Member Profile

An Interview with WCD Singapore Member, Aliza Knox

By Judy Macdonald

Q1. You have been at the forefront of technology for many years, serving as an executive at Twitter, Google and now Cloudflare, tasked with helping those companies to grow in Asia. What are the keys to successfully entering the Asia Pacific market?

If I gave away those kind of secrets, I'd be out of a job (chuckle)! Entering any market requires having a clear but flexible plan so that you can adapt and localize along the way. All of the businesses you listed are ones that scale effectively; in other words they were built so that the platform created in one part of the world can be easily accessed and used elsewhere. That means they were able to enter the desired Asian markets with a minimum of resources. There may need to be slight product or service changes to accommodate different expectations by customers in each country - that's why some localization is critical.

One of my strengths lies in building effective channels of communication between APAC and "HQ." These are critical to ensuring that the teams in APAC get full information about products and strategy, as well as getting specific features or support needed to support regional growth. That said, I'm not an expert in any particular country and recognize that I need to build a team made up of people who are.

Ensuring that regional teams feel strongly tied to the company is one of my critical roles. In other words, they need to see themselves as a key part of the company's success. One danger to a teams' strength and sense of identity is that offices outside of headquarters are often called "satellites" or "remote." These are very distancing terms. A major factor to success is making sure every individual feels a direct link between their contribution and overall corporate performance.

Q2. Based on your tech background, what do you think will be the next big technology issue that keeps C-level executives and corporate board members up at night?

Cybersecurity, Data Privacy, and AI are the three of the biggest topics keeping board members up at night. The last one, combined with current trade-wars, is generating questions beyond which jobs will no longer exist, and what will happen to those workers. It has spawned discussion, seeded by Kai-Fu Lee, about how China and the US may square off as "AI superpowers," forcing smaller countries to align behind them in rival techno-blocks. Such a rearrangement of global super-powers will affect corporations. Climate change is a large issue

as well. But I'm not sure it's keeping as many C-level execs and board members up at night as it should be.

Q3. As a non-executive director with Scentre Group, which owns and operates a portfolio of shopping centers in Australia and New Zealand, do you find that your tech background has added value that was previously missing from the board composition? Do you find that more boards are launching technology committees?

Just a quick point of clarification - so much has changed with shopping centers that we actually now call them "living centers." While retail purchases still take place there, many people go to these places for entertainment, dining, wellness, and beauty. They provide much more than just shopping.

Technology is certainly one of the driving forces behind this transformation. People can shop online, but they can't enjoy immersive customer experiences like "family Sundays," food & beverage or safe play spaces (both indoor and outdoor) that way. Technology also plays a key role in linking online and offline to improve customers' experiences at living centers, for example a) showing you in an app where to park your car (and where to find it after your visit), b) helping you find your way within a center to wear you want to go, c) suggesting places to visit based on past activity online d) delivering personalised services based on data.

Indeed, I was added to this board partly to bring digital experience. I find that more boards are working to bring digitally-savvy executives into the fold. These boards may or may not have technology subcommittees. Whether or not they create a subcommittee depends on whether they want all tech-related topics brought to the full board or whether they want a small group with greater expertise to spend more time on digital issues, then bring summaries and recommendations to the full board. I've seen examples of both. I've even been part of a small external advisory group that was established to work with the technology sub-committee of a board.

Q4. You moved from the U.S. to Sydney and then to Singapore back in the 1980's. How did you adapt to a new business and cultural environment?

Australia and Singapore had enough cultural overlap with the US and England (places I'd lived before) to make them familiar, but still retain an element of excitement and novelty. By keeping an open-mind, being unafraid to be curious, and trying to observe other's behaviour, I was able to adapt successfully. And when I didn't, I begged forgiveness - a tool I still use to this day!

The bigger adjustments have come when working with clients across more diverse parts of Asia. Despite trying hard to learn and adapt, I sometimes found other people's reactions confusing. A common experience was having folks say yes to things, like delivering output or undertaking analysis, but not delivering. It took me awhile to understand that, in some cultures the fear of disappointing others, or the desire to avoid confrontation, leads people to say yes when they really mean no. I eventually caught on.

Q5. You have recently become the head of the Asia region for Cloudflare. Can you explain what makes the company special and how it is leveraging diversity to enhance the business?

I'm motivated by opportunities to work with global businesses that drive change and are full of ambitious and passionate people. Cloudflare's mission is to help build a better Internet and the company is focused on democratizing Internet tools that were once only available to large companies. Making security and speed, which are necessary for any strong business, available to anyone with an Internet property, is truly a noble goal. That's one of the things that's special about Cloudflare.

Cloudflare is also serious about culture and diversity, an area that's very important to me. When I was considering joining Cloudflare, I watched videos from the [Internet Summit,](#) an annual event that Cloudflare hosts in San Francisco and London. One thing that really stood out for me is that nearly half of the speakers were women and all of the speakers came from different backgrounds. The topics could have been covered by a much more homogeneous group of men, but Cloudflare went the extra mile to make sure more diverse perspectives were represented. I'm extremely passionate about encouraging women to pursue opportunities in business and tech, so watching many women give insightful talks made me realize this was a company for which I wanted to work.

Q6. The entrepreneurial spirit seems to live within you. How has that trait helped you as a corporate board member?

I'd say I'm more of an "intrapreneur," or an entrepreneur hanger-on. I've never started anything myself, but I've honed the ability to bring fast growth to a small part of a larger organization. Usually this has been the Asian part of a business, sometimes it has also been a smaller business unit, e.g. the Commercial Card at Visa International. This requires being fast and being scrappy. Sometimes when companies are very large, they forget how to be agile or nimble and become reticent to test new ideas. Or they test in a small way that will never gain traction. I bring a sense of urgency to the boards I sit on and the companies I work with, as well as a focus on testing and learning in new areas.

Q7. You've been involved with WCD for many years. What do you want people who may be considering becoming a member, to know about WCD? What do you value most about your membership?

The best thing about WCD is the opportunities it provides to meet accomplished and inspiring women across the world. Some become friends. Many will open doors for you. And all of them are great to speak with at events, or read about when they share articles.

Q8. What is one of the most eye-opening/important things you have learned while serving on boards?

The importance of the board chair. People talk about boards as a group of individuals who serve a corporation together. In reality, this group can't function well without a strong chairperson. The board chair is like an orchestra conductor. She needs to have a great relationship with, and coach, the key leader. She needs to manage agendas to ensure that all key topics are discussed are the right length of time and that less important subjects are dealt with off-line or not at all. She needs to ensure that all board members contribute and are heard. And she needs to lead a continuous evaluation process by the board of itself and of the CEO.

Q9. What are the biggest challenges corporate directors face today and how do you stay up to date?

The biggest challenge is absorbing all the information about a company. Even with an incredibly strong and communicative management team, it is extremely difficult to stay up to date across all the key things going on in a single business, while simultaneously staying abreast of environmental issues in that industry.

I ask company management to share daily "press clippings" about the company and the industry. I set Google alerts for keywords and designate topics I want to follow in online publications, like Axios and e-marketer. Board members share articles with each other and we invite knowledgeable individuals from relevant sectors to speak to us at board meetings or lunches. We also request briefings from management on key areas.

Q10. What piece of advice would you give aspiring board members?

*When I decided I wanted to become a NED about 10 years ago, I shared with a friend somewhat despairingly that I didn't think anyone would ever ask me to be on a board. This was because I didn't have a C-level title, even though I was driving a $1Bn revenue business at the time. She asked me if I'd ever **told** anyone I wanted to be on a board. It seems ridiculous in hindsight, but I hadn't told anyone. I thought it was something that just came to you once you had enough experience/had achieved enough. This of course, it's just like any other job. Sometimes people happen to ask you, but most of the time, you need to get out there and pursue what you want. So, tell people you want a board seat! Tell search firms (well under 50% of board placements come via search, but the proportion of seats that go to first time board members from search is much higher), tell VCs, tell other executives. And persist.*

One of the things most sought after in NEDs is previous board experience, which can make it a bit hard to get your first board. But hang in there; it will happen.