EP 17 AI LEADERS PODCAST

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

JIN ZHANG: Be the best we can, be that role model, but along the way, bring other women along with us.

LAN GUAN: Hi, everyone. Thank you for tuning into today's podcast. I'm Lan Guan, Senior Managing Director at Accenture Strategy and Consulting Practice. I'm joined today by Jin Zhang, Director of Engineering at Meta. As we all know, there is no shortage of qualified women to climb the corporate ranks. Today, women make up almost half of the U.S. labor force. They outnumber men in earning Bachelor's and Master's degree. However, only 24% hold senior leadership positions, and only 5% are Fortune 500 CEOs. The glass ceiling has yet to be broken.

In today's podcast, we'll hear how Jin navigates the corporate America and her advice for other women. Welcome, Jin. I'm so excited to pick your brain on a very important topic, women climbing the career ladder. To get started, let's hear about your journey so far.

JIN ZHANG: Thank you, Lan. I'm super excited about joining this meaningful conversation. Yeah, let's start by talking about my career journey. I didn't have a straight line here, I think. You know, that's sort of the way to some of my career journey. I've done a variety of things. I've served both for very large Fortune 500 companies, but also startups. I've also switched back and forth between engineering and product and then back to engineering again. I've done quite a few different verticals as far as the technical stack, whether it was related to middle tier or backend databases, or now I'm focusing on cloud infrastructure.

So currently, I support Meta's infra capacity engineering team where we are responsible for all the servers that's running in Meta's fleet today. And I probably want to mention many of us, and you likely in the AI field, Lan, noticed this recent announcement. You know, if you go to AI.Facebook.com, you'll see us mentioning about this AI research super cluster. And these are kind of the innovative, but also huge scale wise kind of work that I'm lately focusing on.

Now, the funny thing here is if you think about the different things I've done, sometimes it's a little bit difficult to relay back to your family. So I've tried to explain to my mom to say, hey, my work is to get whatever you heard about that computing cloud to be able to function, so that your iPad, your iPhone, can properly access your video and photo, especially for the grandchildren. For that particular point, she definitely give me her thumbs up and approval for what I'm trying to do here.

LAN GUAN: Wow, that's wonderful to hear, and I would definitely check out a supercluster that you just mentioned. So I think it's great to hear your story here, and you made it so personal. And I think your point about not just being a straight line at that point resonated really well with me since I didn't have a traditional path to the leadership role that I have in AI as well. I think many of us will find it daunting to tread along different paths to find something that they are ultimately passionate about. But you have a very inspiring story here and lessons that others, I hope, can all learn from.

I'm also curious about how gender has played a role in your career journey for you. So this basically leads to my next question. I want to just lightly touch on the International Women's Day because of the timing of this podcast and it's just right around the corner. So as many of us know, International Women's Day is a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. It also marks a call to action for accelerating gender parity, as you and I both know back in China, there's the famous phrase that we use, women hold up half of the sky.

JIN ZHANG: It's great to hear that.

LAN GUAN: Yeah, so it'll be great to hear your thoughts on what that means to you personally and creating, gender parity in the AI and technology fields.

JIN ZHANG: I was, again, reflecting on a number you shared upfront, as we started the podcast here. We've done really well as far as educational opportunity. If you look at globally and that personally, for me, growing up in China was a big challenge because not a lot of girls get the chance to take that risk and have the entire family support them to take that risk, to go all the way for that college entrance exam. Not many of us have that opportunity, and I was fortunate that I did. But as you called out, despite we now have significant presence from this education pipeline here, the leadership, especially the senior leadership representation, there is still needing a significant amount of work.

My thinking here, certainly as we celebrate International Women's Day together, is role model matters. And therefore, for each one of us, you're leading the AI Strategy Practice for Accenture. I'm here operating Meta's data server fleets here. We all need to be the best we can, because that helps to have more role models in this field and hopefully for women who come after us to say, I see plenty of them up there, so it has to be possible, achievable, fairly reasonable to get to.

And I used to feel, Lan, actually very uncomfortable about that notion because sometimes being the best we can and highlight the role model effect here, can be a little bit contradictory to my own sort of culture upbringing. I think you can relate this to for Asian, you know, I'm Chinese here. The big thing we believe in our value is you don't toot your own horn because that makes you very big headed. You have to be humble all the time. You keep working, heads down and you wait for others to praise you.

So this always made me a little bit uncomfortable about, hey, talking about role model and talking about potentially myself being a role model. I think I've learned a little bit from that perspective, that now I realize be the best we can and highlight your colleagues, highlight your diversity colleagues for the type of the work they do is really the best message. And it's the most effective way to get others to start following in the same and change that stereotype or sort of the direction of the discussion in the room at the table.

So I actually think we need to focus on be the best we can, be that role model, but along the way, bring other women along with us and continue to build that work of allyship here.

LAN GUAN: Yeah, that's spot on. I cannot agree with you more on the point of being visible. If we're not being visible as the leader, who are the next generation women, to look up to? So I think that's almost our obligation to do that, even though that means changing the mindset and getting out of the comfort zone. So, no, I think that's a very, very good point. And personally, I also feel we're now building that strong support network. You know, many women like you and I will still find it hard to break into the leadership role that we have. So oftentimes, yes, we're super confident we can do that, but forming that support network around you is so important.

So can we dig into this topic a little bit more of just of the topic of support? So maybe, Jin, you can share with me some insights you have, how you have built your own personal network? Any suggestions you have for the listeners? We all know it's important, but many people have come to us and say, oh my God, I don't know how to get started. Who should I be reaching out to? Who should be on my network? Do they need to be the same type of people or I should be looking for a diverse set of leaders? What would be your advice?

JIN ZHANG: That's such a good topic. And in fact, I believe this one has a broad, broad application. A lot of people are interested. I'll give you an example. So within Meta, we have a women's network group for Meta infrastructure. So we have hardware engineers, software engineers, capacity engineers and we get together and here we have this group. So we recently did the survey with the group and mentor sponsors, these just constantly come up to the top five here. People want to know exactly, as you said, Lan, how do we navigate, how do you find time to do this?

So I do want to share some thoughts here. Let's think about how to how to go through maybe three of them. The first thing, the first thing I want to share, which is my personal learning. When you think about reaching out for the network, don't go for – you know, don't think about building a network with other like-minded women, include everyone that's in your colleague and based on the statistics you just shared. If we have, let's say, 17% of workforce in fact being women, you know, that means we have about at least 83% there being men. So build that network of allyship with both men and women.

You know, quite a few years ago, I was invited to Atlassian for their Women in Technology group event and we recorded a talk that's still, I think, on YouTube today, where the focus was, how do you list support from the men in your network? We have a lot of male colleagues. I think personally, I've been super fortunate to have had huge support from my male colleagues, from my male mentors. They are there for us, so don't close the door, don't go to think there's this small support group that you can only go to and only women will understand your challenge. You know, many of them have sisters, have daughters, they are passionate about diversity, many of the colleagues I work with. So definitely include and reach out and make that naturally as part of your day-to-day work or project collaboration. I think that's a really big part. It's you don't separate here's my networking effort, and here's my work effort. When you try to merge them together, you get to hit the right critical mass here, but you also get to leverage and be able to scale the limited time budget you have.

Now, with that said, I think the second thing I want to talk about is be really intentional about your networking effort. Lisette, a colleague of mine here, she leads our advertising organization and she's like the one I'm most amazed of as far as her game plan. So what she's shared with me here is whenever she goes to a conference, before the conference, she would study the list of people she's expecting to meet, whom she would like to meet, when and how and how to prioritize. So she literally would have this conference game plan before going to a professional conference. And if you think about her effort here, it really makes sense because you only get to go to a few of these, let's say, in the year, even becoming more rare during the pandemic here. And those are valuable time you've dedicated away from work and from family. So you want to get the most out of it. So she's super intentional. Same thing here. We all are connected through LinkedIn for a lot of our professional network. How intentional we should ask ourselves with our LinkedIn interactions, giving a like, giving a celebration, providing additional resources and tips. Just think about these interactions. If we're spending this time anyway, how to make it a little bit more meaningful from that network perspective.

Yeah, so we talked about include men. We talked about being very intentional about investing. I think sort of the last thing is just commit the time. I find that to be the biggest barrier. We always say when we have time, we'll go meet up. And even you and I may say, hey, we have time, Lan, we'll have a chat. Just first commit the time because what's going to happen is unless we commit the time, you now have to do it and there's much more motivation about how do I get this to align with my learning goals? You know, you asked about who to look for, well, what is it that you're trying to learn? How self-aware are you sort of with your skill assessment, your inspiration? Align that with your learning goals. Even better yet, right, align that with your business goals. Like some of my mentors inside the company has now also become my best business partners because we brainstorm and tackle things together. These are kind of the best type of alignment. It doesn't always happen, but we should be intentional aiming for these.

LAN GUAN: Yeah, I really liked all those points. I think you hit the nail on the head here. So the having a diverse network, that's something that came up multiple times when I hosted AI leader community event in the last couple of months. So I think it seems like that's very common advice from our women leader. You don't want to just have mentors who are like you. In fact, one of the member was sharing that, hey, while the mentors that one criteria to pick your mentor is actually focusing on someone who knows you. Not who you know. I just thought that kind of advice was just so actionable.

And I think on the intentional point, to me, that is a good reminder even for all of us. I also heard of some other members we're talking about, like they set up the network calendar, so that you actually there's something that you calendar for yourself, who to reach out to, when to reach out to, what's the intent? I think that kind of tactical advice will help all of us.

So I also learned something very useful today. You just shared with me what your colleague was doing, actually making a game plan before going to the conference. I'm actually going to be a Mobile World Congress in two weeks. So that's going to be one of my weekend homework.

JIN ZHANG: Yeah, you give it a try and let me know how well it worked and I think about your calendar idea here.

LAN GUAN: Okay, good exchange. So, Jin, let us take this topic a little bit further. Okay. I know we talk about importance of the networking. And, of course, having this kind of network support makes a huge difference in your career success. So I think what we are saying here is, hey, maybe you don't want to just do the networking for the sake of networking, how do you actually leverage the power of the networking, the support network to help yourself change the trajectory of your growth? So basically, the point here about how do you springboard your career leveraging all the support? So any insights that you can share with the audience here?

JIN ZHANG: Absolutely. So I think if you're able to incorporate your networking effort, your learning objective and ended up align with your business goal, that's really the best case. I want to give you an example. When I first joined Meta, I realized my role was responsible to support all Meta products and that includes, let's say, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp. And when pandemic hit initially in 2020, the biggest trend, of course, we noticed, was the increase for video. Anything related to video, video storage, video transmission, video consumption. The peak was just phenomenal, phenomenal increase.

And from that perspective, video is an area I have not had tons of experience with in the past. I'm more coming from an analytics and database background, so I wanted to learn more. And, therefore, I seek out - so I went and said, I want to look for a mentor. And David Ranka, my video infra director, spent many, many years in Netflix, and he's the video guru. I mean I've listened to his external industry talk and learned a whole bunch about what's happening with encoding, what's happening with decoding, all the different standards and the tricky balance about we naturally think the more we compress the video, the more efficient we are about the storage. But there is that tricky balance about the more you compress it, the more "compute" power it's going to cost you in order to decompress, when you're ready to consume it. So these are all very complex considerations.

So I reached out to David here and he became my mentor. I was learning from him about video infra. We were also, obviously, talking about a lot of things, how to build organizations, how do we focus on retention of talent, all that fun stuff. As it turns out to be, not only I learn more to benefit my business so that I can become a better leader. He also gained a lot more interest and

empathy about the kind of work I do, such as how to optimize, to use less capacity and do more meaningful work. So for that reason, just naturally he became a huge supporter for some of these - for my work, for the projects where we get to collaborate. So if you think about it, I'm super grateful for now his both mentorship, but also partnership there, and it's indeed benefiting not just myself, but also significantly benefiting the business.

And this also, if you think of all this interaction, it also helped me a lot to think big. And that's really the area I want to emphasize. You asked about how do we springboard, how do we suggest women to take that next step? Really think big. You know, I could just day-to-day focus on my server, thinking about how do I engineer the best of my capacity? But now I'm adding that flavor that I learned from David here about this is actually serving video. And the video is in turn serving this livestream event that's going on. And that could be potentially serving a community that's in need because they were all stuck at home. Let's say, you know, this was in Italy for that whole week. This is how people get to rely on to connect with each other.

So all of sudden, that thinking is elevated, and that is the important part about springboarding here. Because this reminds me of another example here is one of my - I wanted to go proceed in opportunity to serve on the public board, and another mentor of mine said this, and I've always remember this, while I'm still working on that goal, she said one big thing, Jin, you have to remember is when you're talking about seeking a board voice, it's different from an interview. This is not an operating role. This is an advisory role. And the difference between the two, one is about specifically how I've done this, this. I know how to make that happen. But the other one is really about why. And this is the think big part.

So again, coming back with both the examples, what I'm trying to say is look for ways to help you elevate your vision, elevate your view, look a little bit ahead and don't focus on highlighting your strengths and your achievements with what you've done here, with that strategic view, I think it's not going to help with my future board role down the road here, but just really helps me day-to-day to be able to provide that vision and support for the organization.

AN GUAN: Yeah, those are wonderful advice. I think that your story really brought to life the point about turning a trusted relationship with your mentors into something that is mutually beneficial for the mentor and mentees. I think that thinking big point is also huge. A lot of us, especially for a lot of listeners here, men and women, they come with data and AI background, lots of the technical background. So very naturally for them to focus on getting technical things very perfect. Sometimes we just lose sight of this big picture as part of this career growth journey. So thank you for reminding everyone of that important point. Thinking big.

JIN ZHANG: Yeah, in fact, Lan, you just reminded me of sharing another story that just happened earlier this week, a mentee of mine, a previous colleague, who has now moved on to a different in machine learning, and he's a he's a data scientist, but in a different industry. And he picked me to say, hey, my manager is asking what would be my career inspiration? How do I see myself increasing the scope? You know, how should I think about this, right? But this is exactly kind of where we've just discussed here. I was just talking to him to say, hey, if you're thinking about learning a new vertical to say, hey, now I'm interested to learn about financial services, that's one direction. You can think about whether you want to change from an IC role, Individual Contributor to a manager role. And that means you need to gain another set of skills for supporting people, working with organizations, having that building organization practice and capability. All of these are different paths that potentially will enable you to do more and learn more and achieve your own personal inspiration. But think about where that is and then just go focus on that and sort of you almost need to call your desire. I desire to be this, and then the others will come to help you because now they have the clarity of your interest here.

LAN GUAN: Wonderful. So those are all excellent, excellent advice that I think people need it, right. They often talk about the bigger challenge and bigger changes that all of us need to be taking. But don't so much really focus on the little things that actually make a huge impact and strong influence and they were they will add up. These little steps that you just share will add up to building, this kind of revolutionary changes in gender parity.

I think your point about training the next generation

talents and offering very good advice, your personal advice to them. Again, all those are very, very good reminders for all of us.

So this brings me to the last question. I know we could be going on this topic for another two hours, but I want to give you a small question here. I know you probably have a long list of things that you can talk about, but if you have to pick two to three key success factors or lesson learned that you like to share with the audience, that will be great?

JIN ZHANG: Wow. I do have a long list of lessons learned. That's for sure. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, when I was switching from engineering to product and product to engineering, I had so much lesson learned about specifically how to build a product or how not to build a product, where I put my learning together and developed this into a class. So I'm still teaching that class right now with Stanford Continuing Study, talking about - and the title was about five steps to build a most lovable product. And there was really a stack of lessons learned here.

I think if we're to share some lessons here. Number one, I would say, focus on the joy you have at work. There is this famous book called, Flow, and there's also this very important notion of all positive psychology here. You need to have fun with what you're doing. And that's ultimately what's most important. When you're having fun over time doesn't feel like over time. Weekend effort doesn't feel like as daunting here.

I think a particular example I want to I want to share there was last summer I had the opportunity. I was invited to give a TEDx talk and I was naturally thinking, well, TEDx, I'm a woman. You know, woman in tech. Do you want me to talk about diversity? You know, I, quite frankly, felt a little bit uncomfortable because just like recently I was reading Alinea and the tip is for what's currently going on. The Black History Month, please do not invite your African-American colleagues to plan and take all that extra work because that tends to be what happens. And I'm like you're coming to me asking me to talk about diversity again.

However, my TEDx here that was, please tell me, what is fun about your work? Why do you like your work and why don't we share about that? I felt like all of a sudden, I got all the freedom I wanted. I was able to articulate why I think my job was meaningful. A lot of

the fun conversations I've had with colleagues about how do we optimize our fleet? How do we compact? As I was discussing with you earlier, whether it's the video compression for storage or it's that efficient moving on the fly from one region to another, if we see our users trying to having certain use pattern changes across the fleet. I mean these are wonderful things to have.

So, first and foremost, I think go find the thing that you have joy working in. Tech is so broad, it's everywhere. And for all of our women out there, even AI is being applied in almost every field possible. So go find that joy.

I think the second thing I would then share is focus on specific small joys, small wins, I would say. Although, they may not be - despite the fact that we just talked about thinking big, we spend so much time talking about thinking big here. What I mean here is if you see a colleague over a Zoom call, in the middle of a conversation, just as she's about to speak and sure enough her children came in and asked for something. I'm sure we've all seen this and this is super common. And if you see this colleague there because of this "interruption", I was embarrassed or keep apologizing. It's like nudge her offline. Just sent her a chat to say it is okay. We all get it. No need to apologize in the future.

It's a tiny little thing to do, and it may only make the day for that colleague for that night, but it matters. That's my point. It really matters for these small things. I've personally benefited from these gentle support all over, and I've been very conscious about paying this forward. If this means that you're going to name a colleague woman or not to say, I think you're ready to take on this big project, say it, because many cases they are not quite comfortable to make that move or raise their own hand. And if you just nudge them there. And, of course, don't let them hanging there. So support them with the resources, with your own time and all that. But these absolutely make a difference and will ended up become high value for these specific individuals for their growth. Get them to accelerate.

And from there, the amazing thing is they will bring along others and that will get us having more and more diversified ideas showing up in the business, more aligned with the customer composition that we're trying to serve.

LAN GUAN: Wonderful advice, have fun and have bite sized fun.

JIN ZHANG: I love how you summarize for me.

LAN GUAN: And I think that I'm going to be pre-booking you to come back to talk about the course that you're teaching, Most Lovable Product. Did I get it right?

JIN ZHANG: The Most Loveable Product.

LAN GUAN: We have to set up a time for that. Jin, thank you so much for taking the time off your busy schedule to share all your advice and inspirations from your journey. Hopefully, the audience listening in today, both men and women, understand the significance of mentoring, supporting each other in their career growth and their lives in general, even small actions that they all make on a daily basis really add up to helping others grow.

To me, the most important part of this whole conversation with you is seeing what women have accomplished so far, so that we can both continue to support and develop each other to become future leaders in the next five to ten years.

I also would like to thank you, our audience, who join us today, both Jin and I are very passionate about this topic. I hope today could contribute to helping you think about and starting to create those support network. I hope you all continue to subscribe and listen to our future podcast.

love