Digital Leadership Institute

Founder and Executive Director Cheryl D Miller argues that attracting more women into digital careers is vital to achieving Europe 2020’s objectives, and explains how the new Institute is planning to take Zen Digital Europe’s efforts global.

To begin, could you provide some insight into your background and how you came to found Zen Digital Europe in 2008?

When the financial crisis occurred, I was self-employed in ICT management consulting. I lost two big clients in a short period of time and decided to seek work opportunities related to ICT in the European policy sector. After launching Zen Digital Europe, I was soon working on EU projects related to ICT and sustainability, such as energy efficiency, smart cities, etc.

The link between gender equality and sustainability is a clear one: nothing is sustainable – or smart – when only half the population is engaged. This inspired me to get involved in women and ICT and, eventually, to lead initiatives promoting this area.

After six years, I am now expanding the organisation and mission of Zen Digital Europe. In honour of International Women’s Day, which took place on 8 March 2014, we launched the Digital Leadership Institute (DLI) on 6 March, an international NGO based in Brussels that aims to continue the work of Zen Digital on a global scale.

What are the overarching ambitions of Zen Digital and DLI?

Zen Digital and DLI aim to bridge the gender gap and digital divide through education, empowerment, advocacy, awareness building, mentoring and networking:

- We run grassroots initiatives encouraging girls to become involved in digital and STEM – or ESTEAM (entrepreneurship, science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics) – studies and careers (Digital Muse, InspireGirls.org)
- We teach digital entrepreneurship and leadership skills to women of all ages (g-Hive.org, inQube, iLive2Lead, Digital Leadership Series)
- We promote role models and recognise outstanding girls and women in strategic ESTEAM sectors (the Ada Awards, Digital Leadership Summit)
- We advocate, on European and global levels, for greater participation of girls and women in all these areas and in leadership across the board (Women2020.org, iLive2Lead)

Since 2011, Zen Digital has been the Belgian National Point of Contact (NPoC) for the European Centre for Women and Technology (ECWT). What led to your involvement with this organisation?

As a woman in ICT, I joined ECWT in 2009 and was asked to become NPoC in 2011. The objectives for ECWT and Zen Digital/DLI are very similar, so our education, advocacy and awareness-building work on women in ICT contributes to ECWT’s mission. As Belgian NPoC for ECWT, we:

- Carry out activities to reinforce stakeholder groups supporting women in technology and related areas
- Create awareness about the opportunities presented by increasing the participation of girls and women in STEM areas
- Actively seek to close the European skills gap by encouraging girls and women into digital studies and careers
- Contribute to pan-European and global campaigns promoting women and girls in STEM
- Facilitate greater involvement of ECWT and its network members in European projects that reflect our shared mission (e-skills, mobile workforce, smart cities, etc.)

Your work to promote women in science and technology has been recognised by the UN and EC. What makes you so passionate about this cause, and could you provide some examples of your activities with these organisations?

My passion for getting more girls and women into strategic ESTEAM sectors is about the opportunity for economic empowerment this presents them. It is also beneficial to employers and the economy as there is a shortage of skilled employees in these areas. Almost 750,000 ICT jobs are expected to be unfilled by 2020, so it makes sense to focus on the underrepresented gender to address this shortage.

In addition, decisions that impact the future of our species, fellow creatures and planet are being made without input from women and the results of this are disastrous. More girls studying ESTEAM, more women working in these sectors and greater representation of women in leadership roles are key to enabling women to impact the direction of these discussions. DLI has been actively trying to influence this situation, including through involvement with:

- e-Skills Week and e-skills campaigns with the EC over the past three years
- Pan-European activities like EU Robotics Week
- Initiatives to promote ESTEAM education and leadership to girls, like Girls in ICT Day and Women’s Day
- Campaigns and events, such as Science: It’s a Girl Thing, Every Girl Digital and last year’s initiative to crowdsourced EC Vice-President Neelie Kroes’ (see p26) speech to the European Parliament on International Girls in ICT Day

We look forward to carrying out similar projects in 2014 and will focus especially on female digital role models.

You are involved in a plethora of projects working to increase female participation in STEM. Notably, you founded Women2020, a policy platform aiming to promote female contributions to the Europe 2020 vision. Could you provide some insight into this? Which key themes is Women2020 addressing?

Women2020 is a dialogue bringing issues women are experiencing at the coalface to the attention of decision makers. We have tackled a number of such topics over the past year through a series of events, including women in leadership and the quota directive launched by EC Vice-President Viviane Reding; the opportunities and challenges facing women in STEM sectors, including women in enterprise, as innovators and as leaders; and what this means for young women looking towards the future.
Some issues recurred across the board, including the need to articulate concrete objectives for promoting the specific contribution of women to the Europe 2020 strategy – on education, employment, engagement and leadership – particularly in the strategic, innovative sectors of the economy. We have summarised the outcome of these meetings in a Women2020 Action Plan that was released alongside the launch of DLI. The report reviews the nature of the challenges and opportunities related to the topics explored in the Women2020 dialogue meetings, and offers concrete, actionable recommendations.

We hope the findings of the Women2020 dialogue will be taken on board in the forthcoming review of Europe 2020, and that any future strategy will specifically reflect the interests and needs of women, whose engagement in Europe 2020 is the critical factor determining its success.

Women2020 recently held ‘Young Women for Europe 2020’. Could you shine a light on the key outcomes of this event?

Women and young people are impacted in a disproportionate and negative way by economic adversity. For this reason, young women are at the greatest risk of being overlooked and marginalised in challenging economic times. In the year 2020, today’s teenage girls will be entering the labour force and seven-year-old girls will be making study choices that will determine their, and Europe’s, future. We want to make sure their voices are heard now in the discussion over any strategy in Europe that seeks to be ‘smart, sustainable and inclusive’.

To what extent is a lack of role models driving the STEM gender gap?

If there were a silver bullet for getting more girls into STEM/ESTEAM areas, it would be the media – as Geena Davis says: ‘If she can see it, she can be it’. I gave a TEDx talk on the subject of promoting even fictional female characters in STEM to inspire young and career-age women to enter these fields. Data are sparse, but indicate that this kind of role modelling really works to get girls and women interested in ESTEAM.

I founded Digital Muse (digitalmuse.org) in 2012, a global network that promotes digital skills among girls through creative endeavour, like music composition, DJing, filmmaking and other forms of digital storytelling. The aim is that girls own the entire digital, creative process and its outcome – which gives them new skills, increased confidence and a greater voice in the portrayal of girls and women in digital media.

On a personal level, who has inspired you?

Women who retain a sense of self, dignity and elegance, and who are uncompromising, stand up for what they believe, get respect without asking for it, and are still compassionate and honest with themselves and others. EC Vice President Neelie Kroes is a true inspiration for me, and I am flattered to say that she has been a strident supporter of the work I’ve done. Last year, she was patron of our initiative – the Ada Awards – that recognised outstanding girls and women in digital sectors in Europe and the organisations who support them.

Zen Digital is partner of iLive2Lead, an international leadership training programme for young women. What are the benefits of having more female leaders and how will the initiative help realise this?

iLive2Lead is an organisation promoting young female leaders across the board. I am the Global STEM Director for iL2L.org and have the mission of expanding their involvement in these areas. Through DLI, we aim to launch a ‘Future Digital Leader’ training series for girls and women in 2014, culminating in a Digital Leadership Summit at the end of the year. We will bring iLive2Lead on board to align our European activities in this area, and we aim to support iLive2Lead’s global summits – in the US, Africa and Asia – with more focus on ESTEAM.

What do you consider the greatest achievement of Zen Digital to date, and what are your hopes for its future?

Zen Digital has grown from a personal wish to inspire more girls into STEM, to a global platform promoting greater participation of girls and women in ESTEAM leadership at the very highest level. In the process, the team involved and the number of people impacted by our work have expanded exponentially, from a one-person initiative as Zen Digital Europe to a global organisation with board members and networks around the world as DLI. Our greatest achievement may be in affirming that one person with a passion about making a positive, needed change can inspire like-minded individuals to join her and, together, accomplish great things. I’m looking forward to working with our DLI team to make great things happen for girls and women around the world.

www.dliii.org

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All the accomplishments of Zen Digital Europe, and the plans we now have for the DLI, have been achieved with a lot of hard work by people who share a vision of bridging the gender gap and the digital divide worldwide. In particular, with the upcoming release of the Women2020 Action Plan, I would like to thank Inge De Prins, our Women2020 Rapporteur; Mirna Hidalgo, a contributing expert to the Action Plan; and Valérie Kinoo, my personal digital muse without whom very little of what we are celebrating today – and in the coming days, months and years – would be possible.