

Catriona Wallace: CEO & Founder of Flamingo

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Interview by Molly O'Brien, Marketing & Communications Specialist, Advance

"Flamingo is the second only woman CEO and woman Chaired business ever to list on the ASX."

Catriona Wallace knows first hand the difficulty of being a woman in a male-dominated industry. She is the CEO & Founder of Flamingo - an Intelligent Guided Selling SaaS platform, used by companies with complex products to improve online sales conversion rates.

Catriona shared her experiences and insights with Advance on being an (incredibly successful) woman in business in 2017.

Could you give us a brief overview of your career to date?

Currently I am the CEO & Founder of Flamingo, which is an ASX Listed Artificial Intelligence FinTech based out of New York. Flamingo is the second only woman CEO and woman Chaired business ever to list on the ASX. (*I know...*)

I didn't start in this field however - nowhere near this field! In fact, I only ever wanted to be a farmer. When that didn't work out, I instead became a Police Officer, owned a nightclub, ran a management consulting practice, and got a couple of degrees on the way through, including a PhD in Human Technology Interaction. My next move was co-founding a market research firm, ACA Research, and then a Customer Experience Design Firm, Fifth Quadrant, before realising Enterprise SaaS and building a robot (Rosie) who sells financial services products in the US and Australia, was actually my destiny.

What do you think women in business are collectively excelling at in 2017?

Women currently are excelling at building movements. Movements for the betterment of women in business and other social purposes. This is an underrated phenomenon and we will feel the effects of these movements in the next two years as there will be a wave of women who come into power on the back of these movements.

Regarding power: across the US and Aussie markets it is a bit different. I see more

women in positions of power here in the US. By power I mean the ability to direct and influence people and events for change, not just influence. Here there are more women in power. In Australia we are still struggling for there to be any significant representation. I heard a great anecdote the other day that women never represent more than 17% of anything that involves positions of power. Interesting.

And what's something you think women in business could improve?

We need to get results. Financial results predominantly. It took me some time to realise that we can do all the complaining in the world about being oppressed, discriminated against etc, however in an economic system as we have the only real thing that moves the needle is getting commercial results. Now, in reality this should be easy for us. We already excel at all the other things required in business: empathy, leadership, team building, collaboration, resilience. So now we women should just be laser focused on results. Then with enough of us doing this and profiling their stories, we can not only change biases but inspire those who are following on the path.

Do you promote gender equality in your own business, at Flamingo? What policies do you enforce?

Yes we absolutely do. For a tech company we have a high percentage of women including a woman Chair, Cathie Reid, US CTO, Rohinee Mohindroo and a woman Product Manager, Phillipa Beltran, woman Data Scientist, Parisa Kouchaki, and a woman leading our US Client Delivery, Tracey Robinson. Plus we had a woman CFO, Rachel White and now have head of Finance and Ops, Bree Clare. We also have great racial, mental health and sexual diversity. So this diversity and tolerance is just a part of our culture, it's just a no-brainer. All my staff seek out diverse people, and the quirrier the better.

What do you think is the biggest obstacle for gender equality in the workplace today? Do you think those issues are specific to Australia?

There is still a massive amount of unconscious bias in both men and, interestingly, women. For example, last month I was at a Robotics Programming event with about 150 people, of which about 95% were men. As I was networking with my Chief Data Scientist, Dr Jack Elliott, the other attendees directed all their questions and greetings to Jack where I was completely ignored. In fact, they didn't even attempt to shake hands with me. I instead just cruised around checking people out, before the MC announced the keynote speaker: me. As I walked through the crowd and smiled at the audience I could see the gobsommed looks on the faces of many people. A few years ago I would have made a big fuss over this and been offended, however now I realise it is just a deeply engrained unconscious bias in both men and women. We must change this. How? By constantly having women who have achieved results sharing their stories and profiling women we can start to move this dial.

Is it different in Australia? Yes. I do not experience this any where near as much in the US. I hear other male US colleagues speak with such respect and awe of many of the

US. I hear other male US colleagues speak with such respect and awe of many of the women they work with. I suspect the US is a couple of years ahead of this compared to Australia. Perhaps a harsh, but fair assessment I think.

What is the biggest challenge you face being a female CEO, and how do you overcome it?

The biggest challenge I have faced is having the same amount of credibility given to me as it would a male counterpart. So, given this is just the reality of life, I have worked 150% harder than most of my male colleagues to overcome biases and to get results. And should I complain about this? I used to. But not now. What I have realised is that working this hard for so many years has enabled me skills I may otherwise not have acquired. Things like being super fit, resilient, the ability to work exceptionally fast and make decisions quickly, lead a team with no politics, ego or power plays and to deeply engage customers. These previous hard years have made me a really effective entrepreneur and CEO. Fit, fast, smart, capable is what we women are if we can get through the hard yards.

What's your biggest motivator?

Couple of things: I am personally motivated by the quest for equality of people – a lot of work we do enables this. We are building an Artificial Intelligence company that allows customers to be treated as individuals by large corporates. Eventually we will apply this tech to underserved communities – something that will make me very happy. Building something that hasn't been built before, the Conversational Commerce and Cognitive Virtual Assistants, also motivates me. That's hugely exciting to me – inventing new stuff that changes the way humans work and interact. I love being a leader. I love being an Aussie doing business globally. I love being a female leader who loves other women and who backs other women. I would eventually love to be funding and mentoring women entrepreneurs full time, but I have some stuff to do first, like build the world's first significant Narrow AI Conversational Commerce platform, for example.

What advice would you give to your 20-year old self?

Ha! Well the advice would be: the path you are making now will not be the path you take. That who you are at 20 is not who you will be at 30 or 40 or 50. And that many paths open. That you are more capable than you know. But stick to the things in life that you sense most deeply are important. Above and beyond anything at all, relationships and human interaction are the determinant of success. And this coming from me who is building robots to replace humans. It is all about the humans.

Which women inspire you, and why?

I am inspired by many Indigenous women friends such as Nova Peris and Anita Heiss; my feminist role models Anne Summers, Wendy McCarthy, Eve Mahlab, Ros Strong; my entrepreneur peers like Jodie Fox, Melanie Perkins; super enterprises and mentor Kay Koplovitz and Amy Millman and obviously..... Beyoncé!

