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LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Leading by example

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SPIE. WOMEN IN OPTICS
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Shahida Imani was a financial and technology consultant before taking on the role of Chromacity CEO just over two years ago. Here she discusses adapting to a new industry and her approach to management

In taking on a leadership role in the UK photonics industry, what were the biggest challenges?

One of the obvious challenges I faced was not having a technical background in the industry, though I believe the success of a business is not just based on its technology but on its commercial execution. A lot of commercial acumen is formulaic and can be applied across different industries and technologies, and I've applied this across multiple sectors during my career.

Still, to lead a technology company effectively, you need to develop a technical understanding. Chromacity was my hardest challenge because physics and lasers are such complicated subjects. I've developed a good understanding of the technology and have been able to reframe it into my own, more commercially focused, language. Bridging the gap between the commercial and technical aspects has worked in my favour, especially when speaking with customers and investors.

What surprised you about the photonics industry?

The collaborative nature was probably the biggest surprise. For example, we needed fibres for our ultrafast lasers and one of the suppliers is also a competitor. We had an informal meeting at SPIE Photonics West and, although they recognised us as competitors, they were very open to collaborating with us. There is an almost familial aspect to the sector, which meshes well with our own approach.

What has it been like to helm Chromacity through global challenges like Covid-19?

"I've developed a good understanding of the technology and have been able to reframe it into my own, more commercially focused, language"

The first two or three weeks were definitely tough, as they were for everybody. Our business opportunities didn't evaporate, but there were delays, so we had to model the cash flow impact of that.

I think that's probably where my business background helped, as I was able to pull together answers quickly, present them to the board, and then put the appropriate measures in place. Our plan meant we didn't have to furlough any staff; we had already ensured that everyone could work from home, so the switch to remote working was pretty seamless.

As a laser manufacturer, we faced challenges because R&D and manufacturing had to go on hold for a few weeks.

There came a point where we needed engineers to continue with ongoing projects and manufacturing. We slowly introduced a limited number of manufacturing and R&D employees back to the labs with extensive hygiene and social distancing measures in place. It's been a massive team effort. We all supported each other, and this has brought us closer together.

What are the key elements of being a woman in a STEM leadership role?

Anyone in a leadership role should aim to do their best, work hard, and make sure that what they do is of a high standard. Unfortunately, for women there is still an element of having to work harder to have their achievements recognised. I do feel that male business leaders are still credited more readily for their achievements, and sometimes I feel women have to fight harder to be recognised for their accomplishments.

As a woman and a visible minority in a leadership position, I do feel a sense of responsibility – particularly towards younger generations – so it was nice when I was asked to be part of the Equity in Industry Panel at Photonics West earlier this year. These are important discussions to have: when Chromacity joined the European Photonics Industry Consortium last year, I was told that I was one of three female CEOs out of their 500 membership companies. Equality isn't there yet, certainly not in the photonics industry, but things are changing, and I hope I can be part of that change.

Do you consider mentorship a part of your role? Did you have a mentor?

"when Chromacity joined the European Photonics Industry Consortium last year, I was told that I was

I absolutely see mentorship as part of my role; I am here to lead the company in a way that I believe is the right way. It's often about relying on your instincts, because at times you have to make tough decisions. But you make them for the right reasons, and I've always tried to ensure that the environment and the culture that I've created at Chromacity is nurturing and supportive of everyone in the company. I think that approach has helped us become more agile, efficient, and collaborative. I hope I'm demonstrating leadership and mentorship through example.

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In terms of a mentor who supported me, there are a few who spring to mind, but a special mention goes to our company chairman, Ian Stevens. We first worked together in 1996 and several times since, so I've had his support for quite some time. Since becoming our non-executive chairman last year, Ian has already been invaluable, in terms of his insights, as well as by providing guidance at key moments.

Where do you see ultrafast laser technology heading?

We're at a very exciting time for ultrafast lasers: the technology is maturing and becoming more commodity-based. To date, ultrafast lasers have been mainly used in academic and fundamental research environments. Now that the lasers are becoming more robust, reliable, portable and, in our case, affordable, I think we're going to see their use expand into many new markets and applications – lidar for autonomous vehicles, or environmental sensing, for example.

Environmental sensing is particularly interesting as developments in tuneable broadband sources like our OPO products are enabling quantitative and qualitative multi-species gas analysis from a compact single source. This is significant for environmental monitoring, as existing solutions are often prohibitively expensive, too large to be useful, limited in only being able to measure one gas at a time, or not being able to measure how much of a particular gas is present. As the global focus on climate change becomes increasingly prominent, reducing industrial emissions will be more important and legislation will likely be stricter, so having technology with this kind of capability is going to be critical in the years ahead.

There is a lot of interest in quantum technologies, of course, but it's probably too early to be able to quantify the role of lasers in those applications. Where lasers do have a role to play is in the research that is helping drive the understanding

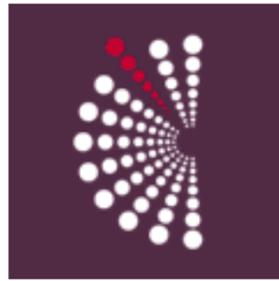
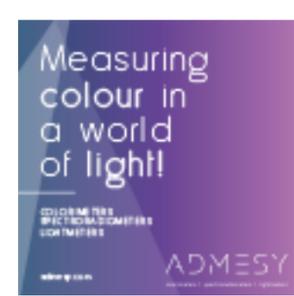
and development of quantum technologies. The increasing availability of smaller, more affordable laser sources, should allow more researchers to work on these questions so that quantum applications can be brought to reality faster.

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