

# CHANGE IS A CONSTANT FOR ANITA SANDS

The life of Anita Sands has been “an eclectic one” so far. Having **deviated from the traditional career path of gradual progression to the top of one industry**, Anita has achieved remarkable success despite – or arguably because of – her many professional pivots.

WORDS: RUTH DORIS

The business and technology leader sits on the boards of three public global technology companies, **Symantec**, a cybersecurity Fortune 500 company; **ServiceNow**, a SaaS service management firm, and innovative storage space business, **Pure Storage**.

She is also on the advisory boards of other organisations, including Grand Central Tech, a New York-based technology incubator.

Growing up in Drogheda, Co. Louth, Anita completed a PhD in atomic and molecular physics at Queen’s University, Belfast. Following a stint in the public policy sector, and a decade in financial services, Anita went to work in the technology industry. Her

career path brought her to Canada, to the United States, from Wall Street to Silicon Valley, and from an operating role into the boardroom.

She says her life has been defined by change. Change is a constant, she says, and “being skilled at change is a very valuable thing both personally and professionally in today’s world.”

On a personal level, her life has undergone huge transformation in recent years. “Three or four years ago I was a single, 38-year-old, relatively successful woman living in Manhattan — and now I’m married and a mother of six.” She explains that her husband John was a widower, and he and his late wife had

five children. They have a daughter, Rosie, who is almost two. “We have five millennials and a toddler,” Anita laughs. She describes the household as a ‘lot of fun. It’s like a sitcom. I’m thinking of pitching a TV network for my own reality show.”

While acknowledging that she has been fortunate in her career, she is, however, quick to dispel the idea that success is all about luck. In fact, Anita is dismayed when she’s interviewing a woman, and in response to comments about her impressive CV, the woman will say “I got really lucky”. “Of course, serendipity plays a role in everyone’s life, but women are far quicker to attribute their success to luck than men are.”

ANITA SANDS ▾



That tendency can be partially attributed to lack of confidence, one of three success killers for women that Anita has identified. The other two are fear and guilt. “These three things either individually or collectively can really hold you back from taking some risk, making some bold decisions, moving forward with your life.”

Confidence was instilled in Anita early on. The eldest of five, Anita says her parents didn’t distinguish between the girls and the boys. Her father put up television aerials and satellite dishes for a living and the girls and boys were asked to help. The ability to solder can be added to Anita’s extensive list of skills. She says this “almost lack of awareness about how your gender might dictate your future is the greatest gift you dad can give you. It gives you the confidence that you can do anything.”

However, Anita stresses that confidence is more of a process than a state of mind.

**One effective tool to build self-efficacy is “build up a bank of compliments and praise”.**

Moving on to guilt which she believes is “kryptonite for women,” she explains why she thinks the Lean In concept of women “having it all” is problematic.

“When you start thinking you should be doing something or you can or can’t be having something you’re getting into that realm of feeling guilty about the choices you’re making in your life.”

She is pragmatic about finding that balance in her own life. “I am three things right now. I am a wife, I am a mother and a stepmother and I am a



professional. In any given day I will do the best that I can with the time that I have. There won’t be balance on a certain day or a certain week, there may not even be balance on a certain month, but over the course of the year, over the course of a lifetime, I feel like I have a balance.”

Anita speaks honestly about reaching this point in her life — both personally and professionally. While her career was on the rise, she had time for personal pursuits; she’s travelled extensively, including an expedition to Antarctica led by polar explorer Robert Swan. However, she realised that to achieve what she wanted in her personal life she would have to make professional compromises.

Referring to author’s Dr Brené Brown’s quote about a woman’s thirties being the time of perfecting, proving and pretending, Anita says by the time she had reached her

late thirties she had become “exhausted” from all of those things. She decided to prioritise what was important to her at that stage of her life. “That meant I might not have the CEO title at this juncture, I may not make the same level of compensation, but the point is it’s on my own terms.”

On the subject of gender equality, Anita says that while awareness initiatives and policies are “terrific,” the approach needs to be bottoms-up as well. She cites statistics that about 30% of American households have women as the primary breadwinner. By 2030 that number is expected to be 50%.

Childcare is a significant issue in the US, as it is in Ireland. Anita doesn’t think enough is being done to support the evolution in the role of men in society. She attended a dinner recently with about a dozen “incredibly successful” women — “mostly C-suite

**“By creating a more inclusive workplace environment, companies will reap the benefits because employees who feel like they don’t belong, don’t bring their best selves to the job.”**

execs and board members”. Around one third or “maybe even a half of us had husbands or partners who were either stay-at-home dads at one point or had flexible careers that allowed them to work from home.” “My husband is retired from an operating role and has a portfolio that gives him the flexibility to be with our daughter.”

Companies need to start thinking beyond diversity and inclusion and look at belonging. For example, to encourage gender diversity in the workplace, she says, a company could look at how to make a returning mother feel like she belongs in the workplace.

“Everybody has had a moment in their life when they didn’t belong. Maybe you were bullied in school, maybe you were gay, and you struggled to come out. Maybe you didn’t have the right accent when you went to college, or you’re an immigrant.”

By creating a more inclusive workplace environment, companies will reap the benefits because employees who feel like they don’t belong, don’t bring their best selves to the job, she

says. “If people aren’t willing to share their most radical ideas, how we are going to get innovation and effective collaboration?”

One way to foster a sense of belonging is to raise awareness of — often unconscious — “micro-behaviours” which exist even at board level. Anita refers to a board meeting where the use of a sports analogy left her feeling excluded. “The CFO was using a baseball expression “at-bats” to explain data in a report, and the nuance was very important to the point he was making,” she says. “I made a joke about it, and everybody laughed. And he said: ‘you know Anita I just realised that this is a diversity and inclusion moment of learning for me.’”

Anita encourages women to invest in themselves. She took up public speaking in secondary school, and through university, getting two buses to classes in north Belfast and then in Canada early on in her banking career. “I’ve had great coaches and great mentors. And luckily — this is where I will subscribe to luck — because I didn’t know it at the time — but public speaking

was probably the singular most impactful investment I made in my life.”

This investment “paid immense dividends,” she says. “When I was young and relatively inexperienced compared to others around the table being able to articulate my thoughts and questions with confidence gave me a presence that belied my years and my experience.”

However, being in Fortune 500 boardrooms before the age of 40, Anita says she often felt like “I was the kiddie at the grown-ups table.” She admits she has struggled with fear — that “incessant ‘mean girl’ voice in her head” telling her she’s not good enough. And one of the “inside secrets about success” she confides, is that fear doesn’t disappear as women rise higher in their careers.

However, she says fear is not always a negative. “If I am feeling slightly fearful, I’m out of my comfort zone and I’m growing.” So how does a successful woman overcome the feeling of being an imposter? Anita is not keen on the expression: “Fake it until you make it”. Instead, she believes in: “Act it, until you are it.” “I act like a confident and thoughtful board director even in those moments when I don’t feel like a confident board director,” she adds.

Gender equality is making rapid progress across many industries. However, it remains slow at the top. According to the 2020 Women on Boards Index, the number of female directors on Fortune 500 boards grew a paltry 1.2% to 22.2% from 2016 to 2017.

Anita agrees that there is still some way to go while “women at the top are exceptions and they are exceptional. We will have reached equality whenever they are mediocre women at the top.”