MOIRA GUNN INTERVIEW

If you're on the road, listening to Moira Gunn on Tech Nation, you'll probably pull over to the side of the road and give your own listening full reign. That's the kind of pull Moira Gunn has through her wise and often humorous interactions with guests, her substantial well of knowledge, and her incisive points of view, all recently confirmed at the monthly gathering of the technology curious through the organization WIM 40+.

Who does Moira manage to captivate by her well-researched shows? Prominent scientists like biologist Sr. Francis Crick and astronaut Alan Shepherd as well as executive folks like the Yahoo Boys. But beside these eminent scientists and CEO's, there are regular guys too. Many of them, beneath their "we mean business; we're gonna charge that hill" exterior, have a desire to run like hell when it comes to the moments of mastering their own anxiety in keeping up.

Technophobia. It's immediately recognizable when one finds oneself repeating sentences like "I'm not stupid, I shouldn't be treated like this." So relates Moira, exuding characteristic good spirit, “Well, I’ll tell you this. There would be no lack of business for technology handholding clinics.”

She goes on to cite the studies. In 1993, among the small percentage of computer users, 40% of U.S. adults declared themselves technophobic. But in 1998, after 85% of the population were known to use computers on the job *daily*, 40% still declared themselves technophobes.

Computer anxiety. Moira tells similar stories about her work in nutrition labs where food intake was measured through tedious researcher observation. To get people to utilize a new computer system however, where the measurement of food would be

assessed almost automatically via the computer, there was complete resistance. People could appreciate the value of the technology, sure, but took their time in making it their friend.

A study of people age 25-50 correlating computers, levels of anxiety, and resulting performance also revealed some interesting findings. The top anxiety group were teenage girls, who felt that they had to "dot all their i's, cross all their T's" (still!), while the least anxious, most relaxed group were the teenage boys who unflinchingly believed in their own posturing. The "mature, over 65" adults who didn't feel identified with the results, felt surprisingly little performance anxiety while the middle-agers, male and female, were not as anxious as the girls but were quite a bit more anxious than the “over 65” crowd.

But the most riveting aspect of this research was this core idea: anxiety levels were not predictors of performance. The girls who were the most anxious did a very good job performing while the boys, with absolutely no visible anxiety, produced completely unusable data. The other two groups performed unremarkably.

So, what was learned from the data? It was that with the proper awareness, "techno-stress" undoubtedly can be better managed. Michelle Weil, author of ‘TechnoStress: Coping with Technology at Work”, elucidates the problem’s dimensions. The book identifies specific behaviors, like the appearance of passive-aggression, as signs broadcasting a situation where anxiety is coming to the fore.

Moira then took us on a slightly different track. She spoke of something she believed in early on in her years-the sameness of men and women. As a feminist who wanted equal rights, Moira admitted it was hard not to believe in this equality, and to accept differences. But her own research convinced her otherwise. The brain, it has been learned, is different in men and women, made up

of different substances and thus, operates differently. (Read Magic Trees of the Mind by Marion Diamond for further study). This difference is vitally important to the information age.

Why? Because if the brain matures differently, tracks for learning should honor this difference, but unfortunately, our educational system has not yet followed the finding. What are the patterns? At puberty, girls typically crash, have low self-worth, and hide out a lot while boys, with their massive self-esteem, just don't suffer in the same way. Girls and women, it turns out, have a dominant tendency toward right brain activity, prefer pictorial, messy, intuitive, even unconscious processing, while the boys and men get it better if the content is presented linearly and in a scientific manner.

In colleges throughout the United States, ignoring this basic fact has implications. Serious implications. Women who have different strengths are railroaded to the slower tracks because they appear to be struggling with the ordered topics like electrical engineering. In her book, The User Illusion, Nortriander speaks about how the conscious mind is actually a second behind the unconscious mind, how we must learn to let the unconscious parts move on their own, essentially, get out of our own way, in order to reach the slower, conscious mind. If women lead from this side (the more intuitive side) and it is not valued, it becomes obvious why they would be having difficulties. Interestingly enough, women's brains do integrate the logical, left brain capabilities too but later on, when their brains mature. But this is often too late for deciding careers; too late for re-entering the more advanced professional scientific tracks.

Moira concludes that females with self-doubt and low-esteem would benefit from recognizing their special processing capabilities while learning to push through their anxieties. Alongside of this she recommends that women honor their own

biological timing, insist that our educational systems respond to the research, and perhaps most importantly, promote the skills where women do offer more, naturally. Whether this is picking up on unexpressed emotional realities, and therefore helping the organization achieve superior service or communicating key ideas or working triumphantly in chaotic climates, women have to learn to define and trust themselves versus letting others define realities for them—in other words, no longer accepting the commonplace "good advice."

Finally, Moira got the group to see how a similar reality is being played out in the computer world. The computer, though harder for right brain people, actually allows for the exercise of both right and left brain functioning. Words and Images. Women, of course, can conquer both but in cultures where only words are emphasized, women have typically assumed a lower, supportive position, while those with pictorial representation have resulted in higher status for women (hieroglyphics and the Egyptian society, for example). A cardiac surgeon, Dr. Leonard Schlein, has a whole book on this topic, entitled The Alphabet and the Goddess. In any case, the medium itself may be changing how we are processing things.

The web, she adds, is a prime example of our preferences for processing, and the opportunities within. Its strength is not so much that it offers all of us a new career choice (in fact, because it is a ubiquitous means of communication, and not a separate career, it should be conceptualized more as an "add-on" to what we already do) but that it offers us new strategies for communicating. Currently, if you're under 40, you email, if you're over 50, you voice-mail, over 60, you ask "hey, where's my assistant?". But the power of knowledge and communication still comes down to a simple truth: people and organizations that trust and respect the innate capacity toward knowledge will feed it; those that don't, (organizations and people) will lag behind. This includes how we are to ourselves. Trust is the key enabler here.

Today, Moira observes, you can still see some old behaviors hanging around. You can still see boys knocking girls off computers when girls, who work better in herds, can do better by insisting on having their own space. You can still see how we may continue to think we're getting older when, in fact, our brains do improve each day as we use them. And you can still see how many of us still worry about not having the company nest but if we're clear about where we're going, we don't have to feel shunted aside because we'll be on our way to our own special goals and experiences. The parting thought seemed to be that the more we know what is primary for us, the more we will make a place for ourselves, in technology and in the world.

A great message, and a gathering of real substance. Thank you very much, Moira!