

Women in Tech: A Discussion about Diversity in the Workplace

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Toyota Connected North America's Women in Tech (WiT) hosted a panel in early February to discuss diversity in the workplace. Among the topics explored: Why women in tech are essential for growth, how men acting as allies is good for business and overcoming barriers for success.

The WiT panel was moderated by Lisa Frey, agile services manager at Toyota Connected. The discussion has been edited to focus on Toyota-related responses.

Participants included:

- Jen Cohen, former CIO and VP of Core Operations, Research and Engineering, Toyota Research Institute, and current CEO and founder of Lights On Advantage
- Kristen Tabar, group vice president, Advanced Mobility Research & Development, Toyota Motor North America (TMNA)
- Charan Lota, group vice president and executive chief engineer, Connected Technologies, TMNA

The Lightbulb Moment

Lisa Frey: What inspired you to pursue a career in technology?

Jen Cohen: Growing up, my mom was the first woman controller of a Japanese company in the '80s, and one of her good friends was an inventor. He found out that I wanted to do history, so he pulled me aside and gave me a tour of the factory. He talked to me about technology. I already liked technology, but I never thought of it as a career. That inside look was what sparked my love for it.

What I've really enjoyed over the years is that technology affects people. So, when you problem-solve with technology, you're talking about impact – a significant impact.

Early in my career, I spent a lot of time being the only woman in the room. I don't want to see that gap. Now, I go out of my way to mentor. I want to help women stay in technology because there's so much they have to contribute to that big impact.

Charan Lota: Growing up Indian, my options were engineer, doctor or the family construction business. I chose engineering. Working on cars and doing things around the house with my father, those things came naturally. But when people ask me where I get my engineering mindset, I tell them my mom. She can build anything, fix anything. We would always tinker with stuff around the house. Growing up not too wealthy, you have to be creative about things. So, my mom and I would always work on stuff like that.

Kristen Tabar: My passion for tech started quite early. I grew up in Detroit and have always liked vehicles and the technology inside those vehicles. I think I was ready for automated driving at the age of 10. While we're still watching that play out, it's interesting that, especially in this space, you can have a cool idea, and in a relatively short period of time, you can see that idea go to market and see that millions of people use it daily.

In high school, I told my parents I wanted to be a preschool teacher, but I always took things apart and put them back together, wondering how they worked. I had a lot of jobs in high school related to technology. I worked in the theater area and hooked up all the lights and audio. I worked with the local cable studio, videotaping sporting events. So, when I said I wanted to be a preschool teacher, my dad said, "No, I don't think that's right for you; maybe something where you put things together and take them apart. Maybe engineering?"

My journey changed from there, and I did quite well. My background is in electrical engineering, and I've worked in the electronics space for almost my whole career. This will be my 31st year working for Toyota.



The Panel – (From left to right) Kristen Tabar, Taylor Shead, Charan Lota, Jen Cohen, and Nikki Barua.

Overcoming Roadblocks

You've all talked about a pivotal moment or things that happened to you that drove you to technology. But along the way, it's not always easy. Can you talk about those moments when you may have felt fear or trepidation? How do you get over that?

Cohen: My background is in IT. So, I often use my cybersecurity experience to help me. With risk management, you think about what's the worst that can happen. One of the times I did that was when I was thinking about a job, I was afraid to take. I thought, "Well, what's the worst that could happen? It can't kill me, right?"

That helped put my fears in perspective. Our careers are serious, but sometimes we put so much weight on that fear instead of taking that step forward. Thinking about that worst-case scenario was a way to give myself perspective.

Also, it's important to look back at our successes. Celebrating our accomplishments helps us overcome our fears before dismissing an opportunity.

We do tend to grow when working in areas where we're not comfortable. If we're comfortable all the time, we're not changing. So, thinking about that, what challenges have significantly impacted your career?

Lota: I'll talk about an experience from somebody else's perspective, somebody who took on a challenge, faced her fears and came out quite successful.

When I was in Michigan working as a general manager of EMS (Electronics Manufacturing Services), I often got these cost planning reports. I would ask my team, "Hey, how much does this thing cost forever?" One individual walked right up to my desk said, "Hey, I'm Judy. I'm the cost planning person responsible for your area; let me take you through all the information you need to know."

Then came an opportunity to move the team to Texas. As I was thinking about who I wanted to bring to start this new Connected Technologies (CT) team, Judy came to mind. I contacted her and asked her if she wanted to move to Texas. She thought about it and said, "OK." When we came out, I put her in charge of over-the-air updates, programming that's used to automatically update firmware, software, and even encryption keys, which is not an easy thing to do for somebody who's coming from accounting and cost finance.

Within a year, not only did she learn how to do that, but she became an expert. Once she mastered that, we moved her to the office of CT. She kept growing. Whenever we gave her an opportunity, she would take it and kill it. Then, we asked her if she would want to live in Japan for three years. She took the job, and now she's in Japan and loving it. Everybody loves her out there. She's a great example of someone embracing opportunities. I don't think she has any fear. But that's also coupled with managers/leaders embracing her. It's a two-sided thing.

Rapid Fire Questions

"Fifty-fifty." What does that mean to you?

Tabar: For me, it's a call to action to change the landscape of our resources internally and our partnerships externally to ensure we represent our customers equally. The automotive space has been male dominated. We need to recognize that as we transform and build on our automotive history into this new mobility space, this is our opportunity to bring in those diverse voices and get representation in the product development from all types of voices representing all types of customers.

"Mentoring others" — What does that mean to you?

Cohen: This is something that I'm passionate about. I was lucky enough in my career to have mentors. So, now, pro bono, I mentor 13 women and three startups. I do that because I want to give back. It feeds my soul.

The way that we help some of these girls not drop off in the pipeline is that we build it; we build it earlier.

We won't solve this problem just with initiatives – although we need them. We will solve them by bringing others with us.

“Men as allies” – What does that mean to you?

Lota: We want to win, right? And if you truly want to win, in the Toyota way of working, we rely on data, not emotion or bias. So, if you really want to win, you have to follow the data. We must make opportunities for women to succeed.

**Other panelists who participated in the discussion:*

- Nikki Barura, CEO & co-founder of Beyond Barriers
- Taylor Shead, founder and CEO of STEMuli Studio