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In this episode, Taren Grom, Editor-in-Chief of PharmaVOICE meets with Jennifer Aquino, VP, Digital Patient Suite, IQVIA.

Taren: Jennifer, welcome to our Woman of the Week podcast program.

Jennifer: Thank you so Taren for taking me and say I love these podcasts over the last couple of months and it's been a nice window into some really inspiring women leaders. So glad to participate.

Taren: Well, you're so kind to say so, so thank you so much, and we look forward to adding you to our inspiring catalog. Speaking of WoW, Jennifer, you've had a wow career. It's been varied amongst different roles in the life sciences, but mainly focused in drug development in particular quality, technology and operations. So Jennifer, tell us a little bit about your journey which has led to your current role as VP, Digital Patient Suite at IQVIA.

Jennifer: Sure. So I started in clinical trials on early 1990s as part of a team that worked on Saquinavir which was the first antiretroviral for HIV. My role then allowed me to get to know the site coordinators and clinical teams that were so passionately fighting the AIDS epidemic. It's really where I fell in love with drug development.

I moved into roles in clinical data management in QA, and much later I actually had an opportunity to do an international assignment in the UK where I was a general manager of a large tech delivery operation. We built out a new facility in the CD center. We centralized the tech talent in the UK and worked on procuring government grants that we invested not only in cutting edge technology facility, but also a university talent program, an expansion of roles that benefited the local economy in the healthcare segment in the Midlands. I think this diversity in roles and assignments I've had has helped me be more effective in my role. I think it forces me to be flexible and quite honestly, a bit fearless in taking on something new.

When IQVIA acquired Cenduit in December 2019 I was a COO, and you certainly wonder what that's going to mean for your future and how things might change. But really our products and services were so complimentary to the IQVIA technology that actually created opportunity for both organizations certainly a lot of personal growth and 25 years later, I still get up and realize I've been so lucky to have landed into a career where I just can have an impact, and I love it.

Taren: That's awesome. So a couple of threads I want to pull on there. One is your time working in that HIV community at the very beginning of when new drugs were coming to market. What was that experience like? It had to feel very fulfilling and exciting in a lot of ways.

Jennifer: Yes, it was fulfilling and it was life changing. And I know that sounds dramatic, but at the time I was so very young, and I had a relatively sheltered upbringing and so I was meeting people who were part of a community of people I had never interacted with, and they were fighting for their lives. They were so passionate in wanting to bring treatments to market. I don't know... it just impacted me. I loved getting up to work in the morning and I loved the feeling that I could make an impact. And before that I hadn't been able to do that.

Taren: So that's the other thread I wanted to pull on is what initially drew you to the life sciences industry? Obviously you have a passion around drug development, but what is that based on?

Jennifer: So again, I think it was – I didn't have a traditional kind of biomedical or science training. I fell into an opportunity early in my career where I was working in a phone center where we actually were building applications that allowed human operators to hand out randomization numbers and IP information to site coordinators, so kind of pre-IRT and pre-web facilitated that whole randomization process.

Taren: Gotcha. So let's go through some of those trends that you've noted. Over the years you've seen some significant changes in drug development. What do you make of some of the recent leaps being made as a result of COVID. Look at where we are, and we're talking DCTs. We're talking e-consents. We're talking virtual trials. What's your take?

Jennifer: That's a great question. So I think this has been just an incredible 18 months for everyone in our industry. I'm confident we're going to be looking back in the not so distant future and just reflecting on the positive impact accelerated vaccine development has had on managing the pandemic in getting the world back to a normal-ish place. I think this is going to continue to build confidence in the process around what can be achieved, especially with people who have been reluctant to participate in clinical trials.

More importantly, I think we've seen a level of coordination and collaboration that's just never happened at scale in drug development. Sponsors and academic centers splitting up research capabilities, regulatory bodies providing support, timely guidance documents and really innovative technology solutions that facilitated remote participation in trials and just superb execution of trial management across all disciplines. Our stakeholders don't want to see us go backwards. I think we've seen what's possible and we've created an appetite and a blueprint, if you will, for a new approach. And I sure want to be part of making sure that technology we're building ensures these changes have longevity and are achievable at scale.

Taren: I agree with you, and I look forward to that next frontier as well. And so what are some of the things that we should be watching for if the last 18 months have been transformative, how will we start to think about the next 18 months?

Jennifer: I continue to see that patient recruitment and retention are just areas of acute pressure when starting and completing clinical trials. I think COVID has given us a playbook for decentralized clinical trials and it's given us a playbook to create more diverse trials that are representative of broader set of geographic, socioeconomic and maybe previously inaccessible groups and patient populations. You don't need to live next to a cutting edge academic institution where therapeutic thought leaders might be in order to participate in a trial for many indications.

I love hearing the conversations that are happening around diversity as it's just a personal passion area for me. I think there's still large groups of people that are less comfortable with clinical research and participating in a trial. And you can see that as you look at the data around the areas of the country that have higher vaccination uptake tied to the political values, and I just believe this barrier really goes away. If you need a lifesaving or a life changing treatment it isn't available yet to you or someone you love, that's where we can win hearts and minds and just reach a broader group of people.

Taren: Totally agree. Since you are really leading the digital suite, patient suite at IQVIA, where are some of the areas that you think technology will have the biggest impact?

Jennifer: I'm seeing from a clinical patient engagement perspective that our customers have a renewed focus and a real drive towards what I'll call interoperable solutions that allow us to leverage the data that's coming out of our technology in a way that simplifies that patient insight experience and takes advantage of a combination of best in class technical solutions and brings them together where it's needed.

We've historically always captured this data, but we haven't fully harnessed the benefit to a lot of our sites and our patients and not even for our own long decision making. We have to do that in order to be successful in COVID. Specifically if we wanted to accelerate the way we worked, we had to change the way that we were doing things. I see a lot of sponsors asking for their tech providers to not only offer end to end capabilities, but to be able to bring together best in class capabilities, and I think that's something that we're going to see more of in the future.

Taren: Excellent. A couple of times you've talked to or touched on interoperability as well as collaboration. Are those two things in your mind the keys to success in sustainability in this post-COVID world as we move towards this next frontier?

Jennifer: I think it really is because I think that sponsors in some cases have made heavy investments into certain point solutions that are really integrated with their ecosystem, but they want to take advantage of what's out there from a new perspective so that they can change the way they do things, and marrying those together is exciting. I like to say that interoperability really allows you to have your cake and eat it too. Because you can still use the things that are critical to running your business, but you can connect those to things that give you new benefits and new ways to engage with patients' insights.

Taren: And as we know as patients and as consumers, we like our cake. You have significant experience in building high performing, customer-focused delivery teams. What are some of your keys to success in building these things and then as a follow on, what are the qualities that you look for in those high performing team members?

Jennifer: I think there are a number of things that consistently come through for me in building high performance teams. My management style has definitely evolved as I've had to refocus as our workforce has evolved. But what remains constant is just an absolute belief in the things I'm working on – genuine appreciation, admiration for the people in my organization who are helping us achieve our goals. I think taking the time to show appreciation by connecting with people at all levels in the organization, celebrating those personal and in kind of group accomplishments and others.

People have choices on where they build their career and if they choose you, you need to choose them too and really invest in them and create opportunity where they can be successful and shine independently of you.

Taren: You know when you look to those team members and obviously let's just say that having the skills necessary to do the job are tablestakes. What's that X factor you look for?

Jennifer: Yeah, that's a good question. So I think there are two things, and something I wish I had learned a lot earlier in my career is that team needs diversity. So you look at some leaders and you see them hire people that look and think and react like they do and that can feel really satisfying because it validates your vision and your approach. But the best teams I've built are the ones where we have very diverse and complimentary skill sets, different geographic and cultural backgrounds and even different views and motivations for why people are working with you.

The most important thing to me when I was younger in my career when I was hiring somebody was shared passion and energy for what we do, because I personally really thrive when the people around me share that high energy. But what I've realized as I've gotten a little bit more experienced and had to solve more complex problems is that the most important quality you can hire is curiosity. You don't have to actually share your reasons for wanting to understand and solve an issue or have the same motivation on why I want to innovate or tackle a hard problem. If a person is curious, it doesn't matter why they want to understand to solve a problem; it just matters that they will.

Taren: It's funny you say that because so often when I speak to leaders at your level, curiosity is the common theme amongst you all. So obviously there's something to be said for being curious and wanting to learn and push yourself in different directions and stretch and to gain new experiences. Earlier on, you talked about IQVIA buying Cenduit and you move from being a Chief Operating Officer to another position within IQVIA. Was that a tough transition for you? You said it allowed you to grow in a lot of different ways, but I would think that also it was a little bit challenging.

Jennifer: Oh, it absolutely was. You know what, for a long time it felt like I was really doing two roles because it was absolutely my job to make sure I advocated for our team and kept focused on the business goals that we have as a team, but I also wanted to make sure that we were bringing value to IQVIA. That was a complicated kind of process, a lot of hard work, but I think what was really good is that not just myself, but everybody we work with, were able to kind of highlight the win-wins for our teams and in the end I think we got to a good place. The majority of my team that started with me on December 2019 when we were acquired are still here. So I'm really proud of that and quite grateful as well, if I'm being honest.

Taren: Excellent. And the reason I asked that is because as we look at the current ecosystem and the landscape we're seeing, there's this spade of mergers and acquisitions happening and that's oftentimes a difficult transition for folks. So that's why I was – that was my curiosity is to understand how you kind of transitioned into that new role as others are looking to do the same from one company to another company.

Jennifer: Yeah. I think you have to be able to look outside of what you're doing a little bit and think about the bigger picture of what your group brings to the new group and make sure if those two things align, then you end up in a good place.

Taren: Fantastic. So tell me, do you have any advice you can share with other women who may want to reach the executive level, what steps should they take to give themselves the best advantage?

Jennifer: Great question. I get asked this a lot, and I'm going to talk about two things. The first is actually pretty simple and short – put in the work. No shortcuts. Take on every assignment, every project, big or small that gives you an opportunity to learn something new and expand your skill set. Not every assignment you get or opportunity you jump into is going to give you the visibility or create that next thing, but nobody can take away what you've learned and the skills that you have. I think every time you get a chance to work on something new, grab it and understand that that's being added to your portfolio.

I think the second thing – and I'm going to go on a bit of a tangent because this is an area that I think has really had impact for me. And that is early in my career I had a really good mentor and I had just gone through a 360 exercise and I think most people in senior leadership positions have gone through that process, and some of the feedback that I had gotten I was really hung up on. It was really around things that have a lot to do with who I was as a person as much as who I was as a leader. And so I wanted to talk to that mentor and I brought my report and my action plan and I sat down with him, and as I was going through it he actually pulled both documents out of my hands – they were paper documents because I was taking notes and he said, "I'm going to give you a little advice, Jennifer." He said, "You're pretty amazing leader and you've made it to a VP because of what you've accomplished so far. And I'm sure these areas you need to improve on are likely all very valid. But I want you to think about something." And he said, "Rather than spend 90% of your energy trying to focus on what I guess are 10% of the things that are hard for you, what if you focus that 90% on really maximizing the things you're

good at and that make you Jennifer. Be aware of the weaknesses and hire people that fill up those gaps for you.”

It really made me completely rethink how I approached everything because I always wanted to be perfect in every aspect of my job. I put significant energy into that, and I agonized over the things I knew were outside of my wheelhouse that just weren't natural strengths for me or were hard for me to execute. I think it was about 10 years later after I heard a woman by the name Paula Harris speak about authentic leadership, and I was finally able to put a label on what he was saying, which is that leading authentically is the best thing you can bring in your role. There's never going to be another Jennifer Aquino. I will always take lessons from incredible women and mentors and other leaders I work with, but the things that I bring to the role are the tools I have that I can make an impact on where I am today.

It's a long answer, but I feel really strong about it.

Taren: It was an awesome piece of advice. Because I think you're right, especially for women, we spend so much time focusing on the negative, we don't spend nearly as much time as focusing on the positive where we can really do make a difference. So that is a great piece of advice for everybody to remember. Get rid of that 90%, you know...

Jennifer: That's the most important thing. We should invest in the next generation of leaders because we're all here because someone did that for us.

Taren: Exactly. So thank you. That was a great piece of advice, and thank you for sharing that. Because this is our WoW podcast program I am going to ask you to identify an accomplishment or something in your career that changed the trajectory of your career or really had a lasting impact on you. And if I can ask you to narrow it down to one, what would you say?

Jennifer: So I've been doing this for 25 years and if you asked me before the pandemic, I would have struggled to pick one. But hands down, let's rewind 15 months ago. We were no more than a month or two into the pandemic and just on the back of doors closing and we started to get an absolute onslaught of request for projects and accelerated timelines. We had a series of meetings with our teams. What can we do to meet the demands in the coming months? I was honestly feeling a bit frustrated and felt we were struggling to come up with something that was truly game changing and I wasn't effectively communicating what were my expectations. We were busy noodling incremental changes. We needed something that was a showstopper.

So I went home. I organized some framework in my mind, sent a note to our team saying quality, patient safety and data integrity are the only non-negotiables. I gave them some parameters to think about. I asked them to really challenge the status quo. I ended the note with "For goodness sake, guys, China built an entire hospital in a week." So it was a bit of heat of the moment. After I sent it, I thought maybe gosh, was that a bit too much. But the team took it to heart and in the end they came up with some great ideas. I think it was probably not even two months later that on a Friday we found out we were going to be involved in a trial that had been awarded to us. We had the first patient in the following Tuesday and the study

protocol wasn't even in English. And I asked the team to come up with their best plan, promised to support the discussions back to the sponsor and our internal stakeholders and understanding it wasn't going to be possible to meet everyone's expectations, but to put the time in over the weekend and we needed to give our best effort.

And that Monday morning when I came in, we all regrouped and my head project management started with "Don't worry. We worked through the whole weekend. We'll be ready to go tomorrow morning with a fully validated application." And I was just stunned. The teams had used all the work they had done over the last few months, they pulled out all the stops and I just felt like it was miraculous, and I was so surprised and just proud.

Honestly, I was almost in tears that day. And I think this isn't just an IQVIA phenomenon, right. I mean I think the wow moment for me has been the absolute privilege to be part of something where everywhere you look, your peers, your competitors, other service providers are just stepping up to find a way. I mean it's pretty humbling.

Taren: You gave me chills. I agree, I think it is humbling to see – as you said everybody stepped up in response and in concert with one another. So as you said, competitors now we're frenemies. But working together to bring, whether it's a COVID treatment or to keep the lights on for the other clinical trials that may have been overshadowed because of the urgency of COVID. It has been a remarkable 18 months to watch the industry come together. It's a great, great story. Thank you for sharing that. I appreciate it.

Jennifer: And I will say my team still uses every opportunity to tease me about when I asked them how long will it take to do something and they say "China built in a hospital in a week."

Taren: See what you put out there – China built a hospital in a week. So, there is no bar too high now, Jennifer.

Jennifer: Right.

Taren: I love that. Well, thank you so much for spending some time with us for our WoW podcast program. I loved learning a little bit more about you and your story. Thank you so much for those valuable insights and those keen leadership lessons. It's been an honor.

Jennifer: Thanks again. I honestly, the honor is all mine and I really enjoyed the discussion. I am excited to participate and look forward to more podcasts from great women leaders.

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