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AI LEADERS PODCAST: WOMEN IN AI
AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

REBEKAH ARSENAULT: For me, this group is about normalizing women in AI.

00:12

JOYCE KLINE: Hello. I'm Joyce Kline. I'm a Managing Director within Accenture's Applied Intelligence Practice. And I'm joined here today by two of my colleagues, Rebekah Arsenault, who is an AI Strategy Consultant from our New York office and Sally Lin, a Data Science Manager also based in New York.

Rebekah and Sally, it's great to have you here with me today to talk about the Women of Applied Intelligence and the group that we created here at Accenture. So welcome, Rebekah and Sally.

What I'd like to do to get started is to ask both of you about how you got interested in the consulting field. So, Sally, maybe I'll start with you. What – in consulting?

00:55

SALLY LIN: Thank you, Joyce, I'm really happy to be here today and excited to share some of my experiences here.

So my past has – my career so far has been about six years. So it's a pretty long span and I'll try to keep it short for our audience here. Essentially, I started in college. I majored in material science engineering, which is very different from the work that I'm doing today. In college, I didn't know if I wanted to stick with engineering, stay with academia, go into industry. And so, I ended up senior year applying for consulting because I knew that it would give me a very broad swath of experiences. And then, if I found something that I really liked, maybe I could dive into it more, turn into academia or industry after that if I was really interested in.

01:45

And so, well, six years later, here I still am. And once I – actually, when I first joined Accenture, I was – I joined directly where my role is today. Back then, it wasn't called data science. It was called general analytics. And that analytics practice later evolved into what we have here into Applied Intelligence, with different branches and strategy, data science, engineering and all of that.

And I actually think that I was very lucky to be placed into this analytics group. I found that I really enjoyed the work here, both in terms of the technical aspects of data science itself, as well as the more business side, speaking with clients, understanding business objectives and all of that.

So I can say right now, that I'm very happy to be where I am here and also lucky that I found something that was very similar to my interests directly out of my undergrad or I would say that I really had no idea where I want to go.

02:49

JOYCE KLINE: Great, great, Sally. So consulting really gave you that diversity that you were looking for. And I don't think we've ever talked about it, but my undergrad actually was in material science as well. But I had the opportunity to practice it for a few years and then, kind of made my way into consulting. So nice to know a fellow engineer and the ability of leveraging those skills. Because I think one thing that engineering teaches all of us is how to solve problems and consulting is definitely about helping our clients with their biggest and thorniest issues and how we can help them be more successful as a result of that.

So, Rebekah, let's move over to you. What drove you into the field of consulting?

03:29

REBEKAH ARSENAULT: Sure, thanks, Joyce, and thanks so much for having me. So pretty similar background as Sally actually. As an undergrad, I actually studied business and I was part of an undergraduate consulting group, which helped me solidify my interest in consulting, so that I could get the chance to try a variety of projects and develop a breadth of knowledge with my career.

03:51

And so, I wanted to use consulting to learn about how businesses work and the strategy behind them. So right out of college, I ended up in consulting at Accenture. In my first project at Accenture happened to be in the analytic space and I saw that there was a huge need for that business strategy mindset, where someone can understand and bring together both the business' needs and the capabilities of data and AI. So I've been working in that space as a sort of translator in different capacities ever since and real excited to be part of this practice now in Applied Intelligence.

04:26

JOYCE KLINE: Well, that's perfect. I think what you've guys have helped the listeners appreciate is you brought your skills and problem solving to bear and leveraged those skills in terms of helping our clients with the examples that you've shared so far. I'd like to go a little bit deeper into the types of industries and more specifically into the type of work that both of you have been involved in because I think that our listeners have really of types of problems that you've been able to help clients address. And, Rebekah, maybe we can begin with you and then, Sally?

04:59

REBEKAH ARSENAULT: Sure. So in terms of industry work, most of my work has been at utility companies, so gas and electricity companies around the country. So they're experiencing a lot of disruption right now with trends like renewable energy, electric vehicles and modernization of the grid, to name a few. And there are a lot of opportunities for these companies to use data to help them address these major changes and help with leaving a positive environmental impact.

05:26

And more recently, I've been more industry agnostic and working on product management for an AI driven product that helps employees understand their current skill set, build new highly relevent digital skills and then, move into these new roles, new digital roles smoothly.

And I really loved this space because I thought the intersection of people's experiences and data/AI and I think this kind of work has a really impactful and tangible benefit on the lives of employees.

05:56

SALLY LIN: And to add in, I'm also seeing a lot of similar things as what you're seeing, Rebekah, with how important data and the digital age is coming these days. For my end, I've mostly worked in CMT, which is Communications, Media and Technology, with large telecom companies focused on problems, such as increasing revenue, retaining your subscribers, reducing churn.

06:20

I'm currently working with a software and platform company to help with operations and workforce improvement with a focus on people which is, again, similar to what you have done as well, Rebekah. And in my experiences, I've learned more and more that, again, how important data is to everyone, especially in the past couple of years, everything is turning into virtual, everything's relying on data to drive solutions and insights and how we can understand what business priorities are and really help improve our workforce, our business goals and everything.

07:00

JOYCE KLINE: It's great to hear of the work that you guys are doing and knowing the impact that you're making to the clients that you're serving in the utilities industry and, Sally, and the work that you're doing with our CMT clients. And I think what's also very interesting is that how you highlighted the transformation that we're seeing at our clients as a result of the data and analytics work that we're doing and how that's really helping these clients become better at the work they do and, ultimately, the customers that they serve. So your stories are definitely resonating with me.

07:33

One of the things I'd be really curious about is the number of women that you interact with, both at Accenture and at your clients. I'm curious if you can kind of take us through the teams that you've been part of and how many have been full of women versus you find yourself being the lone woman at a table? So maybe you could share a little bit of those experiences? And, Sally, maybe we could start with you?

08:00

SALLY LIN: Yeah, definitely. This is a really important topic here. And in my experiences, I've actually been very fortunate that I have had very strong female leaders throughout my career at Accenture. From the very start, I was exposed to a very strong woman leader and she continued to be sort of my mentor throughout all these past six years, as I was here at Accenture. And I'm looking forward to continue learning from her as I rise up in the ranks and stay longer here too.

08:29

So even though I've been very lucky to have strong female leaders throughout my career, I've also had my fair share of experiences where I was lacking a strong female lead. So I'll share one project and memory in particular. So one time, I was invited to a leadership meeting when I was still a rather junior level to help mostly with management of the meeting and any administration materials that were necessary. All the other attendees were managers or higher, a few MDs present, in a room of maybe 15 or so. And I just remember specifically a moment when I looked around the room and I realized that there was only one woman other than me.

09:08

So in a room of 15 people, who were managers or above, only one was female. And I realized then that while I've had strong female leads to look up to, there's still very much a disparity in this field. And maybe not everyone has had the experiences that I have. Maybe everyone else was in that one room where there was only one female lead in a room full of men. And so, that was something that was really eye-opening and told me that there's still work to be done in this field.

09:36

REBEKAH ARSENAULT: For me, I would say I've often been the only women or one of the few women on teams, especially on projects that are very focused on analytics and AI. And I've honestly mostly adjusted to it and not thought too much of it, but now, I actually happen to be on a team where the majority of the team members are female. And for me, it made me realize how refreshing it is to work with other women. So I hope to see more of this.

10:01

I've been very inspired that there are so many women in top leadership at Accenture and in the Applied Intelligence Practice, but definitely agree with Sally that even though we've made strides, there's still a long way to go to seeing more quality across the board.

10:18

JOYCE KLINE: Yeah, Rebekah, thanks for bringing up – I agree with the comment about the fact that we've made strides. I think that's a great way to describe it. I think there have there have been strides made and we all know that Accenture has made direct statements publicly about gender parity by 2025 and those are very aggressive goals and it's 2021. So as you guys know, there's still work to be done, but I agree with you there, it is always refreshing to be on a team when there's a lot of other women around. And, Sally, I've been exactly where you have described, being the only woman in a room.

11:00

I was on a call yesterday with many people, I was the only woman on the call. And so, there's still efforts that need to be made. And so, knowing that, last summer, conversations happened probably about last spring, but last summer, the three of us and a few of others came together and we formed what is now known as the North America Women of Applied Intelligence. As you mentioned, Sally, there was a senior woman leader at Accenture, who turned to me and said, it would be really good that we bring together women across the practice and we create a forum by which they can meet on a regular basis for things such as mentorship, for networking, community building. So we set out to bring the group together. And so, as anybody knows, bringing a group together, setting the mission, figuring out the programming, it's a task. It's an additional activity, but I think for all of us who are on it, it's a passion project to make sure that we are creating this inclusive environment.

12:08

So I think it would be really helpful for our listeners to hear about how the group got started and what the group means to each of you? So, Sally, maybe I'll start with you and you could talk a little bit about the foundation that we set and what the group's mission is and then, get into what it means for you? And, Rebekah, maybe you can add on your thoughts as well?

12:30

SALLY LIN: Yeah, happy to. So, Joyce, as you already said, the original impetus for our group came from our wonderful female leaders at Accenture, who wanted to create a space for our women in Applied Intelligence to come

together and build community. So essentially, our group is exactly that, to create a community and space for our women to support and raise other women in our field, to amplify the voices of our fellow women and to provide a network of support in a time when everyone is facing the unprecedented challenges of working from home.

13:07

So I have been, again, very lucky to have strong women leaders and mentors in Applied Intelligence and not everyone has been so fortunate. So for me, I want this group to be able to sort of be that support group for all the other women in Applied Intelligence, who may not have had such strong role models or colleagues or co-workers and I want this group to be able to fill that space for them, to support each other, to raise each other up, to guide each other in our careers and also to just build confidence, inspire excellence, just as my leaders and my colleagues have done for me.

13:48

And here, I'm very glad that Accenture is so committed to diversity, to the importance of having this group and talking about important issues. I just want to say that I have had friends in other companies who've said that they're the only female on their team. They don't have such a support group or the company hasn't talked about these issues. And whenever they say that, I'm just thinking, wow, I am actually pretty lucky to have a group like this at Accenture.

14:18

REBEKAH ARSENAULT: Yeah, definitely agree with all of that. I think for me, this group is about normalizing women in AI and changing the impression that this – that AI is a male dominated field. When you hear about women and been in situations many of us have been in, when you're the only female on the team, it feels a bit isolating. But when we all come together as women from across North America, there are actually a lot of us and we can build that sense of community and belonging that you may not always have on a small team.

And I think one way to highlight that we do this is at our events, we do breakout rooms, where we can meet women from all over the country and share our experiences and build new connections in small, informal settings.

15:04

JOYCE KLINE: This is great. You guys have hit on some of the real reasons that we work to create this group and what we're hoping to accomplish with it. I'm really curious if you can share out of the various programming that we did this year, what was the one event that really was a capstone for you that really at the end of it, not only pride, but a real sense of accomplishment for we are starting to change the game? And maybe, Rebekah, we could start with you in terms of what was that one event for you and then, Sally, you can round it up and then, I'll share what it was for me?

15:42

REBEKAH ARSENAULT: So for me, it was our Inaugural event which was a panel of female MDs from Applied Intelligence. And I was really inspired because most of the panelists had long careers at Accenture and in Tech. And so, throughout their careers, they'd seen so many changes in the space and in women's roles. And I was really inspired to see how they've helped fight for women's equality in this space and to see how far we've come. And it really also inspired me to keep pursuing this path because when I hear about women who have done it for decades and they're still excited and passionate about it, it makes me excited for what's to come.

16:25

SALLY LIN: So for me actually, it was the same event and I really enjoyed hearing from our leaders in Applied Intelligence. And I won't repeat what you had said, Rebekah, but it rings true to my heart. But I will add a note on that afterwards, after we had the panel, we did have our breakout sessions and within those sessions where we had groups of maybe 5 or so people, who attended the panel, we had a little debrief, we introduced ourselves, we talked about anything from work to non-work. We were also hearing the same sentiment that everyone was very inspired by our women leaders, really looking forward to what the future holds for us.

17:11

And just in general, building a rapport, building community between us, really made me realize that what we're doing here is important, it is making a difference and it is making me really excited to see what our future holds.

17:26

JOYCE KLINE: It's fantastic to hear you guys comment on that event. It was a long time coming in terms of planning for it and you both were integral into making that event a successful one. I'm going to share a different one and I'm going to say that when we did the panel of consultants through senior managers, that one for me was really impactful to hear what is it like to be practitioners within Applied Intelligence? What are some of the things that we do really well, as well as some of the things that we needed to improve upon? And I think it was also at that event, we had a networking, our breakout session as well and just really a nice opportunity to build off of in a smaller setting what were some of the things that people had shared on the panel.

18:14

So I think definitely a key takeaway here is panels seem to resonate. So maybe as we build out our programming for this coming year, it's something for us to reconsider.

So what I'd love to do is build off of the way that you were talking about this first year of the Women of Applied Intelligence and talk a little bit around what changes you'd like to see in the next 5 to 10 years around the role of women in Applied Intelligence? And maybe, Rebekah, we'll kick this off with your thoughts?

18:49

REBEKAH ARSENAULT: So in the next 5 to 10 years, I think we all want to see the gender ratio be more balanced between men and women. And I think one way that I would like to see that happen is by reaching out to the next generation of women at a young age and sparking an interest in Tech and AI, even starting in middle school and high school and helping girls to see this as an option for themselves.

19:13

As a personal anecdote, when I was in middle school, there was a certain point where I labeled myself as being bad at math and I held that view of myself for years and it wasn't until college that I realized that I actually really enjoyed math and numbers. And I probably decided that about myself at a young age for a number of reasons, but gender and the common rules for men versus women was definitely one of them. And so, I think by reaching out to girls and inspiring an interest in this field, they can start to see themselves and their own futures differently. So I hope that we can go about achieving gender equality by reaching out to the younger generation, inspiring this interest and allowing them to see this as a possibility for themselves.

19:57

SALLY LIN: Yeah, that's a wonderful point, Rebekah, and I completely agree. It's really important that we reach out to those who are not yet at age where they're starting to work yet, but when they're really first deciding what do they want to do in the future, something maybe like me who wasn't sure what I wanted to do in college. But even just those who are still in the midst of learning, so for understanding who they are as people and what their strengths and weaknesses are and what they want to do in the future. That's definitely one of the most important areas to start.

20:33

And in my point, I'm going to add also another view, which is from the top, from leadership, from people like you and me and those of us who are listening on the pod and the audience right now. Commitment from leadership is going to be super important. And this will trickle down to commitment throughout all levels, whether through increased hiring, through switching into more technical roles and Applied Intelligence, through promoting women up to higher levels. And then, most of all, just providing the opportunity for women to excel and to support our growth where we see it.

And I think that combined with what you had mentioned with people who are just entering the workforce or just figuring out their careers, that will really allow women to rise and continue rising through all levels of their career.

21:31

JOYCE KLINE: Your comments in terms of thinking about the need to reach back to how and when, I guess I would say, people get involved in the field, I think is really insightful, all the way, Sally, to where you were just highlighting this need for top down commitment flowing through the organization in terms of building skills, creating the right environment and really fostering that role of women. Very inspiring comments in terms of the need for change and the role that different people play. We all play actually in terms of fostering the role of women in our field. So great to hear that.

22:14

You know, maybe one of the things that we can do to kind of come a little full circle, is it would be interesting if you were talking to a person embarking on what do I think I might want to be when I grow up type of conversations. What would you say to them in terms of interest in a field like Applied Intelligence and how they might be able to get involved? What advice would you have? So, Sally, maybe you could start us off here with what you would say to a younger Sally, relative to where you are today?

22:44

SALLY LIN: Definitely. And my answer here is going to be easy to say, but difficult to implement and that is to be confident, be bold. If anything, our female leaders have shown that we can accel above and beyond. We do have the skills and all we really need to do is to take that step forward, believe that we know what we do know and just take the chance, be active, fare what you know and just reach out and I'm sure that everything will work out in the end as it has for me, as it has for, I'm sure, all of our listeners on the audience today.

23:28

REBEKAH ARSENAULT: For me, my advice would be to surround yourself with others who share the same interest as you, both at the mentor level and the peer level. In my experience, I have a small number of mentors who have completely changed the trajectory of my career, thanks to the good advice and insight they've been able to give me over the years. I've also found so much benefit from having peers that are ambitious and passionate, who push me.

And so, basically for me, I would advice people to find good people around you, who will help you to thrive and challenge yourself throughout your career.

24:04

JOYCE KLINE: Both are very inspiring for me. I love the comments about be bold, be confident, find mentors. This is wonderful advice to anybody thinking about careers, in general, but also very importantly, in the area of data science and analytics. So I think it hopefully will resonate with the folks that are listening today to consider as they embark on their career.

24:31

I'd like to thank both of you, Sally and Rebekah, for your time today. It has been amazing to learn more about not only where you started in your career, why consulting, but also the roles that you've played at Accenture and the industries that you are supporting today. But for me, the most important part of today's conversation was the fact that we were able to spend some time talking about the role of women in Applied Intelligence, the role that the two of you play within our practice, how we stood up the North America Women of Applied Intelligence and what we accomplished so far this year in our goals and plans for how that group can support the ambitions of Accenture as we move ahead over the next 5 to 10 years and the role that I hope that you guys will play and the leaders that you'll continue to be within our practice.

25:24

I'd also like to thank our listeners for joining us today and, hopefully, the session that we had was not only helpful as you think about what we do here within our Applied Intelligence Practice, but also a window into the work that we're doing within the North America Women of Applied Intelligence. I hope that you all will continue to subscribe and listen to more episodes of the AI Leaders Podcast Series and I'd like to thank everybody joining us today. So thanks again.