

- Speaker 1: In our next episode of The Vurge, I'm handing the mic over to Emily Carlson, Vice President of Technology at Divurgent, to kick off a very special segment on women in technology. Emily has led clients through a variety of projects, ranging from enterprise architecture and security initiatives to the deployment of Tobias, Divurgent's first AI chat bot, which she created in 2019. Emily has over 20 years of experience in the information technology field, and in 2021 Emily was one of Consulting Magazine's women leaders in technology. So with that, Emily, welcome to The Vurge.
- Emily Carlson: And I'm excited to take over The Vurge podcast to bring you a special series on women in technology. And I am thrilled to introduce Claire Bonaci, Senior Director, US Health and Life Sciences at Microsoft. Claire, thank you for joining me.
- Claire Bonaci: Of course, I'm so excited to be here. This is my favorite topic.
- Emily Carlson: Would you like to tell us a little bit about yourself and your role at Microsoft?
- Claire Bonaci: Sure. So I'm currently a Senior Director at Microsoft for the US Health and Life Sciences industry team. So I really just try to bridge the gap between what's in the industry specifically around pharma and life sciences and Microsoft and technology solutions in general. So I've been here around over two years, but prior to Microsoft, I was at a large global pharmaceutical company focused on clinical trials. And then in my spare time, I really liked focus on volunteering for women in STEM programs, mentoring, and honestly just kind of being part of the women in STEM movement in general.
- Emily Carlson: Great. And I think you have a podcast too, right?
- Claire Bonaci: I do. Yes. I will plug that as well. So I also am the host and co-producer of the Confessions of Health Geeks podcast for Microsoft. You can find us on the health podcast network or on my LinkedIn. So thanks for letting me do that.
- Emily Carlson: Anything to drive continued conversations and topics, that's great. Yeah, on our special series I'm really trying to ... Really it's starting in January of 2021, really started to see the trend of women in technology continue downward. I feel really during the pandemic a lot of women had to make serious decisions about whether they keep working or they have to move to just more supporting and being that full-time mom role or caretaker role. And so our numbers within the tech field really kind of continue to have a downward spiral. So I've been leading a women in technology series and they've allowed me to take over The Vurge and continue that discussion. So I would love to start it with mentorship. I think that mentorship really comes in different flavors and sizes from just quick 15 minutes, bounce ideas, to a fully committed mentorship program. So for yourself, have you had a mentor in your career?

Claire Bonaci: Yes. I've had so many mentors. I mean, I am a proponent of having as many as you can. And really, I think it's better to have kind of that diverse perspective of mentorship. Having people, not just women in leadership as mentors, but different men in leadership positions, or just people that are even your peers, they can mentor you too. I think it's really important to kind of have a complete diverse perspective when you have a mentor in general.

Emily Carlson: Yeah. I agree. And it's funny because I remember the first time I realized that I needed a mentor, I was in my early 20s and I was doing my first large pharmaceutical rollout and this woman walked into the room and I was like, oh my gosh, I want to be her when I grow up. So how do I make that happen?

Claire Bonaci: I still think that. Honestly I meet so many amazing women and I'm like, "Okay, I need to talk to her. I need to figure out the journey she went to get there and what I can do or what I can learn from her." I think that's so helpful.

Emily Carlson: Yeah, it is. And no one person has the same journey. It's really important. And I think ... So I have a young daughter and I think it's important to kind of show the reigns for mentorship, starting in high school. What are some types of programs that you help to lead and participate in for the younger female generation?

Claire Bonaci: Yeah, a lot of them are local. So I'm located in Seattle, Washington. So obviously we are kind of a very tech-centric location. But when it comes to just the women in STEM programs, it kind of ranges from even middle school ages and seeing how can they get involved in STEM related projects? There's one through Seattle University that I'm part of every summer. And then even through just kind of one-on-one mentorship opportunities. So I participate also in just having 15 minute conversations with women in high school that are considering a field in STEM, but they only really see an option of, oh, you're in a lab, or you get your PhD. What else can you do with an opportunity or with a career in STEM?

And I think a lot of women at that age, they just ... You don't know. You don't know what's out there. And I think it's really important to get that diverse perspective and hear from multiple different people in different roles to understand you can be in a healthcare job, and you can be at a tech company, and you can get a biochemistry degree and not go into a lab setting. So there's just so many different routes you can take. It's all about kind of learning what would be best for you.

Emily Carlson: Yeah, that's great. Any resources that you can think of in particular that we can guide people towards to take a look at what ... Maybe locally, even [crosstalk 00:05:48]

Claire Bonaci: Yeah, I definitely ... I have a few links, I can send them to you and then we can put them at the bottom of the podcast. But yeah, there's definitely, there's always quite a few in the Seattle area for sure.

Emily Carlson: Oh, that's great. That's fantastic. One thing also I've been thinking a lot about is reverse mentorship. A lot of people think of the mentorship relationship as older to younger, but I think there's so much that the younger generation can teach the older gens into a tech company. So what are your thoughts on reverse mentorship?

Claire Bonaci: Yeah, I mean, honestly I love it. And I'm probably saying that because I'm on the younger side and so it's so nice to have my voice heard. And I think in my experience in particular, I joined a team at Microsoft of very, very seasoned people, and their very, very experienced. They've been in the industry for more than 30 years. And I'm joining with five or so years under my belt, and really understanding that they still wanted to hear my perspective. They wanted to hear what I thought and my opinions. And not even just on different topics, but on how I would approach problems or how I would approach a different situation with a team or a conflict.

They were really interested in how I was coming about it versus some of their approaches because they've been in the industry for 30 years and do they're doing things and doing processes in a way that maybe they learned 15 or 20 years ago, and it's very interesting for them to kind of hear from my perspective. So I think it's great to have that as a formal program, but also kind of even in an informal program of just having a really diverse team and having kind of a cross-generational team and learning from each other. So I've loved it. I think it's definitely very, very important for any team to have that.

Emily Carlson: Yeah, I think so too. I think it gets missed a lot. I think it's kind of that missed opportunity. I know I recently a developer right out of college, and brought just such a different, fresh perspective to the way that we ran even just our development tools and our development program here and the way that we go about product development. So I think that really was almost like this ah-ha moment of, oh my gosh, I'm learning so much from him because when I went to school for development, that was a bit ago. [crosstalk 00:08:07]

Claire Bonaci: Yeah, no, it's definitely ... I feel like it's just so helpful. Especially as Gen Z is entering the workforce. We can't come at them from a place of hostility, they have so much to gain from learning from us, but then also they just have so much to offer, and we might as well try to learn from everyone.

Emily Carlson: Yeah, yeah. I think that's part of culture though, too. I think that cultures are shifting and everybody's working remotely and there's just a different feel. So I think part of it is making sure that organizational culture kind of adapts with the different mindsets as well.

Claire Bonaci: Yes, for sure. And I think that's definitely hard. I think the transition to being full virtual, even in this hybrid zone is so really, really hard for a lot of people, especially working moms, especially people that have caregiving responsibilities. So it's really, I think it's still a bit of a struggle.

Emily Carlson: Yeah, it sure is. And I think part of it's being empowered. So I think empowerment for female leaders in tech is a big topic as well that should continue to be addressed. What are some ways that you can think of that might help empower our younger female leaders? They want to use their voice, but they don't want to come across wrong or have some sort of negative connotation. So what are just some different ways that you help to empower some of the younger crew in your team?

Claire Bonaci: Yeah. Well honestly I think I even still struggle with that. And kind of a big moment for me was probably a year or two years ago when I was first starting at this current job really thinking, well, I don't want to come off as pushy. I don't want to come off as kind of this bossy younger woman that's joining this team. And actually one of my colleagues mentioned to me, "Well, if a man was doing the same thing and was coming about the problem the same way that you are, would you say that he's being really bossy or would you say that he's super confident, he knows what he wants?" And then I kind of realized, well she's right. of course I wouldn't think that he's being bossy, which is such a crazy thing to think.

And so I really kind of had that empowerment kind of explained to me that this is only going to be negatively affecting me if I'm going in to situation thinking, "Oh, I can't be assertive, I can't be coming off as bossy." It's only going to be negatively affecting me, really. So knowing that I can be confident, I can say in my opinion, I can be assertive, I can be listened to and really come off in a very strong way. I think that kind of, one, just sets a great example for other people in different meetings, or even younger female of leaders who are listening.

But then also just being able to share the stories like we're talking today and have women hear these stories and kind of see us in those leadership positions. I think I've always heard that quote that, "If they can't see us, they can't be us." And I really think that's so crucial. If women aren't seeing other women in STEM positions, in leadership positions, being really empowered to use their voice. They're not going to feel like they can do that themselves. So I almost feel like it's just us doing more of it and people seeing that and really realizing that, yeah, we can do that too. It's not going to be detrimental to us. We're not going to be seen as bossy.

Emily Carlson: I love that. That's amazing. And I think that it is so difficult sometimes to have those conversations. Addressing the problem head on, so in the way that when somebody confronts you because they feel like you've come across as bossy being empowered and having that empowerment to say, "No, this is my opinion. I'm sticking to my guns." Have you ever been in a difficult conversation like that and had to maneuver your way through?

Claire Bonaci: Yes, I definitely have. And full disclosure, the first time it happened to me I did the total opposite approach. I was like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to come off that way. I didn't mean it." And then I kind of took a step back

afterwards and I realized like, "Why did I do that? Why did I say it like that?" And then when another opportunity kind of came about in a very similar situation, I had a very clear understanding of what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it of really, I had these reasons for coming across the way I did or for saying the things I said, here's my rationale, or here's kind of the concrete facts.

Being very objective, not letting myself get emotional or make it personal, and really just kind of being an ally, one, to myself, but then to all the people that this has happened to, or if you see that happening in a meeting, which I've definitely ... That's happened to me a few times, being able to speak up and say, "Hey, well, what do they think?" Or "No, I think you might have misunderstood how they were saying it or what they were saying." Really, I think when people have done that for me, I've been so grateful. So I think it's definitely, it's this kind of paying it forward and being able to do that for others as well.

Emily Carlson: Yeah, no, that's great advice. Absolutely. I know I've had situations where I've even had to use the little, raise my hand button in Teams because I can't get a word in edgewise. So I've also recently taken the step of confronting the group, and not confrontational in a bad way, but voices need to be heard and everybody should be at a level playing field to have a voice at the table. So I think confronting those situations and being empowered to really feel like you can raise your voice. And to your point, setting an example for everybody else, who's in the room of making sure that they see that. Because once they see it, they also will help to replicate that behavior.

Claire Bonaci: No, that's so true. And I think honestly, no one wants to be the squeaky wheel, but when you see someone else being the squeaky wheel, you kind of feel a little bit better about you doing it next time, or backing them up and saying, "Yeah, you're right. We shouldn't have done that," or, "We should have listened to such and such." So it's always hard being the first person to bring up an issue. I totally get that.

Emily Carlson: It is, it's uncomfortable, right? And you want to think that nobody is doing it with any mal intent, but then it's like, "Ah, what do I do?"

Claire Bonaci: Exactly, yeah. It's always a little awkward, but I feel like you just kind of fight through the awkwardness. And I think that almost, it makes it a little easier being virtual, because if it is awkward, you're still at home. You can go to retreat to your bed for a quick nap. Yeah, it's not as bad.

Emily Carlson: Or a Hallmark Christmas movie, like we just discussed.

Claire Bonaci: Exactly. I'm all about having fun in the holidays too, taking some [inaudible 00:14:36] to be with family.

Emily Carlson: Yeah. And I think these conversations led to also networking opportunities as well, right? So just we've kind of had an opportunity to meet in expanding and using our voices. I think just the opportunity for networking across different platforms and across different organizations. So what are some of your thoughts? Because as you're younger, it can be really, I think, daunting to try to figure out how do I build that? How do I build that network? Where do I go? Where do I go to find like-minded people where I feel ... I get that mentoring. I get that sense of empowerment. So what are some of the networking opportunities you've taken advantage of in your career, and any advice for others?

Claire Bonaci: Yeah. Well honestly I know it's weird right now, since we're still in this kind of weird virtual world where things are sometimes in-person sometimes hybrid. But I would just say, try to pick one or two organizations that are specific to your area that are in-person events, or hopefully in-person events in the future that are mainly networking focused and just go to one or two events per month. So when I first graduated college I went to the Young Professionals of Seattle group. So right out of college, I was going to these probably three times a month, because I needed a job. And I went to every single event. And honestly I made zero solid connections that helped me get a job. But really, I mean, it was the wrong group to join. I should have joined something that was more biotech or biochemistry focus [inaudible 00:16:13] kind of a business group.

But those connections that I made actually then helped me get my second job. So really they didn't help me in my first job, but it taught me how to network. It taught me how to be in kind of a large group of people and be able to kind of navigate and kind of make friends and make those networking connections, and then stay in touch with them. So when I find an article that I know someone's interested in, I still send it to them. I still send them an email or send them a text saying, "Hey, I think you'd be interested in this. You might find it kind of cool to send it to your network." And it really, it just puts me at the forefront of their mind, despite the fact that I haven't talked to them and probably three or four years.

But just knowing that you could have kind of broad network and then have a smaller network within that of people that are more specific to your niche area or your career. Obviously mine is more technology in healthcare, but having that broader network where if I need a real estate agent, I know multiple real estate agents from this group. Or if I need a lawyer, I know multiple lawyers. So even having kind of this big network and then smaller network within has been really, really helpful. And honestly, it's never too early to start building that network. I say, do it even while you're in college or high school, but definitely after college. Very, very important.

Emily Carlson: Yeah. That's great. Yeah. I think as often, when you're also younger you kind of lack that confidence and I think networking groups help to build that and help you to kind of branch out of that. Just, I think we all have that inherent comfort

zone that we don't want to branch out of. And I love the fact that you stayed local to the local community because the roots that you build there just can be amazing throughout your whole career.

Claire Bonaci: Yeah. And honestly, I mean, there's so many virtual communities now. I think obviously social media, you can find so many just via Facebook groups. But definitely it's funny, even a lot of my friends have found groups through Reddit, and they have local kind of groups that then they can actually network with, or they're technology groups that then they can have happy hours with. So it's kind of just about being creative and finding that, and then getting over that hurdle of confidence of, "Okay, I have to show up in person and try to talk to a bunch of strangers." Which is hard no matter what age you are, honestly.

Emily Carlson: Yeah. And I think too being a female leader in the tech space, sometimes when you walk into the room there tends to be far more males versus females. So just, again from that confidence perspective, knowing that you can use your voice and rant out in a networking event just as much as anybody, and really use it to your advantage of helping to build that empowerment and just that feeling of community that I think we have in the tech space.

Claire Bonaci: Exactly. And really, I mean, I think the confidence piece is really, really difficult to get over. But once you have that, and once you've had a few successful networking events under your belt, you feel good. You feel you can go in, in a room of full of people that you don't know, and you could make connections, you can make some great networking connections and get it done. So I feel like it really is just doing it a few times, and practice makes perfect really.

Emily Carlson: Yeah, absolutely. One thing too, in thinking about how things are evolving and changing in technology, it's not just about gender equity and inclusion in the day to day, but also in the way, even AI is being developed and making sure that the AI doesn't have some sort of in inequality built into it as they're setting that up. So how do you think we can help avoid that? How do you think we bring the female voice into the AI space?

Claire Bonaci: Well, honestly I think a lot of it kind of goes back to what I mentioned earlier about if they can't see us, they can't be us. And really they shouldn't be building anything without us. So I think more women, one, are kind of needed in STEM for this exact reason. And as more women move up in STEM as role models, as they move up in middle management and upper management, I think it's a little bit easier. Because honestly they're the ones that are going to be making decisions, and they're going to be making decisions with themselves and the other women in their lives in mind. So obviously this is not a quick fix, but I do think that there are more women to the table, really we just need to have more women that are being promoted to middle management that are making those decisions in technology companies or about AI or machine learning.

And actually being able to build that technology with that gender inequality in mind, or any kind of bias, really. It can be racial bias, it can be gender bias, it can be anything. And having kind of a diverse group of people that are in those business decision making positions, I think that's kind of the sweet spot of fixing the problem, but I totally understand it. It's a way work in progress. Like anything currently, it's hard to get to that stage. But I think it's a cyclical process of really trying to get more women involved in STWM. See that more women are in middle management, are in kind of the decision making abilities and positions, and then that will encourage more younger women get STEM. So hopefully that continues.

Emily Carlson: Yeah. I think some of that ties into as well, some of the outreach that organizations in changing the way, even hiring practices. You may not have the perfect candidate, but you have a great candidate. And maybe even adjusting responsibilities to help promote the right people into roles. So getting ... Even looking, I think at outreach and onboarding, and just overall how we are bringing new talent in and then looking at how do we promote, and train, and really guide up the younger generations they come in.

Claire Bonaci: Exactly. And realistically, I mean, you can always train skill. I think that's something that definitely my generation and younger generations are realizing is we can learn things. We can learn how to do different processes in a company. What you can't really train is character. So if you're hiring for character, you're hiring for kind of the personality and the culture fit, you're going to be able to figure out how to train this person. So I think that's so important, and I definitely feel like hiring practices should be and are moving to that direction a little bit more.

Emily Carlson: Yeah. That's great. You're absolutely [inaudible 00:22:41] with that. And we're almost out of time, but before we do wrap up, I just wanted to ask you one question. I think it's fun sometimes to hear, if you could give kind of one word of advice for the younger generation moving into the STEM career field, what would it be?

Claire Bonaci: Yeah. Well, this is probably going to sound so cliché, but I would say be loud. And I feel like that includes listening really loudly, being really confident when you're speaking, when you're talking to people, when you're in these situations of trying to make a decision with a large team. And just be out there. Have your voice heard, have your stance heard and your opinion heard, and everything else should follow after that. So although it's very cliché, that has worked for me and I feel like that's worked for so many women. So that's my piece of advice. But I mean, I'd love to hear yours as well.

Emily Carlson: Mine is authentic. So I think all too often we try to change who we are from a personality, a posture, whatever it may be to fit within a room. I know as emotions change, people try to change who they are, to fit in. And I think it's really easy when you first start in your career, especially if you are the only a



female at the table, to change who you are to better blend in. And I think you're doing yourself a great disservice, because to your point, be loud, use your voice, tell your story continuously so that the trajectory changes, not you as a person.

Claire Bonaci: Exactly. I love that. I love that piece of advice. I feel like you still need to be reminded of that even later on in your career too.

Emily Carlson: Oh yeah. A hundred percent. Well Claire, thank you for being my guest today on The Vurge. I appreciate you helping me take over for this very special series. I really appreciate it. Any last words? Anything more about your podcast you'd like to share?

Claire Bonaci: No, I don't think so. I mean, I'm so happy that I got to be part of this, and I'm really looking forward to, seeing what else happens with Divurgent, so thank you so much.

Emily Carlson: That's so great. Well, thank you so much, Claire. Have a good day.

Claire Bonaci: Thanks, you too. (silence)