

FOCUS

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP



ALI LAPETINA FOR CRAIN'S

Ronia Kruse, president, CEO and founder of OpTech LLC, at the company's offices in Troy.

A few questions for: Ronia Kruse

By Rachelle Damico
Special to Crain's Detroit Business

Ronia Kruse is the president, CEO and founder of OpTech LLC. The Troy-based company provides recruiting and staffing services and technology solutions for Fortune 1000 firms and the federal government. The company also provides consulting services in data analytics, connected vehicles, cyber security, embedded systems and information technology.

Kruse graduated with a bachelor's degree in accounting from Wayne State University in 1992 and received her master's degree in taxation from Wayne State in 1994. Her career began in 1995 as a senior tax consultant for Deloitte & Touche LLP. She left the company in 1999 to start OpTech that year.

You started your career in accounting. What led you to start an IT-based consulting company?

I was working as an international tax consultant for one of the large firms, and we had to leverage information technology to support a lot of the work we were doing in tax. At the

Need to know

- Founded OpTech LLC in 1999
- Provides consulting services in data analytics, connected vehicles, cyber security, embedded systems and information technology
- General Motors was first client

time, I felt there was an opportunity to deliver greater value that was more customized to clients' needs rather than delivering high-cost cookie cutter services that some of the big firms were offering. I was working with a client (General Motors), and one of the executives suggested I leave and start my own firm, and they said they'd be my first client. It took me about two years to develop the courage to do that. I left to start my own firm and General Motors was my first client.

What were your early years like?

I sold my own personal consulting services, and I had to learn the IT. I was developing some applications, but it became more complicated and beyond my capabilities, since I

don't have a computer science background. I began hiring individuals to develop some of the more complicated applications we needed for our clients. I started networking and selling my services to companies, including utilities, health care insurance providers and other large organizations. One of the big challenges I had was that it was much more difficult when you don't have a big name behind you. I had to sell people on my capabilities and develop a brand. I didn't grow up with a huge network, so I had to go outside my comfort zone to network and ask for the business. I worked an ungodly amount of hours to really develop the company.

What were some early leadership lessons for you?

Having a vision, trying to sell people on your vision and getting people to buy into your vision. Later, it turns into being more of a servant leader and making sure you're surrounding (employees) with good people, and making their interests in the company come before your own interests. Leadership for me has always been

to enhance other people's skills and their abilities beyond what they thought they were capable of.

What are some tactics for dealing with the IT talent gap we're facing?

In our mind, there's a short-term, mid-term and long-term approach to addressing the huge talent gap we're facing. The short-term solution is trying to get people re-tooled in technology. There's different training programs available that teach Java or .Net to individuals that want to learn how to program. For example, Grand Circus (a Detroit-based computer training school) does that. The mid-term solution is, we need to change the mindset of corporations that put so many restrictions on individuals they need to hire, and realize you don't necessarily need to have a 4-year degree in computer science in order to do certain jobs. The long-term solution is working with colleges to have more agile programs to allow people to obtain technical certificates or technical training without a 4-year degree. Also, working with high schools' curriculum to perhaps provide college credits, or AP classes

that are more computer driven.

What advice can you offer women interested in STEM careers?

Technology is the thread that goes into every single occupation, and I think a lot of women are threatened (by getting into) STEM because it's male-dominated, and males tend to gravitate more to STEM than women do. There's a lot of amazing careers in STEM. I think a lot of women tend to put barriers in their minds in terms of their abilities to go after leadership positions and go into STEM fields. They should totally just plunge in, because that's where the future is, that's where all the opportunities are and that's where we need a lot of women in leadership positions.

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity. It's part of a series of insightful conversations with women leaders about their triumphs and trials in business and what they've learned along the way. Know a dynamic woman leader we should profile? Drop us a note: abragg@crain.com.