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Barriers still exist for valley's women techies



Danielle Branton (left) and Michele Trommer run 2 Bytes Web Design.

By Valerie Miller, Staff Writer

Being a woman in the Las Vegas technology market today is better, worse and different, depending on who you ask.

Some women, such as 2 Bytes Web Design founders Michele Trommer and Danielle Branton, said they have no regrets about setting up shop in Sin City.

"It does help us stand out," Trommer said of being a female in a high-tech field. Capitalizing on this, they call themselves "Web Princesses."

"I think, as with any small business getting started, we've faced obstacles. I don't think being women stood in our way," Trommer added.

While 2 Bytes has yet to gobble up the Web design market, the women-run firm has held its own. The company's customer list includes the Dairy Council of Utah and Nevada, Nevada Telephone, Southwest Engineering and local attorney Ed Bernstein.

Los Angeles-transplant Branton and Philadelphia-native Trommer first met in 1999, while working on a job together, and thought their individual strengths complemented one another.

"I was stronger in graphics and Danielle was stronger in coding," Trommer recalled.

Their local reception was good, the duo said.

"While it is true that the tech community was mostly male, everyone in Las Vegas was very supportive," added Branton.

Too bad some other females in the industry can't offer the same words of praise for the Entertainment Capital of the World.

"Especially in the telecommunications side, it was very tough, because most of the old telephone people were men," recalled Richelle Shaw, CEO of the workz.com. The small business portal, with more than 3,000 resources online, was purchased by Shaw 2 1/2 years ago, after failing during the dot-com bust. She has since turned it into a profitable venture.

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Shaw admitted she didn't take the typical road to becoming an entrepreneur in Las Vegas. After graduating from UCLA in 1991, Shaw moved here to stay with her mother and "didn't know what to do with my life," she said.

At her then-employer, Las Vegas-based Colorado River Communications, Shaw quickly rose through the ranks. By 1999, she had money saved up to buy their assets. Shaw turned it into the long distance company, COMMEXX. The Riverside-born and bred woman then bought the workz.com, after winning an online bid.

The African-American executive said success didn't come easy.

"I do have other challenges," she said. "I am black, I'm a woman and I'm 35."

Because of concerns of discrimination, Shaw said she won't put her picture on the Internet, and sometimes when people meet her, they are visibly thrown.

Besides that, Shaw contended she sometimes runs into problems with male subordinates who feel that they know more than her.

"I hired this one salesperson and it was like I wasn't the owner of the company. There were constant battles," she added.

Shaw doesn't mince words about the tough road she's traveled as a female in high tech in Las Vegas.

"Even on the Internet, I find the same problem," she lamented. "The women are kind and generous and the men really suck."

Lightening up a little, Shaw laughed, clarifying that she does have some valued male employees working for her. She isn't backing off in her views, though.

So are there advantages to being a woman locally in the traditionally male-dominated world of technology?

"I can't think of any," she answered.

What about other prominent women in technology in the valley?

"I can't wait to read your article so I can meet them," Shaw told the reporter.

Cathe Boudreau Alleger seemed to concur with Shaw's take on the state of gender barriers in the industry.

And Boudreau Alleger, like Shaw, said she has seen discrimination on a few different fronts, albeit not for all the same reasons.

Boudreau Alleger, a U.S. Navy veteran who started her TeleFolks online job board for homeworkers to connect with potential employers two years ago, also has a disability. She has Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, which manifests itself in symptoms such as loose or unstable joints, which frequently dislocate and cause arthritic conditions. Thus, Boudreau Alleger sometimes has to use a wheelchair.

Even before her symptoms kicked in, making her condition visible to technology employers, Boudreau Alleger claimed to have noticed gender discrimination was greater in Las Vegas than in some other nearby cities.

"I thought being a woman (in technology) would be bad in L.A., but it wasn't. Being disabled was a problem there," recalled Boudreau Alleger, who trains her pet rats for film and TV projects to make ends meet. "San Francisco was the most open. So far, it has been the worst here."

Boudreau Alleger also reported being offered nearly \$20,000 less than another, less-experienced, male applicant at a local gaming technology firm.

Are the stories of Boudreau and Shaw atypical for women with careers in technology in the United States?

Sadly, the answer to that is "no," according to Nina Rasmussen, a local technology recruiter.

"I've recruited in Phoenix and Tucson. I would say it is everywhere," she said of gender discrimination. "We (women) were closing the salary gap (in technology) a few years ago, but now it has widened."

Still, Rasmussen, who has been a recruiter for 20 years and currently works for Las Vegas-based computer consulting firm IT Strategies, said the field does provide some equality in itself.

"In my opinion technology is genderless," she added.

That said, however, some technology employers still need to rethink their policies, Rasmussen noted.

"It is harder for women to work in technology in gaming than in banking," she contended.

"They (gaming firms) look for pretty young women and they put them in more traditional fields, like secretaries."

A few can testify to that firsthand.

"Yeah, being a woman in Las Vegas hurt me, very much so," Boudreau Alleger said.

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