

Janet Richards Access Summary

00:00:00 Early life, school and university at Reading

Born Janet Gray in 1960, London, where she spent the first 16 years of her life with her mother, father and older brother. She gradually moved out to northwest London and turned out to return to Pinner in Middlesex through her job at Digital (DEC).

She went to Burlington, a girls grammar school in Wood Lane near Wormwood Scrubs prison. She got a grant from the local council. She says it was a great school, same sex till sixth form where they joined with St Clement Danes, a local boy's school. She was head girl and dated the head boy.

She hated Latin, loved Geography, and did a degree in Physical Geography and Agriculture. She especially liked her teacher Ms Davis and prefers physical to human Geography. She went to Reading university from 1978-81, where they ran field trips to the Sahara or the Arctic in the summer of second year. That's when she generated her love of glaciers, when she went to the arctic in Norway.

From her time at Reading university, she remembers awful accommodation in halls, and privately. She remembers cycling in from Oxford Road up Silver Street. Her second year in private accommodation was closer in Basingstoke Road, but in her third year she moved back to halls for the running water and heating which she had missed in her second year. She remembers the pie shop. She says Cemetery Junction where she used to live was probably more up-market than today. However, now Reading seems more decentralised and dispirited than before, it has become a sad old place needing more investment and life.

Janet says all the social places she would visit like pubs were in the Cemetery Junction, and she remembers the pie place by the Hexagon. She mentions the Student's Union on campus. She says student life and community was good, there were lots of societies and she remembers going parachuting with the parachute club. She went potholing too. It was a social, active environment.

00:07:74 After Graduation

When she graduated, Janet had gotten a taste of the arctic and so wanted to go into the construction industry as a permafrost engineer. However, it was a very male dominated industry, and she didn't feel confident enough for it. She had always wanted to travel and go to New Zealand so she decided to get any job that would fund her traveling. She ended up in the printing industry as a hyphenation programmer.

She explains as a hyphenation programmer she had to research various languages to formulate rules as to how hyphenation could be done (she uses the example of the German scharfes S: 'ß' becoming s-s when hyphenated). They sold phototypesetters¹ globally, and Janet's responsibility was to come up with the rules and exceptions to the Hyphenation program. She adds that even in English it is not as easy as it seems. She did this for a year and travelled for training to Japan, the U.S. and lots of Europe. Eventually, she saved enough money to go to New Zealand and travel for 4 months but soon began thinking about needing a job to return to. She started the traditional graduate search, looking for a graduate recruitment program, at places like M&S,² IBM³ and Digital.⁴ She applied to all of them and ended up getting interviewed by Digital in Auckland, New Zealand. They offered her a job in the UK.

00:11:30 Recruitment to DEC and first day at work

Janet tells the story of her first day at work, where she had told a white lie on her application that she was available to work 1st of February. She hadn't realised that was when her flight arrived from the States, so she ended up having to get a suit and shoes from her mother at Heathrow and go straight to work at DEC in Oxford Street.

Returning to the interview, Janet specifies that she applied to the graduate program, possibly the software services part. She says it was a relaxed environment where most of the Kiwi staff were out sailing as it was Friday afternoon. She suspects the interview was more focused on recruiting the right personality than applying for a specific job.

Janet and the interviewer talk about how D.E.C. must have liked her CV to make the effort to accept her application in the UK and then interview her in New Zealand for a job in London. Janet says she was grateful, but didn't know that much about Digital⁵ compared to what she did about M&S or IBM in terms of brand.

Janet says that because she was travelling, she pushed off the idea of having a normal life and job. She clarifies her route back to the UK was from New Zealand via the Pacific back into the States and then to the UK. She says going from literally landing straight to work was a shock, but that people were so great, and it didn't feel like working. She felt like she'd made a new group of friends.

She specifies that she was going to be a specialist on RSX or Ristas⁶ but was suddenly moved to the VMS side of things, and allocated a mentor, who is still a friend today. Janet says they were very different, with her mentor being a technically serious person while she herself was bubbly and had also just got off a red-eye and didn't know anything about computers.

¹ Machine that prints an image/ letters on photographic paper

² Marks and Spencer

³ International Business Machines

⁴ D.E.C.

⁵ D.E.C

⁶ An old operating system

Talking about expectations for the graduate intake program, Janet said she had none, and didn't really know what to expect, but the team took her in. Initially she was in pre-sales so had to familiarize herself with the systems and learn to support the sales process, then after lots of training she ended up on one of the technical teams supporting Barclays bank. This focused on things like installations.

00:17:12 Pre-Sales and technical team at DEC: support work and training

Janet recounts being part of the technical team going to old computer rooms for installations and updates. She says that she ruined lots of shoes because the heels fell down the grid of the air conditioning units.

Janet says it probably took around a year to progress from sales support to supporting installations across the financial sector. She says it was good to have such a supportive team who you could ask for help, almost like ringing up a mate.

Describing her time in sales support, Janet says that she would go on client visits with a sales guy and support his 'selling' by providing information on technical details. Training for this role took Reading, but when she moved to All-IN-1,⁷ she was sent to Vallon⁸ in the south of France. Location depended on the subject, and there were conferences held all around Europe.

Janet says progression was self-driven, there were some obligatory courses to progress from an associate to a specialist, but if there were some areas you were interested in, you could talk to a manager and budget and availability depending, they'd let you go. They would put you in a hotel and pay for your meals, there was a budget, but it wasn't minimal, and you could go a few days early on the weekend if you paid for the extra accommodation. Janet agrees that it was a two-way street, you could ask to go or be sent.

00:22:17 Management at DEC: workplace culture, socializing and changes

Janet says at first, she was more concerned with getting a grip on her responsibilities than career progression. Eventually she turned out to follow a management career path instead of a technical one and remembers a conversation clarifying this. She said the consulting pathway took her interest and was supported in it. Janet says she found encouragement because she had several female managers. One of them in London was called Val McManus, she also had a manager June May who was also very supportive. When she branched into the European teams, June May, Michelle Mosay [?] and a host of other good managers. She remembers a Jim from Galway who took her to the Galway plant with him on a memorable trip, where they had a lockdown in one of his local pubs till two in the morning, and walking in at nine o'clock lots of them were still there but carried on at work anyway.

⁷ She describes this as an equivalent of Microsoft 365 now

⁸ Vallon-Pont-d'Arc

She recalls how Jim taught her to 'peak strategically', be quiet and say little but when you do say something it has impact, that was his definition, and he did it very well. She recalls being in meetings with him where he looked like he'd fallen asleep, but he was absorbing everything, then the team would get to a point where they didn't know what to do, he would sit up and suggest something. Janet says overall the managers would look out for you.

Regarding workplace culture, she says everyone felt like they were on the same team, they were fair, very respectful and supportive. She says that in London the social side was great, and sometimes the managers would come out and they would socialize as and across teams. She talks about celebrating Beaujolais Nouveau day and drinking till 9am.⁹ It was understood that you might come in at 10am but then you wouldn't have lunch. She says there was respect that you took responsibility and accountability.

The interviewer asks if this DEC culture, this kind of taking initiative or responsibility was directly communicated, and Janet says no. She says she doesn't recall having to sit down and listed to a presentation of the core values of DEC. She says you mainly just absorbed it, that from the top there was this trust, respect and accountability. She says you were expected to do the job, but it was an informal sort of chilled environment, and it didn't seem like going to work.

Asked about the management culture, Janet says she felt it was very open and progressive, especially as a female. She says there were probably DEC specific training courses but also general industry courses available to employees. She reiterates DEC didn't push core values, priorities or strategies. In her experience of London, and DEC Park in Reading, which was a bigger organization with lots more teams, those values were inherent, embedded in the foundation of the company.

Janet mentions the initial informality and freedom at DEC morphing into a formalized, performance indicators, 'and all that good stuff', focused approach. When asked about changing culture, she says she felt that DEC's foundations were impacted due to structural changes like acquisitions, and the involvement of many more different teams during the late 80s.

00:33:43 Women at DEC: Setting up the European Women's Management Development Network

Janet talks about having female role models at DEC, women in more senior roles. She does say there weren't many women on the front lines, but they were certainly present in the first, second, fourth levels of management. Their presence just meant that there was an assumption that you could do whatever you wanted, 'you didn't even not think about, well, that could be me,' given you had the right skills, support and competence.

⁹ The third Thursday of November where the wine is released worldwide at 12:01 am

She clarifies that to begin with this was at an individual level, and that no, there weren't any official programs. But, when she was in the European role, she created the European Women's Management Development Network because she saw that the upward progression only reached a certain point. She wanted to get European countries to look at their skills bases.

She says that given there were as many women using DEC resources as men, it was good to have those resources to support that demographic. Explaining, Janet talks about how ALL-IN-1, certainly in the finance sector, had a lot of female users. She says also women in business would have been using the software and application of ALL-IN-1. So, she thought DEC ought to represent the demographics they were selling to by having more women in the technical and management side of things, having a balanced instead of a male dominated view. When it comes to pitches and proposals for large implementations, it is important to get inside the heads of the users.

Circling back to the European Women's Management Development Network, which she founded, Janet explains that once she had progressed to a management role, she saw there weren't so many female role models above her, so she researched the statistics of women at various levels and thought she could do something about it. So, she put together a proposal for a European management team. She had a supportive boss, who was a woman, who she told that there were women who would benefit the business if they had further training and skills development. She pointed out that there were lots of women with lots of potential, but they weren't realizing it within the company. Janet clarifies that she didn't think women were being held back, but that she realised that DEC was missing a trick.

So, then it was a question of getting a budget, identifying the courses that would help the women they had targeted within the European Structure. She says she would use the management network to look for women that had potential which wasn't being fulfilled. Janet clarifies that it was more of a nudge than a sledgehammer. It would be a suggestion highlighting different courses and mechanisms like coaching, mentoring and training those with the capability and competence.

In the end, Janet left DEC before she could see the benefits of the network, as they offered her redundancy, and she took it. But she does remember several courses that she went on with some peers in Ashridge. This shows that a few women did gain from it.

00:43:55 Janet's career progression and positions at DEC, and misogynistic assumptions

Janet explains her work in technical support mostly consisted in doing updates for Barclays handling floppy disks¹⁰ and RLL2s.¹¹ Within that team, she worked her way up to an account consultant. This saw her communicating the latest updates to senior Barclays staff. This

¹⁰ a flexible removable magnetic disk for storing data

¹¹ Possibly referencing Run-length limited, a line coding technique that is used to send arbitrary data over a communications channel with bandwidth limits.

involved accompanying them to trips to the states to show them the products in Maynard. Janet explains that Barclays was one of DEC's top clients so had a specific account team.

Janet recalls visiting the Monet exhibition in London about four times as DEC was sponsoring it. She took her husband once, and people often assumed he was the DEC employee and she was the support act. He got into interesting conversations where he would have to stop and say he was an air traffic controller, and directed them to Janet. She explains there was the assumption that the man was the person to talk to and not the woman in the tech company. She goes on to say this assumption was held by both men and women, who would ask about children.

The interviewer asks about commitment to her role at DEC, and Janet tells the story of being at work friends for Christmas and one of them being called out due to network or hardware issues. They were being paid to be on call, sorted it out and came back and joined the party again. She links it to DEC's philosophy of 'do the right thing'. She says this was also shown by the fact there was always someone there to support customers, and that you also knew the company backed you 100%, too. Janet is asked if she can remember a customer getting put first over the company, she says it happened but can't recall specifics, just that if something needed doing you got it done.

Janet talks about when she moved to outsourcing, where they were bidding against organizations like IBM for contracts to supply kits or software. This area was supervised more closely and every pound and pence had to be accounted for, which was very different to more front facing scenarios.

When she worked in outsourcing, Janet was a solutions architect where she would sort out the logistics behind the promises made to customers during bidding. So when Barclays were looking to implement PCs across their HQs, Janet would look at the kit and servicing it as well, potentially setting up a call centre or sorting out the VPNs.¹²

She says this role came after moving back to the UK from the European branch, and she used her pre-sales experience too. In Europe, she was a project manager in support services. She was the account manager for Lotus¹³ and Microsoft through their third party vendor services. She was also the business manager for telephone support services. Janet explains that even though Lotus¹⁴ and Microsoft¹⁵ were competitors, with outsourcing, companies used them both on DEC kit, so DEC would have to negotiate service contracts and product licences so that they provide those services themselves.

00:57:03 Changes at DEC and comparison to Compaq

¹² Virtual Private Networks

¹³ Presumably referring to Lotus notes, a productivity software developed by DEC

¹⁴ Lotus Notes

¹⁵ possibly Groupware in those times

Janet says that DEC went from feeling free and open to far more constrained and challenging. Her and the interviewer establish that with the first acquisition or merger when Tandem¹⁶ bought Compaq¹⁷ in 1997 and then bought DEC the following year, it felt like things changed completely. People found it harder to do their jobs as the goalposts changed. They went from the DEC way of doing things to the Compaq way of doing things. She says the informal, chilled out, 'do the right thing' attitude disappeared, everything had to be signed off and rule-based.

Janet details how stricter rules were necessary, but it felt like there was a big corporation that would 'come down on you like a ton of bricks' if you strayed out of them. She highlights that unlike DEC, Compaq was obviously a computer company. By then she was on the outsourcing team, and there was no wiggle-room. She specifies that at Compaq, if the client changed the spec you had to start again at level one and get all the approvals again.

Compaq felt competitive. She says that at DEC, they didn't have to sell themselves as much as the technology sold itself. She names ALL-IN-1¹⁸ as a forefront product, but suggests that DEC's downfall was due to them not doing enough marketing or singing their own praises.

At Compaq, it was all about the brand and specific numbers. It was much more constrained. The interviewer asks if the impression that DEC sold to the engineer while other companies sold to management is accurate and Janet says yes.

01:04:32 After DEC

Janet was made redundant in 2002 just before HP¹⁹ bought DEC from Compaq. She says she took the package as she was in the outsourcing unit and pregnant, and found herself working till 4am to get a bid out. She realised that she was expected to do that instead of just wanting to do it, so she felt the culture had changed and she wasn't comfortable with it.

She left before the HP deal, which she saw as another marker of DEC's decline, and concludes that she just felt happy and privileged to have worked at DEC in its prime, and has never found another company quite like it. Janet says that, because of how DEC was internally, it was a victim of its own success.

Janet took a break to have her first child, and then joined an offshoot of Digital called Global knowledge, an IT training company, as a business project manager. Then she worked in London for a company creating tech apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships. Now the NHS.

01:09:05 Memories of DEC

¹⁶ Referring to Tandem Computers, a manufacturer of computer systems

¹⁷ Compaq was an American computer manufacturer that acquired dec in 1989

¹⁸ an office automation product

¹⁹ Hewlett-Packard, an American multinational information technology company .

She remembers having an interview in Valbonne, France at the same time as some DEC friends who she is still in contact with now. They rented a villa and took their other halves with them for a week. She remembers going to Cannes, Nice, Deville and visiting DEC European exhibitions and staying in the Gray d'Albion.²⁰ She remembers setting up equipment and installing things and providing support as the exhibition went through.

For Janet, the main legacy of DEC is the friendships that she made and has kept till today. She is also thankful for the opportunities they offered her, she didn't realise how lucky she was at the time.

She says that DEC helped develop her confidence in many scenarios: public speaking, presenting, workshops, facilitation. They encouraged 'big picture thinking'. She says she is very good at building proposals now because at DEC they were encouraged to think outside the box in the face of an issue.

Going into it, Janet was just looking for a job, but she says DEC became more than that. It was an amazing foundation of skills development and support, friendship and completely unique. For her it's a huge and wonderful part of her career.

For Janet, she remembers DEC park as unfriendly and very big. She worked with other offshoots on Acre Road. It didn't really compare to being in London. She had also just had a child so the change in social life compared to her experience in Holborn or Oxford Street felt impersonal. She had also worked in the Basingstoke offices. She says she worked during the heydays of London and remembers them fondly.

Compared to her friends, many in the health service, she was one of the top earners as a recent graduate. She was able to buy a flat in Pinner in '84.²¹

01:17:19 Final words: closing remarks, memories, and human legacy

Janet says DEC was a forerunner from a technology point of view, but fell because it didn't market itself. The impact it had on employees was very positive as even though it didn't promote itself outside or inside, everyone absorbed the culture, which was so great and to thank for all the relationships formed when working there. Janet picks up and shows the camera a ruler with a digital logo on it.

Looking back, she remembers winning a trip to Hawaii as an award, where they took to pits out in the concord and Ken Olson was there. She says the awards system was out of this world.

Janet reiterates DEC's human legacy, all her friends who bring warmth as people and also because of how she met them.

²⁰ Hôtel Gray d'Albion in Cannes

²¹ probably 1984