

## Article

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# IWD - Sally Waterston

Sally Waterston is the co-founder of Waterstons and joint non-exec chair.



**Sally Waterston**

Co-chair

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As part of International Women's Day 2023, we're sharing insights from our team about their experiences, their role models and their goals for inspiring others as, or about, women in tech and business.

### **How did you become a woman in tech?**

It wasn't such a male-dominated world when I became a main-frame programmer in 1971; about half of the programmers and systems analysts I worked with were women.

I fell into programming by accident as I have an English degree, and although I had always loved maths, codes and logic, I was forced into the arts by my headmistress.

I was desperate for a job after Mike and I married (I was 22) and took a temporary job answering customer complaints for SouthernGas in Southampton. Mike was doing a PhD and we had very little money, but I was invited for an interview in work study at SouthernGas and the incredibly perceptive man who interviewed me asked if I had ever thought of programming. I said I thought it sounded interesting (I didn't actually know what it was, but I was desperate for a job).

I was given an IBM aptitude test to test out my maths and logic and the next day was offered either job. I took the programming one as it was better paid, and I was terrified. I discovered to my amazement that it was exactly the perfect job for me. I loved it and can still recall the joy of my first programme working.

My idea of bliss is debugging a program.

### **Why is empowerment important in the workplace?**

I feel that everyone should feel empowered in their work; gender, sexual preference, ethnicity etc are all irrelevant. But that doesn't mean I don't acknowledge the disadvantages and prejudice that women, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ and people of colour often suffer from, and it all makes me angry.

I would always want Waterstons to be an inclusive and welcoming place where everyone is treated with equal opportunities and total acceptance. I have often worried about events and groups just for women in the past, as this seems to reinforce the boundaries. I believe that we should be aware of *all* people's needs.

**What advice would you give to the next generation of women starting their careers?**

My advice would be to believe in yourselves, and to believe that there is nothing that any man can do which you cannot if you choose to.

I get very depressed when women claim to be 'hopeless at maths'; it is not feminine and attractive, it is a denial of your intellect. After all, nobody would be proud of not being able to read. Of course not everyone can understand advanced mathematics but that's ok, not everyone can read Beowulf in the original Old English either.

Please don't boast about the things you cannot do - be proud of those you can. Don't make apologies or excuses for yourself; you are great as you are.

**Who is the woman who has inspired you throughout your career?**

Dame Steve Shirley is someone I admire. In the 1970s she recognised that many women could be great at programming and systems analysis, but it was an era of little available childcare, and women were expected to look after their children. She made it possible for women to work part time from home at her company F International - she was ahead of her time.

**What have you learned from the women you have worked with in your career so far?**

I have learned that we need to understand that biologically, women have struggles. We should not be afraid to talk about the challenges of menstruation, pregnancy and the menopause. If I was feeling a bit sexist, I might suggest that these would be discussed with less embarrassment if men had periods too.

**What is the best piece of advice you've been given as a woman in the workplace?**

I was trying to write a letter of condolence to the partner of a very young programmer who had died suddenly in the late 1970s. I kept tearing up the letters I was writing, and my much older colleague said to me: "It doesn't matter what you write. You know you cannot make her feel sadder than she does now, but you might make her feel a tiny bit better, because you care".

I have carried that with me in every situation. Never be afraid to reach out to someone who is sad or struggling; what is the worst that can happen? That they reject you - well that's just your ego that is bruised. If they don't want your support that is totally ok; you have shown them that you care. Always try to see the world from the other person's side of the wall.

**What challenges have you faced, and how have you overcome them?**

My specialism was manufacturing so I have faced a fair bit of sexism and patronising along the way, and some very unwelcome sexual harassment too, both verbal and physical.

My response to the assumption that I didn't know what I was talking about was never to protest, but to quietly demonstrate that I did – and had a good deal of experience in the subject.

It may be satisfying to humiliate the person patronising you, but it is a very short-term advantage. As my 11-year-old granddaughter said to me last week 'build bridges and then get over them'.

As far as sexual harassment and overt sexism is concerned I have always (since my teens) made it very clear that it is unacceptable and inappropriate. My sense of injustice has always been much greater than any fear of offending any more senior person and I always call out inappropriate behaviour. I know that this is much easier said than done and I would never expect anyone in our business to encounter this, and certainly never to address this alone.

### **Who is your professional female role model?**

I have worked with so many amazing people in the past 52 years in tech.

We have extraordinary women in the business now, doing everything from being board members to running the SOC, working on the service desk, in the people and culture team, working in marketing and customer satisfaction, sorting our accounts, working in the technology team, cyber experts, welcoming people on reception, project managing and developing software.

There is an axiom in business: always take on people who are cleverer than you are. I am in awe of them all.

### **What are some things you never expected about being a woman in tech?**

Because things were different in the 70s, and because I was at university during a period of total liberation in the 60s, I never expected to be treated as anything other than equal to the men I worked with. I consider myself a true feminist - there is nothing men can do which women can't, we are all equal and should be treated and respected as such. At the same time, we are all individuals; I have no desire to fly an aeroplane or be a nursery nurse, but that doesn't mean that I don't absolutely respect and admire those who do.

[Find out more about Sally here.](#)

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