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If you want additional information about the technologies featured in this edition of *SMB dynamo* or have story suggestions for future editions, please contact us at dynamo@cisco.com.

Finding new power and purpose

It has taken far too long, but women are claiming their rightful places as leaders in business and technology.

As we explore in the following stories, this progress is about more than climbing corporate ladders and breaking glass ceilings—it's about finding deeper meaning in their careers. In the words of leadership coach Kristina Cleary: "Women are becoming more purposeful about designing the life they want."

And they're using technology to do it. Advances in connectivity, collaboration, and cloud-based digital tools help make women's aspirations more attainable than ever: career growth and networking; work-life flexibility; learning new skills; or starting a company and reaching customers.

Notably, their own career success is often not enough. Women often reinvest their professional gains, using their hard-won influence to support others who want to take similar strides.

These are just some of the threads woven throughout this edition of *SMB dynamo*, which reflects Cisco's [commitment to powering an inclusive future for all](#). This collection of stories features the experiences of women leaders and the mentorship they offer at companies of all sizes, ([p. 17](#) and [p. 22](#)), in their communities ([p. 13](#)), and in traditionally male-dominated industries ([p. 11](#) and [p. 20](#)).

Of course, the path still has its obstacles. "As a woman, it's not assumed that you have the authority to tell people what to do," says Micheline Murphy, a systems engineer and Cisco Certified Network Professional. "Women have to earn it."

Fortunately, growing ranks of women are willing to share words of wisdom. May these stories inspire lofty goals and new horizons.

— ***SMB dynamo* editorial team**

Technology Trends



Taking the lead

Many women are seizing control of their professional destinies—and helping others make similar strides



Kristina Cleary, Founder and Chief Leadership Coach, ACCELLE

Kristina Cleary spent decades cultivating a successful marketing career in the technology sector, first as a consultant and then at several startups, navigating the perils of acquisitions and public stock offerings. But in 2019, as the chief marketing officer of a global technology company that she helped grow into a billion-dollar business, Cleary sought a new kind of leadership challenge.

“I had never had the opportunity to be the entrepreneur, the person in charge,” says Cleary. “You can still be in a corporate job with an entrepreneurial mindset, but it was time for me to go out on my own.”

Today, Cleary harnesses her mix of entrepreneurial drive and corporate battle scars as founder

and chief leadership coach of [ACCELLE](#). Based in Toronto, Canada, she runs programs specifically for women around the world looking to accelerate their personal and professional success.

And business is booming. Whether through launching businesses or climbing corporate ladders, women are seizing control of their professional destinies like never before—and like Cleary, doing so with a stated purpose to support other women who want to do the same.

New directions

According to research by [Catalyst](#), a global nonprofit dedicated to advancing women in the workplace, the proportion of women in senior management jobs around the world in 2021 grew

to 31 percent, the highest ever recorded. And when they can't break through glass ceilings, women increasingly forge their own path: globally, a third of all businesses are owned by women.

The [World Bank estimates](#) that 252 million women are entrepreneurs, with another 153 million women leading established businesses, and women aged 25-45 now more often express an intent to start a business.

Technology is playing a key role in these trends. Advances in connectivity, collaboration, and cloud-based digital tools make it easier than ever to start a company and reach customers. The pandemic also demonstrated the viability of working remotely with the work-life flexibility that provides.

As much as Covid-19 had a disproportionately large impact on women, including those who owned small businesses, it also spurred new businesses—in the U.S., nearly [40 percent of](#)

[female entrepreneurs launched their businesses](#) as a direct result of the pandemic. For many women, the upheaval either shifted or crystallized priorities. According to one [survey of women entrepreneurs](#), more than 70 percent of

respondents said Covid-19 changed how they measure success, and more than 80 percent now seek to mentor other women.

“A lot of women forget they have the power to say no to things that are not aligned with where they want to go.”

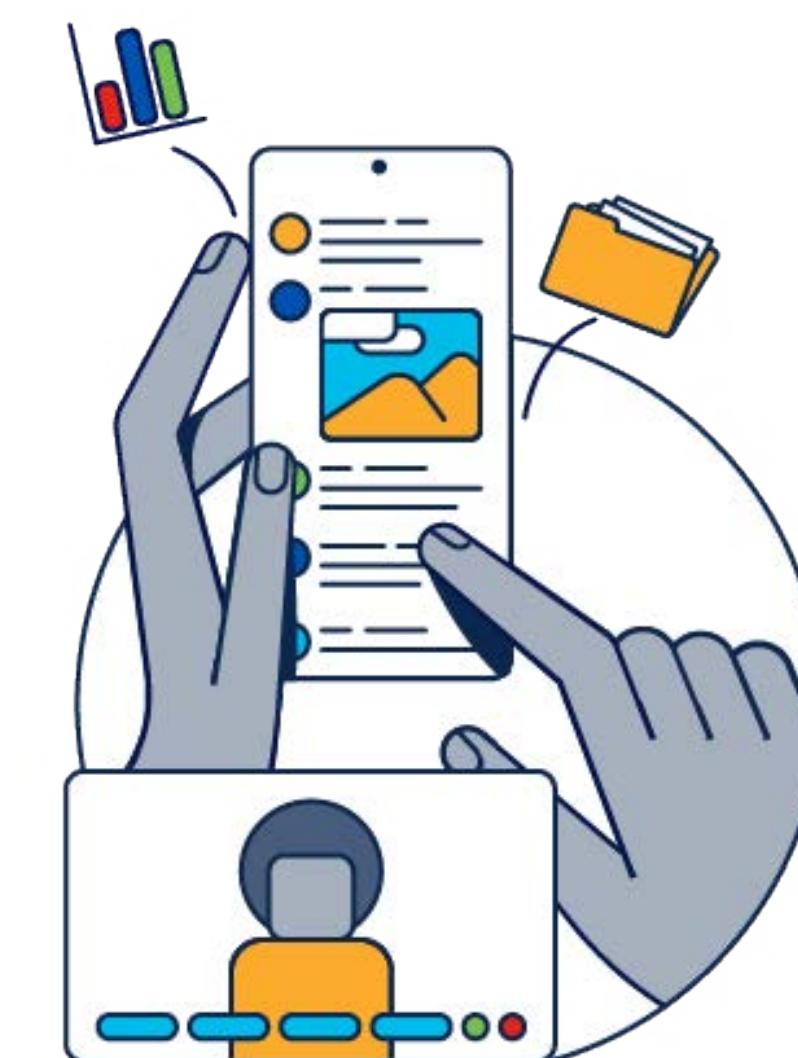
— Kristina Cleary, Founder and Chief Leadership Coach, ACCELLE

“For everyone in society, there has been a huge wake up call with regards to how they want to live their life,” says Cleary, noting one example of a client who left her salaried position to pursue a side hustle full time. “Women are becoming more purposeful about designing the life they want.”

Áine Rogers sees firsthand how more women want to take their careers in new directions, especially as SMB entrepreneurs. As Cisco's director of small and medium business for the United Kingdom and Ireland, she regularly meets

SMBs and sits on panels speaking to professional women. (See [“How company culture supported one woman’s discovery of her own potential”](#) on page 9 to read her story.)

“When I get to meet these women,” says Rogers, “they’re young and a lot of ideas for their businesses were born at the kitchen table, where they recognized a need.” In her experience, that type of creativity and willingness to challenge the status quo is what drives career and business progress at every level. “Why not just push the



boundaries a little bit more? I've found that resonates with SMBs, because that's what they're all about: follow your passion, understand your ideas, fail fast, learn, and move on."

Innovation through diversity

At the same time, growing ranks of companies of all sizes have begun to see the powerful business value of creativity that diversity offers. Rogers even argues it's now a societal imperative that organizations of all sizes harness more diverse perspectives, especially in tech roles, to fuel the

innovation the world needs. "Technology will help solve all kinds of problems we face," she says. "But the people and skills that design technology must evolve if we are to adapt."

Cleary agrees. "Leaders are realizing that innovation is one of the many outcomes driven through the inclusion of people from different backgrounds, genders, races, religions, etcetera," she says. "The highest performing organizations in the world understand the benefits of seeing things through different lenses. Women bring unique character strengths, creativity, and ideas to the table."

Micheline Murphy is a striking example of someone using her unique perspective to shape a new career in technology—after nearly 20 years as a criminal defense trial lawyer.

Based in Seattle, Washington, Murphy retired from the bar in 2016, turning her analytical mind toward becoming a Cisco Certified Network Professional. "My practice area was getting very

repetitive and unsatisfying," she says. "But I found networking fascinating."

Murphy used the skills she honed through diligently absorbing legal knowledge to quickly achieve multiple Cisco certifications, including a specialization in the Application Centric Infrastructure (ACI) solution for data centers. She now works with startups and SMBs as a pre-sales consulting systems engineer for [World Wide Technology Co.](#), a global IT services provider and leading Cisco partner.

As a woman in a male-dominated field, Murphy finds she builds a distinct rapport with clients. "The role I'm in right now allows me the freedom to think in creative ways to solve problems," says Murphy. "I use not just my technical expertise, but all the soft skills that I developed as a lawyer."

However, she has found her gender requires a different approach to the work. "I've yet to be on an engineering team where I'm not the only woman," says Murphy. "As a woman, even as



Micheline Murphy, Consulting Systems Engineer and Cisco Certified Network Professional, [World Wide Technology Co.](#)

a woman lawyer, it's not automatically assumed when you walk in a room that you have the authority to tell people what to do. Women have to earn it. I can't tell a room full of engineers what to do until I've established in their mind that I am the authority. I do that dance with every new customer."

Lifting the sisterhood

Like many women who achieve success, Murphy recognizes the importance of connecting with others trying to do the same. She regularly appears in podcasts and videos, and uses her platform as a [Cisco Champion](#), a community of customers, partners and consultants who like discussing technology and sharing what they've learned. She often forwards to other women in her field opportunities that could help advance their careers, and advocates for re-skilling or pursuing certifications. "There needs to be more female candidates for hiring managers to consider in order to be able to address our gender gap," she says.

Cleary's programs are designed to support such career growth, in technology and beyond, offering skills not taught through typical corporate training: communication, confidence, negotiation, and even how to set boundaries for better work-life balance.

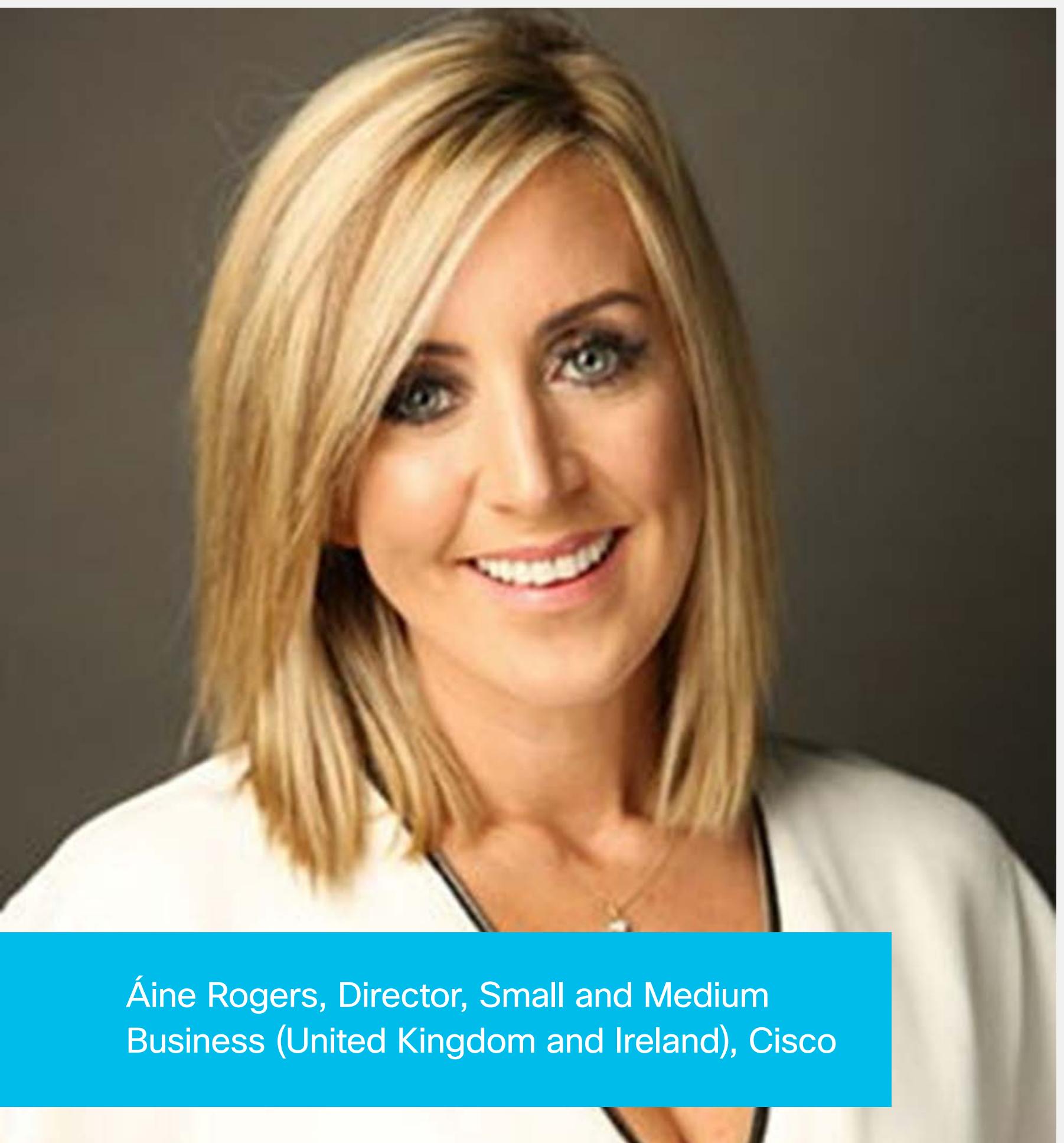
"A big lesson is that women have the power to say no to things that are not aligned with where they want to go," says Cleary. "A lot of women forget they even have the choice. Being intentional about when to say 'Yes' is a large part of designing the life you want."

For her part, she doesn't regret saying 'No' to her C-level position. "What I like about my business is that it's purpose-driven, creating a world full of diverse leadership by helping as many women as possible get to the top, while living the life they desire."

It's a mission shared by growing legions of women empowering each other to succeed on their own terms. ■



How company culture supported one woman's discovery of her own potential



Áine Rogers, Director, Small and Medium Business (United Kingdom and Ireland), Cisco

The catalysts for discovering purpose come in many forms. For Áine Rogers, it began with tragedy.

Rogers' career launched on the fast track. A high achiever throughout her youth, she was identified in her early twenties as a potential leader by Hutchison Telecom while working in Australia and progressed quickly through its ranks.

But at age 25, everything changed when her daughter Croíá was born with a severe deprivation of oxygen. "She passed away after two weeks," says Rogers. "And I fell to pieces."

Consumed with grief, she retreated home to Ireland, her sense of self and faith in the world shattered. "I allowed myself some time to step away," she says. When she did re-enter the workforce two years later, it was with much less confidence and ambition. Her primary focus was family, she says. "I couldn't see that you could have both."

Seventeen years later, Rogers is now the director of small and medium business for the United Kingdom

and Ireland at Cisco. She credits her return to professional success to the culture of support and mentorship at the company that patiently inspired her to rediscover her own potential.

"Even during the interview process, they were offering me higher positions than the sales administration roles I was interviewing for, but I thought, 'No, I'm okay in my lane here.' It took time, but the passion for the business built up and the fire was reignited," she says. "This company saw who I was, believed in who I was, and allowed me the space to believe it myself."

Rogers says it's vital that SMBs embrace a similar mindset to recognize and support diverse talent. "To allow women to break barriers and expand boundaries, we have to be inclusive and creative in our view of what possible could be," says Rogers. "It's having the mentors and sponsors who will speak about you when you're not in the room because they know who you are and they know what you bring." ■

A close-up, profile shot of a woman with long brown hair, wearing a black over-ear headset with a microphone. She is looking towards the left. In the background, a computer monitor with a blurred screen is visible. A solid green rectangular overlay is positioned in the top-left corner of the image, containing the white text "Digital Journeys".

Digital Journeys

Helping women and their stories shine



The Hello Sunshine leadership team

When American actor and producer Reese Witherspoon formed her media company Hello Sunshine in 2016, she had a big vision: to increase female representation and storytelling in the traditionally male-dominated industry. Showcasing stories about and created by women—in film and TV, across digital platforms, and through Reese’s Book Club—the company became a fast-rising star.

Hello Sunshine has thrived over the past few years, and its leaders credit SMB-friendly technologies for helping the company advance its mission and continue to grow amidst turbulent times.

“Like countless small businesses, we used to have rudimentary technologies in place,” says Sarah Oxman, senior director of operations for Hello Sunshine, noting a network with multiple points of potential failure, basic antivirus software,

and a lack of physical security. “But as we grew, we needed to formalize and standardize our technology infrastructure. And the pandemic pushed everyone out of the office, which further reinforced the need for better connectivity, security, and collaboration.”

With help from IT services partner [Feedwire](#), Hello Sunshine redesigned its technology infrastructure with a [Cisco Meraki](#) network, [Cisco Umbrella](#) security, and [Cisco Meraki Smart Cameras and Sensors](#).

“Cisco technologies have helped us take storytelling online and bring conversations to our social community faster than ever before,” says Zoe Fairbourn, head of Brand Partnerships at Hello Sunshine. “We created Shine On at Home with Reese, we’ve hosted Author Talks in conjunction with our book announcements,

and we had the first Legally Blonde cast reunion. Many of them have taken place on [Webex by Cisco](#), and all of them have been enabled by our Meraki network."

Cisco technologies have also helped Hello Sunshine untether its creative teams, reach a greater diversity of talent, and expand its operations beyond Los Angeles. The company recently opened satellite offices in Nashville, New York, and London.



"We've gone from 30 people to 130 over the past two years, but it still feels like a close-knit team," Fairbourn says. Oxman agrees: "We've been able to grow and flourish because we've stayed connected and engaged."

Part of the company's expansion has included the formation of an in-house production team, something that wasn't possible without a robust technology infrastructure that features both digital and physical security.

"Studios require security cameras inside and outside of areas where content is being produced and stored," Oxman explains. "The Meraki cameras have been great, and it's comforting to know we have eyes on all of our IP." To further protect sensitive office areas, [Meraki IoT sensors](#) monitor temperature, humidity, and access doors. All of the Cisco Meraki components are managed through a single cloud-based dashboard.

With its technology infrastructure in place, its most critical assets fully protected, and its

Read more about
[why Hello Sunshine chose Cisco for hybrid work](#)

Discover how
[Cisco Meraki supports SMBs](#)

newly expanded workforce connected across international borders, Hello Sunshine continues to do what it does best—creating, celebrating, and discovering stories with women at the center. And the results have been nothing short of dazzling.

Show produced by Hello Sunshine have received 20 Emmy nominations to date. And Reese's Book Club now has more than 2.8 million followers across social media and over 320,000 engaged members through its app and continues to grow.

For Hello Sunshine and the women in their orbit, the sun is most definitely shining. ■

Solar empowerment

Women entrepreneurs in sub-Saharan Africa drive change in underserved communities



On Katherine Lucey's first visit to sub-Saharan Africa, a light bulb switched on in her mind: small-scale solar power could bring light to the region's many underserved communities.

"Just a single light bulb changes everything about a family's wellbeing," says Lucey, who travelled to Africa as part of a rural electrification project. "In rural Africa when the sun goes down, it becomes pitch black because there are no streetlights, there's no ambient light."

Lucey learned how transformative solar-powered electric light could be for communities. It improves safety, and it increases productivity, as many small homes are built without windows—light allows children to study and others to complete household chores or work. Solar light

improves air quality as well, as people can replace dirtier fuel sources, such as kerosene, that pose long-term health risks.

For Lucey, the trip opened her eyes to a huge swath of humanity being left behind. Although much of the world has shifted toward a future increasingly dependent on technology, more than 600 million people in sub-Saharan Africa have no access to electricity, and 77 percent of people have no access to clean power sources.

A solar solution

Lucey, a former banking and energy executive based in the U.S., was so inspired that in 2009 she helped found [Solar Sister](#), a nonprofit organization devoted to bringing solar power to underserved communities in sub-Saharan Africa.

But Solar Sister's mission goes further, by mobilizing women as its primary agents of change. A network of 7400 self-employed entrepreneurs work with the organization, 87 percent of whom are women. Seventy-five percent of these entrepreneurs come from "last-mile" communities in Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda that struggle with a lack of access to grid power, low-income or seasonal economies, and remote or isolated geography.

Supporting communities and themselves

Lucey explains that Solar Sister's local women-to-women network is key to its model, supporting income opportunities through the sale of products like solar lanterns and phone chargers, clean-energy cookstoves, radios, fans, and water filters. (Even people who have no power in their homes still own cellphones, which typically requires a walk to a kiosk in a nearby village to pay for charging services.)

"By embedding local women as entrepreneurs, women reach out to other women and tell them, 'I use this product myself, and my baby doesn't cough anymore.' 'My eyes have not been having problems because of smoke.' 'I am saving so much money, look at my new shoes,'" says Lucey. "They're able to explain to another woman what the benefits are, and she will trust her because she knows her."

Rachel Joke Olakanye is a prime example. Olakanye has run a successful tailoring business for over 20 years on the outskirts of Ibadan, Nigeria, about 120 km (75 miles) north of Lagos. When she heard about Solar Sister from a friend, she decided it would nicely complement her existing business. Since the electricity supply in Olakanye's neighborhood is unreliable, solar lanterns were a great success. As a Solar Sister entrepreneur, Olakanye was able to pay for her daughter's school fees in Lagos—earning income for education is a primary motivation for many Solar Sister entrepreneurs—and she could make much-needed repairs to her own home, all while improving her community.



Building entrepreneurs

Solar Sister also offers essential entrepreneurial skills through training, mentorship, and familiarization with modern technology. Each entrepreneur takes part in a 12-month training program to learn about clean energy and how to build a business around clean-energy products. In addition to business skills like marketing, networking, and record-keeping, they gain life skills such as goal setting and leadership. “The most helpful training they provide is explaining about capital, revenue, and profits,” says Joyce Noah Mollel, a farmer and Solar Sister entrepreneur in northern Tanzania.

Technology plays a key role in their success. With [social impact grant support from Cisco](#), Solar Sister enables entrepreneurs to enhance their digital skills, using a smartphone to connect to cloud-based customer management and inventory systems.

“The most helpful training they provide is explaining about capital, revenue, and profits.”

– Joyce Noah Mollel, farmer and Solar Sister entrepreneur, Tanzania

The backbone of the Solar Sister program is the monthly Sisterhood Group Meeting, when the entrepreneurs pick up inventory, receive business training and support. “But it is so much more than just that,” says Lucey. “It’s where the women gain a sense of purpose that is bigger than just themselves and they build connections with

each other. It is this ‘sisterhood’ value that they mention time and again as providing meaning, friendship, and belonging.”

Power to the people

To date, Solar Sister has brought solar power to 3.4 million people in sub-Saharan Africa, eliminating nearly 1 million metric tons of CO₂e emissions, but Lucey isn’t content for the organization to rest on its laurels.

“We’re very proud of that accomplishment, but it’s not nearly enough,” she says. “We want to

take that milestone and multiply it by 10 so that we can reach 30 million people. We want 30,000 women entrepreneurs.”

And in the process, Solar Sister will continue to light up women’s lives and their communities. ■

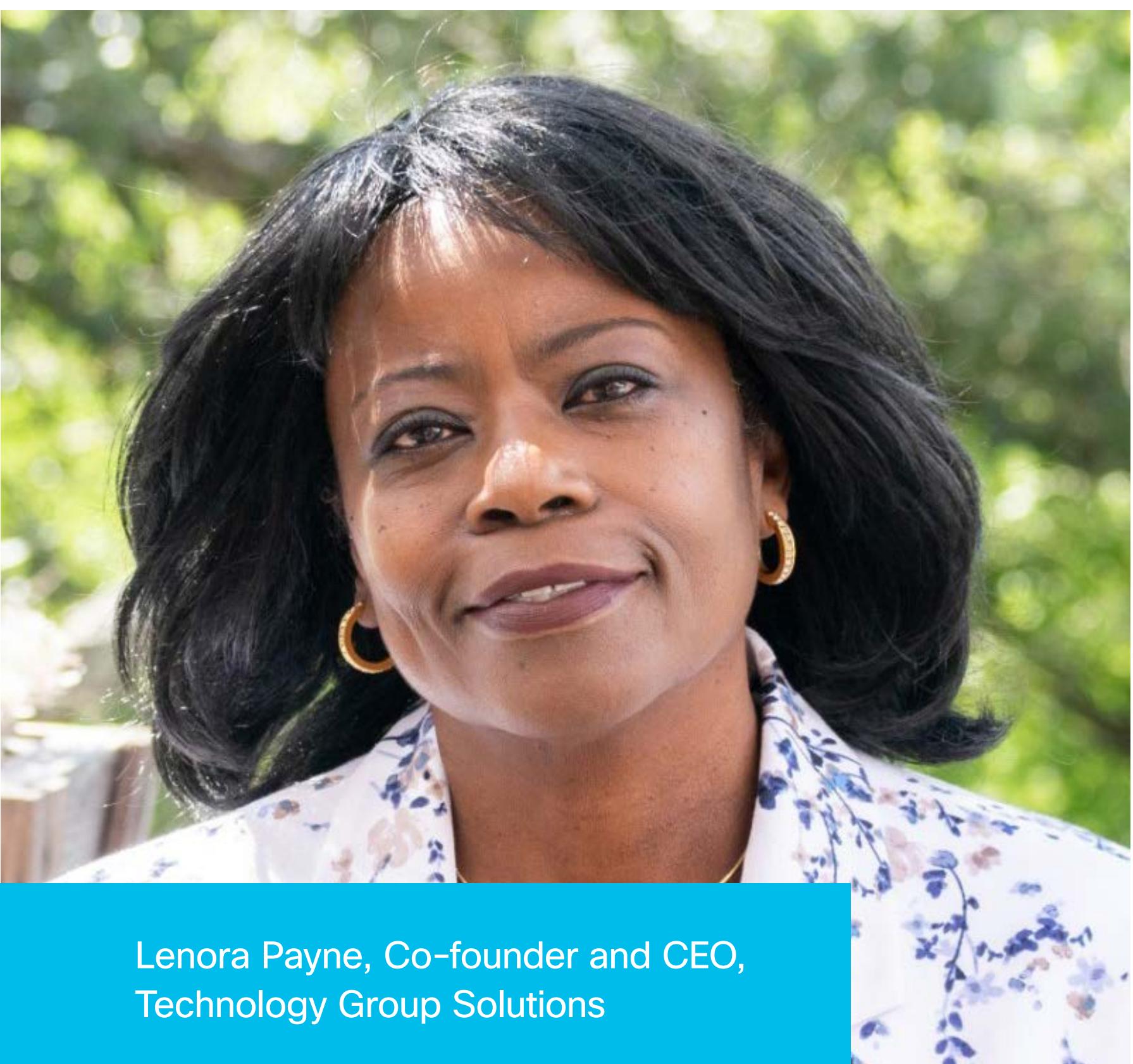
**Learn more about
Solar Sister
and its mission to
power a brighter future**

**Discover how
Cisco supports nonprofit
organizations
to accelerate global
problem solving**

Expert Perspectives



Unlocking business success through diversity and community



Lenora Payne, Co-founder and CEO,
Technology Group Solutions

Lenora Payne is living proof of the value that diversity and community can have in building a successful company.

As co-founder and CEO of [Technology Group Solutions](#) (TGS), a leading Cisco partner with three offices across midwestern United States, Payne has grown her full-service IT consulting firm to annual revenues of more than \$140 million, earning it recognition, among other accolades, by the [Women's Presidents' Organization](#) as one of the 50 fastest-growing women-led companies worldwide for six years in a row.

TGS is also the Official IT Provider of the Kansas City Chiefs professional American football team.

Not bad for someone who had some background in IT but lacked any entrepreneurial experience in 2005 when she started TGS in Kansas City with two co-founders.

"I had so much to learn," says Payne, with typical modesty. "Kansas City is good to its entrepreneurs, especially in making resources available to women-owned and minority-owned businesses. I quickly realized I should lean on people who had the knowledge I lacked."

Payne turned that lesson into a winning corporate culture dedicated to fostering diversity and community through mentoring other local small businesses, elevating women entrepreneurs, and helping minority communities.

"The speed of the leader is the speed of the team," says Richard Long, senior vice-president of sales at TGS, which is a member of the [African American Cisco Partner Community](#) that accelerates the growth and success of minority-owned Cisco partners in the United States.

"This company is a reflection of the values that Lenora has instilled. Lenora embodies the spirit of giving back to the community, and this shapes everything the company does."

Sharing hard-earned knowledge

Mentoring is central to Payne's involvement in the business community. During the earliest days of TGS, Payne herself went through an internship program with the local Kansas City electrical company. She also turned to the Kansas City [Women's Business Center](#), which she still recommends to other local female entrepreneurs.

"Lenora embodies the spirit of giving back to the community, and this shapes everything the company does."

— Richard Long, Senior Vice-president of Sales, Technology Group Solutions

"It was like going back to school again," says Payne. "I didn't know about P&Ls, operations agreements, or licensing when I was getting started, and they helped me find my feet. Without the early help, I don't think TGS would be where it is today."

Payne is now well known across Kansas City, frequently attending Chamber of Commerce meetings, women entrepreneurial groups,

and other community gatherings, where she shares her hard-earned knowledge. One of her core messages is the importance of the ABCs—Attorney, Banker, and CPA. "As an entrepreneur, learning your business ABCs is critical," she says. "Surround yourself with trusted professionals who can answer the questions you don't know to ask."

Strength in diversity

Not surprisingly, Payne is especially eager to offer help to women pursuing careers in IT. "Over

Learn more about
[Technology Group Solutions](#)

Find out how the
[African American Cisco Partner Community](#)
can support your business

the years, I've often been the only woman—and sometimes the only minority—in the room. It's disappointing that there are so few of us but seeing others taking the plunge in the IT space is inspiring," she says. "I turn cartwheels in the office every time TGS hires another woman."

Payne always understood intuitively that diversity is an important source of innovation and growth. A diverse workforce brings different experiences and perspectives to bear on business problems, with the power to transform them into business opportunities.

Nurturing diversity also creates new hiring opportunities. Like every IT company, TGS has trouble finding enough talent, and it sees very few minority candidates. So, in an effort to bring more African Americans into IT, as well as fill its own pipeline, TGS runs mentoring programs for inner-city high school students in Kansas and throughout Missouri. “We illuminate the IT

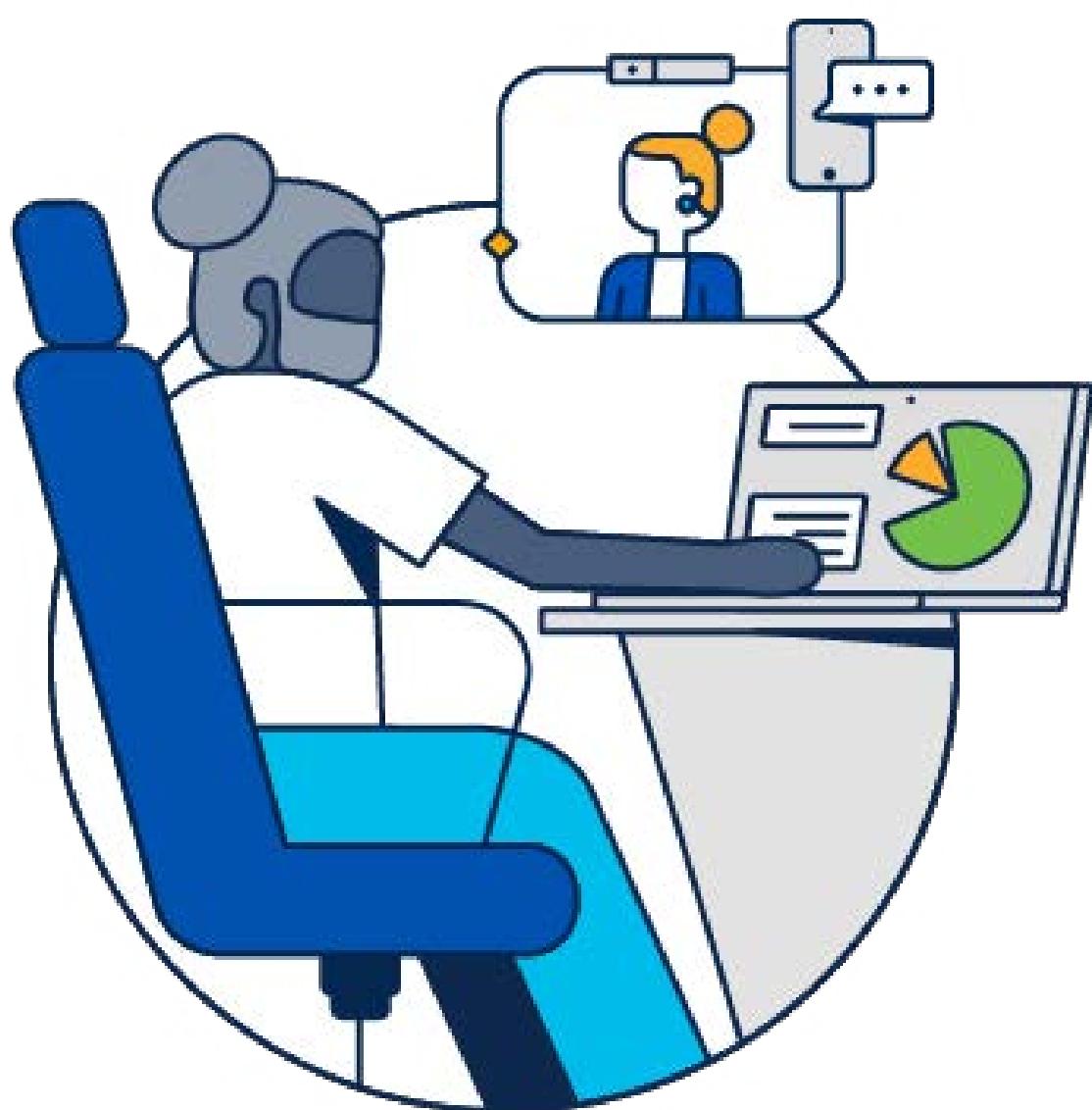
industry as a possible career path for the youth in our community,” says Payne.

A driving purpose

TGS has grown into an exponentially larger company than Payne had dared to hope at the outset. But that success is not what keeps her coming to work early every day, long past the age

she intended to retire. “I love being at TGS because everyone here gets along,” says Payne, “and it’s a good feeling when you’re able to give back to the people and the community.”

Ultimately, her driving purpose is profoundly simple. As she puts it, “Keep spreading the love.” ■



Lenora's lessons

Follow through on commitments. If a customer gives you an order and with a specific deployment date, make sure you beat it. Going to miss your date? Tell them at least a week in advance.

Get to know your ABCs. Surround yourself with trusted Attorney, Banker, and CPA professionals who can answer the questions you don't know to ask.

Carefully plan business finances. Make sure you have credit lines available. You never know when someone is going to give you a large purchase order that exceeds your credit.

Negotiate with suppliers. They want to succeed as much as you do. I provide forecasts to TGS suppliers so they can see what business is coming, which helps open our credit line and delay our payment.

Ask for help. Women entrepreneurs in particular should never be afraid to ask questions and ask for help when they need it.

She always finds her way in

Being underestimated works in Jenny Radcliffe's favor

Jenny Radcliffe will rob you, if you pay her.

As founder of the Liverpool-based consultancy [Human Factor Security](#), Radcliffe has cultivated a unique career infiltrating companies' buildings and systems to identify security weaknesses and recommend improvements. "I'm a burglar, what's not to like?" she says.

Her legal thieving is much less "Ocean's Eleven" than it is ethical social engineering. As she told a [Cisco Networking Academy Women Rock-IT session](#) earlier this year, Radcliffe and her crews are hired to "manipulate humans in order to gain unauthorized access to data, information, finance, or premises."



Jenny Radcliffe, Founder,
Human Factor Security



When Radcliffe talks her way into offices or stores, it's often by posing as a cleaner, delivery person, or maintenance staff. "Because I'm not a huge guy with lots of muscles or full of tattoos, they let me in," Radcliffe says. "People underestimate women in security. My biggest advantage is that people underestimate me at every turn. People have underestimated me all my life."

Radcliffe learned some of the tools of her trade as a child in 1980's Liverpool. At age 8, she was attacked in an alley and fought her way out; later,

she was kidnapped by a neighbor. Her parents paired Radcliffe with her older male cousins to become streetwise.

"They taught me to get into abandoned buildings and explore," explains Radcliffe, who will publish her autobiography, "The People Hacker", in 2023. "I learned to open locks and get through alarm systems."

More importantly, she began to learn how to subtly influence people—a knack that led her to become an expert in negotiation, persuasion, and conflict management. Radcliffe's business, now marking its 10th year, has grown to include clients throughout the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States.

Although she succeeds by remaining inconspicuous, her success is anything but, especially as a woman in a field that's almost entirely male. "Looking back, I realize that I predominantly work with women," says Radcliffe. "I try to bring as many women as I can into the business."

One key has been hiring small crews based on her strict rule of "no peacocks, no magpies, no parrots"—in other words, she refuses to work with anyone who is ego driven, tempted by shiny things, or repeats what they hear on the job.

Because in Radcliffe's line of work, getting ahead—and getting in—depends on not standing out. ■

Visit [Human Factor Security](#) to find Jenny Radcliffe's videos and podcasts

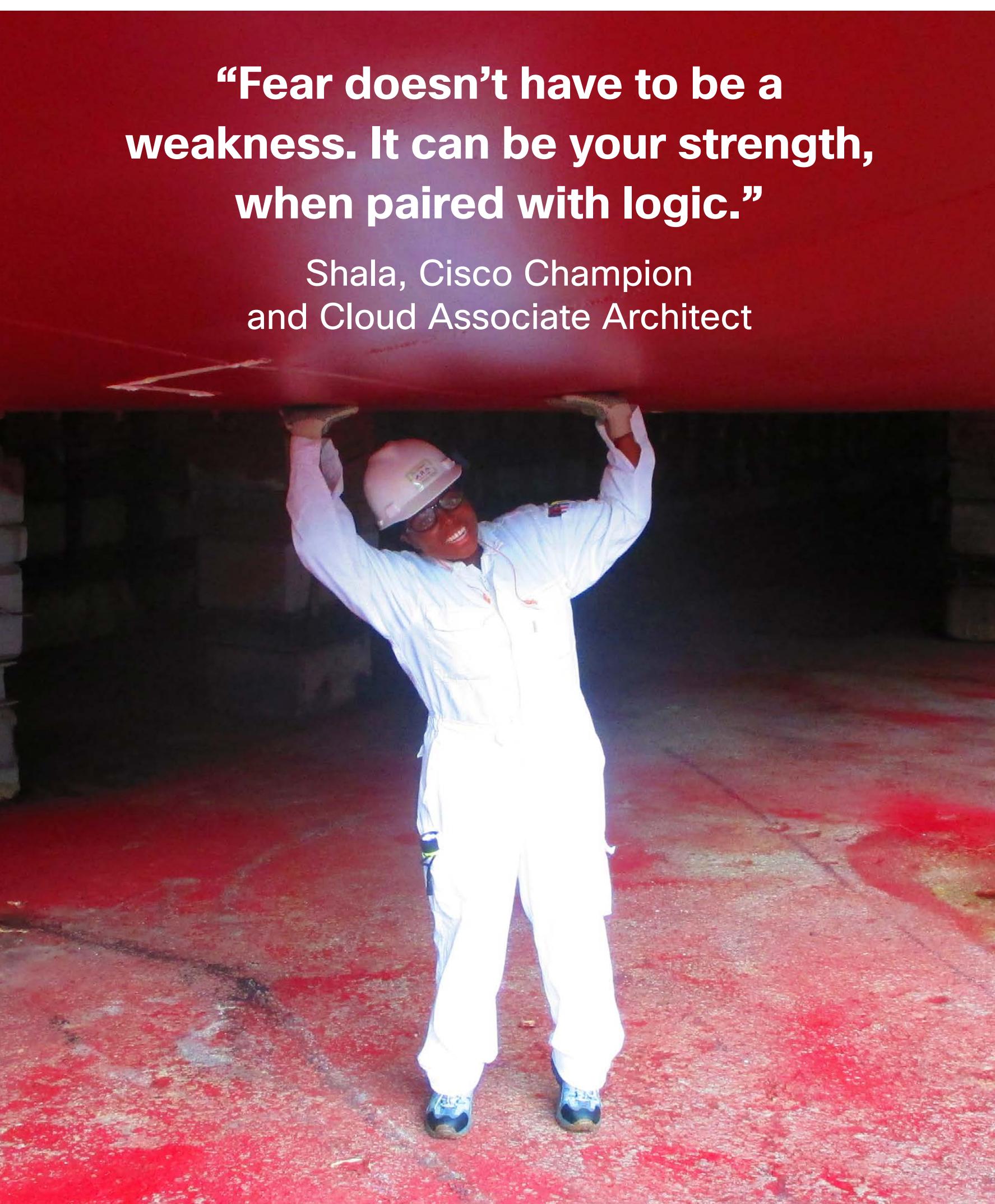
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How I succeed in tech

4 lessons to help other women get ahead in a male-dominated industry

“Fear doesn’t have to be a weakness. It can be your strength, when paired with logic.”

Shala, Cisco Champion
and Cloud Associate Architect



By Shala, *Cisco Champion* and Cloud Associate Architect

I don't agree that "women aren't interested in tech", as some say. It's why I like being a voice to find out why there aren't more people like me in this profession. Here are a few lessons I share to help women realize there are jobs in tech for them too.

You don't always need a degree

I started in IT as an office admin. People came to me with issues about software or PCs, not the IT help desk. So, when a senior IT person retired, I was offered their position and I became lead network engineer overnight. I didn't even know what IP addresses were. At first, it was stressful, learning a lot and trying not to mess up

—as a woman and a person of color, I felt it was especially important to prove myself. But within about four months, networks that used to go down daily would only go down once a year.

Tech careers offer more than you think

As lead network engineer for an oil and gas company, I worked on tanker ships all over the world—that was my office, so it's not like you have to be stuck at a desk. Working with hedge fund companies was fast paced. Even when I did desktop support, every day was something new. And now cloud engineering has re-ignited my love for networking and I'm constantly learning from everyone around me. It keeps me on my toes.



Learn to negotiate compensation

I've often wondered if a male counterpart might get paid more, simply because they're not afraid to go ask for more money. Early in my career, I just accepted what I was offered. I had to decide not to be like that and push myself to have those conversations.

Don't let fear hold you back

Often, I hear women say, "I want to get into tech, but I'm waiting," usually because they want to earn some degree first. They fear they don't have what it takes to do the job.

I have experienced my share of fearing failure—not eating, not sleeping, pit-in-my-stomach, gut-wrenching fear.

But I've come to realize it's okay to feel fear, because it draws out one of my superpowers: thinking 10 steps ahead, planning for contingencies on top of contingencies. And that's what helps me pull off the win.

[Learn more about the Cisco Champions community](#)

[Listen to Shala and other Cisco Champions like Micheline Murphy share their perspectives on work as women in tech](#)

[Find Shala \("Gifted Lane"\) on social media](#)

Fear doesn't have to be a weakness. It can be your strength, when paired with logic.

Besides, everyone, of any gender, starts not knowing what they're doing. Sometimes you just have to jump in. ■