

SheHer

Tech GIANTS

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I'm **Gemma Telford**, Founder of She/Her Ltd, and I specialise in human marketing for technology businesses. My work redefines and evolves traditional marketing in the IT sector through a more collaborative, flexible, human-centric approach. Cultivating partnerships that deliver mutual value by starting real conversations and delivering work which excites, inspires and connects people.

I started **Tech Giants** to celebrate some of the great people I've worked with in the channel over the last 20 years and to share their wisdom and knowledge with others. I hope you enjoy reading about them!

Gemma: Let's start with question one, which is what is your current role and how did you get into it?

Apay: What is my current role? Now, hold on a minute. Can you see me? (Apay switches on his moving Avatar)

Gemma: Oh, it's a very nice picture of you, but...you haven't got as much beard as that in real life!

Apay: I will go back to my normal self. I was just going with my new image.

Gemma: That's a bit too cool for me. I like your normal face.

Apay: There you go. Ok, so I'm the partner sales lead at Microsoft for our SMC business. And what that means is basically working with our partners to create, sell and drive opportunities within our small, medium and corporate customer segment.

Gemma: Ok, I was wondering what the SMC stood for. Very good. And how did you get into that role?

Apay: The easy answer is that I came from Symantec, and as you know, I led the partner organisation prior to coming here and post Symantec's acquisition by Broadcom. But I think my route here probably started with my first job in the

industry, which was at a reseller partner. I started at a company called Micro Warehouse who are no longer around, they have been acquired since then. But after that reseller then I went into distribution, at Ingram. So, my journey here probably started all the way back then and that's how I think I've ended up here. I'm sure you were one of those who I spoke to when I told you I was coming to Microsoft.

Gemma: ...About time! Yes, I was!

Apay: Well, yeah, we knew. We expected that it was just a matter of time sort of thing. But truth be told, I never thought I'd end up here for various reasons. I didn't think it was really on my trajectory.

Gemma: I was going to say the next question is a bit of background about your career in the channel, which I know you just touched on briefly, but also how you got into the channel originally.

Apay: I applied for a couple of graduate programs, one with a well-known telco brand, and another one was in a retail sector and I was accepted with both. But a very good friend of mine, a mentor who was a lecturer at my university, said to me 'Don't go and join a graduate program. Try a different route. You'll find that you'll actually learn and develop quicker and do more by going a non-traditional route, because you'll get to cut your teeth hopefully in a number of different organisations and learn that way.' So, I started off with Micro Warehouse, as I said earlier, as an associate product manager. In those days, it was about learning how to create catalogs and web content for B2B buyers. I moved on then to the product management of my own category. Then I was kind of headhunted by Ingram and I went there to take on the Microsoft business, amongst other things, and the group grew. I was at Ingram for about 15 years, in various different roles. My first directorship was there. I learned about business management. I learned about telco, learned about mobile, software, and then eventually my biggest role,

the one I would say that probably got me to where I am today, was taking on the role of creating and building the European Cloud Organisation for Ingram and particularly leading Northern Europe, that then took me to Symantec. I then spent about two and a half years there prior to coming to Microsoft.

Actually, I joined during the pandemic, which was a really strange experience. But it showed the positive strength of the culture of Microsoft, because joining as a lead being in need of support is not easy, never mind anywhere else. But also joining remotely was definitely not the easiest of things to go through. But actually, I think it was made that little bit easier because of the culture. We share a mindset and generally everyone, my peers and those who are in my team, etc, all made it easier to try and land in a very complex organisation that's got a huge portfolio and that runs at a serious pace as well.

Gemma: What did you do your degree in? I don't think I ever knew that.

Apay: My first degree was in tourism and marketing. I've always had an interest in really wanting to drive low income economies. And how you drive economies and create value, create jobs and all the rest of it. In those days, certainly tourism was key to low income economies. But I also believed technology was going to play a big role in that, hence why I chose to go professionally towards it. The idea was I'd go learn a bit more about technology then eventually go back to Tourism. But hey, I'm here all those decades later.

Gemma: You got stuck in tech, like me.

Apay: Yes. Then I did my MBA at the University of Liverpool.

Gemma: Very good. I vaguely remember talking to you about your dissertation and stuff.

Apay: You remember all of that? At the end of that, I said I would never do it again, but I'm now contemplating, I'm only contemplating, on an area that I

might do a PhD in.

Gemma: Oh, really?

Apay: Well, I'm not there. I'm not sold on that. On the journey.

Gemma: It is a big thing, isn't it? When I did my masters, my lecturer really wanted me to do one and I was like...hmmm, no.

Apay: I think you need to give yourself a bit of time after a Masters. It's been, you know, nearly not quite a decade, but it's coming towards that since I did my MBA so the pain fades away.

Gemma: Okay. What's the best thing about working in the channel?

Apay: Best thing about working in the channel. The people. It's the richness of people from an intellectual capability perspective, from a human endeavors perspective. The innovation that you see comes out of the channel and the people in the channel. I know I wouldn't be where I am if it wasn't for many people in the channel such as yourself that have been supporters, sponsors, advocates, mentors and so on. So, I think when you put this all down to how we do business – it is done by people, right, irrespective of where you're at. The technology's not about the tech; it's about the people. It's about what we do to really drive human progress. And so when you really boil things down – it's people at the end of it all. So, yeah, I would say the best thing about the channel is the people that are there and are in it for sure.

Gemma: Good answer. What's your biggest frustration?

Apay: I think I would say it's not necessarily frustration, but my biggest...I'm trying to find the right word. I'll come back to the right word on this, but... The biggest, excitement, I would say is the current evolution of the wave of innovation we're now seeing in industry. About AI and what that's currently doing and what it's going to do to industry.

Gemma: Yes, because my next question is actually what are you working on right now that excites you? So, I guess that it links together pretty well.

Apay: Yes, I think I'm going to go from the frustration to saying it's my biggest anxiety. Yeah. It's really how do we prepare for this next wave of innovation as a partner ecosystem, as an innovator ourselves, as industries overall and community, society and more. When you think about the challenges we face, which are all interconnected and they're all systems based - bad food security, big waste and so on they are all linked as kind of sustainability vs economic growth. And so therefore the economy, governance, systems, community, life, all of those are all interconnected now. When you think about that, then you think about the role of technology in that connectedness and the role of technology in innovation - as out of, or into those new opportunities. So it brings along anxiety. How ready are we all? How well are we preparing ourselves? How well do we help our partners and our customers more importantly, really understand the opportunities that are ahead and how can we lay the foundations for that?

As a leader, I'll give you a very simple example. As I think about what you can now do, we see where you can bring it up. What we've just launched - it brings you a whole different way of thinking about talent and what type of talent do you really now need? Now, if you think about where your low performers and your high performers are now that the world is coming to life, is it going to level the playing field? Now you'd have, of course, the power of the high performers also going up but do I need them to be at that level to deliver the value that we're looking to deliver? Those are some of the realities. How do we create more space so that people can really focus on driving, creating value rather than just, you know, turning a wheel on the same stuff, or just doing more of the same. So that's just an example of how I think we need to think about AI as an industry and as I said, there's an anxiety around how we are preparing for this. And that goes across the economy, too.

Gemma: So it's interconnected.

Apay: Yes. How does government think about AI? How does it respond to that? When you think about inclusive economic growth, how do we make sure that a part of our society at the moment isn't left behind as we evolve into this new world? How do we make sure we're bringing all the talents along? Yeah. So there's some really big challenges that we need to face. I like to call them opportunities. Yeah, big opportunities for us to advance as humanity. But it really means a fundamental change. There's a step change needed in mindset.

Gemma: Sounds like a PhD thesis to me.

Apay: Or something like that. But yeah. Those are some of the things that I would go as far as saying are keeping me awake at night.

Gemma: Yeah that's good. We need to be thinking about them! What are you most proud of?

Apay: I think at the moment I would probably say the progress we're making - not just me, but the role that we're playing to improve the whole diversity and inclusivity of our industry and also other industries. And for me, this is very close to my heart, as you know. So what we're doing around improving the race ratio, improving representation within our industry from ethnic minority communities and also those already in - how we are helping people advance and grow is, is very important because it comes back to the point I mentioned earlier on inclusive economic growth and making sure no one is left behind. As you know, I'm a strong ally and advocate of gender diversity in what we do and I have been a proud CRN judge on the Women and Diversity award.

I think, you know, those of us that will make those changes, they're real human changes rather than just virtue signaling. I think some real human change is out there. But, you know, make no mistake, we've got a long way to go and we certainly know where we need to be. And there are also a lot of detractors

out there, too, to the whole diversity agenda. And I maybe even I have just played into their hands by just calling it the diversity agenda because they see it as an agenda. Whereas the reality is we have we don't have enough human resources to waste. The point I know for me is that we need all talents involved in solving and embracing the opportunities that we have. So that's it for me. To answer your question, one of the things I'm most proud of is the work we are doing towards delivering a more inclusive economic outlook within our industry and then hopefully beyond that.

Gemma: Nice one. What was your biggest mistake?

Apay: Staying at Ingram for too long.

Gemma: Yes, he said it out loud.

Apay: Just kidding. My biggest mistake. I don't know if I'd say because I don't look at mistakes that way. My view on mistakes is, they're always lessons. So there isn't one. By the way, I've made mistakes. I've made lots of mistakes. I can see mistakes I've made along the way, but I've learned. And actually, would I go back and say if I could, stop that? No, because it made me who I am today. Yeah. I would have learned from that. I think probably for me if there was something I would say if I'm forced to call out one, it would be, I would say probably earlier in my career, I could have been a stronger advocate of diversity. I think many of us will probably look back and say and there were moments early in our career where we didn't feel we had the psychological safety and therefore the boldness to go out and challenge certain things. Yes, it was pretty obvious then what you would change.

Gemma: I think that's right. I agree with you about mistakes, actually. But I also think that things have changed and it does make it a bit easier, to call things out now, than it was. Still not easy though.

Apay: No, I agree the environment has changed. It has definitely made it easier.

So generally I've made mistakes along the way. No single one has been catastrophic. But at the same time, I think, you know, I've learned from them along the way.

Gemma: Yeah, that's good. Is there a piece of advice that you would pass on or someone has passed on to you that was useful?

Apay: Always be yourself, be authentic. Which is different to bring all yourself to work. I'm not an advocate of bringing all yourself to work. Because the reality is, you're in a professional environment. You, whether you like it or not; you just can't bring everything into such an environment. So be mindful of that. That doesn't mean don't be authentic. Secondly, for me, the advice would be to do the things that nobody else wants to do. Take on the challenges that people walk away from and perhaps as minefields, because actually that's where you learn the most and that's when people tend to pay more attention to you once you've come out on the other end. And by the way, if you felt everyone else has failed, the bar is very low anyway. So, you know, be bold and be brave in taking on challenges. And the sad thing for me, the third piece of advice is I would say is just be mindful of the room. And what I mean by that is that as you look around, just be careful. Everyone in the room isn't exactly like you, thinking like you - right? So challenge yourselves to make sure that you really do have as many voices in the room that are different. That means you can innovate differently as well.

Gemma: Is there a little-known fact about you? And the test is, do I know it?

Apay: I would have thought most people know, but, yeah, I would say that I'm certainly very close to my African roots. I had two different weddings - a traditional wedding and then a white wedding. I suppose the other thing, although I don't talk about it really is my guardian. My other mum, I call her as well. She's the outgoing chair of Greenpeace.

Gemma: Oh, wow. Why is she your other mum?

Apay: Well she's my mum's best friend and when my mum was working abroad, she was chosen to be my guardian actually. So she's always been my other mum. My mum was the first black woman to be a local government exec. She was the first woman to run black female social services direct in the UK.

Gemma: That's a pretty good one. And it ties in nicely with your other stuff that you've talked about. Okay. And then the last question is, do you have a favorite film, song, piece of music? It depends what you're into.

Apay: Songs is too many. Like, uh, a favorite song....oh god, no. In fact, here's another thing people might not know...I'm a DJ. Weddings, birthdays, events. Um, I've done clubs.

Gemma: Oh, I did not know that either!

Apay: I even ran sessions during lockdown. We ran one session where we had people dial in from Canada and from Hong Kong. From all parts of the world.

Gemma: And what's your DJ name?

Apay: Ah, it's Apps. So yeah, that's my hobby. Ok, for a book - I'm torn between Audacity of Hope and Long Walk to Freedom. I'd say I'm going to go with Long Walk to Freedom. It's a book that's filled with hope through adversity. There's innovation in there, there are challenges. It's a book about the fact that irrespective of backgrounds, we can all work towards a common goal. In that book, if you think about all the characters that surface at different parts throughout the book, they are just such a diverse group of individuals. In that, the book represents all kinds of humanity, all trying to work towards a common goal. So, I think for me it is that whole inclusive opportunity for all. And I think that book kind of summarises that if you really read the book properly. Yeah, it's about inclusive opportunity for all.

Gemma: Do you know, I, I lived here then, but I didn't know until after it happened. But Nelson Mandela came to Bedford 20 years ago. Because there's a statue of Trevor Huddleston and he came to like officially 'open' it. And I didn't find out about it until the next day that he'd been in Bedford. And I was gutted. Because obviously they didn't announce it or anything.

Apay: Well, I'll tell you, the other person I met when he was at the University of Sussex was Mbeki, who was his vice president at the time, then became the president, the second president of South Africa.

Gemma: Oh, wow. Pretty impressive.

Apay: Yes. And I met him properly. He's a really good friend of my second Mum.

Gemma: Oh, wow. That's cool! Well, thank you very much, Mr. Obang. That is the end of your questions. You've passed the test.

Apay: I have? Great. It was a pleasure.

If you'd like to suggest a Tech Giant, find out more about the work She/Her Ltd does, or have a question or feedback then please get it touch!

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