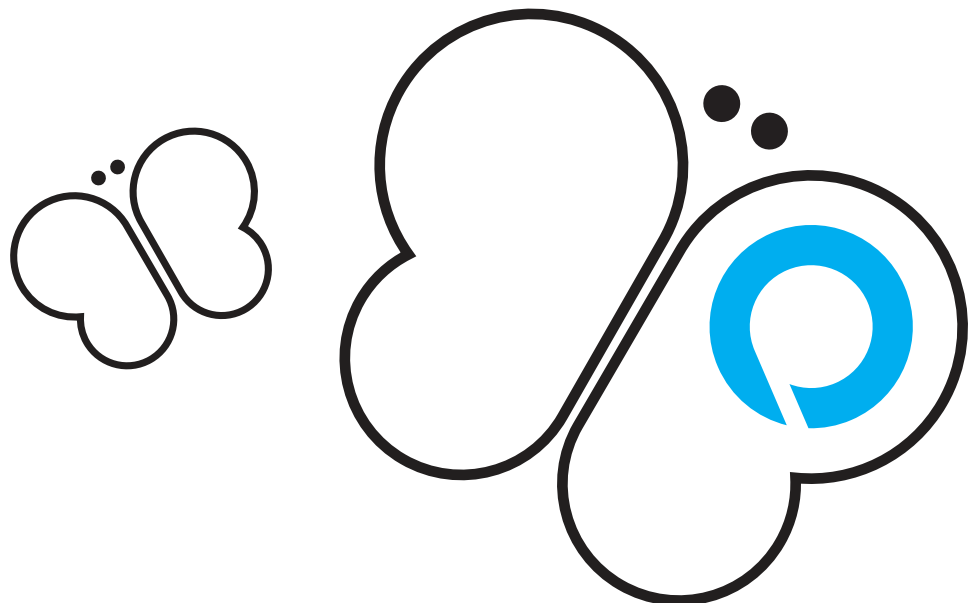

Women in Leadership: Nina Muhleisen

Nina Muhleisen is the founder and Director of Three6, a consultancy focussing on helping clients embed a 'successful, sustainable digital transformation,' whether their aim is to create a culture of continuous improvement within the workplace or transform customer experience through technology.

Following her career in manufacturing and banking, Nina developed a passion for **transformation** and thrives on new challenges. In this interview, Nina speaks about what she looks out for when hiring for her company, the differences in working in a large corporate environment to creating her own small business and who should be held accountable in order to allow more women to access leadership positions.

Based in Australia, Nina has worked in a range of organisations such as Audi, Toyota and ANZ Bank. Using tools and methodologies that she has learnt throughout her career, she noticed a gap in the market around implementing processes from the person perspective when undergoing a digital transformation rather than focussing solely on implementing the technology.



Q&A with Nina Muhleisen

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Can you outline your career?

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I've had a really varied career in terms of my professional path and in terms of where I am today. I started off my journey as a Mechanical Engineer, so it was quite heavy on the technical side of things.

My first job was with Audi, designing the pistons in the V10 engine. That was in Germany, so after a year I came back to Australia and worked again in the automotive industry, at Toyota. When I was at Toyota I fell in love with Lean there and I stayed with them for 5 years. During that process, I completed a Business Management degree and at that time the business was growing and so I was asked to work on some really exciting projects. By the end of my time at Toyota, money was decreasing – it wasn't really profitable to make cars in Australia anymore and so the projects went from really interesting to maintenance requests.

I always give a lot of detail around this because I want to highlight why I made my next steps and why I went from manufacturing and mechanical engineering into Banking and Finance. The projects weren't stretching and challenging me anymore and that is a key thing about my personality - I love to be challenged and I love doing new things. ANZ Bank tapped me on the shoulder and said that they were looking for people with Lean experience to come into the bank and at first, I didn't understand how my skills in manufacturing could be used in a bank, but I took the opportunity. I ended up spending seven years at ANZ and at first, I really didn't enjoy it because it was incredible bureaucratic and political, there was so much waste in the business and I couldn't get my head around it.

I moved to the wealth division and began to be able to teach and train and embed a continuous improvement culture across the wealth division. That was a really important stepping stone in my career as I realised that I had a passion for continuous improvement. After that, I moved into different areas, one being Innovation where I helped them to build an app and looked at how you embed it, and not just in a technical sense, but looking at how you embed to make them work in a sustainable way. I then looked at how you can set up teams so that they will be ready for transformation and change. After this, I wanted to challenge myself again and try something completely new, so I moved to a start-up with only three people. When you work in such a small environment, the people that you work with are so critical in what you're doing and on the culture there. When someone that you work with doesn't have the same vision as you, it makes it difficult, so I decided to leave. I knew that I had a passion and I saw a gap in the market because when people talk about digital transformation, there's always focus on the technology, but what is also really important and where the success happens is how you embed it sustainably and how you implement the process from a people standpoint.

Alongside that, it's not about going in and doing the work for someone else, it's about teaching and training and uplifting the skills and resources. Its focussing on how to uplift the people so that they can do it themselves. That's where Three6 was born and has been in operation for over a year now. It's been a special journey.



How do you keep yourself motivated in a start-up and keep going every day when there are challenges that you have to deal with?



I'll take today as an example. I've just come back from 3 weeks on leave and as I'm the founder and CEO, the main decisions come down to me. Even though I trust my employees, everything comes back to me. This morning was a daunting task, after having been off for a while, to tell myself that I have to get back into it and motivate myself. You really need to break it down and figure out what it is that you need to do today and how do you want to achieve that goal.

I have a yearly goal which I want to achieve, and I also have a group of people that I call my 'Brains Trust', so they are like my board but they don't have any shares or voting rights but they are people that I have respected or learned from over the years. I report back to them on a monthly basis about how the financials and customer pipeline is doing and I get their feedback and opinions on how I'm running the business. I couldn't do this by myself and it is their input which keeps me motivated to keep moving. Having yearly goals, daily goals and continuous support are the things that keep me motivated. But the internal motivation comes from a drive and a love for seeing things change, so there is nothing better than getting great outcomes from customers who are excited by the changes and seeing their improvements.



As an agency deploying digital transformation programmes for a range of different companies, how do you evaluate the needs for each individual company?



Digital transformation means something different to everyone. People hear a lot about digital transformation, they read all about it in McKinsey and PwC articles etc. People are constantly reading about how they need different types of technology to get them to where they want to be. This is great, but it's also a bit of a blocker at the same time because digital transformation isn't necessarily about the technology that you're going with, it's about the customer problem that you're trying to solve. When I sit and talk to customers, the first thing that I talk to them about is what the customer problem that they are trying to solve is and what they are trying to achieve by doing this. I am currently talking to a bank in the US who are looking to transform their business and their strategy, but my core question is what exactly their customer's needs are and then after that we can talk about the technology that they can use to achieve that.

At Three6, we have a variety of different tools that we use – most are from the industry, but some are tools that we have made up ourselves and we talk about how we can use them in different environments. Understanding the customer and understanding where they want to go is almost like a diagnostic that we run which is key to understanding the customer problem that they are trying to solve and whether their strategy fits this. We usually find that there is some sort of disconnect where people are going off and solving problems, but their strategy is saying something different.

For each company, it is very much individual but there are standard questions which ensures that we are addressing the right areas. The process doesn't need to be that long, as we have key questions that we can ask that will really fine tune where the individual problems are. The key is knowing the right questions to ask at that point in time and understanding the thinking and feeling of the workforce which is supported by data. It's not as complicated when you know what you're looking for and if you focus on the tools and methodologies that you have seen to be successful, even though the situation is always different, how we can achieve success is the same.

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You have already spoken about your 'Brain Trust' which are your mentors. How important do you believe it is to have mentors? Is there anyone that you can highlight who has been a mentor to you throughout your career?

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These are people who aren't your direct boss or line manager, but they are people who have a different view and will challenge you. They will stretch you to get you to go where you need to be. I first started to have mentors when I worked in Banking. My mentors have been fantastic in challenging me and asking me questions that you maybe don't want to ask sometimes.

I also now have mentees; I mentor university students that are just coming into the workforce as well as people from previous organisations. It's really important because if you can support people and get them to think differently, allow them to focus on themselves and their career which is such a privilege and not something that we do too often, then we start to build and develop ourselves in areas that we didn't know were possible. You're not just learning from yourself and the direct people around you, but you are having external influences too. I think that mentors help you access leadership positions but they're not the sole purpose of it.

For me, mentorship is about growth and that could be upwards, but it could also be expanding into new and different areas. I'm trying to get someone that I am mentoring now to not focus on the next step up in their career but to focus on the skill set that he needs and on the breadth of his skills so that he can become a more rounded individual, which may lead to growth and career progression. I have a variety of different role models with a variety of different skills sets but one that I want to talk about is someone who lives in America. He isn't what you would consider a typical mentor to be and if I told him that he was my mentor he would probably laugh at me, but he provides a different view and he challenges me to think about things very differently.

Often, we are inclined to choose mentors that are similar to us because we get on well and it's comfortable but it is important to work with people who think differently and encourage you to leave your comfort zone. Your mentor isn't just a clone of you with more experience, they're someone who can provide you with a different life experience and different view.

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Within your start-up, what do you look for in team members?

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For me now, I really have to sell the vision of where we are going. I'm now at the position where I have four team members so I'm aware that I don't know all of the answers so I need to continue to hire people that are smarter than I am in different areas and are skilled in areas that I'm not great at. Marketing isn't my strong point and it isn't particularly something that I enjoy doing and so it's important for me to be able to fill in the gaps for the skillsets that I don't have. If they're smarter than me in that area, then fantastic!

We've just hired a Head of Change and Culture and the views that she brings are different to mine and that is great. My goal as the leader is to provide the vision of where we want to get to and what I want to do with Three6. What I look for in my team is people that can take that information and run with it – who are passionate and confident in their skills and knowledge to do the tasks that I want them to do. We all need to share the same vision and have the confidence to take the company where we wish to go.

Working in a start-up comes with a culture of trust because it comes with an element of risk. If you work for a large corporate organisation, you know that it is safe, that you will get a pay out if something goes wrong, whereas the people who are working with me are taking a risk. They are people that really buy into my vision and trust in what I want to do, and they are willing to take a bet that it will work out. It's important for me to paint that picture so that people do want to take that leap and trust in my business. Choosing the people that work with you is exciting because for people to trust in you and to have taken a risk to work with you, you build a close relationship. So far so good!

Q

What do you think is the most significant barrier to female leadership?

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It's really varied depending on the industry that you are in, the support group around you and the direction people want to head in. I don't think that there's just one obstacle. Sometimes it can be due to a mindset for women who don't put themselves forward enough, or it can be a boys club where people don't even realise that they are making an unconscious biased decision based on females because they've always had a male who has done that job before. It can be down to not having the right education in primary schools, to not having someone say, 'just go ahead and do it'.

There are so many factors and they are all dependent on the individual that that barrier is going to be different depending on where you are in the organisation and your perception around that. I've worked in some organisations where there has been inappropriate behaviour towards me in a sexual sense, where people have assumed that because I am the young female in the room that I'm not the boss. Much of it is unconscious bias, for example when I was working in Banking, I worked in a team where the majority was men in their mid-40s and at that stage I was late 20s. When I walked into a room with my team, they would always talk to the men first even though I'm the boss. They would always get so embarrassed because they are used to it being the man that is the boss. I also used to sometimes get annoyed working in engineering because I would get recognised and promoted because I'm female as they wanted more women in engineering, however I wanted them to promote me because I'm skilled and I'm good at what I do. I don't want to be recognised because I'm a woman, I want to be recognised because I'm good at my job. That was conflicting for me because I was getting my name recognised but also, I wanted to be the same as anyone else in the room.

Also, people are so quick to label women, whether they are too soft or too hard, too quiet or too loud which are often meant in a negative way, used to highlight how she stands or responds or reacts, whereas terms used for male leaders are shown to be a positive thing such as a 'strong leader'.

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Do you think that there have been improvements in gender equality in the workplace?

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I think it is improving. I think it's a generational thing and I think that people don't see as much of a difference as they used to between men and women. I'm sure in certain places they do, but on the whole, I think that there is more equality. We're still struggling with people up above but they're being forced to come on this journey with us. It isn't being tolerated in the way that it used to. There are still pockets where inequality still happens where it is difficult to change due to mindsets that people have had for their whole lives which builds up this unconscious bias and is engrained on their outlook. But we are seeing that these biases are not true – some men are far better cooks than women at home in their kitchens and home life is becoming more balanced. I know for a fact that division of labour at home is equal for me and my partner.

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Who do you think is responsible in getting more women into leadership positions?

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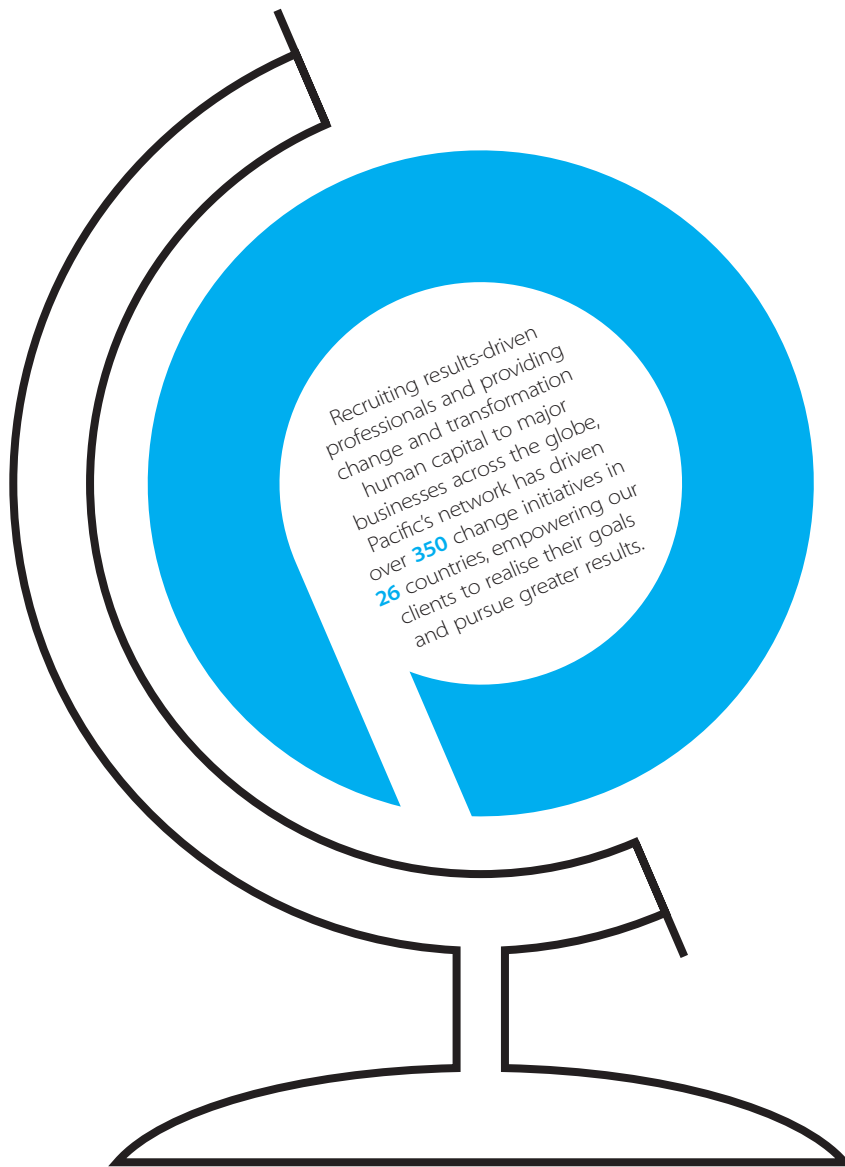
Its everyone. Our schools need to be training our students on the right mindsets to have, so not calling little girls' bossy and talk more about leadership potential and how this can be built into the curriculum. It absolutely starts from the ground and providing girls with confidence is essential. It also is the responsibility of our recruiters, for example, as well gender bias, name bias is also an issue.

We might take someone whose name is Barry to be more of a tradesman than someone's whose name is Charles who we might expect to have had an upbringing from a wealthier family. Head-hunters and Recruiters need to make an effort to take out this unconscious bias when looking at resumes and maybe this can come from AI and robotics which will in turn assist more women in accessing these leadership positions. There are many women who slow down their careers for a short point to have babies and whilst there is nothing wrong with this, we need to reach a better balance between males and females to support having children and allowing women to continue to grow in their careers.

Women start to drop out of the leadership curve when they go and have children but we need to get better support when they return to continue to climb up the leadership ladder or at the same time, provide support to men so that they can have leave to and split the responsibility so that both can continue to thrive in their careers. That's a critical point that I see a lot. How we continue to support women who decide to have babies. Statistics show that women who don't have children are on parity for leadership positions to men, but women who do have children fall back dramatically so to get more women in leadership positions it is about creating a balance and creating a flexible working environment.

That is on businesses and governments – to support paid paternity leave which will really support women and men to take on that role.





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