

Using diversity to breed innovation

Paul Gillespie sat down with Anne De Kerckhove from Freespee, a self-described start-up addict, to discuss her exciting journey in the technology sector, her most recent challenge as the CEO of Freespee and inclusivity in the workplace.

Anne, you have had a fascinating career journey –how did you get to where you are now?

I never really planned my career and instead of specific roles, I focused on the things that I'm passionate about. In my first job in finance, I was lucky enough to get a mentor, who helped me realise that I was more interested in the innovations than the financing part. Thanks to him, I ended up in the project financing department where I could explore my passion for innovation.

From then on, I started looking for roles where I could co-create with other people and push the boundaries; where I could work with amazing people who think differently, create new things and build tremendous projects. I equally wanted to be an investor and after my second IPO, I was lucky enough to build my own portfolio of companies as a business angel investor.

For many people, it is a one-way street – you become a CEO, you make money, and then build a portfolio. You on the other hand, have been an investor and now come back to the frontline with Freespee as a CEO. What made you take that turn in your career?

You are right. Every time I sell a company, people ask: "Are you done now?", but this is so much fun! Why stop? And with Freespee, there were three factors that made me take this opportunity.

Firstly, the product and the technology are superb and have true impact! Secondly, we are very lucky to have 22 nationalities across 5 locations in Europe, a hugely talented team that is open to doing things differently. I get fantastic energy from a team that is super motivated to innovate every day.



Anne De Kerckhove, CEO of Freespee

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Third was the relationship with the founder. It is always hard to take over from a founder, as you are taking over at least sharing their baby. With Carl, I felt a genuine connection and saw a way to continue this journey together, as well as with the board of investors. There is an alignment of the vision that starts from the executive team and continues to every single person within the company.

Were you looking at a number of CEO roles before you decided or did you know that Freespee was right for you when we came knocking on your door and said, “What about...?”

Bizarrely, Gillamor Stephens knocked on my door the same day I was signing the terms sheet to sell my last company, and I remember laughing about it and thinking, “Do they have a hidden camera in my office or something?”

I believe that in taking on roles like this, you have to follow your instinct. When it's right, it tends to be right from the beginning – starting with the first call with the head hunter, through meeting the executives and the conversations

you have with the rest of the team. It really should feel like you are home, and that is how I felt throughout the process with Freespee.

Who are Freespee and what happens now you have closed your B-round funding?

Currently, there is a great disconnect between the digital self-service journey and the sophistication that consumers encounter on digital platforms and the moment you engage in a conversation with a brand. When a consumer calls a service centre, they start at square one and have to tell their story all over again. At Freespee, we create the bridge between the digital experience and the call to create a seamless and contextual user journey. We create a unique user journey for every single person, routing the call to the right person and giving the agent all the information on the consumer's previous digital journey.

We are growing at about 80% year-on-year, so we are in what I call the 'hyper-growth mode'. It is always a super exciting period for a company. You have found your market fit, you are having a huge impact on clients. Now it is all about expansion and scale. Since I joined, we have brought on board about 45 people and we have 30 more to recruit before the year end. There is no part of the organisation we are not scaling up - the research and development team, the sales teams, the customer success department... The demand is there, and we will continue to grow to keep up.

Taking a slightly different turn, you are recognised as a major flag bearer for female entrepreneurs. First of all, how hard has it been for you?

I guess I was always the only female in my tech executive positions since I was 27, or the only female investor and it was not an issue for me personally as I took leadership roles so early on.

It took me until I was in my 40's to realise how it could be a problem

for other women. I had this lack of self-awareness around how it could be hard for other people to be the only women on the board or executive room etc. Now I am making up for the lost time!

I have realised how important it is to have mentors and to fund female-male mixed start-ups, for example. I am super vigilant about this and I talk, write, and make videos about it. In Freespee, I encourage diversity and it works - you need to pay attention to it and pro-actively make changes!

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In tech firms, it is one of our most important challenges to resolve, because diversity produces better results. If you only hire people that look like you, talk like you, went to the same school as you - you don't have different perspectives! No one challenges you properly. At Freespee, Our 22 different nationalities challenge each other every day and produce better results because of it.

You are also a mentor, how do you fit that in?

Well, there is a famous saying which goes something like - "if you want something done, get a busy person to do it". Meaning that if you are passionate about something, you will always find time and with mentoring, it sometimes takes just a coffee. I mentor about 10 women a year - some just need to have a sounding board, others need perspective. Most of the women

I mentor are part of the mentoring programme at INSEAD or Accelerator programs where I volunteer, but I also get approached on LinkedIn, sometimes on a daily basis.

Many of the most successful female entrepreneurs are in B2C or B2B2C companies. Why is this? Empathy?

You took the word out of my mouth. It might be a stereotype, but I strongly believe that it is empathy. Women tend to naturally think of others and this will play a role because there is a certain value and skill that comes with empathy. As we move towards an obsession with customer experience, more companies will search for it.

There has been a major change in leadership compared to 15 years ago, when people would use brute force to drive results and squash partners and clients. We can see the fiasco of Uber's founder leadership, where that sort of style is not accepted anymore. Both internally and externally, people look at the CEO and expect them to have good values and for them to communicate those values and to adhere to them. I think it's a great time for women to make it to the top of tech companies, because they bring that added perspective.

Could it be that the entrepreneurial world is more open and receptive? It is, "What's your proposition?" as opposed to, "What's your gender?"

Completely! If you think about it, I've only ever been hired by men, so clearly, men don't have an issue hiring strong women. What I brought to the table, was a drive. I teach a lot of women to have a clear identity and proposition, because that is what entrepreneurs are looking for.

They do not care about your degrees or your background, or your skin colour or gender. They care about the impact you are going to have in the company.