

Elona Mortimer-Zhika

CEO, IRIS Software Group



IRIS Software's Chief Executive, Elona Mortimer-Zhika, talks to Jane Wakefield about the importance of authenticity, why she hates to be referred to as a female CEO and how her worldview went from small to large.

Elona Mortimer-Zhika leads software giant, IRIS Software Group, a market leader in the provision of mission-critical compliance, engagement and productivity software to the accountancy, education and SMB sector. Despite its valuation of over £3 billion, Elona has no intentions of taking things easy.

IRIS is one of the UK's largest private equity-backed businesses. Having steered it through a sale and trebled its earnings, she remains focused on scalable growth. "Building the right foundation is so important. We are a £3 billion to £4 billion business now and need to get to £10 billion. You can't do that without the right foundations."

IRIS has acquired 40 businesses during Elona's tenure, so the creation of the #1RIS culture was critical in uniting the disparate parts of the business and welcoming new acquisitions. This allows Elona to focus on evolving cloud products and market expansion. IRIS' cloud revenues, which were at <10% when she joined, are c60% now and will be at 80% in the near term.

Expanding beyond the UK has been Elona's second key area of focus. She explains: "We started with nothing in the Americas 2.5 years ago and now c23% of IRIS' total business is generated in the region."

"The team is now over 300 people strong, over 6,000 customers (including 50 of the top 100 CPAs), and we pay over one million people monthly in Canada and the US through our software and bureau services. Our revenues are already over \$100 million and we have high double-digit growth organically. All this has been achieved in less than three years."

So far, so business textbook. But that's where the textbook lessons end, as Elona is also determined to run the business her way. She doesn't like being referred to as a female CEO as it is not a novelty.

"It will be a great day when we don't see it

as such a difference," she tells me.

Her other focus, and her personal passion for the business, is diversity. "I think many people still see DE&I as box-ticking and something they have to do, rather than something that is genuinely good for business," she says. "At IRIS we are doing this in a very targeted way, starting with our male/female balance as I'm passionate about that."

IRIS has moved the dial of female employees to 46% overall, and 43% of those are senior positions, which is extremely high for the technology industry, where the average is around 25%. Recruitment and retention policies are key, as are flexible working and return ship schemes, she says.

But she acknowledges there is more to do in making sure the right people apply for the job in the first place. "There is a lack of diversity in the pipeline of applicants. That's a key problem no recruitment strategy can fix."

Nobody wants to hire people just because they are the right gender or race, and nobody wants a job to fulfil a quota. We need more diverse people applying, and to make that happen, we need to help the next generation," she says.

So, 18 months ago Elona decided to focus IRIS' CSR on one thing – powering the next generation, particularly from under-privileged and under-represented groups, to be better equipped to enter the workforce and, particularly, a career in tech.

IRIS is working with Salford University and Wigan College on various schemes and scholarships, with a view to recruiting young talent for its Manchester office. Every employee at IRIS is offered three days off a year to do charity work, and many use them in schools to teach children about a career in tech (IRIS has over 12,000 schools as its customers).

IRIS also sponsors the charity Bookmark, which teaches kids to read and partners with the Prince's Trust.

"I'm very privileged to have the job I have, and I'm going to spray as much positivity and empower as many people from different parts of life to grab those opportunities," she says.

Before joining IRIS, Elona worked for years at accountancy giant Deloitte and admits that whilst she worked with amazing people, there weren't many female partners as role models at the time.

"There was one female partner who was working part-time, but really she was working full-time and getting paid part-time."

That was back in 2009, and she says Deloitte has done a lot since to address the lack of female role models, but that wasn't the case 14 years ago.

Time and time again, the highly successful women I talk to as part of the Boardwave community bring up the importance of dressing how they want to dress rather than conforming to a corporate image.

Elona is no exception. She describes how

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It's women like me and people like us whose job it is to spread the word. We have a responsibility to use our power and privilege.”

Leaders Lives

after a long-distinguished career at Deloitte, the next stage would have been to become a director. Elona explains: "I didn't think that I could be the best version of myself anymore because I was quite loud and wore bright colourful clothes. At that time, that did not fit the image of what a director needed to look like for the end clients."

She even bought some grey suits but said that it "took my sparkle away. I wasn't me."

At IRIS, she says she has focused on building a culture where she and all employees can be themselves.

"In today's world it is difficult to separate work and life and you, bring work home and you bring home to work. I don't think it's humanly possible to conform to someone else's version of what good looks like for 10 or 12 hours a day."

She realised early on she needed a plan to get the work/life balance right for her and her family.

"I don't do school drop-offs and pick-ups because anything recurring, I can't commit to, but I will never miss any of their activities, concerts or plays."

"You get these dates at the start of term and you can put them in the diary and plan ahead."

But even this seemingly simple act betrays the problems women at the top face.

"When I first joined IRIS and said I needed to put a nativity play in the diary, my assistant asked if she should note this as a doctor's appointment," she tells me.

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It's not just a job, it's my life. My children, my husband, my family all 'live and breathe' IRIS.

"I said 'absolutely not.' I am going to work so hard for this business, so when I need an hour off, I want that to be clear what

I'm having it off for.

"You can have me at 9pm, or 7am, whenever, but sometimes I am going to be on the football pitch or watching cross country because that is what matters to my boys, having me there."

Elona's own childhood was spent in Albania. She was born in 1979, at a time when the country was under the rule of a dictator and pretty much closed off from the rest of the world. Looking back now, she says it reminds her of Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood's dystopian story of a totalitarian society.

How do you relax?

Spending time with my wonderful boys.

I also have a personal trainer, mainly because I hate exercising!

What is an important lesson you have learned?

I remember five years ago saying I'm running a tech business and I don't know much about coding. So I thought maybe I would put myself on a course.

But somebody pointed out that there is probably a reason you're not good at those things and it is because that's not your passion. So you can spend time on it but the chances are, you are only ever going to be mediocre at coding so why bother? Learn enough to be dangerous but no more".

That was a valuable lesson: "Play to your strengths".

What piece of tech (other than your phone) would you not be without?

My companion Alexa. I order all my shopping through the technology, turn on the heating and ask her to remind me of birthdays or put the blinds down. Sometimes I even randomly talk to her... but that's our secret!

She admits it meant her worldview was incredibly small.

"We were conditioned to believe we lived in the best country in the world, and ignorance is bliss, I didn't know any different," she says.

The only hint to Westernism came from comedian Norman Wisdom, whose shows were allowed and aired during the controlled four hours of TV in the evening. The airwaves were not the only thing that was controlled by the government.

"It decided where you worked, and it had a five year plan for the economy.

"The government would decide how many doctors, teachers, engineers they needed, and when you came to deciding your degree, you didn't decide what you wanted to do – they told you. And we just thought that was quite normal."

Elona also lived under the shadow of war and spent time in bunkers preparing for an imminent invasion that citizens were warned would come because the rest of the world was jealous of Albania's equal society.

Things changed in 1990, but

while the downfall of communism heralded much more freedom, things didn't get better immediately.

"People had no boundaries and no benchmark, and it almost flipped the other way around. There were kids with Kalashnikovs in their hands, it was out of control."

But the ending

of communism did mean a new life beckoned for Elona, and aged 16, she was given the chance to study for an international baccalaureate (IB) at the UWC Atlantic College in Wales.

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Leaders Lives

She admits she was terrified. "I had never been on a flight. My mum fainted at the airport as I said goodbye."

"I had \$100 in my pocket; you couldn't even buy pounds".

Getting through security at Heathrow proved a challenge because she had packed her student visa in her hold luggage.

"They had to accompany me to my bag to get my documents so I could prove to them what I was doing in the UK."

"It was the most scared I have ever been in my life. When I arrived, I tried to call my parents. They didn't even have a phone at home, so I had to call somebody we knew who worked for the government and had a phone line which was 10 minutes walk away from my parents."

Once she had got over the initial homesickness, Elona's small-world view began to get larger.

She shared a dorm with a range of students, including one who had survived the genocide in Rwanda and would wake up in the night screaming.

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There were also students from Palestine and Israel, and as part of its mission, the school was to promote international understanding.

"It was about teaching us the impact of war and trying

to remove some of those biases that we are born into."

It is a lesson she now brings to business. She describes her father as her hero and her biggest inspiration, and she knew from an early age that she wanted to follow him into accountancy and economics.

But studying these subjects when she had come from a communist society brought its own biases.

Elona laughs as she remembers how hard she found economics, which she started to study as part of her IB.

"I spoke little English, but more importantly I couldn't translate anything because Albania was run as a centralised economy, and the dictionaries didn't have proper translations for terms like demand and supply. There simply was no free trade or free economy because everything belonged to the government, so I couldn't get it at all."

She recalls going home after her first term and trying to make sense of it with her beloved father.

"And my dad didn't get it either. He was talking about long-term plans. And I was like, I don't think it's like that – I don't think it is designed from the top down. The market decides!"

She worked it out and went on to study Accountancy and Economics at Reading University, where she graduated with a First Class Honours degree, joining Arthur Andersen once graduated, then Deloitte.

What are your three tips for a successful business?

1. It may sound obvious but make sure the product, solution or service you are offering actually solves a problem for your customer, is scalable and future proof or they won't buy it. Regardless of what you sell, consider a subscription / recurring business model as this creates annual recurring revenue and protects your profits. Sell it once, benefit many times.

2. Surround yourself with the right team and people with different strengths. No one can be good at everything. We are trained from young to focus on improving the things we are not so good at. However, I don't agree with this. There is a reason we are not good at some things and no matter how hard we try, we cannot excel in every area. Play to your strengths and employ people that are different from you to cover areas of deficit. That way, the team complements each other, operates at 100% and is able to be the best version of themselves.

Bringing together diverse teams is key to success: it makes our world bigger; leads to better decisions; better collaboration without unconscious bias; more curiosity and more learning and innovation.

3. Flexibility and diversification should be part of your strategic business armoury. Markets evolve and change quicker than ever before so remain agile and don't lose your sense of urgency. Even if your business is ahead, never trust success blindly. When your results are better than anticipated or there seems no need to change, ask sceptical questions to stimulate debate and drive success. Stay hungry in paradise and disrupt yourself to remain one step ahead.

Five years at Acision as VP of Operational and Commercial Finance came next, followed by a year as chief of staff to the CEO of Mavenir.

She joined IRIS as its Chief Financial Officer in 2016.

"I joined for a number of reasons, number one – both IRIS and Hg have a fantastic growth mindset with a great reputation for focusing on mission-critical tech.

"I had audited IRIS 20 years before when I was Deloitte and had followed its success, IRIS was always challenging and complicated but it was growing, and that's what I loved."

As CEO, Elona may have taken IRIS Software to >£3billion status, but she confesses to me that she may have an eye on a new job – at MI5.

"I've always wanted to work for MI5, I love puzzles and problem solving and always ask a lot of questions, but as I wasn't born in England, I couldn't apply.

"I still do their online tests every year. Amazingly, as of November last year, they removed the need for being British born as British citizenship is now sufficient. So, watch this space."

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My theory is to bring teams that are different and with different strengths around the table.”

