Cybersecurity Advisors Network

Behind the Keys:
Women Who Secure the Future

(In)Securities Special Edition: Day 2 Featuring:

Daniela Fernandez

Celebrating International Women in Tech Day

Daniela Fernandez

CyAN Cybersecurity Advisors Network

Division Dir., Technology and Cyber Security Risk, Macquarie Group
Non-Executive Director, Australian Women in Security Network

With over 20 years' experience in Information Technology, Daniela is a cyber security and analytics leader who values integrity, diversity of thought, continuous learning, sense of achievement and ensuring a healthy work/life integration. Prior to Macquarie Group, Daniela was the CISO | Head of Information Security Risk at PayPal Australia from 2021 to 2024.

Prior to PayPal, Daniela worked at Deloitte and CBA, across multiple domains including protective security services, intelligence, analytics, fraud detection and cyber security. Daniela serves as a Non-Executive Director for the Australian Women in Security Network (AWSN).

Daniela's contributions to the security community have been recognised in the industry. For three consecutive years Daniela has been one of the winners for the CSO30 Awards.

Daniela has a bachelor's degree in computer science and software engineering and a Master of IT in system security. She also holds multiple industry certifications including CISM, CRISC, CDPSE and CFE.

Feature in (In)Securities- Special Edition- Day 2

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1. What inspired you to pursue a career in technology/cybersecurity, and how did you get started?

From the moment I took my first coding class at school,I was captivated by the power of code and the ability to bring ideas to life and create something from nothing.However, my interest in a career in security started when I was doing my first year of Computer Science and Software Engineering degree after a tragic experience back in 1998.

I'm originally from Colombia, a beautiful country with a complicated reality; my mother was victim of urban violence. After visiting a bank when she was leaving the branch two men tried to rob her. She was badly injured after receiving five gunshot wounds. This experience led me to have a strong interest in security and how to apply my career in crime prevention. Hence, after finishing my bachelor's degree, I moved to Australia to complete my Master of IT in System Security, and since then I've worked in multiple roles across protective security services, fraud prevention, security intelligence and cyber security.

2. Can you describe a defining moment in your cybersecurity career that made you realise this was the right path for you?

There wasn't just one defining moment for me, it's been and still is a series of experiences that **every day reinforce my passion for security and for bringing more diverse talent into this industry.**

For example, whether it's identifying new threats that could put customers at risk, improving an organisation's security posture to enhance protection, raising awareness to build a more resilient community, or even helping friends and family by sharing knowledge on how to stay safe online, every aspect of cybersecurity reinforces my passion forthis field.

3. Can you share some of the key challenges you faced as a woman in this field, and how you overcame them?

I have found that the industry has been quite open to me not having a technical background in cyber security, which is an issue that some people face in this field.

However, I think my main obstacle has been around unconscious bias relating to my ethnicity and English not being my first language, which can affect confidence.

Some of the techniques I've used to overcome those challengers are **embracing my unique perspectives and background to propel me forward in my career, surrounding myself with allies, and providing support to others who may be facing similar situations**.

4. Who has been your biggest influence or mentor throughout your career, and what specific lessons or turning points have you experienced because of them?

I've been fortunate to have several influential personalities throughout my career, especially in my early years.

Two managers come to mind, one in my first job in security who saw potential in me that I hadn't fully recognised myself and trusted me with big project deliverables, challenging me to be resourceful, take ownership and deliver results by doing what is right. These lessons have shaped the way I approach challenges today.

The second inspiring leader is someone who likely is not aware of the profound impact they have had on me. Seeing them go through an experience that took them out of the workforce and never being able to fully recover has been a powerful reminder of the importance of prioritising mental and physical wellbeing, sustaining ourselves for the long run.

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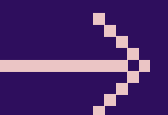
5. What are the biggest challenges women face in the technology/cybersecurity industry today? Can you share specific examples from your own experiences?

Despite progress in diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, **women continue to face challenges related to gender bias**, workplace culture and career progression due to lack of suitable mechanisms offered in some organisations to balance family responsibilities and demanding work schedules, especially at leadership level roles.

Some of these challenges were highlighted as part of the Australian-based research conducted by RMIT '**Investigating the reasons why women leave the cyber security workforce and strategies to address this attrition**'.

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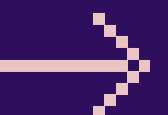
6. How has the industry evolved for women since you started your career? Have you noticed any significant shifts, and can you share a personal story that illustrates these changes?

Although challenges are still present, the biggest change I've seen since I started my career is the increased representation of women, mentoring programs and diversity initiatives within companies. **10 years ago, if I attended a cyber security conference I could count the number of women in one hand**, these days I would say around 30% of the attendees are females, making the environment more welcoming and inclusive.

In Australia, organisations like the Australian Women in Security Network (AWSN) have played a crucial role in supporting and advancing women in cyber security across Australia. These organisations are creating a strong, inclusive community for women in security and providing opportunities for networking, career development, mentorship and collaboration with the support of their corporate partners.

Over 3 years I was a chapter lead for AWSN and witnessed not only the network expanding (currently ~3K members across AU), but also heard incredible stories from women who were able to advance their career through the programs offered by AWSN.

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7. What role do diversity and inclusion play in fostering innovation in tech/ cybersecurity? Can you share a personal example or case study where diversity directly led to innovation within your team or project?

One of the key roles of diversity in cyber security is **addressing the industry's talent gap by attracting a broader pool of talent,** including encouraging young girls and women to study tech/cybersecurity subjects.

Another crucial role is bringing in diverse perspectives and deep expertise that reflect the communities that companies serve.

In the technology space, I worked on a project a while back where we deliberately selected individuals from diverse backgrounds (across gender, physical and mental disability, race, language) to contribute to the design of a new product. This inclusive approach enabled us to design a solution that was more effective and accessible for the diverse community we served.

8. What are the most exciting trends or developments in the industry right now that you're passionate about?

Advancements in AI, quantum computing, which includes the accelerated efforts in post quantum cryptography, passwordless adoption and digital identity technologies are and will continue having an impact in cyber security.

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9. What advice would you give to young women considering a career in technology or cybersecurity?

My advice would be to embrace lifelong learning as the threat landscape changes rapidly, stay curious, build a network that can support you, advocate for yourself and don't be afraid to bring unique perspective that can shape the future of the industry for the better.

10. Can you share examples of initiatives or programs that have made a real difference in promoting women in our field?

AWSN has a series of programs supported by their corporate partners, such as the Security Pathways program that helps members navigate different domains in cyber security and incident response training, cyber security experience days for high school girls, mentoring programs and the Women in Security Leadership program. The Women in Security Leadership program includes courses to deliver powerful presentations, training on certifications and communicating to the board.

Tangible Uplift Program is another initiative that was created in collaboration with ISACA Sydney chapter, the Australian Information Security Association (AISA) and the Council of Australian University Directors of Information Technology (CAUDIT) to train and assist women to pass one of the popular certifications for information security management.

And of course, companies across all sectors have different initiatives both internally and as part of outreach to cultivate interest to help women pursue a career in security.

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11. If you could envision the ideal future for women in cybersecurity, what would it look like? What key changes would have been made?

The ideal future would be one where we don't need to talk about the lack of diversity in cybersecurity, where women occupying leadership and technical positions across all levels is the norm. Ultimately, cyber security is an exciting, fast-paced industry and women and other diverse groups should play a central role in shaping a secure digital future.