

No longer a member of any boys' clubs

WHAT IT MEANS TO ME

Kate Craig-Wood has a unique perspective on being a woman in the IT world. Peter Whitehead explains why

Women say they are put off working in IT because they often feel left out in what tends to be an overwhelmingly male environment. One woman who understands this better than anyone is Kate Craig-Wood. Because until two years ago Kate was Robert.

In her first 29 years – “I was born with a female brain and a male body” – she played the role of son, brother, husband and businessman. Since her gender transition was completed in 2006, she has been daughter, sister, girlfriend and businesswoman.

“Having been one of the guys – or at least doing a good job of pretending I was – I have seen it from both sides. I can see if I’m being closed out of a conversation and can push my way back in, while other women don’t... perhaps because of assertiveness or they don’t recognise what’s happening because they haven’t been in that situation,” she explained.

Ms Craig-Wood, the attractive, intelligent and articulate 31-year-old managing director of a successful technology business, is a woman whose extraordinary journey provides a unique insight into the role that gender plays in the technology workplace.

Mentally and emotionally, she has always been feminine: “You could regard me as an interesting social experiment. As a boy, the dinner table conversation was all around business and technology, so I was socialised towards an interest in them – but I am stereotypically female.

“One doesn’t like to criticise one’s parents, but I think if I’d been born female I would not have been encouraged towards business and technology. My sister certainly wasn’t. And it wasn’t anything deliberate – there’s just an assumption that girls don’t do that stuff.

“My brother was often introducing me to computers and things but, look-

ing back, my sister didn’t get that same encouragement. I showed an interest – and she wasn’t prevented from doing so, so it wasn’t anything sinister – but that cultural programming does exist.”

Ms Craig-Wood is managing director of Memset, a web and IT hosting solutions provider based in Guildford, Surrey, a company she founded in 2002 with her brother Nick, its technical director.

She was made a UK finalist in this year’s BlackBerry Women and Technology awards for “best use of technology by a woman in a small to medium business”, largely for her work in green IT and for pushing the boundaries of data centre and virtualisation technologies which she hopes will make Memset the UK’s leading utility computing provider.

For now, the company is small but fast-growing, with 12 employees, only two of whom are women: “We have only two full-time women employees and only one with a technical background.

“It’s not through want of trying. At

Male hobbies?

Meeting her for the first time, it is hard to believe Kate Craig-Wood was ever a man: her looks, movements, mannerisms and ways of thinking all seem so thoroughly feminine.

She does, however, enjoy stereotypically male hobbies: motorcycling, flying helicopters, Scuba diving, sky diving and online games. How does she explain this:

“It’s a good point; but the question one should be asking is why are they stereotypically male interests? Lots of girls are into bikes, flying and IT, so even if in a minority I am not unusual.

“I would argue that it is society that encourages boys towards such areas and girls away from them, not anything innate. There is no good reason why those interests should be the domain of one gender.

“I suppose I am bolder than many women, but again I would argue that is largely thanks to my upbringing. I suspect that if girls were not so cosseted during their youth we might have many more women in leadership positions, for instance.”

the last round of interviews, we had 70 suitable applicants for a post of systems administrator and only two were female. We’re always on the lookout – but even my own company is being swamped by guys. It worries me because I don’t want to be alone in five years.

“We need more girls going into all areas, not just facilitator or slightly fluffy interface areas, but also the hard-core areas, systems administrators, programmers – you need that gender balance throughout.”

She accepts there is no easy or quick way to turn things round, although she believes companies needs to address the issues of pay for women and workplace culture: “There is a 23 per cent gender pay gap in IT, which is 6 per cent more than the UK as a whole. Some of that is plain discrimination, some of it comes down to issues of women not being good at asking for pay rises.

“If I were able, I’d positively discriminate towards women – if it wasn’t illegal – because I’m deeply concerned. There’s almost a jobs war looming in terms of people fighting over the few women there are.”

Growing up as a boy, Ms Craig-Wood knew that she should be a girl. It became a dark secret that grew increasingly difficult to hide. Growing older, she shunned alcohol to prevent her more animated female persona from being seen. She closed herself down emotionally and suffered the consequent pain.

Two years into her marriage to the woman who had been her first girlfriend, Ms Craig-Wood created Kate in an online computer game. As Kate gradually started to permeate her real life, she sought help and embarked on gender reassignment. She described the agony of growing up: “Choosing male interests was a good way to mask my secret. I wanted to do what my sister was doing, but if I did I was worried about being discovered.”

Later, at work, she found being male had some advantages: “In my earlier career, establishing credibility was very easy – it was just assumed I must know stuff. It was even assumed I knew more than I did.”

Those particular advantages are now gone: “Since transitioning, and particularly in the past year, when I’ve gone from being a fairly average-looking



Kate Craig-Wood: ‘If girls were not so cosseted we might have more women in leadership positions’

Daniel Jones

woman to developing and gaining confidence and getting the dress sense right, and the hair and especially the breast augmentation – the reaction to that was bizarre – it suddenly became really difficult to get guys to take me seriously on technical subjects. I found myself having to re-state points several times before it clicked that this blonde knows what she’s talking about.

“There is a really irritating perception that women aren’t good at technology. From a very personal perspective, and without wanting to sound arrogant, I’ve become more attractive, and it has become increasingly difficult to establish credibility with male colleagues on technical and complex business areas. Once I’ve established credibility it’s OK – but sometimes it’s really hard. It’s something I’ve experienced in an unusual way in a short time span.”

Sometimes, the response to her femininity is more blatant. Ms Craig-Wood occasionally likes to answer calls to Memset’s technical support line and says at least a third of the male callers ask to be transferred to a man: “It makes me laugh – it’s outrageous sexism.”

On top of that, there are Memset’s growing pains to worry about, and how a lack of women will affect it when it grows to a size that requires layers of management: “When you put structure

in, that’s where the gender balance becomes more important and that is a worry.

“Also, a lot of our creativity comes from within and comes from me talking to the guys and gleaning from them that they have some interesting technology that can be converted into a really great product or service

She is concerned that IT is not seen as a sexy career path: ‘There’s a view that if you want to get on in IT, you can’t be feminine, you can’t be attractive’

enhancement. That interplay can be really important.

“When we get to the point where I can’t reach out and touch everybody all at once, I would want to see more women embedded within the organisational structure. Because – and it’s a gross generalisation – women are better at talking to all those people and then thinking ‘Oh this person needs to talk to that person’, in a sort of opportunistic innovation.

“One of my worries is that you end up with silos, or male-dominated teams

that end up being very closed to each other. They see themselves being in competition.”

Was she not part of those silos before the gender transition?

“I don’t think it’s something I ever did, but I’ve seen it happening from both sides and having that insight into how the guys operate does assist me.”

She is also concerned about the negative perception of IT as being “geeky” and not a sexy career path: “There’s a view that if you want to get on in IT you can’t be feminine, you can’t be attractive.

“Women in IT say they have to be able to rise to the banter and become a ladette; you have to be willing to laugh at the crude jokes in order to be accepted because you a minority group, so you have to subsume part of your identity into the collective. This can be why women feel uncomfortable in IT careers, because they aren’t allowed to be themselves. They feel they have to be part of the boys’ club to get on.”

No longer part of any boys’ clubs, Ms Craig-Wood is determined to get on – her way.

HEAR THE INTERVIEW

Listen to Kate Craig-Wood’s views in our latest podcast (for May 7), at:

www.ft.com/dbpodcast