

Intro: Hello and welcome to the CPA Australia podcast, your weekly source of business, leadership and public practise accounting information.

Coralia: Welcome to the CPA Australia podcast. My name is Coralia Mielczarek and I'll be hosting today's podcast. A little bit about me. I currently work as a management accountant at STREAT, a Melbourne based non for profit social enterprise that is dedicated to helping disadvantaged young people who need a hand. STREAT offers young people, aged 16 to 25 a supportive pathway from the street to a sustainable livelihood.

I was one of CPA Australia's Australian scholarship foundation applicants, which led to attending CPA Australia's national not for profit conference. You can find a feature of my boss and me in the September 2018 edition of In the Black magazine, highlighting our working relationship, and the role of finance professionals in the for-purpose sector. You can find out more about STREAT in the show notes.

In addition to wanting to use a CPA qualification to help disadvantaged youth, I have personal reasons for wanting to be a CPA. Ultimately, I want to have an international recognised qualification which will enable others to identify me and my career as one of integrity and quality accounting knowledge and skills. With me today to talk about her journey to leadership and technology is Michelle Joosse.

From accounting major to CEO, Michelle's vision has always been to influence business and disrupt the status quo. More than a whizz with numbers, her interest's spanning across economics and natural science, but the lure of a stable career shaped her initial career choices. Graduating from Monash University with a Bachelor of Business Studies Accounting, Michelle's first position was with the leading cast iron producer Ajax Foundry, before landing a prominent accounting HR role with the global Japanese electronics giant Sanyo.

2001 proved to be a pivotal year, achieving CPA status and attaining a Master of Commerce, Professional Accounting. She also met and fell in love with her husband and now business partner, Malcolm. Realising they shared the same vision to make IT easier for business, Malcolm asked Michelle to enter the business in 2003. The duo worked successfully together for almost 14 years until Malcolm felt Michelle was the right person to manage the business and lead the team, whilst he focused on product development.

Leading a business that has been established for over 20 years has been no easy task. Michelle constantly interacts with customers to ensure Hotline IT is always improving the service to clients and innovating within the industry, a key part of the organization's mission, thus proving she can drive Hotline IT's direction and growth whilst providing a full IT solution for businesses.

From its humble beginnings as a one man band in 1993 to a multi million dollar organisation, Michelle is now dedicated to building the mission of Hotline IT to ensure businesses have a simplified IT process that provides a secure and reliable technology solution. Welcome Michelle.

Now firstly, tell me about your career journey prior to your current position.

Michelle: Thanks Coralia. Well, I've actually had quite a few casual jobs back in the day when I was studying full-time, both at school and at university. And even in those roles, I sort of always liked to identify areas of improvement. I worked mostly in food, so working at the old Sizzler restaurants when they were around and little Chinese takeaway. But I felt, while I was studying full-time at university, that I really wasn't being challenged. You know, I had lots of time on my hands and so then I decided that I'd study part-time. And yeah, just found that I was eager to start working in my chosen career.

So I originally did part-time study at the local university, but just found that going to university after work was a bit challenging. So I switched to distance education and so it was quite different to the way that distance education is done these days. We didn't even really have the internet back then. It was really in its infancy and emails were only really starting to emerge.

So, I had these big books of notes that I had to use to do my study and then I'd go to a local exam centre to do my end of year exam and had to post my assignments in. So it's quite different to the way things are run now. But, my first job, as you mentioned before, was for a small little cast iron foundry and at first, I really didn't think that it was going to really do much to help me develop my career, because it was only a small business, but given that it was only two of us in the office, it really gave me a good opportunity to be able to manage all aspects of the finance of the business and the administration side as well.

So, I think I really got a really good grounding in accounting up to the trial balance stage. But it really, particularly my boss, when she was on leave, it really gave me the opportunity to show that I actually knew what I was doing and to trust what I've learnt.

And then I moved on, I felt that I really needed to. I'd finished my degree, that I needed to move on. So I took on a position, assistant accountant at Sanyo. I think Sanyo has now been absorbed by Panasonic these days, but that was quite an interesting job. I was doing payrolls as well as doing the assistant accountant role, but I sort of had the opportunity to prove myself there. They really had a very convoluted system of selling off reconditioned and seconds stock. So I really refined that process and they really saw what a difference I'd made there. So I was actually promoted to accountant then.

And so I probably would have been still working there and progressing there, except that I met my husband. At the time, he was obviously my boyfriend and I could see that that relationship was going somewhere. So I moved somewhere that was more central to where we both lived and took on the management accountant role at Jupiters Gaming which oversaw their game Keno. If people know Keno from their local clubs and hotels. And that's now owned by Tabcorp. But basically, when Tabcorp took over Jupiters, I felt that was probably a good time to transition out because the office was relocating but also, my husband had been on my case for a while to sort of come work with him in the business.

We felt that we really complemented each other's skills, in that he's very technical and great with ideas, whereas I'm more very process driven and more of a business brain as I usually say. So, yes, I came along and joined him in Hotline, initially as their finance and administration manager.

Coralia: That's excellent. How would you describe yourself, Michelle?

Michelle: I quite often call myself an organised reformist. I came across that term somewhere, I thought, "Yes, that's me." Because I'm very organised. And I'm always looking for ways to improve things. So I thought that term described me quite well. I was actually really quite shy when I was a child. I think the way that I've overcome that, because I'm definitely not shy anymore, but I think I've overcome that by pushing myself outside my comfort zone.

One of the things I did in my early '20s, was I went on a trip to Europe by myself. I joined up with a Contiki tour as most young Australians do but it really ... I had to go and make friends 'cause I didn't know anybody. So I think that was the beginning of my losing my shyness. I'm definitely not an extrovert, but there probably is a little bit of an extrovert in me, but I don't think I'll ever be an extrovert.

I'm a mother of three young children. And I'm really actively involved in their school's P&C association. So that and having the kids and running the business probably leaves me not much time for hobbies. But I have just recently taken up tap dancing for a bit of fun and a bit of fitness.

Coralia: Excellent. Yeah, I've heard that before. It's really stepping out of your comfort zone, it's where you really challenge yourself and shine. So that's great. What led you to taking on the CEO role at Hotline?

Michelle: Well, we felt that Hotline had sort of probably plateaued after ... My husband felt that he was probably the handbrake on the business, that's his term, not minute. So be careful with that. But yeah, he'd be running the business for a little bit over 20 years, and he just felt that he didn't have the drive to be able to develop strategy and also implement that strategy to grow the business. You know, he'd done very well with the but yeah, we sort of felt like we were just plateauing a little bit.

So he approached me about running the business. I mean, he approached me on numerous times but I think I was finally ready. And so I said, "Yes, this time." But I mean, the inside joke is that I was always the boss anyway, I'm referred to as the boss's boss. So I guess, me being CEO now just makes it more official, I guess.

Coralia: That's exactly right. Fantastic. How did you transition from the financial controller to CEO role?

Michelle: Well, the first thing I did was I got a mentor. I felt I needed to have somebody on my side that has got experience in running businesses. So I actually approached someone who actually used to work for a client and then has had many businesses that ... He's

had successful businesses and not so successful businesses. So I'm able to benefit from his knowledge. And so in the early stages, we used to catch up quite regularly, like every two weeks. Whereas now, we probably see each other probably once every two months, sometimes a little bit longer. I still go to him sometimes if I'm looking at an opportunity or I will sometimes ... And if I'm sort of getting a little bit of push back from my team. They're getting a little bit scared because it's a big opportunity, I will run that by him just to make sure, a bit of a sanity check that I'm not being too risk, taking too many risks because I'm generally risk adverse.

But his advice to me in the early stages was invaluable, and he helped me identify where my strengths were and where my weaknesses are and so really encouraged me to skill up on the areas that I'm weak in. And at that time, it was marketing and the business has always been a little bit weak in sales and marketing. So I basically ... And I'm still, obviously still learning and still doing things but I sort of went and learned a bit about SEO, I learned about marketing theory, looked at traditional marketing methods, online marketing methods or digital they call it. It's about making sure that everything ... I'm working in the one direction.

So one of the things, actually, that I learned and he helped me with as well is about the focusing on the eight P's, being the price, product, promotion, place, production, process, people, and profit. And I use the analogy of the spinning plates, and I'm constantly go to keep all the plates spinning at once, so I can't just focus on one area, I can't just focus solely, for example, on my people. I've got to look at our products and services at the same time. So it's a constant challenge, and I visualise that in my mind actually and it helps me. I've just got make sure I keep all those plates spinning.

Coralie: Yeah, definitely. How has your CPA background helped you in the CEO role?

Michelle: Well, I feel like having a strong financial understanding for anyone running a business is essential. To me, being a CPA is not just about accounting anyway. Being involved in and developing strategy-direction of businesses is part and parcel, I think, of being a CPA and so I guess, for me, being a CPA just means I was probably more qualified than a lot of other people that would take on the role.

Coralie: Okay. So, do you think being a woman has impacted you in a largely male dominated industry?

Michelle: At first, I thought that potentially it would. But actually, I believe it's actually been an asset. Being a woman and not being technical sets me apart from our competitors. Most of the other IT companies I work with are run by a technician, like my husband, and basically started out as a one man band and have grown a business sort of under them. So they tend to focus a lot on the tech, which is not so much on the business and the customer experience. And so I think I offer a fresh approach and also being a woman, I'm finding we've been bringing on a few more customers that have got women at the helm, particularly some of the recent customers we've brought on. I think having a woman, which generally sort of care more about the person, the user than I think a lot of men generally do.

Coralia: Yeah, I'm sure they find that quite inspiring, that you've got three kids and you juggle your work life balance with family in the CEO position. So I guess, how do you juggle work life balance with a family and being a CEO?

Michelle: It's not always easy, especially the kids are used to me being the primary carer. So it's been probably a bigger adjustment I think for them than it has been for me. I still try to drop them off and pick them up from school most days and then I work around it but for me, it comes down to quality, not quantity of time. And I think that's been the big adjustment for them.

So what I do is I take turns in having lunch with each of the three kids, one on one each week and then I try to have a date night with my husband at least once a month. I think the kids ... I'm hoping the kids realise it's about having quality time with mum and not so much about the food, because you know, they're very specific where they'd like to go.

But I also try to exercise. I exercise twice a week as well as my tap class now, so there's my third. And I've had to reduce my volunteer commitments though, so like I mentioned before, I'm quite heavily involved in the school P&C association. So I've had to sort of taper that back a little bit more. But you know, I think I've done my share and it's good for someone else to step up.

But yeah, with all that responsibility, I still need to make sure that I don't forget about me. So I try to take some time for me that the exercise is one thing, I try to get a massage when I can fit one in, do a bit of retail therapy. But yeah, I can't forget me.

Coralia: That's exactly right. It is very important to focus on yourself as well. Yeah. But it sounds like you've definitely got your hands full there with everything and yeah, volunteer commitments too. So sounds like a lot. So do you think your lack of technical ability has hindered you in this role?

Michelle: I had my doubts when I first took on the role. But now, I actually see it's like an asset. The prospects we meet with are not technical. So you know, I can talk the same language as they do because I know some of our technical guys can get a little bit bulked down on the tech when they talk with people. And so I can ... and I know enough about tech to be dangerous so I can basically ... I'm the interpreter so to speak. I can talk it in layman's terms and then if I need that technical knowledge, I will take a technical resource with me along to meetings. And I'm not afraid to sort of say, "Actually, I'm not sure, I need to check on that," rather than trying to bluff my way through.

Coralia: What challenges have you had to overcome to be successful in this role?

Michelle: My main challenge has been overcoming that impostor syndrome. I used to think it was just me but the more I started to network, I noticed that many people, especially women, suffer from it, too. So whilst that doubt is still there, I work hard to ignore it and soldier on. And another challenge has been overcoming being the boss's wife. I've always felt that I've had to work twice as hard as everyone else to prove myself as

worthy of the position and not just there but because I married the boss. I'm there because I'm the right person for the job.

So but now that I am the boss, I'm sure there were some doubters, you know, myself included. But with the runs on the board and a clear direction, I believe that's no longer an issue. Someone said to me that it's a free opportunity and no real pressure if I stuff this up, like being the CEO of our own business. But you know, I really disagree with that because I think there is more pressure on me to succeed than if I've come fresh into any other organisation. So, yeah, I felt that I've really had to get the runs on the board quite quickly, as well.

Coralia: Yeah, definitely. I think because it's like I would say another child, it's your business, you want to make sure that it's the best that it can be. So there is that extra pressure on you to succeed than if you just came from somewhere else. So definitely.

Michelle: Yeah, and I don't know whether that pressure is ... that I'm just placing on myself, I'm not sure whether that's ... other people are actually thinking that. But I guess it's that impostor syndrome that is sitting in the back of my mind that I think that that's what other people are thinking.

Coralia: Have you made any mistakes along the way and what have you learned from them?

Michelle: Yeah, of course. We all make mistakes and I've had some wrong fit hires so we've probably hired some people in roles that probably wasn't really a good fit. And I probably went a little bit too hard on the marketing expenditure and went a bit crazy. And maybe, and I sort of partnered probably with some wrong marketing companies along the way. And so that was probably because I was lacking that knowledge and now that I feel that I've got a lot more knowledge of that, I know what I'm looking for, particularly on the marketing side.

So, you know, I've learned that you'll sometimes not get the new hires right. I mean, you interview them, you can do some assessments but sometimes you really just don't know how well they're going to fit. So you need to really ... the thing I've learned there is you need to cut your losses and don't let it drag on too long. I mean, if it's not going to work out then I think you need to, for the employee's sake and yourself is to end the relationship quite early on.

I've built up my marketing plan so that I rather than go gung ho with spending money on marketing and research my target markets and looked at what other companies are doing well and so I think myself and Hotline, we've learned to be a much more customer-centric business rather than focusing on the features and functions. And so my website, I'm really trying hard to reflect that.

Coralia: Yes. Do you have much of a social media media presence at all with your marketing?

Michelle: We do. So I mean, we have the standard website but I'm very active on LinkedIn and I post a lot of content on LinkedIn every week. Mostly, a mix of educational posts,

obviously emerging technology but also some thought leadership and life experiences about myself.

Coralia: Yes, great. And so do you think that a social media presence compared to the traditional way of marketing is a lot better? Do you feel like you get more exposure and so forth?

Michelle: Actually, for us, I think I've had success equally on the traditional methods as well as the online. So we have some vertical markets that we work with and we go along to their events and I think nothing beats that face to face communication. People, I think, find that less threatening so they'll come up, we have like an exhibition stand, they'll come up and have a conversation with us. It's not about giving me their email address or basically I've got them on a hook and then they're going to end up getting all these emails from me. So we've found that that face to face communication which is your more traditional has been equally effective as well as the online presence.

But anyone I see and anyone does a search, they always ... you know, if you did a Google search on myself or on the business, it'll always take you to ... it'll come up with my LinkedIn profile. So, it all works together.

Coralia: Yeah, it all ties in. What has surprised you the most since taking on the CEO role?

Michelle: I think particularly on the marketing side, how process driven it is. I'm actually really enjoying it and I was always of the perception that marketing is a little bit of fluff and had sort of little substance. But it actually ... there is very process driven ... it's a real science to it. And you know, actually I'm surprised that I actually ... I don't think I'm a bad sales person because it's all about the conversation, not about the tech. It's not about trying to sell [inaudible] boxes. It's about having that conversation with people about what their challenges are.

So I guess, I focus on the customer and not on the features and functions of our products which, I think, when we've employed sales people in the past, that's what they've done. You know, I have meetings with business owners as a general chit chat and enjoy learning about their business and they're basically asking me for the proposal. So that was the big thing that's surprised me.

And so yeah, I basically did it because I felt that I needed to get a good understanding of how to attract new customers. So, yeah, so I have a whole new appreciation for sales and marketing.

Coralia: Definitely. What advice would you give to other CPAs considering stepping up and from a purely financial role?

Michelle: I think you need to ensure that you have good, smart people around you that are good at what they do. You need to recognise that you can't be good at everything. And so, I always have the approach that I try to employ people who are smarter than me. So yeah, so good people. I've got people who are really strong in technical because I'm not. I'm not a technical person and now, because I'm focusing more on growing the business,

I've even got myself a really good accounts person to work with me and do a lot of things I used to do.

But, another suggestion would be, get yourself a mentor. Someone that can help you when you're maybe doubting yourself and be a great sounding board. I'm one of those people that have that impostor syndrome from time to time and so I think that's a great ally to have, someone to have in your corner.

Don't be afraid to skill up and step outside your comfort zone. Like I said, I didn't think marketing, I'd enjoy it, but I'm actually really, really enjoying it. But again, as I said about the impostor syndrome, don't listen to that inner doubting voice. You can do it and you are ... If you think that you've put the runs on the board to trust yourself, that you can give it a go.

Coralia: Exactly. I think a lot of the time it is that doubt in the back of your mind, that you can't do something or you haven't done it before or so forth, that probably stops you from achieving many things. So that's really great. Okay, well thank you Michelle, for your insightful and inspirational story. And thank you to all our listeners, for tuning in to the CPA Australia podcast. Thanks for joining us.

Michelle: Thank you.

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