

Debbie Houser: Gannett Fleming leader reflects on her career in tech

By Nicole Chynoweth
contributing writer

Why don't you just go file your nails?

Despite Debbie Houser's ability and desire to complete challenging projects at one of her former jobs, that was the task a manager once assigned to the computer science professional.

Fortunately, the manicure comment is one of very few instances of sexism in the workplace that Houser has experienced in her career.

"I had an experience here or there," she said. "I probably chalked it up to my mom was a teacher so I never felt restricted by being a female. I look back and I really thank my mom for that for making me feel like there was never something I couldn't do."

Today Houser is the vice president of **Geo-Decisions**, Gannett Fleming's geospatial technology division. She is the project manager for the division's largest project - the Department of Defense's U.S. Transportation Command GIS system, for which GeoDecisions implements the latest advances in geospatial technology and location-based services and manages assets like tracking equipment. Her team recently received a Certificate of Appreciation from the Army for their work on integrating its mapping system and the entity's route planning.

"Where I am now, I don't feel any restriction being a female," she said. "I feel so blessed that I've been able to earn a lot of opportunities."

Houser recently shared some of her career insights with CPBJ. Answers have been edited for length and clarity.

As a professional in tech, you've acquired a lot of technical skills to perform your job well. What soft skills have you had to develop to succeed in your work?

Soft skills are probably one of the most important and hardest things to learn. I'm lucky that Gannett Fleming also recognizes how important soft skills are, and I've attended several training classes on leadership, which focused specifically on these soft skills.

The most influential set of classes I took was



Debbie Houser, Vice President of GeoDecisions
(Photo: Submitted)

on Motivational Value Systems (MVS). In these classes, I learned to identify my personality traits, what motivates me, and how I like to communicate. Then I learned about the other types of personalities and how they like to communicate. This allows you to adjust the amount of information you provide someone and how you deliver that information.

You're treasurer of Connected Women, Gannett Fleming's female empowerment and mentorship network. What leadership or business lessons have you learned from being a part of it?

I am a fairly optimistic person by nature, so I always believed that women were making major strides in the workforce. I knew that I was able to advance in my career, so didn't that mean that everyone had this opportunity?

Through being involved with Connect-

ed Women at Gannett Fleming, I have been exposed to more studies that show how far behind women are in some areas of the workforce. For example, there has been little to no progress with women in corporate C-titled jobs like CEO, CFO, CIO, etc., over the last 30 years. There is also a very low number of women going to college to pursue degrees in the math, science, and engineering fields. Why is that happening and what can we do to change that?

By learning more about these types of issues, it allows me to be more aware of what is happening around me and to leverage my leadership position to help other women when merited.

What keeps you engaged in your work, and how do you avoid burnout?

I work on several different projects, which can be challenging to keep track of at times, but it also keeps my mind active. I love to solve problems, so being in a management position where I am constantly looking to see where improvements can be made fulfills that problem-solving need in me.

Burnout is definitely something to be careful of. I try to stay active and go to the gym most mornings, which really helps work off any stress. I enjoy it so much that I am a certified cycling instructor. I also try to use my vacation time each year. Taking time away to be with my family is so important and leaves me feeling refreshed and ready to get back to work.

I'm lucky that my job allows a fairly decent work-life balance. I appreciate it because I don't feel that I need to work 80 hours a week to advance. I work hard when I need to, but sometimes I just don't check my email in the evening. It's important to set boundaries so that your work doesn't rely on you being someone who works constantly. You should be a hard worker and available to be all-in when something comes up, but that shouldn't be how you operate every day of the year.