Female tech founders reflect on cybersecurity sector in 2020

The impact of coronavirus has created new challenges for cybersecurity. In the latest webinar in Wayra UK's Big Tech Sister series, female tech founders discussed the impact of the global pandemic on cybersecurity and the fresh issues that have arisen.

The webinar – Big Tech Sister: Cyber, in collaboration with CognitionX and Maddyness UK – consisted of a keynote and two panels, with discussion topics covering cybersecurity innovation trends, the personal experience of each panellist and their predictions for the space.

Cybersecurity in 2020

Helen Lovekin, Technical Director for Sociotechnical Security, National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), hosted the keynote speech. Lovekin discussed the findings of the NCSC's Annual Review 2020, noting how 200 incidents out of 723 from the year were related to coronavirus.

In 2020, the NCSC scanned almost 1 million NHS IP addresses for vulnerabilities, and the Suspicious Emails Reporting Service (SERS) led to more than 2.3 million reports and 22,000 take downs.

Diversifying industries is crucial, and Lovekin believes that is no different for

cybersecurity. In her keynote, she highlighted both its importance and the positive impact such an approach has on boosting the effectiveness of cybersecurity. Lovekin said:

"You can't be what you can't see. We need to make sure we're fishing [for recruits] in the biggest pool we can and think about the language we use in job descriptions to reach different perspectives and diversities, all of which benefit cybersecurity. Mentoring, coaching and training is invaluable."

Lovekin also highlighted the NCSC's CyberFirst programme, which is developing the UK's next generation of cyber professionals through its student bursaries, free courses for 11-17 year olds and competitions. With the panelists all being female, the CyberFirst Girls Competition, which provides a fun but challenging environment to inspire the next generation of young women to consider a career in cyber security, was particularly of note.

The impact of coronavirus

A panel discussion with the female founders in cyber discussed strategy, experience and success, with an inevitable focus on the fresh issues coronavirus has created for the sector.

Nadia Kadhim, CEO, Naq Cyber, discussed the importance of protecting small businesses around the world from cyber threats. Kadhim compared such businesses to families and consumers, as they struggle to know where to start with cybersecurity and deciding how to make the best of the overwhelming number of tools available. This is particularly notable in 2020, when many small businesses took their offering online to stay afloat, and many new small businesses have been created online as a result of redundancy and more free time to pursue side projects.

Dr Anna Vartapetiance, CEO, Securium Ltd, voiced her concerns on the vulnerability of children during the pandemic. She noted an increase in child abuse and exploitation in 2020 due to predators having extended access to

children online. This is because children have spent more time at home and therefore online. Vartapetiance said:

"This year has enhanced the need for online security. Child vulnerability online is a multi-faceted problem and needs regulation, parents on board, policing, and companies creating the technology to protect children better.

"In 2021, we should all be working towards adopting more online safety technology so we don't go through the same problems again and, instead, have the risk under control."

Becoming a female founder

Big Tech Sister is a Wayra UK-curated initiative designed to elevate, encourage and be a safe space for women in the tech industry, which led the panel to discuss advice for budding female founders.

Naq Cyber's Nadia Kadhim said: "There are lots of online communities that women can join such as Female Ventures, [a non-profit organisation that stimulates and supports ambition, leadership and entrepreneurship for women in corporates, SMEs and startups].

"There are lots of great opportunities out there, but you need to know what to look for and ask peers to point in the right direction. It's important to join any event, network group or accelerator – not just focused on women – to surround yourself in diverse groups.

"The cybersecurity industry is still predominantly male, but if we keep working together, we can change the face of cyber by putting ourselves out there. We just finished the NCSC Accelerator, which was amazing. Early help is invaluable,

so seek that as soon as you can and ask for recommendations."

Tabitha Goldstaub, Co-Founder, CognitionX, commented: "Don't give up, despite this year being so tough. Join more sessions, don't feel isolated, and find a way to be part of a community even from home to avoid feeling lonely."

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