

Inside Data Centre Podcast.

WITH ANDY DAVIS

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Title

Barbara Sacha & Charlotte Berry-Selwood: Forum for Women in Data Centres

Date

15th November 2024

Transcript

This is the Inside Data Centre podcast.

We talk to the people who power the data centre sector to give you insider info on everything happening in DC today. Here's your host, Andy Davis.

Welcome to the Inside Data Centre podcast.

Today, I'm joined by Charlotte Berry-Selwood and Barbara Sacha. Good afternoon, both of you.

Barbara Sacha (0:38 - 0:39)

Good afternoon.

Andy Davis (0:40 - 1:11)

We were just having that conversation. Is it morning or afternoon? It's definitely afternoon, just crossed the midday hour.

So we're in the afternoon in the UK. Thanks for coming on today. Obviously, we're going to talk about a recent initiative and programme that you've established, the Forum for Women in Data Centres, which covers a very important topic.

As a dad of three girls, something that I hopefully can shed light onto my children to help them develop a career such as the one you've both developed. But before we go into that, do you want to give a quick introduction about who you are and what your role is in the industry? If we start with you, Barbara.

Barbara Sacha (1:13 - 3:54)

So my name is Barbara Sacha, and thank you for saying my last name correctly. It's nice. I'm a partner at Cundall.

And we are an engineering consultancy, and we do multidisciplinary engineering designs for data centres, open access lead consultant for the clients. And together with a few fellow partners, I'm driving the critical systems sector at Cundall, which is one of

the biggest sectors for our company. I'm a mechanical engineer by background, and I started my career just in building services design.

The first years of my work, I spent in Dubai working on different projects in the Middle East. And probably the common denominator of those projects was that they were all quite large scale, complex jobs acting in very often also lead consultant capacity. And over seven years ago, I moved to the UK.

That's when I started working for Cundall, and that's when I really entered the data centre world for the first time. And I think the thing that let me have a good start in the sector was the large projects experience, because I found myself working straightaway in a very similar environment to what I was used to. And I started building design management team dedicated for critical systems then in Cundall, which since then we've grown, and the whole sector has grown a lot as well.

And I guess the thing I've enjoyed hugely about data centre sector is the more bigger technical focus compared to other commercial sectors that I have been working with previously. I do enjoy the fact that we as engineers drive the project rather than maybe projects driven by very often either architecture or very different focus of what the actual objective of the project is. And currently, we work with a really nice portfolio of clients in the industry.

A lot of the very well-known clients that we have good and close relationships with. And I think the specifics of working in the industry really much relies on partnerships with those clients. We work on frameworks and multiple projects on their programs.

So building those relationships with the clients and having a really nice long-term relationship with them is something I enjoy a lot in the industry.

Andy Davis (3:55 - 3:57)

Definitely. Charlotte, over to you.

Charlotte Berry-Selwood (3:58 - 6:30)

I'll follow that now. So, yes. Hi, I'm Charlotte Berry-Selwood.

I have been in the sort of data centre space for my entire career, actually. Currently, my role is VP commercial for AVK, who are a power solutions company providing both prime solutions and standby solutions only really into the data centre market. The company's been around 35 years and has worked in lots of other sort of mission-critical type industries.

But now with the boom and growth that we've seen in the data centre space, that is its entire focus. Previously, I guess me starting my career, my background is actually civil engineering, but I very quickly sort of fell into project management and project delivery. So I spent the first sort of decade of my career in project delivery of data centres, mainly in Australia.

So I used to live down under and delivered data centres all over Australia for sort of the best part of a decade. Moved home, moved back to the UK and started working at consultancies, doing similar things, so project managing data centres, and then found myself in the sort of developer space, taking on sort of head of commercial global roles for them. So I've been in this industry quite a long time, I would say my entire career, and it has been really just a fantastic place to grow.

I think the opportunity that comes with being in a fast-paced sector that is experiencing significant growth allows you to have sort of career expediency, if you like, or expedition where you might not have experienced that elsewhere, you know, where there is money coming into the sector is always nice. But also just the challenges of something that has gone from, you know, through that rapid change where when I first started, we were building very, very small data centres, and now into the absolute colossal builds that we're experiencing now. And as Barbara said, that major build experience has just proved invaluable with the complexity of the projects that we're now facing as the industry moves into this, if you like, maybe third phase of its journey.

And we start to see sort of the increase of AI and what that means for the developers and the end users. Through my career of having that sort of major project experience has just helped and has just sort of, you know, helped me go from strength to strength and take on bigger and bigger opportunities where they've been offered to me. So it's a wonderful sector to work in.

I feel very lucky that I really fell into it at a very junior level.

Andy Davis (6:31 - 7:27)

Yeah, I think that's the story of the industry though, isn't it? And that's why initiatives such as yours are important. Most people do fall into this industry, and historically they have done.

Through doing this podcast and however many episodes, 170 something episodes it is, I think the story of careers is amazing from people that left school at 14 and sold a business at 35 and people that had an engineering degree, a civils degree, a HR degree, whatever it is, did an apprenticeship, so many different avenues into this sector. But the kind of key point that I always pick up is most of us didn't do it intentionally, which is what we need to change as an industry in order to develop. We need more people.

Hence why we're having these conversations. So you recently established the Forum for Women in Data Centres, a great initiative. I think you had an event a couple of months ago now.

Do you want to give an overview of exactly what it is, why it's important? I don't know who wants to take the lead on that one. Barbara, do you want to start?

Barbara Sacha (7:28 - 10:14)

I'll have a go. We had a few events already and we have more coming up. But yeah, I think it started as an idea in many people's heads over the last years as we were maturing in the sector and trying to figure out how to improve the way women as such a minority, as in general in construction industry, how to make it more friendly, how to make the opportunities more equal.

And I think you do experience that imbalance differently at the different levels of your career. But as you grow, I think it started impacting me more as I was growing to be more senior and the ratio was getting even more sad. And I think we started meeting up and talking about do we create some community?

Because what we did realise, especially in London, which is such a huge hub for data centres in Europe, I think it's the biggest, if you talk about number of people based here working in the sector, that we don't really have anything women specific functioning in the data centre industry. There are a few wider initiatives like iMason Women, Women's Tech Forum. They are stemming from US and are active in Europe.

But we wanted something that was, first of all, a community. From my point of view, I just wanted to have a group of women from the industry to hang out with, very simply put. And then we started talking a bit more about what impact it also would have for much more junior women who would see a bit more condensed view of that female part of the industry and a bit more of the role models in one room together, more of your fellow industry people in your room together, which you will build your future with, you will build your relationships with.

So that's how it started. We had a few, a smaller event in May, earlier this year in London. Then we had a morning coffee in Cannes during Data Cloud.

And then our first launch event in September. And I think, you know, a great experience for me because this is how I actually got to know so many more women, including Charlotte. We only met earlier this year just because of that.

And yeah, I don't know, Charlotte, how has your experience with that been?

Charlotte Berry-Selwood (10:14 - 12:39)

Yeah, I think, you know, look, I agree. There was a glaring need for a space and for the few of us that have been, you know, in this sector for some time now, I think, you know, the chasm between, you know, the genders is very much still present. And as Barbara says, it is something that construction in general struggles with.

But when you're in such a sort of a rapid growth industry and you can see so much opportunity, it also does feel we're letting the side down a little bit. It would be nice to have, you know, a better representation of women. And I think off the back of that, it was sort of a, well, who is in this industry?

Who have we got? What are their stories? What do their careers look like?

And the ability to have those people together in a community, be able to share experiences, because it is not the same experience that I will have experienced to, you know, yourself or, you know, men who have come up through this or anyone else for that matter. And the fact that we can have people as a group with those shared experiences, especially people who have got into senior positions, sharing how that journey has gone for them, hopefully will not only inspire the next generation of women who are coming into their careers. It's obviously at this point, we're not necessarily attracting in.

Hopefully that's something we can target in the future. But for those who have just graduated, are coming in as junior engineers, sort of talking to them and them seeing, you know, I'm a big advocate of, you know, if you can see it, you can be it. If you've got women at the top or women in quite senior management positions, talking to grads coming in and really talking about how wonderful this sector is, which, you know, both Barbara and I, both firmly believe.

It's a wonderful place to have a career. And showing them what that journey looks like and that opportunity looks like, we will open the doors for them to stay in the industry. Because I think so often when you start, when you graduate and you start working, you're not sure where you're going to find yourself.

You're not sure what interests you. And because data centres are not spoken about widely in media, because data centres are not well known as, you know, a hospital or a school or whatever else it is in construction you can go and build. It's difficult to attract people.

And I think this is a good way to have a forum where not only can we have a nice community, we can have nice events. We can have, you know, that collective of women coming together and sharing those experiences. But actually it can serve as a bit of an educational piece to, you know, young women coming in and say, this could be a fantastic career for you if you were prepared to sort of push through into this space and stay with this space.

Andy Davis (12:41 - 13:12)

Yeah, I think it's a great, I'm a big believer in communities, as most people probably know, like Data Centre Club is a similar conception really just to get people together, like nothing more than that. And what do you think you can achieve from this community? Obviously you've talked about, you know, such as sharing knowledge amongst yourselves, building those networks, the new generation coming through.

But what else would you, if you could fast forward two years and look back, what are you hoping to achieve once this becomes more public, I guess? Barbara?

Barbara Sacha (13:13 - 15:14)

I think I want to achieve, in general, women to feel more comfortable in the industry. And now if we look through how that might present itself in practice, is when we go to various networking, BD events, I want every woman to come in and not feel intimidated

by a strong imbalance because, for example, through the community, you just have much many more familiar faces, yeah? That you actually look forward to meeting, and that you make connections with women in other companies.

That, you know, there is something sometimes difficult to explain, but that affiliation through different common either background or experiences is really powerful, yeah? And, you know, when you're very often a majority in a group, you might not appreciate that there is, you know, the value of the link between different people within the minority group. But I think it is very powerful, and that enabling a better network of your connections being created, I think, has a value.

I think there is a longer game there as well, but something that will not necessarily have, for especially the more junior people, have an effect maybe in a couple of years. But as you grow through the industry where you have long-term connections, because you made through certain communities, it will pay off later on by just, you know, how established, basically, you are within that. So I think we have, yeah, a couple of things to achieve.

One, for the more maybe established people just to feel, or for me as well, I just want to enjoy it a bit more, I guess. And then for the junior people to create a nice networking, practicing ground, connecting to role models, and really being inspired and encouraged to grow in the industry.

Andy Davis (15:16 - 15:17)

Charlotte?

Charlotte Berry-Selwood (15:18 - 17:38)

I mean, obviously, everything Barbara just said is it would be a dream come true. I think, you know, we've actually, I think we've also got another opportunity there for an education piece where, you know, when we look at the C-suites, when we look at the top of the tree of, you know, most of the companies that we work for, you know, and especially within the data centre space, it all looks very homogenous, and it doesn't look very female. And I think there is an opportunity for us through this networking to bring in our male colleagues, bring in, you know, the companies to really educate them on the experience of women, you know, within this sector, and, you know, and hopefully drive a little bit of change.

You know, it is not the same experience, and actually through that education piece, we can make the environment a better environment for women to work in. So I think that that's one opportunity. The other opportunity is through that networking, having, you know, that access to women in senior positions or women who have shared that experience, that there can be also an education piece for, I guess, more junior staff to say, okay, well, what do I need to do to grow my career in a similar vein, and what does that mean for me?

But also vice versa, we've got to recognise that it's becoming very difficult to hire people. We have a talent, you know, dearth, there is a real lack of resource in the industry. We want to attract people in.

What do they want as a career? So it's a two-way listening street, and I think that there's a lovely opportunity to do that. We, A, we want more women in, and B, we'd like some more junior staff coming into the industry and staying into the industry.

So through this community as it builds and grows, you know, we've already recognised that we want to have lots of different types of events to sort of different engagement, and we're really trying to seek feedback from, you know, the group, which grew so quickly, I should add. You know, as soon as we launched it on LinkedIn, it was hugely popular. Which just tells you it was crying out for it.

So, you know, our drive to seek feedback from the members and from the community to say, right, what serves you best here? What would you like to hear? Do you want to hear from, you know, people who have been super successful and sit on a panel and

talk about their experience?

Or do you want a different type of engagement? And I think as we hone in on what is best useful for the community, you know, we will have lots of functions as, you know, hopefully the success of Forum for Women and data centres grows and grows.

Andy Davis (17:39 - 18:43)

Yeah, definitely. I think I always say quite a lot, the sector's ripe for disruption, like positive disruption. A lot of people are, you know, they do need things like this.

It's really important, but it always takes some people or some person to kind of create it. And that's, I think that's when you do it, you're suddenly like, whoa, this, you know, everybody wants this, but you need the community in order to know that everybody wants it. It's like, you can't have one without the other.

So as soon as you launch it, all of a sudden you think, oh, actually this is gonna be probably a lot more beneficial, a lot more important than you actually thought it was when you first had the idea over a coffee or wherever it might be. So I guess that's what you're seeing now. You mentioned about, you know, men obviously helping you on this quest and other people help you on this quest and say like, you know, I'm a dad of three girls.

So it's really important to me that females do get equal opportunities. It's, you know, it's the right thing to do, not just something we should be doing, but how can we help you? I guess is the question, like how can people listening to this help you on your quest?

What do you need? What can we do for you? Anything.

Now's the time to ask the audience.

Barbara Sacha (18:45 - 21:38)

Well, I think easiest and first step to do is join the LinkedIn group. If you haven't, it's unlimited to anyone. So join and you can track what's happening there.

And on events, we try to get invite men as well, but we try to achieve a bit of an inverse ratio in terms of gender balance, which is a very interesting experiment. I think for both sides, it's nice to be for women in the majority. And also it's a very interesting and maybe a new experience for a lot of the men that come there and to observe how different the dynamics actually look of conversations and such a different balance.

I think it is about listening. I know it's a lot of companies or teams are actively trying to do something about it for many years. It is very difficult, I think, to appreciate the point of minority if you are in the majority though.

And I think it's not only listening, it's listening and then actually believing, not questioning anything that is being said. If it is being said, take it. It's true.

It's coming from that person. It is subjective, but that's the point. That's exactly the point.

I think that. And as well, we were talking about joining more actively the community because we do want to grow it and do a bit more of varied and meaningful things like Charlotte said, different kinds of events. But a lot of people were mentioning it would be great to have mentoring schemes and maybe some trainings a bit more aligned with what would support gender balance.

So to do that, of course, we need engagement, active engagement. We need support. And we also thought of anybody who would want to join us on behalf of a company.

We do want to see that whoever is joining has a good strategy and an active plan on what is it that they're doing themselves about it. We were quite conscious of not making it just the networking exercise. We do want to try and drive the change.

We don't want to be too naive about this, of course, but with whatever we can do, we do want to really make this about the purpose. And yeah, side effect of it will be nice networking and BD. But it is about trying to make a change and getting people actively engaged to think about it.

Andy Davis (21:39 - 21:50)

Yeah, definitely. You've got to have that. Why haven't you to make things like this work?

And it's important that everybody's on the same page and trying to achieve the same objectives. Charlotte, anything to add or?

Charlotte Berry-Selwood (21:51 - 24:09)

Yeah, I think it is. That's bang on it. Really, it's very easy to dismiss things that are not actively happening to you.

And, you know, quite often the feeling when you are in the minority of and some of the difficulties that you face when that is your reality are not always surface level. You know, they're not always easy to see, easy to spot. And if you're not experiencing them, you know, as a man, it's really difficult for you to identify that.

So that active listening and then being an active advocate to sort of taking that step back and having that cognisance of going, oh, they might not be enjoying this. This might be quite difficult for them. So it's that being really open to learning.

I think it's for all people, you know, is a wonderful step in the right direction. In respect to particularly, you know, obviously the Forum for Women, it's you're helping us already getting the word out there. So that's a great step in the right direction.

But supporting the events, coming to the events, putting your hand up for the opportunity to attend, really engaging when you're there, listening to the stories, listening to the experience of those people and taking that away with you and then taking that back into your day-to-day life and learning from it. Being open to learning is a wonderful thing. And the hope really with that sort of change and with that partnership, as we see with companies coming in, you know, they take on what we're saying very seriously, that if we do want to partner with us as an event sponsor or somebody that's going to give time into these events, actually we want to see your company's engagement and that they're really moving towards a better diverse workforce that supports both the hiring of women, but also the retention of women into this industry. And let us not forget that we lose a lot of people, of women through the industry too, through, you know, for a variety of reasons.

So what are we doing about that? And I think that's how we sort of start to affect change and that's how we start to better the working environment for women and other people in minorities in general. So I think that's how we can get help.

And I mean, certainly that's what we're seeing already. The positive thing is we are seeing that, you know, that want from the companies and certainly from the companies of the women who have, you know, taken time out to start this up. All the companies behind them are really engaged and really wanting to kind of do the right thing to be involved.

Andy Davis (24:10 - 25:01)

Yeah, I always say it. I think the industry is full of great people and I think that's what it comes to the fore when you start communities such as this. The great people will rise to the top and will support you and hopefully help you on your journey.

And it's about, I think retention is a really good point. It's something I talk to clients about all the time. Like it's, you know, they come to me to hire, but you only hire if you're growing or if you're losing people.

So if there's that balance, you've got, if we, as an industry, if we want to grow and progress and develop and take the opportunities that are out there, we need to keep the people that we've got as well. And that does involve different things for different people. It's not a blanket approach.

So that's another good point. And finally on Forum for Women, what's next? I know you've got, it's the 8th of November today.

I always have to say the date because I never know when it's going to go out. But I know you've got a few things coming up fairly soon.

Barbara Sacha (25:04 - 26:31)

Yep, so our next event is on 20th of November. So that's in less than a couple of weeks. We'll actually have a nice discussion panel for people taking part, talking about their careers in data centre industry and how they found themselves there.

It's a not only female panel. So we're also interested in seeing like, you know, how does it look from all the perspectives, of course. And so that's on 20th of November.

And I think there are still some spots. You'll find all the links on our LinkedIn group. And we're planning really to do at the moment targeting quarterly events.

We're quite conscious about, you know, being practical and aiming at feasible targets because everybody in the steering group running forward is like us having full-on jobs. And, you know, that's an initiative on top of that. And it does need time.

So the following event, I think, will be February or March. And we'll try to pick some date for that. But really, we're also open for people reaching out and suggesting what is it that they would want to do or want to see happen.

Andy Davis (26:33 - 26:36)

Excellent, a lot coming up. Charlotte, anything to add or did Barbara get everything?

Charlotte Berry-Selwood (26:37 - 27:23)

Yeah, I mean, look, it's in the shard, which is rather nice. So definitely come along and be part of that. We want to run these events.

Yes, there are limitations with people's, obviously, full-time day jobs. But I think, you know, as this starts to grow, we will see hopefully, especially the summer months, some smaller events popping up as well. You know, people have spoken about quiz nights and we want to keep it quite fun.

Yes, panel discussions are fantastic and they are so useful. I'm really excited to see the next one. But we also try and balance it out with some really social activities.

So we're starting to think about that. We're starting to look into that. So sort of keep an eye out in the new year for some announcements.

And fingers crossed, we can get some other things in the diary to really just keep it mixed up so that there's something for everyone.

Andy Davis (27:24 - 28:23)

Yeah, and again, it's important as well, isn't it? Because a lot of the events, we all know, they all revolve around the same social elements of bars and restaurants. It tends to be the case.

So it is good to have things that are different. Again, like if you want a different audience, you need a different venue. And it's kind of, I think that's, again, you're seeing it across the industry now and it's important and they're very popular when they're launched.

So yeah, I think any ideas around that, which I'm sure you have will do very well and attract different people than what you would get at the core events. We will add the link for the group in the show notes of this. So if anyone needs to find it, they can find it there.

Obviously they can reach out to me as well. I'll direct anyone if they can't find Charlotte or Barbara. But before I let you go, a couple of questions that I ask everybody on the pod, just to get your views.

If you could ask everyone in the sector to start or stop doing one thing, what would it be? And you can relate it to the topic, that's fine. So Barbara, start with you.

Barbara Sacha (28:25 - 29:17)

I actually will not probably relate it to the topic because as well, we have those full-time jobs in data centre industry, which actually consumes most of my headspace. And I think I would really want everyone to start being serious about sustainability and how we drive it through the data centre industry, how the zero carbon approach is taken to another level. It's being talked about.

It's not probably acted upon as much as it could be already. So we're quite actively trying to drive it, but the key to success is in the whole supply chain from clients to the supply chain, getting engaged in it. So that would be my plea.

Andy Davis (29:18 - 29:18)

Definitely.

Barbara Sacha (29:19 - 29:19)

Charlotte?

Charlotte Berry-Selwood (29:20 - 29:59)

Well, she's taken my one. But actually, if I think about also sustainability, I could really talk to also sustainability of supply chain. I think the project scale now that we are at, the money is big, the risk is big.

And everybody is kind of under huge amounts of pressure to deliver. I think we've got to start thinking a little bit outside the box. We keep doing things the same way over and over and expecting a different result, like we're mad people.

It would be nice to see a bit of a change to the way that we procure projects, to the way that we deliver projects, to the way that we work together in partnerships.