



# WILL THE NEXT MARK ZUCKERBERG BE A Woman?

Look past the cliché of geeky teenage boys, and the tech world is full of pioneering and inspiring women. Armed with her new business plan, Tracy Ramsden heads to London's Tech City to join their gang

*Illustration Emma Barratt*

I feel like Dorothy when she first lands in Oz. Stepping out of a lift, I walk across a carpet of wall-to-wall grass, towards a woman sitting behind an upturned tree stump for a reception desk. On either side are themed meeting rooms with names like Cloud, Bloom and Map (all decorated accordingly). There's even a slide for quick access to the floor below - it takes all my willpower not to jump on it.

This vibrant office comes as an unexpected treat, given that the building is grey and concrete on the outside and tucked away down an east London side street. But there are more surprises in store here at Mind Candy HQ, home of the digital entertainment company behind the kids' smash hit Moshi Monsters (a game about adopting a series of groovy beasts): the place is buzzing with female employees. Tech-land may be famously inhabited by geeky boys who don't see enough sunlight, but here I'm surrounded by distinctly un-geeky-looking girls. Mind Candy's co-director Divinia Knowles, 34, is one of them - as are 40% of her workforce. Suddenly, technology feels like a promised land, with women rising to the top. >>

## The digital leap

It's a land I'm taking my first steps into. Until the beginning of this year, it was uncharted territory. I had a PAYE salary and a job I loved as features editor of a national magazine. Until, one day, I quit. I went slowly at first, concentrating on setting myself up as a freelance journalist. Then I started to wonder what lay beyond the walls of the traditional publishing industry and how the tech world might help me add new strings to my bow. I started an ideas agency with a friend, Skribe London, aimed at helping high-profile clients get more press coverage. It didn't take us long to realise that - like every business today, from banking and health care to fashion and retail - we needed to get more digitally savvy, fast.

That's when I started spending time at Google Campus (campuslondon.com), a working space for early-stage entrepreneurs. Set in London's Tech City (the area around the Old Street roundabout that has become a hub for digital innovation), Google's set-up is like a university campus, but with more drive and fewer hangovers. Enthusiastic men and women zip around the technicolour café, huddle around laptop screens and bounce ideas around, arms gesticulating wildly.

It's a gang I want to be part of. And I find that I can be, quite easily. You just go to the website, sign up, include the name of your new business (even if, like me, you haven't actually bought the domain name yet!) and then turn up to be given a modern-day library card. I go in tentatively for a latte but am soon hovering round the skill-swap boards and talking to a friendly woman in a Marc Jacobs camouflage tee about the soon-to-arrive tablet library where we'll be able to test out our apps, once we've learned how to make one.

'Even for creative minds without technical skills, there will be a developer at the next sofa waiting to collaborate with you,' says head of Campus Eze Vidra. 'Like the woman who quit her job in banking to work on ideas at Campus. She met a developer and three months later they had created an online directory to find, book and rate doctors impartially in the UK. Last month, they secured £250,000 funding.'

## Turning the tide

It's appropriate that this female-friendly tech world has a woman at the top. Tech City's CEO and *Red's* Hot Women judge Joanna Shields was poached from Facebook by the government last October to head up

the UK's digital revolution. She is evangelical about bringing more women into technology. 'It is happening,' she enthuses when we meet for lunch at Westminster's Corinthia Hotel, following her weekly meeting at Number 10. 'There's a rising tide of women starting tech businesses - it's not all 19-year-old male computer programmers,' she points out, looking polished in a Moschino jacket, black dress and heels. 'Look at me, I'm 51 and I have a few start-ups in me yet.'

Shields is a digital adopter from way back. She was at Google when search engines were born and she headed up Facebook in Europe when it took over the world, working alongside Sheryl Sandberg, the powerhouse COO of Facebook since 2008. Growing up in a family of entrepreneurs in Pennsylvania, Shields drove all the way to California, aged 17, to meet the head of a digital imaging company. 'I told him, "You don't know me, but you need me."' She got the job.

I wonder if it was this early entrepreneurial spirit that made her so fearless. My own upbringing was big on job security and a career for life. Which could explain why it took me years to leap into self-employment, as well as the worried reactions from friends/colleagues/my mum along the lines of, 'You know that there's a recession on, don't you?'

Shields is keen to demystify her apparent bravery. 'Hell, I was as terrified as the next person!' she smiles. 'The risks are big but the rewards are greater. A job for life doesn't exist now in the way it did for our parents. Google started during the last recession and look at them.' She shrugs, before adding, 'You can always get another job.'

Shields' enthusiasm is infectious, but is the tech world as entirely female-friendly as it seems? Perhaps not. According to tech website Lady Geek, only 17% of all tech jobs in the UK are held by women, including programmers, web developers and computer software engineers (one of the most lucrative jobs around at the moment, with an average income of £50,000). 'Tech has a serious image problem,' asserts Lady Geek founder Belinda Parmar. 'Four out of 10 gadgets in the UK are purchased by women, yet it is men who design them. Hence the patronising "pink it and shrink it" approach to marketing. I want my four-year-old daughter to know that a career in technology is not off-limits. We need more role models.' >>



'THERE'S A RISING TIDE OF WOMEN STARTING TECH BUSINESSES - IT'S NOT ALL 19-YEAR-OLD MALE COMPUTER PROGRAMMERS'

Joanna Shields (above), Tech City CEO and Red's Hot Women judge



## It's easier than you think

Role models just like Mind Candy's Divinia Knowles, who jumped into the techno world from a career in antiques. 'I could see the internet taking off and I wanted in,' she says, doing courses in book-keeping and the digital marketplace to get herself up to speed. For Emily Brooke, 27, YouTube tutorials were another way in. After a personal tragedy led her to embark on a charity bike ride across the UK, Brooke stumbled upon her start-up idea: a bicycle light that uses a laser to warn drivers of the presence of a cyclist. She created Blaze and learned 'on the job. I became an expert overnight in branding, distribution and patenting laws. But I also wasn't afraid to ask for help'. Michelle You, 31, co-founder of one of Tech City's biggest music start-ups, Songkick, agrees. 'I was super-naive when we started. But you just try until you work it out.'

One woman determined to revamp the image of the tech world is Kathryn Parsons, 31, co-founder of Decoded and winner of two *Red's* Hot Women awards in 2012. Her company hosts code-in-a-day courses to learn HTML, the language of web-building. The idea is to convince people in traditional industries such as publishing, fashion and retail that they need to think more digitally. People just like me. 'I get angry when women say, "My brain doesn't work like that,"' Parsons tells me. 'Give me one other aspect of your life where you're willing to say, "No thanks, I'm too stupid to do that."'

I resist the urge to tell Parsons my brain doesn't work like that, and instead sign up

to one of her courses. My fellow students in the sleek, warehouse-style 'classroom' include CEOs of global media corporations, PR execs and a recent graduate. Thanks to the jargon-free tutoring, by the end of the day, I have built an app for Skribe London. It takes years to become a talented coder (it is, after all, a complicated new language) but for people like me, code-in-a-day helps me understand what's going on under the car bonnet. I may not build our company's website myself, but knowing the work involved will avoid me getting ripped off when I commission an expert to do it for me.

Tapping into the growing female community of Tech City has made me feel excited in a way I haven't since I first elbowed my way into magazines 10 years ago. It's got me thinking more practically about all those start-up ideas I never knew what to do with. As a journalist I'm a storyteller - how will we be reading, sharing and telling stories in 10 years' time? I don't know yet, but I'm inspired to find out. As Decoded's Kathryn Parsons reiterates, "Taking that first step through the looking glass is hugely empowering. The door is very much open if you're prepared to walk through it."

And I am. Tech City really does remind me of Oz in that it makes me feel like I'm wearing a pair of ruby slippers, my brilliant idea for the next big Airbnb start-up just a heel click away. Gender now seems a ridiculous thing to worry about. Why shouldn't the next Mark Zuckerberg be a woman? 



'I COULD SEE THE INTERNET TAKING OFF AND I WANTED IN'

Divinia Knowles (above), Mind Candy co-director



Kathryn Parsons, right, and Songkick founders Michelle You and Ian Hogarth

## Up your digital credentials

Kate Russell, host of BBC2's *Click* and author of *Working The Cloud: The Ultimate Guide To Making The Internet Work For You & Your Business* ([workingthecloud.biz](http://workingthecloud.biz)), gives her advice...

- When you've decided on the name for your brilliant new company, go to [weebly.com](http://weebly.com) to buy the domain and build a website in 15 minutes.
- If you're not interested in a fancy site, fast-forward to an immediate online store by using [tictail.com](http://tictail.com). People will be able to view your wares and buy them through PayPal.
- Sign up immediately to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google+. People who need to display visuals should also check out Pinterest.
- If you're worried about not having enough traffic to your site, [glypho.com](http://glypho.com) lets you put out a blog-style message to a ready-made audience.
- Meet up with like-minded women by signing up at [girlgeekdinners.com](http://girlgeekdinners.com). Founder Sarah Blow organises lively social events nationwide.
- For a free virtual secretary, go to [getlunched.com](http://getlunched.com). It searches your LinkedIn contacts to find the person who'll give you expert legal advice, say, in exchange for you designing her/him a logo. The site will set up the lunch date between you both and even provide a list of restaurants with different price brackets.
- Start thinking about goals and strategies. Want to gather another 500 people to your Facebook page? Try handing out leaflets around your neighbourhood, then reward your new friends with news of an exciting event every Wednesday night.
- Remember, anything that goes online, stays online. If someone makes a mean comment about your new sugar-free muffin business, stop yourself from coming back with anything too acerbic - it could end up tarnishing your company for years to come.



Got a brilliant digital business you want to tell us about? Enter this year's Red's Hot Women Awards, with categories covering everything from tech to fashion to food.

Find out more at... [REDONLINE.CO.UK](http://REDONLINE.CO.UK)