LEADING LIGHTS

We asked five female technology leaders to evaluate the direction their industry is going

FIONA CARNEY

UCD commerce graduate and former consultant with both KPMG and Accenture, Fiona Carney joined Microsoft in 2007 and is currently its director of customer, partner and field operations-UK, France, Germany and Western Europe

What are you working on right now?
My team manages Microsoft Partners across UK, France, Germany and Western Europe, running and improving a high quality service, making it easy for their sales organisations and our customers to do business with Microsoft.

What's the most interesting innovation coming down the track in your sector?
The Internet of Things. Connecting your "things", including devices or sensors, is only the beginning. The data that those devices transmit will have a revolutionary impact because of the insights that will be delivered. For instance, through the internet of things, we think businesses will be in a position to learn more about their customers, helping them to deliver a better experience for their customers and even unlocking new revenue streams.

What is the biggest challenge to the Irish tech sector?
There's no question that the Irish tech sector is extremely vibrant. Sustaining the high level of innovation that is taking place here is a priority and that means making sure that a pipeline of skilled individuals is in place to take up roles in the sector now and in the future.

At the moment, employers in Ireland and across Europe are faced with a situation where there is a limited pool of candidates with the required skills, and that limits growth.

Encouraging more young students to study [science, technology, engineering and maths] subjects and take up careers in the technology sector is a key factor in any solution to this challenge.

Why aren't there more women in tech?
There are many exceptional women in technology careers here in Ireland and around the world. More and more female role models are progressing to senior levels in their careers, and that example is an incredibly important asset as we go about encouraging more women to join their ranks.

But, we need to do more. The education system is a powerful tool – we need to ensure that more girls are studying the subjects that will give them the right foundation for technology careers. You can't avoid the importance of science, technology, engineering and maths, and young women must be given the opportunity to excel at those subjects.

Opening up this opportunity can be as simple as encouraging young girls from as young as seven years of age to join a local CoderDojo and learn to code. However, it should also be said that the tech sector requires people with a wide variety of careers and backgrounds – from project management through to sales and marketing.

What was the most helpful career advice anyone has given you?
Ask for what you want, even if you don't think it's remotely possible to get it. Always be clear on where you are trying to get to and don't be afraid to verbalise your ambitions to others. They may not be able to help you directly at that moment but people tend to be generous with their advice and they will often give you some clarity around what you need to do to get there.

MAJELLA MUNGOVAN

Majella Mungovan is finance director at Facebook Ireland. A chartered accountant, she studied commerce at NUI Galway and holds a master of accounting degree from UCD. She previously worked for Deloitte, Glen Dimplex and Microsoft

What are you working on right now?
Facebook continues to enjoy incredible expansion and growth rates. We now have 1.59 billion people using Facebook each month, 400 million on Instagram, 700 million on Messenger, 900 million on WhatsApp, in addition to our new Oculus Virtual Reality business.

That level of growth brings with it lots of interesting challenges. The finance team at Facebook Ireland is working on scaling processes via automation so we can best support our customers and suppliers. A primary focus for us is on hiring the best talent and growing people quickly.

What's the most interesting innovation coming down the track in your sector?
I am particularly interested in our internet.org efforts to bring internet connectivity to people living in under-privileged parts of the world. Through internet.org, we have connected millions of people in more than three dozen countries.

What is the biggest challenge to the Irish tech sector?
Competition for top talent. This is a great time to work in technology, Ireland has become a hub with most of the top tech companies having significant operations here. We all compete for a limited pool of talent.

Why aren't there more women in tech?
Gender diversity is a hot topic in the tech industry. The industry as a whole is challenged to attract more women. The issue is especially prevalent in the engineering teams, as the pipeline of young girls taking computer science or engineering courses is far too low. More needs to be done to expose girls to coding and technology at school age.

Diversity is considered to be everyone's responsibility at Facebook, which is why we place a big focus on attracting and developing female talent. We do this in a variety of ways, both internal and external. We have strong mentorship programs, such as our Lean In Circles on campus, and CS&E Circles for college women in Computer Science and Engineering classes.

We host a variety of networking events, including Women's Leadership Day, which is open to every woman at Facebook and focuses on strengthening our community of women at the company and building the capacity of Facebook women to positively impact the global community.

Our Women Employee Resource Group (ERG) is global, and we also offer a variety of training programs designed to train and support managers.

What was the most helpful career advice anyone has given you?
To get out from behind the Excel spreadsheet and spend time with your colleagues. It's hard to progress your career if you are not meeting people, solving problems with them and building your network.

Having a strong, varied network of people to call when you need help is essential.

JAYNE RONAYNE

Jayne Ronayne is chief executive of KonnectAgain, the software company she set up in 2013. Its platform helps enterprises grow and leverage networks of current and former employees as a way of building their talent pool

What are you working on right now?
We are changing the tradition of how companies interact with ex employees, helping build a community of past and present employees.

What's the most interesting innovation coming down the track in your sector?
The rapid pace of change. Ex-employees have never been seen as a valuable asset to a company but this is changing. We now see companies invest time and finances trying to keep up with their ex-employees. Millennials don't expect to stay in the same job for years but for an 18-24 month period. They have options – they want to learn further, they want to gain experience, they want to travel. As a result people change jobs more frequently which is putting HR under pressure.

HR managers have started to change their language and procedures with hiring and implemented new strategies on how to improve retention but unfortunately the technology they are using is still stuck in the past. This is where we come in, KonnectAgain allows users to create profiles using their social media. We link users to interests that are relevant to them such as upcoming events, people of interest and jobs of interest.

What is the biggest challenge to the Irish tech sector?
Capital is always going to be a challenge; we don't have enough venture capital firms and some of the VC firms in Ireland are too traditional and at times risk averse. I've seen so many great Irish companies pitch to Irish VCs and have been turned down only to leave and raise capital in the States.

The Government also do not make it easy for angel investors in Ireland. Angel investing is a massive risk and the Government should support anyone who is supporting Irish start-ups.

More companies based in Ireland should visit the start-up scene here to see up-and-coming technologies as our sector is constantly innovating.

Why aren't there more women in tech?
I don't think it's encouraged enough at school or within companies. I know many fantastic females in great jobs in the consulting sector who would be phenomenal in tech. Consulting firms pay for accountancy exams but why not open this up to IT to learn skills too?

Companies could also offer complementary or subsidised tickets to IT conferences to give at least a pathway for employees to understand the IT world and keep up to date with new technologies and trends.

What was the most helpful career advice anyone has given you?
PCH founder Liam Casey, an investor in KonnectAgain, told me "don't believe you know it all. Your job as CEO is to work with people that are smarter and faster than you are and learn from them." Another investor, Ronan Harris, head of Google Europe told me "If you had all the money you needed in the bank what would your priority list be?" This is an amazing way to look at your company.

FELICITY McCARTHY

Felicity McCarthy founded digital and social media marketing training company Spark Digital in 2014 after two decades leading European marketing teams for a number of companies including Facebook, eBay and Dell

What are you working on right now?
As a consultant and trainer in digital marketing and social media, every week is different but I'm currently working with teams at Daft.ie, Pinterest UK and IDA Ireland. I've also been working on materials for upcoming courses with Irish Times Training and the Digital Marketing Institute. It's been an especially busy few weeks for speaking engagements as I was asked to speak at Social Media Summit 2016 and *Image* magazine's digital masterclass.

What's the most interesting innovation coming down the track in your sector?
It's becoming ever more important, and easy, for businesses to embrace video marketing and livestreaming tools. Today's consumers want as much access to a business as possible.

Livestreaming is a very authentic way for a brand to engage with them in real-time and at scale. All of the social platforms are optimised for video content, so it is important for businesses to find more creative ways to visually engage their audiences.

What is the biggest challenge to the Irish tech sector?
It's still quite difficult for start-ups here – getting access to finance is a real challenge. I've met two businesses this week who are possibly reaching the end of the line, primarily due to funding issues.

We have all the tech giants here which is a double-edged sword - on one hand, lots of us, me included, get exposure and experience in amazing businesses, on which to build our careers and businesses.

On the other hand, it makes the race for talent much more challenging. Small and even medium-size Irish tech companies can find it hard to attract the talent they need.

Why aren't there more women in tech?
There is no good reason why either gender would be better at embracing new technology.

There is, however, a fundamental problem that simply not enough young girls are taking computer science or engineering courses.
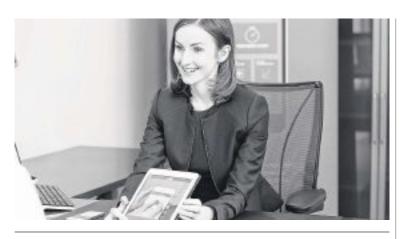
Our education frameworks need to change to incorporate learning technical skills from early stages, for all children. It should be standard on the curriculum at primary level.

At events within the digital marketing industry, it still shocks me that I frequently find that I'm one of just two or three female speakers.

This is despite the fact that within digital and social, there are plenty of expert ladies. I'm not sure if it's laziness, lack of vision, or simply following a formula, on the part of the organisers.

What was the most helpful career advice anyone has given you?
It was from Prof Jim Ward at NUI Galway many moons ago. After I had been working for a year since graduating, had just moved role and felt out of my depth he laughed and said "Felicity, when you stop learning it is time to change, never stop learning". It was very powerful for me. Now I move towards change rather than away.

CIARA CLANCY

Physiotherapist Ciara Clancy is the founder of Beats Medical, a technology company aiming to improve the gait of people with Parkinson's disease. Its product, which launched in October 2014, is sold around the world via the App Store

What are you working on right now?
We provide Parkinson's treatment via mobile phone to treat the walking symptoms of Parkinson's disease. Right now I am working on our launch of new add-ons to treat speech and dexterity issues, symptoms of the disease. These are launching in the UK now and are part of our ongoing commitment to innovation, treating the symptoms of neurological conditions non-invasively through technology.

What's the most interesting innovation coming down the track in your sector?
It's the collection of big data on specific diseases. In recent years we have seen the big tech players working in this space including Apple and Google.

It's really exciting, particularly in the area of chronic diseases as big data may hold the key to identifying predictors and causes of disease and ultimately one day hopefully a cure.

Big data may help with some of the constraints on current research which can be limited by participant numbers, shorter time frames and multiple variables. Big data also provides the opportunity to gather detailed information on people over a number of years and record numerous variables and patterns which will further the development of research like never before.

What is the biggest challenge to the Irish tech sector?
We are seeing a real growth of SMEs in Ireland, however, with this continued growth we need to increase the number of skilled professionals in the tech sector to fill the vacancies across tech specialties.

Why aren't there more women in tech?
I think labelling may play a part in it. In the past, and this is changing now, certain professions were labelled as predominantly female and male professions.

A label can have a powerful impact and can be self limiting. For example, our users are people with Parkinson's, not patients. To label someone with a chronic disease a patient can be limiting and define them by their diagnosis. They are not their diagnosis.

The emergence of programmes like CoderDojo, Girls who Code and Girls in Tech are making incredible strides in challenging stereotypes in tech. I believe the future generation of tech leaders will be more gender balanced and in the years to come we will see further emergence of great female role models who will continue to change the industry and pave the path for others.

What was the most helpful career advice anyone has given you?
"There is no such thing as failure – just opportunities that you have and will learn from". I've learned so much from the things that haven't gone right the first time round and they have ultimately made me more driven to do the best I can in the future.