

# Skirting The Norm

Local women of tech are all powered up with everywhere to go

**I**n an ideal world, we wouldn't be writing this article. Women in technology wouldn't be a novelty. They wouldn't account for only 8 percent of venture-backed tech startups. And there wouldn't be a lone set of heels in a tech class flooded with loafers.

But while the current climate for women in technology may not be perfect, it's powering up in Utah Valley with increased interest, standout examples, a lush environment and mentors in waiting.

Shifting an industry? It doesn't get more ideal than that.

Read on to discover the who, why, when and how of local women in tech.

## THE WHO

Science was always Cydni Tetro's thing. In fact, the math whiz worked at Word-Perfect in high school (yes, high school) — and it's led her down a path numbered with success.

"Technology has always just felt right to me," says Tetro, co-founder of the Women Tech Council. "I love everything about it."

Then there's Mary Michelle Scott, a certified tech superstar who has powered leading roles at Lindon's Center7, American Fork's Certiport and now Orem's Fishbowl.

"If you have skills, the computer never

knows your gender," Scott says. "That's a beautiful thing."

And don't forget Cheryl Snapp Conner. Twenty years ago, the founder of the tech-driven SnappConner PR was an English major who "fell into" the technology field.

"It wasn't typical for someone with a tech background to communicate well, so I gained traction by being someone who understood the tech but could still describe it in plain English," Snapp Conner says. "But I'll tell you, Utah is the place to be. The opportunities for women in technology here are limitless."

And she's not kidding.

Just look at Carine Clark, CMO of Symantech in Lindon, one of the world's largest software companies. Look at Shau-na Theobald, former program manager for the Technology Center at Novell and current director for the Entrepreneurship Institute at UVU. Look at Susan Preator, founder of Provo-based ImagineLearning, a software company teaching literacy to students all over the world.

So many success stories; one little valley.

## THE WHY

Thanks to women like these, the landscape for technology has never been greener. But back in the day, there were some serious weeds — and we're not talking walk-20-miles-barefoot-in-the-snow back in the day. We're talking as little as 10 years ago.

"As a woman, the challenge in the early days was being taken seriously," says Preator, who founded her company in 2004. "I would talk to people in fundraising circles about creating programs to teach children how to read, and they had this view of a company where I would be sitting in the kitchen cutting out pictures and crafting worksheets. That wasn't my vision at all! I was looking to reach millions of children. My plan was a world-wide one."

Yes, it was. And Preator's vision has more than come into view. ImagineLearning had a gross revenue of more than \$21 million in 2010, and more than 200,000 children around the world are benefitting from its programs.

What a difference a decade makes.

"Today, I actually think I have somewhat of an advantage being a woman in technology," Preator says. "There's an excitement right now, and it's only going to get stronger. This is so much fun."



Cydni Tetro, who has worked at local companies like Novell and FamilyLink, has always had technology powering through her veins — which made a career in the flexible field a no-brainer.

Cheryl Snapp Conner, founder of Snapp-Conner PR, stumbled across the technology field and never looked back. "This is an incredible time for women in technology," she says. "It's never been better."

Mary Michelle Scott, president of Fishbowl in Orem, is thrilled to be a part of an industry that caters to everyone. "I'm honored to be a part of a field that levels the playing field. Anyone can do this!"

Part of the reason it's fun is because of the backdrop. Utah Valley is a place where technology companies thrive and legendary companies are born (hello WordPerfect, Novell). It's a place where we have top talent, top capital and top mentors.

And when you combine those perks with the flexibility factor? Fun doesn't even cover it.

"I love the lifestyle," says Tetro, who's currently the CEO at SocialPlayz in Lehi and an Entrepreneur in Residence at Disney. "I can work during the day, I can be home for my kids at night, and then I can get back online after they go to bed. Technology has afforded me a way of life I couldn't have had in other careers."

And it's all thanks to the almighty computer.

"The computer doesn't care. It's the great equalizer," Scott says. "We've truly arrived when we realize we are one together — when we don't create separate tribes. We need to collaborate, support and uplift one another. And I've never seen a place embrace that more than Utah Valley."

## THE WHEN

No time is the wrong time to start a

career in technology. No age is the wrong age. And no life situation is the wrong life situation. If there's a desire and a will, you can get yourself a way.

Take Colette Marx, Jennifer Christiansen and Allison Banks — three stay-at-home moms turned three SEO experts. Rich Christiansen, a Provo entrepreneur who has started nearly three dozen businesses, hired the three women, trained them and empowered them financially, mentally and emotionally.

"Just because we're stay-at-home moms doesn't mean we don't have the smarts," Marx says. "I love a challenge, and I love to see how my work produces results. It's been invigorating for me to do SEO work. Sounds kind of crazy, but there is a rush that comes when you see your site head to the top of the ranks after your hard work

has paid off."

And the best part? Their families aren't sacrificing.

"I love that I can sit at home in my pajamas with no makeup and crazy hair, do a little work and then go fix lunch for my kids. I can spend time with them, lay them down for their naps, and then do a little more work," Banks says. "I can work when it is convenient for me. I don't have to conform to anyone else's schedule, and I absolutely love that."

What's more, the learning curve's been more than doable, although it hasn't been without its challenges — or dreams.

"A couple days into the gig, I dreamt that I couldn't view my own dream until I solved a captcha," Jennifer Christiansen says. "This message kept popping up that said, 'We're sorry that's incorrect. You

## GENDER MENDER

Too often, a push for more women (in any given industry) can translate into anti-men rhetoric.

So not helpful, says Cydni Tetro, co-founder of the Women Tech Council.

"We try very hard for our organization not to be about women's rights. It's 100 percent about networking, mentoring and visibility for women," Tetro says. "In fact, 40 percent of our advisory board is men. We want to collaborate with and support men every way we can."



LEFT TO RIGHT: Allison Banks, Colette Marx and Jennifer Christiansen. These three stay-at-home moms were looking for an opportunity to learn a new challenge and bring in extra money — and they found said opportunity in the technology field. Rich Christiansen, author of the “Zig Zag Principle,” hired the local women and trained them in SEO — while still giving them the flexibility they desired as moms.

can't view this dream.”

The dream job, on the other hand? Plain as day.

“I attended a conference in Ohio. One of the speakers asked the audience what words they would use to describe how they would feel if they won the lottery. A few responses were ‘relieved,’ ‘excited,’ ‘happy,’ and ‘on top of the world,’” Marx says. “Then the speaker said that’s how we should feel when we go to work. If we have the right job, it can feel like we have won the lottery every day. That’s exactly what I feel like with this job.”

## THE HOW

So how exactly do you get a career in technology? It’s up to you.

“The opportunities are there if we take them,” Tetro says. “There’s never been a real barrier for me because I have such a technical background. It’s helped me level the playing field.”

And that’s the key — education.

“The biggest illusion is that this is unattainable,” Scott says. “Putting in the time and learning the skills opens up a whole new world. When you cross that digital divide — with college or without it — you give your life endless possibilities. Don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t play.”

As for how to play, start by finding the right circles. Local groups like the Women Tech Council and the Women’s Business Network are crucial to fostering relationships and finding mentors.

“We created the Women Tech Council because we wanted a community and a platform for women in this field,” Tetro says of the group that has more than 4,000 women involved. “I love my interaction with these smart women. We learn from each other. We network with each other. We support each other. And it’s a wonderful outlet because there just aren’t enough of us in this field.”

In order to change that, local women have made a big push to get younger generations of girls interested in a career of tech. They’ve spoken at high schools, sponsored mentor programs and given of their time to advocate the cause.

“A lot of young women think about a career in technology as sitting in front of a computer and building accounting software, which, you can imagine, doesn’t always sound glamorous or fun,” Preator says. “But there’s so much more to it than that. With technology, you can control the kind of career you have, and we need to get that message across.”

Tetro couldn’t agree more.

“The perception of what it means to be in technology is starting to change,” she says. “You actually can be in the technology world and still be considered ‘in’ or cool. The two aren’t mutually exclusive anymore.”

But if you want to get technical, success in the larger-than-life field comes down to basics.

“The skills will win in technology. It’s not personality or politics. If you have skills, you are going to do well,” Scott says. “It’s really not that difficult, and I hope the secret’s out.” ☐

# 2018

The year in which there will be more than 1.4 MILLION computer specialist jobs available. Yeah. We like those odds.