

Career Sheet: Managing Director



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I've always been a problem solver at heart, perhaps that comes from being the daughter of an engineer. For me, nothing feels better than coming up with a creative solution to a challenge, except of course, securing the funding needed to bring that solution to life. Because of this trait I've always been drawn to the empowering potential of technology and the unlimited opportunity it offers people to make a difference. My first job twenty years ago was with a dot.com which orchestrated the world's first legally-binding public election using electronic voting. That was an exciting time as we were truly at the start of transformational tech adoption in the public sector, and it's been a wild and exciting whirlwind of progress ever since.



OVERVIEW OF THE JOB

I proudly lead a digital transformation SME called 21c, which consistently punches well above its weight on the European stage. We thrive on pushing boundaries and operate at the forefront of public sector innovation trends helping our government partners embrace new technologies that bring about tangible and far-reaching impact for people and their communities.

Our approach is driven by design-thinking and co-creation, bringing together diverse teams to help conceive unique solutions to pressing public problems. Whether it's addressing issues of inclusion, combating air pollution, or tackling disinformation, we actively contribute to 'calls for proposals' from the European Commission to develop, test and bring innovative 'smart' solutions to the world. We may not be coders or developers, but we understand people and public sector needs so can see how technology can be applied to solve common challenges. In essence, we architect new state-of-the-art ideas and possibilities without being constrained by deep technical knowledge.

Pulling together dedicated teams of experts from academia, public sector, business, and NGOs and drafting a proposal is no small feat, but building relationships and assimilating new knowledge keeps work feeling fresh and rewarding. Crafting project proposals requires meticulous effort and attention to detail, especially as we operate in a highly competitive landscape and are vying for funding against other world class consortiums. Yet, when that notification arrives announcing we secured a budget and can embark on a new digital transformation initiative for the next three years with multiple change agents from across Europe, the effort becomes completely worth it.

Highlights from the last few years include delivering the first Local Digital Twin initiative for better data supported decision making in Europe; harnessing the power of generative AI for raising people's critical thinking skills in the fight against disinformation; developing ways for assessing the trustworthiness of AI systems. Our success in this field has also positioned us as trusted consultants enabling us to deliver value to globally renowned consultancies including IBM, TCS and Microsoft.



WHAT INSPIRED YOU

My career trajectory has been far from conventional, characterised by diverse experiences and a non-linear path. My educational background doesn't directly align with my current work, and I've held positions in both a dot.com company and a prominent big 5 consultancy before taking the leap to launch my own SME (Small Medium Enterprise) in my late twenties. Reflecting on this pivotal decision, I realise that my motivations were not driven by fame, power, or financial gain - although those certainly have their merits. Instead, my driving force was a desire to have control over my life by choosing the projects I worked on. I yearned for intellectually stimulating and captivating endeavours that could generate real impact in the world.

Recalling my involvement in the world's first legally binding e-elections two decades ago, the profound impact of technology on disenfranchised individuals remains etched in my memory. Witnessing how technology empowered those who had been excluded, enabling them to vote independently for the first time, was a transformative experience. Their sense of inclusion, a newfound sense of being humanised, deeply resonated with me, and served as an emotional catalyst that fuelled my inspiration and commitment.

While the desire for personal fulfilment and societal impact was a significant motivator, I must confess that another, more selfish reason prompted me to establish my own company—I simply wanted a dog. Being a co-founder of a business afforded me the freedom to implement a dog-friendly policy within the office. Consequently, my faithful pup accompanied me to work every single day, often sneaking into meetings alongside me, from Sheffield City Council to the Department of Justice and even the hallowed halls of Parliament!



TYPICAL WORKING DAY

Each day is a dynamic blend of various tasks, ranging from managing emails and participating in online meetings to nurturing new ideas, drafting communication messages, crafting articles and research papers, and overseeing project progress. My schedule often takes me across Europe to present project results at conferences and workshops, as well as attending project meetings with colleagues and partners from multiple countries and cultures. I still love visiting new places for the first time and I really like the fact I have an ever-evolving routine that keeps me on my toes.



STUDY & CAREER PATH

It often surprises people in the industry when they discover that my university studies revolved around rocks. It's not the typical degree one would associate with someone in the realm of GovTech, where computer science or political science tend to dominate. However, the critical thinking skills I honed during my geological studies have proven to be invaluable assets in my career. If I were to start all over again, I would likely choose the same path, albeit with a greater sense of confidence in my own awesomeness when younger.

The experience I gained in the dot.com world after university was nothing short of brilliant. It entailed long hours of work alongside a cast of eccentric characters, but the memories I formed during that time are unforgettable. My journey took me across the globe, from the colourful spires of Moscow to the scenic shores of Lake Como and the bustling corridors of Washington, D.C. It seemed like everyone I encountered was eager to hear about the boundless potential of new technologies. I had the opportunity to participate in conferences alongside world leaders like Berlusconi and Putin, dine in the prestigious dining room atop the UN building in New York, and meet inspiring thought leaders from academia, politics and industry. I was insatiably hungry for new knowledge and experiences, and those years fulfilled that thirst in abundance.

Joining Accenture to help form the world's first e-Democracy agency, I gained firsthand insight into building a new business unit and began to comprehend the intricacies of navigating the internal politics within a large organisation. I learned many valuable lessons during my tenure there, akin to acquiring a mini-MBA, but I missed the dynamism that being part of a smaller organisation brings and grew somewhat weary of being another cog in a well-oiled machine. My desire was to see projects through from inception to completion, to have a hand in every stage of the journey.

Starting 21c, I finally found my niche in research and innovation. I am grateful to work alongside remarkable colleagues from whom I continue to learn on a daily basis. This stage of my career journey allows me to relish intellectually stimulating projects, where I can make a meaningful impact on the world around me. Furthermore, I now have the joy of sharing my workspace with two new four-legged companions, which helps to balance work stress. For example, if I encounter a brain block, I just slip the leads on the dogs, go outside, and feel re-energised by the green space around me.

Looking back, I can now see that when one chooses a path driven by passion, purpose, and a genuine desire to make a difference, incredible possibilities unfold. I feel blessed that my career journey has led me to a place of fulfilment, where I can embrace intellectually stimulating endeavours and leave a lasting impact on the world.



KEY SKILLS

One of the most invaluable skills throughout my career has been the ability to break down complex problems and convey them, along with potential solutions, through simple graphics. This skill has proven to be immensely powerful and effective in communicating ideas and concepts, and I was lucky to have a boss and mentor (now close friend) who recognised and valued this capability in me. Our complex research and innovation proposals are often reviewed by individuals for whom English is not their first language, so to ensure clarity and understanding from the outset, I incorporate simple concept diagrams at the beginning. This visual aid helps the reader grasp the intentions, methods, and reasons for our idea, creating a strong foundation for their understanding. It sounds simple, but trust me, it works.

In addition to professional qualifications and skills, I cannot stress enough the importance of the three C s: Communication, Critical thinking, and Collaboration.

- **Communication** is the cornerstone of success, regardless of whether you're managing upwards, downwards, horizontally, internally, or externally. Effective communication is key. For instance, if your manager is swamped with tasks, sending them a lengthy email with multiple attachments might not be the best approach. Instead, concisely bullet points the 3-5 key pieces of information they need to know, enabling them to quickly digest the content.
- **Critical thinking** is an essential skill to nurture. Continuously question the status quo and challenge yourself to explore why things are done in a particular way. Can they be improved? Is the research being conducted accurate and reliable? Embracing a mindset of critical thinking opens the doors to innovation and improvement.
- **Collaboration** may sound cliché, but its truth remains undeniable. The strength of your work is intrinsically linked to the team with whom you collaborate. Foster an environment of open communication, trust, and shared goals. Together, you can achieve remarkable outcomes that surpass what any individual can accomplish alone. Achieving this means you need to respect the time of others, be polite in your communications, follow-up and do the tasks you promise, and always, always, always take the time to celebrate achievements!
- **Leadership** skills are essential for setting a clear vision, motivating teams, and driving organizational success.
- **Negotiation** is also an extremely invaluable ability in this job. Collaborating with various entities, including clients, partners, forging strategic partnerships, and securing funding for transformative projects requires strong negotiation skills.
- Lastly, **project management** skills are necessary to plan, execute, and monitor digital transformation projects, ensuring they are delivered on time, within budget, and meeting the desired outcomes.



CAREER PROSPECT

You don't have to be a coder or data scientist to work in/with tech. If you have an interest in the world, can project manage and put yourself in other people's shoes you can pretty much work anywhere. Go with what interests you and the rest will follow. When you align your work with what genuinely captivates and engages you, the rest tends to fall into place naturally. By pursuing areas of interest, you tap into a well of motivation and enthusiasm that will propel your professional journey.



CHALLENGES

Challenges change with every decade. In my 20's, the tech field then was heavily male dominated and so challenges were mostly around being the only female in the room at meetings and events. I was often told to 'take the notes' despite being at the same level as other men in the room. I wish I had pushed back and asserted my voice more then. In my 30's, challenges were around stress, working hard to establish a viable business, paying my mortgage and finding time for friends and family. Now, in my 40's I think I have finally achieved the 'balance' I was looking for, not everyday mind you, but overall, I have more perspective around stress and awareness of when to let go, and when to push for excellence.



YOUR ADVICE TO STUDENTS

As you embark on your unique career journey, I'd like to offer three essential pieces of advice that apply across industries and job types. First, pursue your passion and embrace opportunities that genuinely excite you. Following your interests fuels motivation, helps overcome challenges, and brings fulfilment to your work. Remember leaving school is not the end of your learning, it's just the beginning. Secondly, build a strong network and cultivate relationships with like-minded individuals in your desired field. It may seem intimidating (I've been there) but networking, even just by saying hello to one stranger in the room, opens doors, provides mentorship, and offers valuable insights. Lastly, embrace resilience and see challenges as opportunities for growth. Learn from failures, develop problem-solving skills, and bounce back with determination. Cultivating resilience will help you navigate uncertainties and persevere in the face of adversity. In essence, stay true to yourself, your values, and your strengths and you will carve your own path to success.



YOUR ADVICE TO TEACHERS AND PARENTS

As someone who has hired young people at the start of their careers, I have observed that qualifications alone don't guarantee success. Instead, it's emotional intelligence and critical thinking that make individuals stand out. Good mentorship from parents, teachers, and other adults plays a vital role in developing these skills. By practicing social and emotional skills like conflict resolution and perspective-taking, you can help foster self-awareness, empathy, and effective communication in young people, which are essential in the workplace. Emotionally intelligent individuals navigate conflicts, create positive work environments, and build meaningful connections, leading to improved teamwork, productivity, and overall well-being. Similarly, critical thinking equips young people with problem-solving, decision-making, analytical, and communication skills. It promotes creativity, independence, and a commitment to lifelong learning, enabling individuals to analyse complex situations, evaluate information, think creatively, and make informed judgments. Whilst academic qualifications open doors, I believe it's ultimately these 'soft' skills which are crucial for career success, and importantly, help young people contribute positively to society.



LEARN MORE

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EU Project websites include: www.digitalurbantwins.com www.titanthinking.eu

21C Website: www.21cconsultancy.com

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