've definitely learned from my colleagues, especially my younger colleagues, who maybe times have moved on slightly about how to explain things and how to say in a non-accusatory way because I think sometimes if something just comes out as, "Why are you so bad?" that's not the most constructive way to have the conversation so actually learning new ways to give me the strength to say things I found very helpful.

**Zoe:** Yes, it's a great point. You can almost build a kind of arsenal, can't you of phrases that you can go to when you're at that moment where you're thinking, "Hang on a minute, what do I say here?" If you've got a list that you can fall back on of just phrases that have been helpful at times or phrases that help you buy the time to collect your thoughts and make it a more appropriate moment. It's a great point.

To the point of colleagues from different generations, from different backgrounds, having so much to say that is relevant and we can learn from, absolutely, there are so many bright people, so many bright people, and I feel completely inadequate in the face of most of them, actually.

**Claire:** On that note, let's have some questions.

**Zoe:** Yes, why not.

**Claire:** The first question is about you mentioned that you would come home weeping or [crosstalk] day where you came home weeping, obviously that's not a desirable outcome. We're not saying this is brilliant, and career progression shouldn't require you to work yourself into the ground, and how can businesses better support ambitious women to ensure others don't face what you did?

**Zoe:** It's interesting. I'm not sure there's a single nugget for that. I think that there was a lesson for me at one point in my career about self-management, and I do work hard, no doubt about it, I really work hard and I do that through choice now rather than necessity, and I suspect that even at that point, I was pushing myself way harder than I needed to to stay at the top of my game. I could have worked smarter, not harder.

I think for me, there was something there, and I'm certainly not advocating that we all work ourselves to the point where we're exhausted, but it was a big lesson for me in terms of self-management and responsibility for myself because that's ultimately what made it. It wasn't the organization that forced that.

I think we take responsibility for our own actions. It may be an unpopular thing to say, but if the organization is one in which you feel that you can't be yourself and still do a great job, then it's not the organization for you would be my take on it.

**Claire:** When you were saying about something you've learned from, for me, it reminded me it's a boxing metaphor. It's like, yes, you got punched in the face that day.

**Zoe:** I put myself in the ring.

**Claire:** Yes, but you learnt a little bit about how to not get punched in the face in that way in the future which is the point about learning. All right, let's just have him look at the next one. Oh, okay.

What if you just don't get on with the key stakeholders? Actually, this is another point about hard work then. Hard work doesn't really make a difference.

**Zoe:** I absolutely haven't got on with most of my key stakeholders. Maybe I haven't looked at who's on the call, but there may be people on the call that can vouch for that. I don't think we can like everybody, but I think we can behave professionally and respectfully and value other people's contributions and recognize that everybody has something of value to contribute. What was the question? Sorry, I'm a bit taken by the concept of stakeholders and not [cross talk]

**Claire:** Yes, there's lots of different threads, I think actually in the question, there's a lot of different aspects of it. I don't agree regarding hard work. What if you just don't get on with the key stakeholders, then hard work really doesn't make a difference. I think that's definitely about when you're applying, choosing to apply hard work or when you think it's expected, which I think we've covered a little bit already.

You mentioned choosing to work hard for yourself versus choosing or feeling you have to work hard for other people, which I think is a super important distinction. Then there's getting on with key stakeholders and if there's a problem, then what do you do about it and all those kind of things.

**Zoe:** I guess the way I interpret that is sometimes just hard work alone won't get you through. Sometimes if your key stakeholders don't and you don't get on or don't see eye to eye, it's much more than just working harder at it, isn't it?

I think again, certainly from the perspective of career development, what I have learned is that you have to try to build an arsenal of skills around communication and influence and all of those attributes, because we have to deal with people, both stakeholders and team members that we're not always going to vibe with. We're just not, we can't get on with everybody.

Actually, some of the people that have been the most valuable to me in teams that I've worked with have been completely different to me in terms of preference and styles of working. That's necessary because I've needed that person in the team to counter my weaknesses and vice versa. What that can do is lead to relations that are quite challenging sometimes because you're thinking, why are you going about this in that way when I would do it this way?

One of the things that I have learned is that really, the people who often present themselves as being the most challenging are there because they're a necessary learning for oneself and it's about trying to adapt your own style. I do believe that we've got a responsibility if we want to work in the best possible collaborations with other people, we've got a responsibility to actively understand how we can better communicate with them and how we can better influence, manage and work alongside them.

**Claire:** It is within our control to change ourselves, is what I'm saying. As opposed to changing someone else is not within your control. I think it's back to everything being super complex, right? That obviously there are times to stand firm and challenge, and there are times to be flexible and life is working out which-- the exact delicate nuance of which to do when.

All right, I'm going to crack on because we've got another three questions, and everyone's bringing the big questions today. This is exciting. What do you think of equality versus equity? Equality being that everyone has the same resource and treatment i.e. sales targets, everyone knows what they're hitting, and equity having the right thing for what you need for the job or for your own requirements. That reminds me of there's a brilliant picture about looking over a wall and people having different stools, right?

**Zoe:** Yes. It's important, isn't it? There's also a number of videos on YouTube and various other places about people in a race and stepping backwards if you didn't have this particular advantage and so on. That, to me, brings about the whole question of privilege. It's a thing, there's no doubt about it. The more that we accept that, I certainly accept I have privilege and abundance. I'm a white woman in an environment that, whilst I grew up in a time of sexism, I actually had lots and lots of privilege because I didn't need to worry about walking into rooms and experiencing some of the things that some of my counterparts have. I think yes. I'm not sure what the question was.

What do I think about it? I think it's absolutely appropriate that we discuss equity. I think we've got to think about the kind of input to a situation in the first place because not everybody starts on a level platform. How we can manifest that appropriately in the workplace, I think is incredibly complicated. I don't know that anybody's found a magic answer to it.

I think it starts with really trying to understand people's personal lived experience. From that point, we can only start to open our minds to what the potential is.

**Claire:** Perhaps really focusing on the outcome because actually, if the outcome is we want representation at all levels within an organization, it's clear that equality isn't going to get us there because not everyone's starting from the same point. I think once that's your philosophy it's hard, but at least you're working within the right framework.

**Zoe:** Sorry, just on that subject, there are practical things that we can do, practical things. You and I in particular because we've got a platform. Recognizing that actually sometimes you don't need experience in a particular field. You don't need a particular qualification or string to your bow because you've got transferrable skills that with the right environment, with the right support, development, sponsorship, mentorship, whatever it happens to be, can result in a really successful move.

That's something that I'm absolutely all about. If I think somebody's got transferable skills into a role, brilliant, let's create the environment in which that person can flourish.

**Claire:** Great. As always happens with the Q&A, we've got loads of questions coming at the end. Luckily, the next one isn't a question. I'm just going to read it out. "I'm not sure I agree with pointing out to people in a room to ask their opinion. I think introverts would really find that difficult. We should be mindful of this and learn how to bring people into the conversation without singling them out." I just want to apologize if I wasn't clear on that. That was exactly the point I was making.

That I had misguidedly early in my career thought this was a good thing because I wanted to encourage people to make sure everyone's voices were heard and then I realized that actually, it was not. It was just problematic for all the reasons that you say, so yes, thank you so much for making that comment and clarifying, and I absolutely agree.

Now, example of phrases, please. I think this is when I was saying, "Oh, you learned phrases from other people about how to say things." As I was saying, it was examples only, give an example. Just be vague and say this is the thing. I don't know if you've got any good examples, Claire.

**Zoe:** Give me a scenario and I'll try and think of one. There's a whole lots of scenarios out there. What were we talking about specifically? I think it was about being challenged or being called out in a particular--

**Claire:** What I was thinking of is actually a much broader way. For example, at Softwire, we have a Slack channel called #Menstruation, which is just a great place to talk about as we have sanitary products in the office, in the cubicles so that people can use them. If I go back 20 years to when I was starting out, I can remember being in public places with older women talking openly about mooncups and just going, "Oh, no, please stop it. This is terribly embarrassing."

That's moved that conversation on for me and I can see how open everyone is now and how almost every time you find a way to be open and say something, it helps someone else. I suppose that was what I was trying to get at. I've also learned a lot about gendered language and that helps me make an effort to change my own language so that I'm not using words that refer to men to refer to everyone. I try to choose words because words have power.

Those are my examples, which actually isn't quite the what if someone calls you "darling" and you don't know how to say it without going, "Excuse me." [laughs]

**Zoe:** I have been in meetings before where I've literally said to somebody, "Did you just mansplain me?" Just reflected it back but tried to do it with humor. I don't know if those are helpful but I think there are definitely stock phrases that we can use to help buy ourselves time or to help confront the situation.

There's a classic mode of explaining yourself when you are confronting a particular behavior that says, when you said X, it made me feel like this. What are you trying to achieve? There are stock phrases that you can take on board and then make into your own. Again, I can't think of any off the top of my head but give me the circumstance and I'll try and come up with a list for you.

**Claire:** Super, there's one question. It's just disappeared off my list, but I thought it was quite cool, which was-- and maybe we don't have time to go into it in depth, to be honest, which is how do you promote your own achievements without tooting your own horn?

The way I would say it, without feeling like you're showing off. If you've got any tips on that, that'd be great. Then let's just talk about the next one as well, which is how can women-- which is similar in some senses, how do you think women in tech can address a natural lack of confidence or assertiveness? Then we're going to have to call it because we've only got three minutes. [laughs]

**Zoe:** I think the whole confidence or assertiveness thing for me is-- and I said this earlier, sometimes it's not about confidence. Confidence is something that's transient. It moves, it shifts according to your circumstance, what it is you're being confident or in-confident in.

Sometimes I think it's just about being brave for that moment. Forcing yourself into a position where in that moment you take the plunge, and you are brave. In doing so, you challenge yourself. You put yourself in this feeling of discomfort and you grow stronger as a result. The next time you look at that, you think, "Oh, I just did that, and it wasn't quite that bad. Wasn't as bad as I'd imagine."

I think sometimes there is a need to be brave rather than to feel like you should feel confident. Nobody feels confident all of the time, it's a complete illusion.

**Claire:** I definitely don't. [laughs]

**Zoe:** What was the previous point? There was a previous point that you just made that--

**Claire:** About how do you share your achievements to make sure to take responsibility and accountability yourself for being recognized? I think it's a great thing to aspire to do while at the same time not becoming that person who is always talking about themselves, and which is what we fear becoming. I think we all fear becoming that.

**Zoe:** Yes, we do. It's really interesting. I'm part of a WhatsApp group for women in tech, even though I spoke about lack of affinity with affinity groups. There is one person on there who is extraordinarily successful. Works globally in a fabulous capacity and talks it up really talks it up. I felt the group response to that be quite varied.

I had to say to myself, if this was a man, this would just be commonplace. Why do we interpret that as being in any way anything apart from, "I'm stating the facts about what I've achieved here." I had to have a bit of a word with myself about that, if I'm honest.

Personally, I think results often speak to themselves and actually I haven't achieved very much at all. The teams that I've worked with have achieved most things and they're the people that I would always try and big up.

**Claire:** People who are smart know that that's a sign of a good leader. Well, we are out of time. I just have to say thank you so much, Claire. I've had an extremely enjoyable hour. Should we do this every week? [laughs]

**Zoe:** Well, can we talk about your film career next?

**Claire:** Yes, sadly, we're out of time. Just a reminder, thank you everyone who's joined us today. I hope you have enjoyed yourself and maybe learnt something. We have more events coming up.

Our next one will be with Mario Chauvin, who is the director of Engineering at The Guardian. That will be on the 29th of March. He's going to talk about managing multiple teams and reacting to a fast-paced environment. The link is in the chat, and will also be sent in the follow-up email.

Yes, thank you everyone for joining. Thank you so much, Claire and have a great International Women's Day.

**Zoe:** Thank you. Lovely to see you all.