

# Coding Up the Career Ladder

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*Coding (as in computer programming) is a rewarding, high-demand skill set that takes commitment from a person to master. With the right motivation, however, anyone can rise to the challenge of reaching a high-ranking programming position. **THINK** explores how someone goes from classroom coding enthusiasm to running a programmers' team at one of Malta's most prestigious authorities.*

When Shirley Cini went to secondary school in the late 2000s, information and communications technology as a subject was already an emerging field. Teachers started encouraging students to pursue science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) as subjects for in-depth study. That was the time when tech started getting good PR as the online world was maturing globally; the Smart City concept in Kalkara was revealed locally in 2007 (coincidentally, the first iPhone hit the market that same year).


Tech buzz was in the air. 'I chose computer science as one of my optional subjects at school, as I had already been a bit tech savvy. I found myself genuinely enjoying the concept of being able to build a program from scratch. The sentiment of translating

your thoughts into a working program got stuck so much that I continued pursuing the subject at university,' Cini tells **THINK**. She holds a Bachelor of Science (Honours) degree in Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence from the University of Malta and today leads a team of developers at the Malta Financial Services Authority (MFSA) as a software development manager. She has come a long way since her first, experimental code, such as displaying 'Hello World!!' on a black screen.

Enthusiasm is essential, but merely attending classes and courses on programming will not take a student far. Commitment towards this field of science is imperative, as classes teach students how to program, but excellence is hard to reach without investing due time into continuous learning. Still, a good lecturer can do loads to kick-start a student's learning curve. 'Lecturers can create the

spark that ignites the fire of passion for programming. This is essential to ensure that someone becomes an expert in this field,' Cini says.

## MIND THE GAP

What makes a good lecturer? Cini says that the best lecturers are those who are part-time coders and part-time educators; they have the hands-on experience that helps bridge the gap between academia and the workplace. The gap she mentions has been widely discussed in modern business. The most recent corporate sentiment concerns a significant skills shortage in the labour market, making it difficult for companies to hire well-equipped talent. The whys and hows of upskilling are hot topics in the corporate world. Closer collaboration between education and business can help. Cini advocates more synergy in the form of traineeship and internship collaboration between 



Shirley Cini  
Photo by Sarah Zammit

academic institutions and the business landscape. 'Student placements ensure that there is a knowledge exchange between academia and the labour market,' she says.

Recruitment is difficult, as skilled talent is scarce. 'When it comes to choosing a career, there are numerous considerations, from wages to job stability and other benefits. Apart from these considerations, it is important for me to work in a fast-paced environment that keeps me on my toes – offering me challenges that strengthen both my technical abilities as well as provide me with the opportunity to progress further in my career,' she adds.

As digitalisation and artificial intelligence continue to pervade every industry and business process, the skills shortage is amplified. Upskilling and life-long learning are not catchphrases but required building blocks in a person's mindset to help

them retain expertise in any field. When technical skill development is the focus, Cini believes that investing time in mastering coding languages is essential. 'You have to keep on learning new languages. We attend courses to ensure that we are up to date with the latest coding languages while we focus on managing the workload as well,' she says.

Furthermore, digitalisation creates possibilities and a lot of challenges in development. 'The most challenging part of digitalisation is understanding the business needs. We have to bridge the gap between the technical people and the business users,' she says. Essentially, the most critical task is to understand what practical solutions businesses need and translate that demand into the technicality of coding, all while ensuring that, when the final digital product is produced, it fulfils the requirements of its respective function. 'It is a continuous conversation

between the developer and the business. We receive feedback, factor it into our product-in-development, and continue to the next phase,' Cini says.

## FROM CODER TO MANAGER

The MFSA, which Cini says has undergone significant modernisation and transformation since she joined, has been a welcoming environment for her. The authority supported her professional development as she joined the watchdog without having prior financial services experience or knowledge. 'As a team, we identified several gaps in the business processes and revamped the systems in place. We also worked on improving the security posture of the MFSA's information systems. It was a tough journey, requiring a great deal of teamwork in a purely technical environment,' she says.

Her work paved the way for her career progression. The diligent developer dashed up the career ladder



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and broke the glass ceiling; she is now a manager responsible for a team of software developers. 'The process of becoming a leader is a rewarding journey. It involves continuous learning and self-development,' she says.

As a student and a programmer at the beginning of her career, Cini would focus on developing her technical skills and on staying abreast of the latest technologies. At the beginning of her career, she would never have imagined that she would lead a team of developers. However, her prompt and quality work stood out, and she rose through the ranks. With time and experience, she shifted from a technical role to a managerial one. It was a natural progression; it came with the flow.

With that, her tasks have also changed. 'Now, my role is more focused on analysis and planning. I am responsible for quantifying work effort and planning sprints to help

the team accomplish goals instead of working solely on the technical aspects of a project,' she says. But analytical, strategic, and people skills did not overtake technical skills; instead, they were built on this firm foundation. 'We have to understand our team members when assigning them tasks. We need to understand what they love in programming and what they are technically capable of doing,' she says.

The recent years, both on the academic and business fronts, have seen an emerging promotion of including more girls in STEM subjects at school as early as possible, to break down the stereotype of science, technology, engineering, and maths being boys-only arenas. This is even more prevalent in the programming world, which is predominantly male. However, Cini met no discrimination during her studies or in her workplace.

And while coding is chiefly a boys' club, many say it should not be so.

Almost a decade ago, your author attended a background discussion of experts working for the Hungarian sister company of a US-based investment management and financial services giant. C-level executives (chief executive officers and chief operating officers, for example) unanimously cried for more women programmers, as they said women's code is cleaner, more logical, and shorter. 'I tend to agree with that comment; women are more organised. Even in decision-making – women take a decision much before men, who tend to overthink,' Cini says.

Cini's merit-based progress up the career ladder comes at a time when most developers are still men, according to figures by Statista, a German think tank. Ensuring equal opportunities of outcome in any field requires a collective effort from educators, parents, and the business landscape. It is time we practise what we preach. 