



The Deloitte On Cloud Podcast

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Title: Leveling the playing field for women in cloud computing

Description: Look around at any cloud conference, and you'll see a lopsided ratio of men to women. Why aren't there more women in tech, and in cloud computing specifically? In this episode, David Linthicum talks with Deloitte's Lisa Noon and Appgate's Tamara Prazak about how to get more women into cloud. In the end, it comes down to bridging the STEM gap for girls early on, recruiting more women, and making their working lives more flexible. Cultural change also plays a big role in closing the gap.

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David Linthicum:

Welcome back to the On Cloud Podcast. Today on the show I am joined by Tamara Prazak who is the senior director of channel sales at Appgate, and managing director at Deloitte, Lisa Noon, who is back—is this your third time back on the podcast, Lisa?

Lisa Noon:

I think it is, Dave. It's great to be here with you again. I really enjoy it.

David Linthicum:

Well, the listeners love you. So, Tamara, tell us a little bit about yourself. Lisa's been on the show a few times, and we're going to get to her, but tell us the Tamara Prazak story.

Tamara Prazak:

Well, thanks for having me, Dave—excited to be here with Lisa. I'm Tamara Prazak. As you said, I'm the senior director of sales for Appgate. We are a cybersecurity company focused on zero-trust network access, and I reside in Denver, and I've been in tech for—let's just say over 20 years, and I'm excited to be here.

David Linthicum:

Wow. Yeah, excited to have you on, too, and love this topic today. We're going to talk about the Cloud Girls but also talk about women in cloud computing and that whole thing that's been going on for a few years, and the ability to kind of improve the situation out there. So, tell us about Cloud Girls and, also, has any event occurred recently with someone who's on the call?

Tamara Prazak:

Yeah. So, Cloud Girls was founded in 2011, and it was really created to unite female tech thought leaders as kind of a place to come together to learn, inspire, give back. And Dave, we get a lot of questions about the name because we have some very seasoned members like Lisa who are very respected vets in the field. But we hear Cloud Girls sounds so youthful, and that's by design. The name was chosen to be emblematic of kind of that youthful exuberance of learning a new technology, and it started with cloud and then it's grown over time as tech has expanded into other areas like AI, cybersecurity, blockchain. But again, going back and trying to capture that youthful exuberance of digging into something.

And you asked about the award. So, one of our core values of Cloud Girls is giving back and then also celebrating success. And seven years ago, we started the Cloud Girls Rising Awards, and the intention is to recognize standout performers in cloud. And what we like about the award is it celebrates women in all stages of their career. And this year in 2022, Lisa was selected as our Visionary winner, and so she's recognized for her leadership in cloud, and not only for what she's done, but as that visionary, recognizing where the cloud market is headed and leading others toward that vision.

David Linthicum:

Well, congratulations, Lisa. So, what do you think were some of the attributes of your work that kind of led to the Visionary award? What are some of the things that you've been focusing on for the last few years in terms of cloud computing and also getting women into cloud computing?

Lisa Noon:

Well, yeah, thanks, Dave, and thanks, Tamara, for the kind words. I just want to say it was really, truly an honor. First of all, it's an honor to be associated with Cloud Girls. Tamara is one example of a network of women that are just extraordinary. They're extraordinary individually, and they're extraordinary collectively, and I couldn't be more excited to be associated with them as a member, and then recently as an awardee.

For me, the award—I mean, I've been in the business, Dave for 40 years, and so I've been a proponent of improving the talent experience, the work-life balance, the work, the opportunity for women and minorities for that entire time. I've been in cloud now 15, and so the thing about this award that really makes it special for me is that it kind of knits together those two parts of my career, with recognition that one feeds the other and really unique to Cloud Girls to recognize that.

I want to also mention the other—there were several other awards, as Tamara said. But the group of women that—kind of the just the candidate pool we had for award nominations this year, it—every year it gets better. So, that's great to see. It's great to see all the hard work that all of us are out there doing to advance DEI while we drive cloud forward on a technological level that are starting to pay off. It's a thrill to be associated with progress in that area.

David Linthicum:

Yeah, absolutely, and it's well-deserved, too. I've been working with Lisa for the last two companies. We were executives at a company prior to joining Deloitte, and it's funny. We started the same day, and we were on the same press release. And the first time I saw your work before I even met you is someone in the company came up and said, "We had Lisa's profile"—this was a particular market opportunity, things like that. And they put in front of me this 20-page paper that was detailed and footnoted and really kind of nailed the market in terms of where it was going. And I said, "Wow, I really have to work with some smart people; I'd better step up my game." But she's one of the hardest-working people that I know, ultimately, well-deserved, serving a lot of value with the previous company, also serving a lot of value here at Deloitte. And so, we're lucky to have Lisa here on the team. And with that, we're probably going to embarrass her enough, but it's really a great attribute to have the talent and really kind of moving forward.

So, I've got a question. At a conference this week in Vegas, and everybody's back doing that, and walking around, well-attended. The hotel was sold out; the conference was sold out. And looking around at a particular tech show, in this case a cloud tech show, only ten percent females were there at the conference, and that's not unusual. It's funny. You just have a tendency not to notice it. When you do notice it, you kind of realize there's a large deficit between the two genders, ultimately.

And we have women who make up 54 percent of the population according to the search I just did, but a smaller amount in the cloud game. So, Tamara, I'm going to go to you first. What do you think is causing that and what are the steps we need to take to kind of get more people interested in cloud computing and get more companies off the dime and making sure they're employing females?

Tamara Prazak:

Yeah, and to validate from some statistics that women make up less than 20 percent of the cloud computing workforce. I think actually it's closer to 15 percent. And if you look at STEM, women make up only 28 percent of the workforce in science, technology, engineering, and math. And a lot of that goes back to—it even goes back to many girls lose confidence in math by third grade. So, it goes back to when they're young, and it's really all of us collectively encouraging our youth, our daughters, the people that we know early and through high school, and also highlighting success stories in these field. That's

part of the reason why we do this Cloud Girls Rising Award, because if you can see it, you can be it. And so, I think it's all of us. It's mentor programs. It's all of these organizations and things, but it's still staggering when you think where we are and the low—it's just disproportionate.

David Linthicum:

So, you guys are taking action in terms of Cloud Girls and promoting this as a career choice moving forward. So, would that be your purpose, or is it basically to assist people who are members in the organization, or all of the above?

Tamara Prazak:

All of the above. Again, we want to inspire. We want to give back. A lot of our giving campaigns are focused on organizations that help try and bring up the next generation of women in tech, so all of those things. And like we said, the Cloud Girls Rising Award is really to highlight women at all stages of their career and highlight these standout performers and make sure that other people see again what they're doing. These are women to watch, and understanding their path. And everybody kind of has a different path, and as we highlight all of those arenas and areas, then people can see it.

And I know Lisa and I had this conversation last time we were together, that women and work-life balance is a challenge, and there are all routes to success. I know I took some time off in my career early on, and I always talk about that to people because you can give up some certain things, but there are a continuum of options to be in tech. I've done things where I've done job share. I've done things where I was full time. I took time off. And I think it's important that women understand it. Is it all or nothing? It doesn't have to be. And I know, Lisa, you and I talked about this.

David Linthicum:

Lisa, you've been in this industry for a long period of time as a woman so what's your opinion on the state of females working in the cloud computing space, and what can we do to improve?

Lisa Noon:

Well, Dave, I think kind of what's changed in the last handful of years is that we now have raised awareness. It was an ambition kind of sporadically funded in different programs around, but every major enterprise, profit or nonprofit, right now seems to have a program about improving the lives of women and minorities in their organization, and that's a good thing. And I think there were some assumptions about potential quick fixes to the problem. We're kind of in uncharted waters now when it comes to recruiting and interviewing and other things that we can talk about if you want.

This is, for all the reasons Tamara mentioned, that we all I think blatantly observe, is there just aren't enough women, and so this is going to take time. We have to nurture all the women that have as we just talked about, left the workforce for one reason or another. While we get new talent in, either retrain women that are in other parts of the industry, in the cloud, start young. There are organizations out there like IGNITE Worldwide which we had to talk to our board—that are out there globally trying to get young women to get into STEM and coding. There are scholarship programs. It's going to take years to get kind of to the concept of gender parity in this business, and it's going to take all of us working together and communicating very clearly to get it done.

David Linthicum:

So, Tamara, what I love with what Lisa's saying is this isn't an easy fix. This isn't just turning up the demand and the number of opportunities that are available for women. And you alluded to this earlier, it's the ability to get females into this career field by educating them in different ways and promoting them in different ways early on in the lifecycle as they start forming their ideas and opinions and skillsets and figuring out what they want to do. So, this becomes kind of a harder problem to solve. It's more of a systemic problem and something has to go back a bit in terms of how we recruit and maintain females in the technology sector. So, what do we need to change? What are some of the core things? And I know we don't have the ability and the power to change everything, but what should educational institutions do? What should companies do? What should mentors do? How should we think differently?

Tamara Prazak:

Well, like we said—and it goes back to early education, high school, just having that focus. If many girls are losing confidence in math by third grade, then how do we address that and change that? And I mean, there are studies that show there is difference in gender performance in the field of math, but yet there is kind of that myth or that confidence gap. And so how do we address going back, how do we address the confidence gap? How do we highlight and enable—and again, if you can see it, you can be it, so consistently letting young girls see the examples of people like Lisa and others who've gone before them who are successful in these fields.

And so, I think it's everything from educational perspective, at a mentoring perspective, at an exposure perspective. And there's lots of great organizations out there, but I think it's a collective. Like Lisa said, we're not going to fix this today with the pool that's already in the workforce. It's how do we bring up the next generation and the generation behind that and continue to address some of those gaps, where that confidence drops off and step in there and help bridge?

David Linthicum:

Yeah, so, Lisa, we're doing some things wrong in terms of how we're educating and encouraging women to get in this particular marketplace. That's kind of my observation of studies from that. But there's things we can do to improve how that happens. And I always say if people have the strategy—in other words, well, we're going to improve and make it better, but I'm always into the how we're going to do it and the mechanisms we need to put in place and the money we need to spend, and really getting to a point—and by the way, we have a technology shortage now and it's severe—the ability to recruit, train, and launch more women into the technical field, but cloud computing in general. So, what are the mechanisms do you think we need to put in place to improve?

Lisa Noon:

Well, Dave I think it's going to take some tough decisions to get us there. and that's the hard, honest truth. Offering women more incentives to join cloud, I'm a big fan of coding scholarships. I think it's great. I learned to code very young.

That's what got me excited and well-paid. I was making more money as a coder than I could've in any other profession, and that's what drove me into the business. Girls Who Code, Lesbians in Tech—all these organizations could use a hand. So, corporate sponsorships are important, having female leaders in

organizations, recognizing them to collaborate with them is important just thinking outside the box generally and doing things that for a short period of time may feel very uncomfortable –

Tamara Prazak:

And I would add—sorry to interrupt. I would also add, too, like we talked about as women do leave the workforce and then providing opportunities, like Lisa said, and avenues for them to come back in or to come back in in a flexible manner if that's what they need at that stage in their career and that stage in their personal life and to support that and having that—again, I think the problem is a lot of people think it has to be all or nothing. And there are options along that where women can still contribute and still maintain those skills, because if we lose somebody out of tech again, like Lisa said, it takes a while to reestablish that. And so, we want to provide options for the ability to come back easily.

David Linthicum:

Tamara, getting to a larger problem in talking to women about why they didn't pick tech as a field, leaving cloud computing out of it right now, many of them view the cultures within the organization as very unfriendly to having women in the technical field. In other words, so they don't join it because they view it's going to be an upward battle and therefore go after more traditional female careers and leave tech alone. So, what can we do as a society, as a company, as someone who's maintaining a culture and trying to change cultures within an organization to be more friendly and accepting to women in tech?

Tamara Prazak:

I think you hit it right there with the keyword of culture, and yes, I mean, the stats are out there. Women are like we said, less than 20 percent in cloud computing. But if we are—people I think you do have a natural inclination to be part of something larger than yourself, and culture is important. We spend so much time working. So, I think the way to combat that is to highlight the culture, highlight being a part of a group, highlight that path to success and that while women are going to be the minority on that, but highlight the opportunities for them so that they understand that there is a path, a route for them to be successful.

David Linthicum:

So, Lisa, companies are looking at this as a problem—we already talked about this—as maybe it's a supply chain issue, not a demand issue, and we're going to have to fix this in a systemic way including dealing with cultures and how we educate, promote, and encourage females to move in this particular career path, and the ability to have mechanisms to accelerate that supply chain creation stuff, in other words creating more talent in the marketplace moving forward.

So, what should executives at global 2,000 companies be thinking about right now? So, in other words, we have a shortage of tech workers, we really would like these workers to be more women. That points to the movements that occurred, things like that, but we're looking for an effective way to do it. What do you think those effective ways are?

Lisa Noon:

Well, Dave a lot of things have been tried. I think we have to look at things that haven't been tried. And just one quick idea and it's one I kind of—the path I took personally, in order to do two things, right—increase the number of women and minorities in the tech business and increase your tech talent dramatically, right, a lot of companies require four-year degrees. Well, you can have workable, usable, valuable skills in tech without a four-year degree. And loosening the reins on that and maybe being a little openminded where you can hire people out of coding academics, you can hire people out with an associate's degree in comp sci focus on the skills and the quality of the talent and get them in the door and encourage people.

I'm a big fan of organized education, right, but you don't have to have a four-year degree out of the gate. It seems like years ago we used to have more of those programs where I could get my four-year degree while I was working, but those seem to be kind of gone by the wayside. And I'd like to see the big firms look more into those areas because I think that would help a lot.

David Linthicum:

Yeah, you think about it. There's more opportunities to train out there and the reality is you can get the skills and the talent you need directly just by being a continuous learner and so Tamara, how do you think we're going to change that? How do you think we're going to move in directions where we're more pragmatic about how we're obtaining and training people, specifically women, how we recruit, and also open up our doors a bit more in terms of folks who may not have what we consider the standard degree programs that we're looking for?

Tamara Prazak:

I think it's doing—exactly what Lisa said, doing that, and then highlighting that. And then that's going to speak to the other people who, okay maybe I have this coding degree, but I don't have a four-year degree. So, I think we have to highlight those success stories. Where are we seeing it work? How have people succeeded? Or create some success stories and then tout those success stories both internally and externally. And again, if you can see it, you can be it. And I keep saying it, but if we show people the route to success and knock down some of these perceptions that, oh, I wouldn't be successful there; I'm not a good candidate because I don't have X, getting over that perception and creating that awareness which then creates the demand. And again, people want to be part of something successful. You show them how they can be successful. I think that's going to help ignite more excitement and more applicants.

David Linthicum:

Well said. So, Tamara, where can our listeners find out more about Cloud Girls?

Tamara Prazak:

You can visit us on the web at CloudGirls.org.

David Linthicum:

Let me tell you, this is very important stuff. We have a severe, severe skill shortage right now, and certainly in the cloud computing field, and it's hindering the ability for companies to move forward and be productive and innovative in leveraging this technology. So, the ability to open up this other area of

talent, recruit and bring them into the organization, also have an open mind in terms of how we're going to hire and how we're going to leverage and how we're going to grow people I think is going to be a key changing moving forward. So, keep this in mind so we have to focus on solving this issue.

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