

ASPIRING CIO

WOMEN LEADING TECH

INSIGHTS FROM INDUSTRY EXPERTS ON LEADERSHIP, EQUITY, AND OPPORTUNITY IN IT LEADERSHIP

In a recent Talent Locker-hosted webinar, "Aspiring CIO: Women Leading Tech," three senior technology leaders came together to share their stories, perspectives, and practical advice on how women can navigate, shape, and thrive in the world of IT leadership.

Hosted by **Sam McWilliam, Lead Consultant, Business Change & Transformation**, the conversation featured:

- **Anna Barsby**, Founder & Managing Partner at Tessiant
- **Kjirste Coltham**, COO at Motor Insurers' Bureau (MIB)
- **Joanna Pamphilis**, SVP, CIO - Global Head, Investments and Securities Digital Products at UniCredit

What followed was an authentic and energising discussion on leadership, confidence, diversity, and the real challenges women face in tech.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The role of the Chief Information Officer (CIO) is evolving. But while the landscape is shifting, the path to leadership remains uneven for women in tech. In this whitepaper, we discuss key insights from "Aspiring CIO: Women Leading Tech", a Talent Locker-hosted webinar featuring three accomplished technology leaders.

The discussion offered practical, candid advice on what it takes to succeed as a CIO in today's business world, with a particular focus on the unique challenges and opportunities facing women in IT leadership. From the importance of communication and resilience over technical perfection, to the confidence gap that still holds many back, the speakers explore how leadership is being redefined—and what needs to change to build a more inclusive and representative future.

Key themes include:

- **The evolving DNA of an effective CIO**, driven by adaptability, empowerment, and strategic clarity.
- **Why confidence—not competence—is often the bigger barrier** for women aiming for leadership.
- The critical need for **authentic representation** and **systemic change** across organisations.
- The **value of non-linear career paths** and redefining what "success" looks like.
- How companies and individuals can **overcome outdated hiring mindsets** to create real opportunity.
- The **importance of lifelong learning**, especially in a rapidly advancing tech landscape.

THE DNA OF AN EFFECTIVE CIO

The panel opened by exploring what defines a great CIO. While technical competence remains important, all three women emphasised the need for leadership skills that centre around communication, business partnership, and resilience.

Joanna emphasised the importance of pragmatism and resilience, saying:

"There are always things going wrong—so you've got to be the kind of person who can keep going, even in the dark days."

Anna added that a modern CIO must know when to stay out of the weeds and empower their team.

"You have to let go of needing to prove your competence through doing the work yourself."

77%
of CIOs have a strong educational partnership with the CEO / board of directors.

State of the CIO Survey 2025

"You don't need to be the most technical person in the room. You need to be able to translate the vision, manage change, and communicate with clarity."

Kjirste highlighted how CIOs today must be comfortable navigating ambiguity and providing strategic alignment across the business.

THE CONFIDENCE GAP AND HOW TO BRIDGE IT

All three women agreed: **confidence is often the greatest barrier, not competence.**

Joanna shared that in her career, the biggest challenges weren't technical—they were about self-belief.

"You can know everything on paper and still hold yourself back because of doubt."

Anna pointed out that confidence doesn't come from perfection—it comes from action.

"The biggest thing that holds women back is thinking they're not ready. You learn on the job."

"You have to say yes before you're fully comfortable."

Kjirste reinforced this idea:

"You're never going to feel ready. Don't wait. Stretch yourself."

They also discussed how traditional corporate environments sometimes fail to support confidence-building in underrepresented groups. **Sponsorship and advocacy**—not just mentorship—are critical.

REPRESENTATION & THE ROLE OF THE CIO

Representation was a core theme throughout the webinar. Despite efforts to bring more women into tech, many don't feel a sense of belonging once they're in. It's no longer enough to get women into the room. We have to make sure they feel they can stay—and lead.

The CIO role can be a lonely place if you're the only woman in the C-suite. Creating communities, both internal and external, is key. DEI efforts must go beyond optics and leaders must drive systemic change through hiring, policies, and everyday behaviours.

14%

Average percentage of female CIOs and CTOs in NASDAQ-100 firms (2021-2024)

1.4 years

Average tenure for women in tech leadership, compared to 4.3 years for men.

You need someone in the room who's saying your name when you're not there.

“

CAREER GROWTH ISN'T LINEAR—AND THAT'S OKAY

The panellists each shared the twists and turns of their own careers—none of which followed a textbook trajectory. It was agreed that non-linear paths often bring broader perspectives and empathy.

Each of them talked about pauses, pivots, and setbacks—including taking time out for parenting or caregiving. These weren't detours, but part of their leadership journey.

"You have to be at peace with your own path."

"Success doesn't look the same for everyone—and that's a strength."

WHAT'S STOPPING WOMEN FROM BECOMING CIOs - OR BOARD MEMBERS?

Despite progress, there are still barriers, many of them structural, some self-imposed.

Many talented, mid-career women opt out of the CIO track, choosing entrepreneurship or consultancy instead. They want flexibility, they want ownership—and often they don't want to keep pushing against an outdated culture.

Companies need to do more to take chances on people who don't tick every box on paper but have a lot of potential. If you only hire for what someone's already done, you miss out on who they could become.

The panel agreed that rigid requirements—like needing experience with a specific software platform—are often outdated and irrelevant. Joanna gave a powerful example: *"A role I was offered required SAP experience. When I said I didn't have it, they almost pulled the offer. But I said: you're hiring me to be a CIO, not an SAP consultant. If you don't get that, you don't understand the role."*

LIFELONG LEARNING AND STAYING FUTURE-READY

So, how can CIOs stay ahead—particularly with AI and fast-changing tech landscapes?

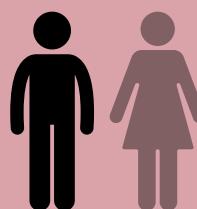
"Don't wait for someone to train you. Get online. Watch videos. Join communities. There's more free knowledge available than ever—you just have to go after it."

Curiosity is a superpower. You don't have to know everything, but you do have to want to keep learning.

It's clear that despite the challenges, women are absolutely capable of leading tech at the highest levels. What's needed now is a shift in culture, a boost in confidence—and more people, like those attending this webinar, committed to building the future.



66% of women lack a defined career advancement route.



Women are 1.6 times more likely to be laid off than men.



57% of women in TMT anticipate leaving their jobs within two years.

Women In Tech

ASPIRING CIO: WOMEN LEADING TECH

The path to becoming a CIO is no longer defined by a straight line—or by a single profile. As Joanna, Kjirste and Anna have shown, today's technology leaders are shaped by their resilience, curiosity, and ability to lead with authenticity. But if we are to see more women thrive at the top levels of IT, we must continue to challenge outdated norms, champion underrepresented talent, and create environments where diverse leadership can flourish.

This conversation is just the beginning. Whether you're an aspiring CIO, a hiring manager, or a fellow leader in tech, we all have a role to play in driving meaningful change.



Sam McWilliam

Webinar Host

Sam is a Lead Consultant at Talent Locker, specialising in Business Change and Programme and Project Management. Sam has over 8 years' recruitment experience and has proven success at delivering the very best talent for her clients.



Anna Barsby

Entrepreneur Founder & Managing Partner

Anna is one of the UK's top transformation and technology leaders, used to delivering large scale change across different industries. Previously the CDIO/CTO at Halfords, Morrisons and Asda, she significantly improved the technology capabilities in many organisations.



Kjirste Coltham

CIO, Motor Insurers' Bureau (MIB)

A leader with 25 years' experience of IT and Transformation in Wealth Management, Banking and Insurance. Successfully leading high-performing delivery and change teams in complex environments, with a proven track record of managing both internal and external stakeholders at all levels.



Joanna Pamphilis

SVP, CIO Global Head of Investments and Securities Digital Products. UniCredit

Joanna has over 20 years' global leadership experience in the Finance industry at UBS, State Street Bank, Northern Trust, KCG and UniCredit. Joanna has been named a FinTech Top 100 Women 2023 & 2024, is a Global Top 100 CIO 2023 & 2024 and an OnCon Icon Top 10 Technology Professional 2024.