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*In this episode, Taren Grom, Editor-in-Chief of PharmaVOICE Magazine meets with Melissa Easy, VP, R&DS Technologies IQVIA.*

**Taren:** Melissa, welcome to the WoW podcast program.

**Melissa:** Thank you very much for having me, Taren.

**Taren:** I really should have said Liss because that's how you're better known throughout the industry. And you and I know each other a little bit; we met way back in 2015 after you had founded DrugDev in 2007. Let's start there with your entrepreneurial mission to help sponsors and CROs connect with and support investigators and sites worldwide. Why is this such a driving passion for you?

**Melissa:** Well, I firmly believe that if you're going to do something you should do it well, and I really didn't think that there was a lot of things being done well. So in 2007 people were still faxing doctors and sites to ask them if they were interested in participating in a clinical trial, and I just thought that was crazy, totally crazy, and people kept sort of saying to me 'well, that's the way we've always done it.' 'Doctors don't want to get emails from us.' I was a little bit infuriated because at the same time people would be saying well, what can you do to make it go faster. And so again, it was that passion when I just sort of saw that something could be done better and it could be really simple that really drove me to sort of start DrugDev.

**Taren:** That's excellent. I love it when you get infuriated and you're impassioned because from that stems so many great things. It seems like it was such a long time ago. It was like a different age. What was it like to be a woman to start a tech company in the clinical arena? You were pretty much a trailblazer.

**Melissa:** Well, it's very nice of you to say that. I'll say just starting a company is both exciting and terrifying full stop. And then you're right, it was exacerbated in technology as a female. And just to make it even more complicated something people don't realize about me is that I am not technically trained. So I definitely had some of that imposter syndrome going on. But what I am is I'm a very good listener and I'm a very good communicator and because my passion of trying to simplify things and do them well I really saw that opportunity and that was where DrugDev came from. I mean at first we were literally matching doctors and studies and we didn't need a crazy, complicated technical solution; we needed something very simple. So that's what I put in place.

And a slight divergent, but something I really like to remind women these days is you actually don't need a technical background to work in technology. People need all sorts of skill sets for a group to be successful. And even if you think about technology, think the pace of change is so fast that even if you went to college or university and you have your degree in something technical, you have to keep learning because otherwise you're going to be totally outdated. So people really can break in. I think my advice there is to ask questions and listen and there are recurring themes and you get to understand what different things are and how to do it.

Even if we think about when we all moved into clinical research at first, it is mindboggling to a new person all of the acronyms, the processes, the rules and it's no different in tech. Like it does get simpler as you do it. So that, for me, women in tech, like I think we need more of us. I do think it has really changed, but don't assume you need a technical background.

**Taren:** I think that's excellent advice because I think there are areas that women do self select out of because they think they can't because they don't have that background. Fabulous advice. So since starting DrugDev, how much or how little has changed?

**Melissa:** Well, that's funny. So personally I now have two children, a dog, I've moved to another country and we sold DrugDev to IQVIA, so you could say a little bit has changed. But from the industry perspective, I think there's also been a lot of change. And if I focus more on sort of what I've seen from customers' technical journeys, so it's the digitization used to and sort of talking about technical innovation used to be buzzwords. Like if we think back I think it was 2011 that Pfizer did that entirely virtual study. I think it was called REMOTE. We all sort of heard about how expensive it was and thought of it as being so super innovative, but now if you look at what we're doing in the industry, I mean decentralized clinical trials have started to become the norm in a lot of what we're talking about.

But one of the other differences I think is the way people are using data to make informed decisions in real time and really thinking about different user journeys throughout technical ecosystems. So it is crazy we for awhile as an industry just kept coming up with point solutions and sort of throwing them at science, throwing them at patients, throwing them to the sponsors. Whereas now I think it's a lot more coordinated and pulled together and just thinking of it from the different users versus how do we just try and make it quicker.

**Taren:** I think that's an excellent point. Quicker is great, less expensive is great, but thinking about it from a user perspective is even better because...

**Melissa:** Yeah. Quality is key.

**Taren:** Quality is key and in thinking about the patients who have to be or the stars of the show are often in the backseat sometimes.

**Melissa:** Correct.

**Taren:** We talked about DCTs. You just brought that up and that is obviously one of the hottest trends going right now. Is this trend going to continue? Are we in a new place? What's your view on DCTs (decentralized clinical trials) and is it truly a game changer?

**Melissa:** Yes, I believe it is a game changer and yes, I believe it is here to stay. I do think however, Taren, that it means something different to everyone. I think, for me, it is if any component of a study that used to occur at a site that is now happening in the patient's home or it is happening online, data being collected with all the various devices, to me that is a decentralized clinical trial. It does not have to be 100% virtual and I think there is an amazing work happening in the industry, it's really collaborative about how do we define what this means. How do we all sort of come together and think of it in the same way? So I think that's great.

Why I think that this is a game changer is that even think about how long it takes the average patient to get to a clinical research site many often have to take time off work, many of them can't afford to do that. So I think it's a game changer because if we can make the burden of participating in a study a lot less, more patients are going to be interested in actually participating in clinical research. And right now given COVID, I think it's been really fabulous for the industry because there has been such a light shown onto clinical trials. I have never discussed my job so much with people than I have in the last year with people kind of asking questions about is it safe, because they seem to be doing it so much faster than what a normal trial is run... and all of that, so I think we as an industry need to capitalize on the fact that everyone is so hyper aware about clinical trials now and get more patients interested and then by making it easier for them to participate, I think it's great.

I have also in my role I get to talk to many, many sponsors, and I'm seeing they're all approaching decentralized trials slightly differently. But I will say there are some companies that have been really aggressive in this area and they are actually setting targets and metrics for themselves and they are by protocol having study teams explain why something was not remote, why is it in person. I mean clearly some studies it has to be in person, but if it doesn't need to be, some customers are sort of saying – or sponsors I should say – are sort of saying well, how could we make this remote because there was – and that's what they're starting to think of is what the next innovations in the industries need to be, and I think it's super exciting.

**Taren:** That is super exciting. Wow. I hadn't heard that before, but when the sponsors are driving this then that's fabulous and that is really thinking about the culmination of everything that we've seen over the last five, seven years towards this patient-centricity movement, which was said so often it almost lost meaning, but now it really is putting the patient at the center of a clinical trial.

**Melissa:** Yes.

**Taren:** That's fabulous. Talk to me about your current role at IQVIA and where you're concentrating your efforts.

**Melissa:** So my current role is it's really fun because I get to speak to a lot of sponsors and as you can probably guess, oh you know Taren, I love talking to people. So no day is ever the same for me. But what we're really focused on right now is the sort of making sure people understand our end to end clinical trial platform. We call it orchestrated clinical trial platform (or OCT) because again, going back to the acronyms this industry, we love a good acronym, and really thinking about user journeys. So for example the site, the patient, sponsor, the CRA and really looking at the technologies we've got, the data we've got and how can we provide connected intelligence.

And so what I mean by that is we're really looking at using – we have so much data at our fingertips, so whether that be real-world data, historical data and really looking to make sure that we can pull that data together and use it. So we need some AI ML and different analytics so that we can really look at different insights that can help us drive actions or what the next best action should be in real time. I think that's going to make a phenomenal difference because rather than getting a report or sort of having to manually dig into detail and try and understand what a trend is, it arises almost in real time so that we can actually quickly take action. And so I believe that's going to really save a lot of time and money, but most importantly if we think about patient safety because there is nothing lagging; we have all the trends and everything we need. And so we're really looking now at trying to truncate with data how you sort of bring that intelligence and how you shave months off by having automated insights there, and it's really exciting to look at some of the impact that that is starting to have on studies.

**Taren:** That is exciting. And I love how you use the term user journey as well as the next best action. It holds true all of that as it relates to patients, patient safety, efficacy, speed and cost and time, all those things that we all are striving for to bring more and better medicines to the market for those patients in need. What a wonderful approach to thinking about what you're doing. You're at the top of your game right now and you've won several awards along the way. What does it mean to be a role model for women throughout the industry, not just tech, but throughout the industry?

**Melissa:** Well, I'm honored that you and maybe other people think of me as a role model because...

**Taren:** I do!

Melissa: ... getting there, now I've got my awkward embarrassed laugh happening, which is wrong. I should try and embrace it. It's a nice positivity. For me, I really try and create a very inclusive environment where anyone can succeed, and I really do love helping women succeed throughout their careers. And when I have been asked before about how I support women and I sort of looked at it – and most of the women that have reported to me have had career growth and promotions under me, and I am super proud of that and how they've really progressed their career under my leadership.

I really like to encourage women to widen career paths for themselves. Like before when I was talking about you don't have to be a technologist to be in technology, people's careers don't... it

doesn't need to prescriptive, and so I really like to try and give people further opportunities and drive excellence for themselves. But I will say even outside of my direct team I do get approached about doing a lot of mentoring and coaching and I do behind the scenes do a lot of sponsorship of women at work as well because I do feel like I can use my influence to create a really positive impact for women.

One of the most rewarding things is when you are either coaching someone or mentoring someone, and I see coaching as being a bit less informal. So I see someone do something in a meeting and I'll sort of call them afterwards or email them and said hey, you did this, you shouldn't have.

One piece of feedback I'd give myself from my reaction about being embarrassed that you're giving me a compliment, I would normally call people I have in the past and said, 'hey, just accept it. Accept the compliment. It's true. You've done it.' So we all need to continue taking our own advice.

But mentoring, being much more regular with very specific areas that you're working on and for me watching someone absorb my advice and then actually go and do it and see that I have made a difference in someone's career is super rewarding. I have never had a mentoring relationship that I haven't gotten something out of. I find that maybe I am the most senior person, but I always learn from the other person. It doesn't matter how senior you get, you still learn regardless of the level or who – everyone brings different experience to the table. But I wish I had more time to mentor more people, but I find it really rewarding to be able to help women in that way.

**Taren:** Well kudos to you for carving out the time and widening that path for women. And I think you touched on something a little bit earlier too is that sponsorship piece. There's coaching and there's mentoring, but it's that sponsorship piece that is so important to widen the lane for women because they need sponsors to get them to that next level. And thank you for doing that as well.

**Melissa:** People often don't even realize that's going on, and I think it's something that we can all, regardless of our level, really sponsor more women. Because women historically, or generally I should say, don't stand up for themselves and maybe it's not as broad... people aren't as broadly aware of what they're really good at because they often just get on with it. But anyone I've worked with that I think should have an opportunity I will have their back and they won't even know it. And I do believe I've had many sponsors, especially at my time throughout IQVIA, and I will say I think they've generally been men because when it comes to progressing women in the workplace it is not just women's job to do that; we need men doing that as well. I have absolutely experienced that. I encourage everyone to sponsor someone who they think is working really hard and deserving in the background and not feel that you need to get credit for it. Just tell the right people and then move on and watch what happens.

**Taren:** That's excellent point, excellent point. We need everybody together and that's what so important is we've seen report after report where the most successful businesses have that

diversity of thought and perspective and that includes gender diversity as well as other diversity points as well – points of view. So it's so important. A little bit ago, you said your leadership style is very inclusive. How else would you describe yourself as a leader, and then what are some of those leadership lessons you've learned along the way to the C-suite that could help other women, or men for that matter, to achieve success in their careers?

**Melissa:** I am very transparent, maybe sometimes to a fault. I am also very collaborative. I really believe that – I mean even when I look at my responsibilities today, I believe that I know the least of anyone in my team on any given topic, but it is my job to gather the information from all the different sources in light of the goals I'm set by the company to make the right decision. I really firmly believe that collaborative teams are high functioning teams. I also think a mix of 50-50 men and women also makes for very high performing teams because of the different perspectives that are brought to the table.

I also think my number one priority is to do the right thing for IQVIA, not myself, not my career and I find I really do internalize and believe that. I find that having done that, it has removed all sorts of politics because I again, being very transparent I don't have time for politics. It's so obvious when someone is playing it that I can't believe people think that they're really clever, and I actually believe that has been a key to my success. So I think that's definitely sort of my style and advice I have for people.

But when it comes to things that I think leaders need to do I am very clear in regards to expectations with my team, and we will have conversations, and very direct conversations if I'm not getting what I need. And because I approach it in terms of not trying to be a stick and have a go at someone that they haven't done something, the reason I'm asking them for it, it's the intent behind the conversation. Because it can be really hard to tell someone that they're not living up to expectations, but if the intent is to help them grow or the intent is to make sure that a particular initiative succeeds, people actually love getting feedback. I know I get less and less feedback the more senior I become, and I ask people for advice. I say well, how could I have done this better, how can I do this, and at first people are amazingly uncomfortable at the thought that they might need to give some negative feedback to someone more senior, but even more senior people when we often – people like to have positive conversations, but if we don't have some of those direct and honest conversations, how do we grow. And so that for me is if it's coming from the right place and your intent is to help someone improve, have those difficult conversations. I think that is definitely something that I have learned.

And then in regards to the C-suite and dealing with people in the C-suite, I think this is where you've got to think about knowing your audience. C-suite executives I mean they jump from meeting to meeting on topic to topic very broad, so my advice is to be succinct, to be very clear and remind them upfront why you're meeting. What is the point of your meeting because it can be hard, the more meetings you have a day to sort of go okay, what gear am I shifting to now, and so I think that that is always appreciated.

The other thing is if they ask you a question and you don't know the answer, don't make it up because that will get you in more trouble down the track. You say you don't know. You say you

will find out and you make it your priority to very quickly get back to them with what you didn't know. That proactiveness and the honesty will get you much further than lying and being caught out later on if you answered in the wrong way.

**Taren:** That's great advice, and I also have to applaud you for being open to being vulnerable and asking for feedback whether it's positive or negative from your team, from your peers because not everybody is willing to do that. So that really takes a lot of strength and a lot of guts to do, so kudos to you. Let's dial up the way back machine. Is there anything you know now that you wish you had known earlier in your career? If I had just known this 25 years ago, I could be so much further ahead. Or if I had known *that*, I wouldn't have made *that* mistake.

**Melissa:** How long do we have? ☺ So a few things. If I look back one thing I used to feel really uncomfortable that I did not have a career path mapped out. Some people who were very ambitious like I'm going to do this for this many years and then going to do this and going to move on to this and I'd be like whoa, I don't know what I want to do next, let alone what I'm going to be doing in 10, 15 years. It did used to make me feel a little bit inadequate. So my advice is that's okay. It's really okay. One of my mantras is you've got this. So I feel a little bit nervous. I feel like I've got a massive task that I have to start to work out how to do, and I repeat that, I even have – if we had video on, I could show you – I even have it up on my wall. Anything is possible and you can achieve it if you put your mind to it.

I mean I would have never thought that I was going to start a company or that when I did where that might end up. So continually pushing myself is something that I watch when I look back.

There is one piece of advice I often give younger women who especially those that you can tell are exceptionally ambitious and have very big plans, and I think people kind of look at me shocked when I have given this advice. But for a lot of women who they choose to marry is going to have more of an impact on their career than their level of ambition. Personally, I have been very, very lucky to have a super supportive husband. It's probably a bit of a competition who is my biggest cheerleader – if it is my mom or my husband. But people do need to think about that as well as when they are thinking about their career and I was lucky. I look back now and I realize how lucky I was, and so that is something that I think people kind of maybe should think about as well.

**Taren:** I think that is an amazing piece of advice and you're right, because without the support you can't have it all. Because you need to have somebody who's in your corner and who's willing to pick up those pieces when you can't pick them all up. I think that's tremendous. And just as an aside I also am very intimidated by those who have made out that career path by decade or by job or what have you. I never did that either and I, too, often feel inadequate because I didn't have it all laid out. So I'm glad that I'm not alone, so thank you for that.

**Melissa:** Can I tell you I don't know what's next. I don't know where I wish to move, and I'm really comfortable with where I am at the moment. I'm still learning. I feel like I'm making a difference, so I'm not really thinking about what's next. And again, that is something that makes a lot of people really uncomfortable because they don't know if they feel they need to be

working towards that next thing. But it is okay to just make sure so long as you are learning still and stretching yourself, I think you're in the right place at the right time and a new opportunity will present itself when the time is right.

**Taren:** Couldn't agree with you more, so thank you for that. And it's not that I don't admire those who have that laid out plan, I'm just not one of those people. So I often too felt like ooph, what am I missing here, but thank you. So finally, tell me about an accomplishment or a wow moment that shaped your career.

**Melissa:** These questions are getting harder. Okay. I would tell you. So I think the turning point in my career was not actually starting DrugDev, but there was a really large deal that I was bidding on and I was up against some really large tech companies that I know sent in teams of people for a bid defense and I turned up by myself. That was terrifying to be presenting to a very large roomful of people up there by yourself, but to add to that – well, first off I should say that I won the work, and I think that was the real turning point for DrugDev and as a result my career, but at the time I was three months pregnant. No one knew. I didn't actually suffer from morning sickness, but I had been doing quite a bit of international travel in the days when we were allowed to and I actually started to have during this bid had morning sickness, didn't really wish to tell anyone.

As an aside, I suffered from recurrent miscarriages and the particular pregnancy I'm talking about was my oldest son, so I was never very keen to have the conversation about the fact that 'oh I'm sorry, I'm suffering from some morning sickness' because maybe the next time I saw them that could be an awkward conversation. But I was looking around the room trying to find a bin, or for Americans a trash can, thinking oh my God, how am I going to explain to this room of 30 people why I have just been sick in a bin in front of all of them.

But I will say that I do think that managing to get through it, telling myself you've got this, you'll get through it, you'll be out of the room in a few minutes was probably the defining moment of my career.

**Taren:** You are just the epitome of fearless. Unbelievable. I just I am so inspired by you, by your just your thought processes, your fortitude and your just fearless approach to everything. You're really amazing.

**Melissa:** Oh, thank you.

**Taren:** What a story. I'm so glad you won the business and I'm *so glad* that it resulted also in the birth of your first son. That's tremendous.

**Melissa:** Yes.

**Taren:** Well, good for you. Congratulations on everything and I can't wait to see what's next for you whenever that may be.





**Melissa:** Thank you, Taren.

**Taren:** Thank you, Liss, for being so much a part of our WoW podcast program. Thanks for sharing your story. Thank you for being vulnerable with us and really sharing those deep insights.

**Melissa:** Well, thank you so much, Taren. I really enjoyed myself today.

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