



# Inspirational Women in Telecoms

By Melissa Cogavin, Managing Editor, SCTE

**To celebrate International Women's Day, Broadband Journal talked to three influential and accomplished women in the telecoms sector, exploring their motivations, achievements, challenges and experiences.**

International Women's Day took place on March 8 and at the SCTE we wholeheartedly support the increasing diversity of our sector. We feel strongly that as an industry we must do what we can to recognise the substantial achievements of women in telecoms, support those women working hard within the sector and inspire others to join an industry that is collegiate, close-knit and fast-paced. In the last five years the rights and the profile of women have been in the spotlight for all sorts of reasons and it seems only right that Broadband Journal should do its bit to recognise the considerable talent we are lucky enough to work with.

We could think of no better way to mark this date than to speak to three inspirational leaders whose innovations, vision and hard work have substantially impacted on the way we absorb content, enjoy our leisure time and facilitate our working lives.

Traditionally a male-dominated industry, mentorships and sponsorships are becoming more and more a force for positive change in the workplace; all three women acknowledge the support they have received from male colleagues as they have progressed. That said, it has not been an easy journey at times and cultural challenges do still exist. Awareness of these challenges is key however, and it is excellent that initiatives are in place to enable women to progress and the opportunity is increasingly there to voice concerns. Educating young people – and their parents

- of the opportunities in telecoms and recruiting women to the workforce must remain high on the agenda for providers in this sector, as much as providing equal pay and conditions and the visibility of both. It does seem strange that in 2021, in a period of history that has seen more technical and social progress than any other, 103 years after British women earned the right to vote, 21 years after the Women's Suffrage Movement began in 1897 to achieve that goal, equality is still being discussed at all.

The hope must be that one day there will actually be no need for an International Women's Day and we can celebrate International People's Day. Until then, there is work to do to achieve the kind of gender balance so many would like to see.

Let's meet Yvette Kanouff, Partner and CTO, JC2 Ventures, California.



**Yvette Kanouff**  
Partner and the Chief Technical  
Officer of JC2 Ventures

Yvette is responsible for technology strategy and engineering relationships within JC2 Ventures investment companies, partners, and customers. Heading up the \$7B service provider business at Cisco Systems for several years,

she also held CTO and President roles at various companies in the communications and media industry. She has received numerous industry awards including a 2020 Lifetime Achievement Emmy for Engineering and Technology, the National Cable and Television Association's Vanguard Award for Leadership in Science and Technology, was named an Industry Pioneer, won an Emmy for her work in Video on Demand with SeaChange, named an Industry Wonder Woman, Top Techie and Woman in Technology; she has been named one of the 11 most influential women in the Television industry and has consistently been ranked as one of the top 100 industry executives.

Yvette began her career in digital signal processing and has a bachelor's and master's degree in Mathematics. Yvette holds several patents, sits on various company and industry boards, and is an active participant in industry organizations, standards bodies, and leading industry technology efforts.

***What first attracted you to the telecoms industry, and how did you get into this business?***

It was a deliberate decision – I first worked at the Department of Defence as a mathematician, working on radar systems. I came into it to enable two-way communications. Time Warner Cable was leading this effort with the first ever trial and I was delighted to be a part of it. I was responsible for engineering software and handling operations. It was all about innovation and I just loved that. I loved working with partners and making things happen.

***Can you tell me how you got to where you are today?***

At Time Warner I was involved in the very first ever on-demand video system in the world. We launched it and then it was – ok, what next? We had to figure out how to make it into a product. I wanted to keep going so I moved onto the building of the product – I worked for Seachange which is how I know Roger Blakeway. Eventually I became president of the company. It was fantastic to be part of a wide-scale operation.

Then I went to Cable Vision – and worked in operations, I went to Cisco and moved overseas. I lived in London, then John

Chambers, CEO of Cisco, created a venture capital company and invited me into be a partner, focusing on start-ups all over the world. The start-ups are all in the same area; I am focusing on my industry in general. I was concerned by then about next generation networks, cyber security, AI – machine learning.

***You say “then I became President of the company’ like it was nothing. I am struck by that.***

Yes I became President, but what helped me so much was that I had great mentors and supporters and sponsors and they were all men. They were wonderful. This area is definitely male dominated but they were very welcoming, and I would say that helped me along. I always felt – being driven – it's important to look larger than your current role. I had a lot of industry involvement, there was some publishing, lot of public speaking. I became the first female SCTE:ISBE Chair in 2005 and held the position for two years, when I was re-elected in 2006. I feel it's important that if you're innovating you should share it.

I also had some fantastic mentors and sponsors. At Time Warner I had people who would introduce me to people in the industry all the time, and really, what a gift that is.

***Do you think that has been the driving force behind your success?***

Yes. The people I have met. As I said, the mentors and sponsors. As women we are very good at telling each other, “you can do it, you're amazing’ but they are already amazing. The question really is, how do I get to that next level? Creating that ecosystem of people around you is the most wonderful gift, and regardless of who you are – and goes for any under-represented group – if you can help with this concept of equality it's amazing. I can't tell you how grateful I have been to have that over the course of my career.

***What would you say are the main challenges for women in the telecoms industry?***

I think it's knowing what opportunities exist; that ecosystem isn't well established. That goes for everyone, it's beyond just

**“ As women we are very good at telling each other, ‘you can do it, you're amazing’ but they are already amazing. The question really is, how do I get to that next level? Creating that ecosystem of people around you is the most wonderful gift. ”**

women. The knowledge in understanding how to succeed, how do you get there, get to that next level, knowing the jobs are even out there. I did a lot of speaking, a lot of publishing... creating that path for yourself is important but knowing how to do it is a challenge.

### ***What would improve opportunities, prospects and a foot in the door for young women looking to get started in telecoms?***

It is really about having the support of mentors and sponsors who are prepared to open doors for you via introductions, that is what will help you. There are amazing, wonderful, talented women out there, but women talking to women is one thing; having sponsors and mentors – for me many times over that's been men. You don't realise the true impact that people can make by caring and taking an active role by taking someone under their wing and supporting them on their way up.

### ***What are you most proud of in your work?***

I would say from a public perspective, I won the Lifetime Achievement Award – an Emmy in Engineering and Technology. I was so incredibly honoured to win that. However, as wonderful as that is, the thing I am most proud of is working on so many great innovative products that you see being used every day. Things like streaming media, creating video on demand. I am really proud of that. That has an impact. Also, working with the people in my new role, developing these small businesses, as I cross over, that's very rewarding. The collegiate nature and closeness of this industry continues to be unique; I still get a lot out of that.

### ***How do you see the future for women in this industry in 10 years' time?***

I've done a lot with the creation of sponsorship and mentorship programmes, working with women's groups, and I was the executive sponsor of Conexion, the Hispanic ERO (Employment Resource Organisation) at Cisco. Success is when that underrepresentation is gone.

### ***What is your personal vision for the future - what would you like to see happen in your career?***

I've really shifted my focus to helping others to really helping pay-it-forward. I've had so many wonderful people help me and now I want to help others. It's a bit like being a parent of a child; I want to help people to gain their own success, to own their successful innovation – I am happy to be the person in the shadows helping them move ahead.



**Gilda Leicer Avila**  
**Agile Coach, Agile Transformation, Virgin Media**  
**Board Director & Sponsorship Chair at Women in Cable Telecom UK**

Gilda works in Agile Transformation and helps teams deliver change by embedding an agile mindset, adopting agile practices and supporting the delivery of strategic programmes. With an engineering degree and over 18 years of experience working in IT, she started her career in the telecommunications industry in 2017.

She's a diversity champion and joined WICT as Board Member in 2019 with the objective to empower and support women in becoming leaders and help transform the industry.

### ***How did you get started?***

I have always worked in IT. Then in 2017, I joined the telecoms sector. I had 10 years working in a software service start-up before that. I wanted a role where I could contribute directly to the organisation rather than provide a service to other companies. I wanted to work in a more established organisation, that was innovative and growing, that was the appeal. I wanted the future to seem clear in terms of opportunity. After years in a start-up, it was nice to get here and see that the hard work had already been done by someone else – that was really attractive!

### ***Was it something you always wanted to do or, like many of us, was it something you have fallen into?***

I was always into innovation and wanted to be in the technology space. I always knew that, though not necessarily telecoms. I fell into it. It seemed like the right fit for me; I was looking for a more mature organisation. When I got the opportunity to work with Virgin Media – I must admit the element of the brand, being part of the group was very attractive after my experience thus far.

There is a lot to be said for brand identity – I can relate to it. And with telecoms, I could relate the services and products more and I could also see it was an area of huge innovation. I was excited by the prospect of connectivity, 5G etc. As an outsider and a user of such technology myself it ticked all the boxes.

**Would you say your career choices have broadened or narrowed over time?**

That's a good question. Well, it's definitely different now. It's evolved a lot. The opportunities when I graduated 20 years ago to now definitely have evolved. I did an engineering degree and specialised in computer science. In that sense you could argue the opportunities were very broad then as I hadn't specialised at that point. In a male dominated industry, I felt the sector was very open to opportunities in fact. I was able to travel to Australia, Mexico; it is such a diverse industry. The demand is huge, but as far as coding is concerned the same language is spoken everywhere. So in the beginning doors opened a lot.

As I've gone on my soft skills have become a big asset compared to coding for example. I am also fluent in English and Spanish. I have the communications skills to deliver the solutions; so, I organically moved into project management from coding. Then that led to account management, product management and onto the transformation area now. I have done better than a lot of men, having both soft skills and technical expertise. I am the interface, the link between the two. A lot of people don't realise I have both.

**What's the reaction when you show you have a deep understanding of the technical elements?**

They're happy when they find someone who gets it, it makes the job easier all round. I don't sense any resentment, but they are surprised. There is a lot of unconscious bias. However, it has been hugely helpful to be the bridge between the technical side and soft skills side.

**What are the main challenges for women in the telecoms industry?**

We are very far from where we should be, but it's fair to say there is unconscious bias across all industries. I can tell you definitely in the telecoms industry it's a good thing is that there is an acceptance that we are very far from where we should be. That's a positive step.

There was a diversity and inclusion report a few years ago that said as an industry we have improved, but we have also got worse. We are discussing things, which is encouraging. But there is still a broad sense that the commitment of women is always in question; that essentially, women will want to start a family, for example, so there is a reluctance to invest in women who may go onto take maternity leave. That attitude still persists.

The fact there is a huge investment in inclusion and diversity is of course a great thing. Ultimately it is behaviours that need to change. There are opportunities out there that need more support like mentoring. Mentoring is nothing but a good thing, but the challenges are still there, and there is a lot of education required very early on.

There is a huge topic around education in terms of women, in terms of tech careers, bringing diversity to these male-dominated industries.

I feel that this must happen early on in education; we need role models so that young girls, young women can aim for those careers. There are very few women truly visible in this industry, and unless you look you don't know they are there.



## **Do you feel some of the industry is just paying lip service with these gender-balance initiatives?**

Look, there is definitely a core group within this industry looking for a change, and people are trying, but it's quite mixed. There is resistance. I have seen it a lot in the organisation and outside of it. You see this sort of thing on panel discussions for example, people all discuss the possibilities, they are all gung-ho at the time but ultimately, nothing really changes.

Wearing my WICT (Women In Cable Telecommunications) hat, which is a charity, it's very different. We are funded by Liberty Global, Accenture and Virgin. Everyone working for them believes in it, and together we are building a network. There is definitely passion there, a deep belief that we can make a difference and we can drive something. Tangible transformation has to be the goal. It's focusing on things like managing your profile, managing difficult conversations, funding mentoring programmes and so on. It has been fantastic, and I have got a lot out of it myself. As both a mentor and a mentee. In my experience these initiatives have made the biggest difference to my career the biggest difference to my career.

There are lots of organisations that are doing great things across all industries. And collectively they are moving the dial; Women in Business are working with us to fund the mentoring programme we are running. There are a lot of really passionate people out there who are making a change. But for others it is a box to tick. It's a fashionable cause to attach your company to.

I have got a lot out of WICT, and our members have got a lot out of it too, but you have to be proactive.

## **What would improve opportunities, prospects and a foot in the door for young women looking to get started in telecoms?**

I would say it's all about building your network. Find those networks that can support you. Yes, I mean women's groups but also generally. To get this role I joined two or three different networks concerned with adult transformation, and the connections I made from that were amazing.

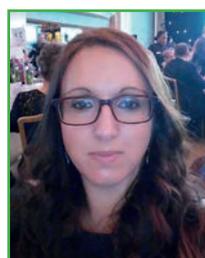
## **What are you most proud of in your career?**

I think I would say the connections I have built; women's networks or transformation networks to advance my career. Through my connections I have met the most amazing people who have been fundamental to my career progression. They are the ones pointing out to me: *you should be doing this, or*

*have you thought of that.* It's been very inspiring and supportive. What's enabling me is the network around me, and that has been fundamental to me and my success.

For the last three or four years I have been proactive in making sure I look for those opportunities, I look for people I want to learn from. Most of the time they are very happy to speak to you. It's a pay-it-forward thing. I have connected with people from different organisations – externally – and I must say it is hugely helpful to get those kinds of perspectives.

What am I most proud of? My network. My connections. Not my pension, not my job title. I am ambitious, I am proud of the progress I have made, but I am not done!



**Natalia Awodeji**  
**Principal Engineer at**  
**Liberty Global**

With a lifelong interest in technology, it was while studying at the Open University Natalia discovered her passion for networking. In 2011, despite having two small children at home she enrolled as a full-time student to study Computer Systems Engineering. She earned a graduate placement with Virgin Media, leading to a variety of experiences in Access Networks, Transmission and TV Engineering.

She then became a Senior Design Engineer in Access Network, eventually responsible for designing solutions across many Liberty Global's Operational Companies. Her main focus has been on the very first integrations of Video On Demand services onto its Cable Platforms. She became Principal Engineer in 2020, introducing new technologies such as Remote PHY, paving the way to a Distributed Access Architecture and migrating Linear TV services from legacy platforms to new Access Network technologies.

## **What first attracted you to the telecoms industry and how has it changed over the years?**

I always had an interest in IT but a lack of confidence stopped me for pursuing it 100% so I did business studies. I like talking to people, so I started off in a customer service job at the airport! Then I just thought one day, I can't do this for the rest of my life. I knew I wanted to do something technical. I did some courses, that snowballed, then I got my first role in IT support - at a local school. I had an interest in telecoms and networking. I was doing Open University at the time.

Then I suddenly decided to go for university full time and to focus on engineering. The bravest thing was absolutely the maddest! That was in 2011, it was mad. I had a 4-month-old baby! I was a late starter with my career.

### ***My goodness. Whatever brought that on?***

I just had this lightbulb moment when I realised that for me, the business side of things was really boring. Engineering was what I wanted to do at that point. I just thought, let's see how far I can go. So, I started an electrical engineering course. There were only a few girls on the course, out of 100. I specialised in computer systems and engineering at Brunel University.

### ***Was it something you always wanted to do or, like many of us, was it something you have fallen into?***

In Slovakia we barely had a computer, it was a very different time. The focus wasn't on IT there in the 90s!

### ***What are the main challenges for women in the telecoms industry?***

It is better than it was. I still have my challenges, the same challenges that women all over face in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths). It is really about just being heard. Sometimes when I am on a call or in a meeting, I can discuss a solution for an hour around a table of men and then the question comes: Who is dealing with this? Nobody is looking at me. There is just an expectation that it will be a man in charge.

When people see a department full of men and only one woman, it's really difficult to establish yourself as the point of contact. You have to work twice as hard as a woman in this field.

### ***That must be a depressing experience after all the work you've put in.***

It's unconscious, it's not malicious. It's just a way of thinking. This is what we are used to. It's a generational thing. When I sit in a web meeting, I barely ever work with women. If I do it'll be a woman in HR or marketing. That's what everyone is used to.

### ***You mean it's ingrained?***

Yes. So, when you are dealing with people who have been in the business for 20+ years, that's the attitude you need to change. There is no easy answer to it, but I think if we had more women coming through the door then eventually it'll change things. It's still quite rare.

### ***What do you think is needed?***

There are many initiatives for gender diversity aiming at the younger workforce, apprenticeships and so on. I can see things are changing as there are more women, the intakes - even within engineering - it seems to be better.

### ***What do you think would improve opportunities and prospects for women in your field?***

I think first and foremost, to be heard. Secondly I think it's important to look at changing the stereotypes - and there are many. When it comes to telecoms a lot more effort needs to be made. There were experiments that were done - workshops looking into these and kids were asked questions like "Draw me an engineer," and the results were all along the lines of a man in a hard hat and a high viz vest. Always a man.



**Even my own bias is there when I think of the word 'Engineer'. I don't think of a woman necessarily.**

Exactly. Those preconceptions need to change from parents too. I've been at jobs fairs representing the company and I've seen girls being dragged away from the STEM tables. They don't want their daughters to be engineers either. They get directed to the legal tables instead.

Across the board there is a lack of awareness, a lack of education. In recent times it's become fashionable not to be able to open up the back of a phone, a computer and have a look at the circuit board. It's all down to Steve Jobs' sealed unit theory basically, which hasn't helped our cause.

**You mean his sense that the consumer had no business snapping open the back of his phone, swapping batteries like Nokia users used to do?**

Yes. His products have always been difficult to open - that was absolutely by design. The customer doesn't NEED to know what's inside, but the trickle-down effect means there is very little awareness of what is going on in the telecoms industry at a technical level. If I say 'telecoms engineer' to someone they think it's the person who fixes your phone line when it's broken.

**What are you most proud of in your career?**

Where I am right now. I never thought in my wildest dreams I would end up in this position - just for you to be wanting to talk to me is like, wow. To get this far, from a rural village in eastern Europe. It makes me proud.

**How do you see the future for women in this industry in 10 years' time?**

Foundations are in the right place now. We need to work on more for mentoring women in the company, to bring in some positive examples, show women that they can achieve as much, if not more than any man. Overall, I do think we are on the right path, but it does seem to be changing very slowly.

**Will your girls follow in your footsteps?**

The older one is open to it. That's all you can hope for, right?



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