

# Don't try to be a super woman – build a dream team instead!

## INTERVIEW



BY RUTH SUNDERLAND

GROUP BUSINESS EDITOR

**T**ECH boss Nicola Hodson, who runs computer giant IBM in the UK and Ireland, wants to let women into her secret for combining career and family life.

Don't try to be a superwoman and do it all on your own. Get yourself a pit crew. By which she means a supportive posse of people who will help you fulfil your roles as boss, mother, wife, daughter and friend – as well as taking care of yourself.

Hodson, who is in her fifties and married with three sons and two stepsons, is a rare woman leader in tech, which remains a male-dominated field.

'It's a bit like Formula 1. A driver only succeeds with the right team,' she says. In keeping with her turbo-charged metaphor for her support system, she relaxes by ditching her business suit, donning her leathers and roaring off on her motorbike, a Ducati Cafe Racer.

So who's in the crew? 'My parents, my kids and my husband,' she says. 'He has a little more flexibility in work than I do.'

'I have an external coach – she is another successful woman and she is sassy as heck, she really pushes me.'

Then there's Sam the nanny who was hired after the birth of her second son and now helps out at home. 'I occasionally use a psychotherapist when I just want to get my head clear, maybe once a year.'

She also mentions 'the team in my office; Jill, my yoga teacher; Claudia, my coach; Mark, my nutritionist; and the mentors who have supported me throughout my career'. Her list of helpers will be the envy of many a working mum feeling everything falls on her shoulders.

Hodson, who hails from Widnes in Cheshire, acknowledges she is 'super-fortunate' compared with many women, who can't afford that level of help.

'It is a pretty big crew,' she laughs. 'And it changes all the time. It is important not to think of yourself as an island, but as a person with a support network.'

She is refreshingly honest in exploding the 'Superwoman' myth and giving credit to others. And in case the idea assembling a pit crew sounds a bit egocentric, she feels it is important to be part of other women's

She's the boss of IBM in this country and one of the leading women in tech. Her advice for every aspiring female business leader? Get a 'pit crew' to help YOU get to the top

## NICOLA HODSON: IBM BOSS (AND MOTORBIKE RACER)



**FAMILY:** Married with three sons and two stepsons, between the ages of 19-28.

**EDUCATION:** MBA from Lancaster University and a PhD at Liverpool University.

**CAREER:** Previous senior roles at Microsoft, Siemens and EY.

**HOBBIES:** I am an avid reader and always have a book or two on the go. Keeping fit and getting out on my Ducati (pictured).

**ROLE MODELS:** My father. We used to love watching Concorde, the supersonic aircraft that used to fly over my house when I was a little girl, and we also enjoyed poring over the encyclopaedia together.

Fantastic bosses include Dame Sue Ion, an engineer and nuclear power expert.

**FANTASY DINNER PARTY GUESTS:** I would invite American writers Richard Bach and Michael Lewis, US professor Brené Brown (famed for her work on leadership), Barack and Michelle Obama, former IBM CEO Thomas Watson Jr, Richard Branson, Elon Musk... the list goes on. And my pit crew!

**MOTORBIKE RIDES I'D LOVE TO DO:** I have a Ducati Café Racer, which I love to get out on the open road. I'd love to ride the coast of the Carolinas in the US and the old Silk Road.

crews in return. Leaders like herself, she believes, should be open about the level of help they need. She hopes this frankness will give other women the confidence to prioritise their work-life balance, which shouldn't, she says, 'be a privilege for those at the top'.

'You cannot do it alone. You can't work at this level without the right support in place. If my pit crew goes AWOL, I feel wobbly very quickly. We are all human. 'The more senior you get, the bigger the problems you get. I am vulnerable enough to say I can't solve everything on my own.'

'Once you have opened up to that fact, it takes a lot of the pressure off. If you share a problem, you can have more brains on it.'

'As a leader, it is dangerous to be the dominant voice all the time because you can swallow your own hype. If you show your own vulnerability people will come behind you.' She believes her

team-based, inclusive approach can help in the transformation of IBM. The US behemoth has been synonymous with computers for generations but has been left behind in the great stock market tech boom.

Known affectionately as Big Blue, IBM is trying to regain its place in the tech pantheon. Hodson is at the centre of this endeavour, working with group chief executive Arvind Krishna, who took over in 2020.

The company has a chequered past, going back to the 19th century when it was a pioneer of an early form of data technology. As early corporations sprang up, they had a growing need for efficient accounting and admin.

That led to the invention of early office machines such as typewriters and cash-registers, and the birth of what became IBM, which stands for International Business Machines. For most of the 20th

century, IBM was dominated by two men: Thomas Watson Senior and his son, Thomas Junior.

Famously, for many years it offered employees a job for life.

So why does Hodson think IBM has fallen so far behind the newer breed of US giants such as Amazon, Apple, Alphabet and Meta?

Partly, she says, it is because it sells its wares to businesses, not direct to consumers, so it is less in the public eye.

In the 1980s, IBM failed to capitalise on the fledgling personal computer market, leaving that lucrative field clear for its rivals.

In an episode that has become legendary, it struck a deal in 1980 with the then 25-year-old Bill Gates. This allowed the Microsoft founder to develop an operating system for IBM but to retain the right to sell it to other customers.

The deal set Gates on his ascent to billionaire status. More than 40 years on from that fateful agree-

ment, IBM has a market value of £122billion – while Microsoft has far surpassed that to become worth nearly £2.4trillion.

Hodson herself spent 15 years at Microsoft before moving to IBM in January 2023. She insists IBM 'has made some really smart strategic moves over the years'.

It is now 'super-focused' on artificial intelligence (AI), along with hybrid cloud – a mix of public and private cloud services – and quantum computing.

'IBM has a great consulting business, a great software portfolio, a great hardware portfolio and really smart R&D,' she says.

'That combination is really powerful. We are the only company in the tech sector who has that at any scale. It gives you an advantage with customers because you are able to bring deep industry expertise together with the tech and the R&D. IBM has all these amazing building blocks.'

## IBM BY NUMBERS

### WORLDWIDE

£122bn Value

1911 Founded

175 Countries

282,000 Employees

### IN THE UK

£3.1bn Revenues

£170m Research investment every year

10 Offices

10,000 Employees

\*Revenue and investment figures from 2022 Companies House accounts for IBM UK Limited

Even as its woes piled up in the 1990s, IBM was a trailblazer of AI. It pulled off a worldwide publicity coup in 1996-7 when its Deep Blue computer beat chess champion Garry Kasparov.

Now it is hoping another Watson – a computer system named after its founder – will help restore it to its former eminence. In 2011, its Watson DeepQA computer won the US TV quiz show Jeopardy against two all-time champions.

At that time, Watson was at the cutting edge of a new generation of computers capable of answering questions more accurately than standard search technology.

It used hundreds of algorithms to analyse questions from multiple angles and come up with the correct response, all within about three seconds. This was a huge advance in a branch of AI known as Natural Language Processing.

After the win, Watson was put to work in around 70 per cent of the world's top financial institutions and multiple other industries.

Watson is a staple at Wimbledon, providing AI commentary, predicting winners and providing highlights of matches on the app.

It is also behind RITA, the world's first AI chat bot trained to give information to cancer patients, in use at the Velindre Centre in Cardiff. Named after a long-serving receptionist at the centre, RITA can answer common questions, leaving specialist staff to deal with more complex topics.

'You might say who with a cancer diagnosis wants a bot, but when you get a diagnosis it is a lot to take in,' says Hodson.

As for quantum computing, she describes it as a 'moonshot'. Traditional computers, even the most powerful, use binary code and 20th century transistor technology.

Quantum computing, as its name suggests, deploys quantum

mechanics to solve complex problems that would baffle traditional computers, or take them too long to work out. 'Computations that can take months or years can be done much more rapidly. So we could have faster vaccines, for instance.'

Hodson also points to 'better fraud detection' and helping companies protect their data against quantum security threats.

She believes AI has the potential to boost economic growth. Is it realistic, though, for the UK to be a tech superpower? 'Absolutely. We already are one, we are third to the US and China.'

'But why settle for bronze? We are brilliant for start ups – second only to Silicon Valley. But we need to be better at scaling up businesses.'

Many jobs, she says, will change because of AI, but will 'potentially be enriched.'

'It can do the mundane tasks so you can spend your time where you add the most value.'

'I think that is quite exciting. I can see ways I can be a lot more productive.'

So could there be a CEO bot, that doesn't need a pit crew? 'Ooh that's an interesting one,' she smiles.



PICTURES: LES WILSON