

Inspiring Women

Episode 54: Miruna Sasu

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. I am your host, Laurie McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership and over the years I've come to learn one thing. Women need women and not just any women, but inspiring women. Tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at inspiringwomen.show or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening. And I hope you will be inspired.

Welcome to this episode of Inspiring Women. And today we're talking with Dr. Miruna Sasu. Now, Dr. Sasu is the Chief Strategy Officer of COTA, which is a company that focuses on data and analytics working on cancer, the research and how to advance care patterns with cancer. Now, most recently, Miruna was the head of Johnson and Johnson's clinical trial feasibility and advanced analytics team. She's got over 20 years of experience leading life sciences organizations, and she is an accomplished executive with a track record, having driven broad-based digital innovation at organizations like Johnson and Johnson and Bristol Myers Squibb. She has a PhD in biology and statistics, a master's in business administration. And Dr. Sasu, I am so excited to be speaking with you today on Inspiring Women.

Miruna Sasu:

Same here, Laurie. Thanks so much for having me. Very excited for our conversation.

Laurie McGraw:

Great. Well, I want to get into what you do, but I also want to say, congratulations, you're a new mom. So that's also a pretty exciting and I want to talk about how you do that with your executive professional career as well. But as we always start on Inspiring Women, I like to get a sense for what are you doing right now? What are you doing professionally? You've been in this role at COTA for about half a year. What does your day-to-day look like?

Miruna Sasu:

Yeah, great question. I love that. Thanks very much for the congrats. It's a really wonderful thing being a mother. In my personal life, certainly I will get into that in a little bit later, but my professional life, my role here at COTA is Chief Strategy Officer, so my remit is really about understanding the competitive landscape, understanding our competitors, as well as our clients, and really bringing the company into that future vision and putting an operations plan around that future vision. So what we do here at COTA as you very well stated is we actually work with

electronic medical records and data, and we make sense of that data. And we analyze it for doctors at health care provider sites, as well as life science companies. And so in order for us to always be on the cutting edge of that, we have to utilize advanced analytics as well as data science and so on and so forth.

So we always have to keep ourselves and our company on the cutting edge. And to do that we really have to go through a visioning exercise every so often to ensure that we have the right technology, the right people, and that we're moving in the direction, not only with our competitors, but also ahead of our competitors. So that is my role here. In addition to that, I am a life science company expert. As you mentioned, I worked at Johnson and Johnson as well as Bristol Myers Squibb. And so I'm kind of an insider from that perspective. And so really understanding our clients and what they need and what they will need for the future is something that I have brought to COTA to help with that visioning exercise. So in a nutshell, that is on a daily basis what I do. I lead teams and I am leading the company into that future vision that we're also excited about.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, Miruna, your background in statistics and life sciences, that seems like it perfectly situates you for COTA, about a ten-year old company in the space of analytics. And we'll talk about big data because that is an emergent field and a critical field and lots to parse through there, but let's talk about you. So how did you get there? You've got a biology background. You've got a statistics background. How did you take steps career wise? Did you have a vision of where you were going? Did you just fall into the next thing? I always like for women executives the how did you get there story is always really helpful to listeners.

Miruna Sasu:

Yeah. Great question. And something I'm really passionate about is helping women and other people who want to advance in their careers, get to that next step. So the way I did was I decided very early on when my family and I went through, what am I going to do for the rest of my life? I really decided early on, I'm going to go pursue the highest level of education I possibly can. And that is what spring-boarded me into a lot of different opportunities. And to start with, when I went from my bachelor's degree to the PhD program, I had a very interesting decision to make. Would I go get my MD or would I go get my PhD? And that decision was made very, very easy because I'm not able to be in a hospital.

So I decided to go get my PhD. And after I finished my PhD, my journey throughout that PhD time, I thought to myself, do I want to be an academic? Do I want to be a professor or do I want to go into industry? And it took me a while to understand where I really wanted to go. I decided I was going to try to go into industry for a lot of reasons, but from there, I said, what do I have to do to line up opportunities for myself after a doctorate degree to get into industry? And I ended up going through a pathway in the federal government. So from my doctorate degree, I applied to a whole bunch of different jobs. And I decided to go with a role at the Department of Agriculture. I was their first and only statistician at that time because I decided my statistics degree was going to be the selling point to non-academic jobs.

So I went there and I performed a statistician's role for about a year and a half when they decided, Hey, I think she can actually lead people. And so why don't we have her build us an ecosystem for data capture and analytics within the food safety inspection service. And I did that for quite a few years. After which, and during which I was networking a lot. And really the next step for me was one that I decided to take because of a personal situation. And that was my grandfather was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer. And I have a very, very soft spot in my heart for my grandfather. He and my grandmother raised me while I was still living in Romania, which is something we can talk about as well. But he was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer and entered a clinical trial, which saved his life. And when that happened, I said, I want to work for the company that made that happen for me. And I want to do it for other people.

Laurie McGraw:

Those personal moments. And so, first of all, I'm sorry you had that experience. And those family moments, which impact you and shape you in ways, but then drive you to a passion and to fulfill something, to do something about it, that makes sense to me. And I know many people like yourself who have pursued next level impactful careers because of something that influenced them deeply personally. Miruna, when you had that aha, I want to pursue, I want to have that impact, I also think it's interesting the background in statistics, I mean, we all know about big data today. We all know how important that is, but 15 years ago, 20 years ago, statisticians, we weren't talking about big data. How did that connection happen? And how did you know that would become a really a great place to double down focus on because in the strategy that you lead now, it's all about big data to get to insights, to advance cancer treatments.

Miruna Sasu:

Yeah, absolutely. I've always been attracted to math and analytics. Always. Which is part of the reason that my second PhD is in statistics. So when I left academia, I very quickly realized that my biology degree was going to get me into the industry through a lab pathway. And I said, I'm not sure that I want to go in that direction. So the data space is a place... I was always good at math. I always good at statistics. And so I thought, let me just try this for a while. Let me just apply to some statistician roles. And I was pretty good at it. And I enjoyed it. And big data really didn't come into the picture until I would say six or seven years back when I started incubating companies that have data, right? At that time the electronic medical records curation was not really being done at scale.

And so it was almost a close my eyes and dream type of scenario. How could I take big data, put it at the core of what a pharmaceutical company does? The data that is not clinical trial data, for example. And so that became a reality, when we started working with companies like COTA to make the data, to really put together the data set that we would need for these analytics. And some of the most interesting outcomes that we have had out of these analytics have come from big data. So I got even more interested in big data and decided to come to COTA and actually make it. So it really has been a journey for me. And big data has always been at the top of my mind, but it didn't start there. My thinking wasn't, let's go after big data. It was, let's go after trying to answer the really pertinent medical questions that we need to extend patients' lives.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, and your background seems perfectly aligned to where we are now. I mean, we're at a time in healthcare where big data, innovation, digital advancement, it is happening at an, I think, accelerated an unprecedented pace. Some of that is most undoubtedly the pandemic, but these trends have been coming for a bit of time. So the work that you're doing now, some of the things that I've read about, interviews that you've done, writings that you've put forward, that you really want to turn the spigot on when it comes to oncology and solving some of the very complex issues there. So how are you thinking about it? And one of the things that anyone who knows anything about big data is that it's messy data at best, and that's part of the issue to get to insights. So how are you thinking about those problems and how do you expect to advance in those areas?

Miruna Sasu:

I love that. I love that question. So the first thing we had to do was to have access to this big data. And now we do. Especially in oncology. There are many companies, not just COTA, that are going after this and have data arsenals. So having the data is actually tremendously important and now allows the analytics that we need to answer those big questions. So now that we have that and that we're growing, that we have to think about, and many of the issues that you've listed are very pertinent to everyone in the industry, the questions around data missingness and methodologies that are needed to account for that, so that when we make sense of the data and we analyze it, the methodologies are appropriate. And traditional statistical methods are fine, but you're right.

They don't necessarily always account for and correct for some of the things that big data and messy data, for example, innately have, right? And so the methodologies are just as important as the data itself. So now we're thinking about algorithms and analytical methodologies that are needed to make sense of the data that we have in its current state. And of course, part of that is not just how do we analyze the data that we have, but how do we potentially make the data better? And so some of the algorithms and artificial intelligence that you're going to hear about over the next few years as well, are not only to analyze the data and to answer questions, like how do we extend patients' lives? They're also to go in and really make the data more palatable to an algorithm and to put it in a better format, to be consumed by algorithms that need to answer those questions.

Laurie McGraw:

Miruna, one of the other angles that I wanted to ask you about on these problems and getting to the insight to the data is the human capital, the talent, to work on these problems. You are a double PhD, a data scientist, and expert yourself, but you're also one of few data scientists that are women. There are far more men in this field. And we also know that there are simply not enough data scientists or professionals to work on these problems. And beyond just the gender differences, we also know that the BIPOC, the levels of racial differences and biases that might be within data are part of the problems. So what are you seeing? Are we making progress there? Do we have enough talent? Do we have enough pipeline of talent? And if we don't, should we be optimistic about this? I'd love your thoughts on those areas.

Miruna Sasu:

We can do more here. We can do more. I would say we don't have enough talent. Do we have the right talent? That's something to be debated as well. I think one of the misconceptions about how you can analyze data and how you can make a difference in this space is that you have to be a data scientist. I don't actually think that's true. Data scientists come in many forms. So there are mathematicians, there are statisticians, there are data scientists that work, for example, just in machine learning. There are data scientists that work, for example, just in analytical algorithms. And there are data scientists that work on IT systems. So there are a lot of different pathways that folks that have a math degree or can go into math because, for example, they have a genetics degree. There are many, many ways to take a degree and actually practice data analytics. So do I think that we have enough people in this space? I think number one, we don't have enough people in this space.

So I would love to see campaigns about how folks that want to potentially pursue a career here can get there. I think it's very challenging to understand what jobs might be available for folks who have this type of proclivity, for example, or if they want to go in this direction, how do you actually get there? What jobs to look for and what job descriptions to go after, even if you don't have 100% of all of the attributes on a job description. Do you even apply to a job, for example, in this space? I think that's one aspect of it. And the second aspect of it is having the ability to take a next step and maybe try something in this area. I think a lot of folks think, oh, no. I'm a geneticist by trade, or, oh, I have a bachelor's degree in psychology, for example. So I could never do this. I'm interested in it, but I could never do it. I would say that's not true. I think part of it is having educational opportunities and having the colleges and universities be able to steer students in the right pathway and the way to get there, because a lot of times these roles are a little bit confusing, to be honest.

Laurie McGraw:

It's emerging. And so that's actually encouraging quite frankly, that your view is a more expansive versus narrow set of skills that can be used and pointed at solving some of these really. I mean, I view them as super complex problems, but with tremendous opportunity, which doesn't mean there's a clear path, but that if there are more opportunities to address these problems from different angles, skillsets, as long as, as you're suggesting, that there's a math orientation and we'll call that STEM. It's something where there's a lot of attention to building out more STEM capabilities in both schooling and other things. So that's very, very encouraging. Miruna, I'd love to turn the conversation a bit to what's going on in your life. So you are a new mother and you took this new executive role when you were far along in your pregnancy. And you've talked a bit about modern motherhood. What does it look like now that you could take on a new executive role while at the same time, beginning your family? So, first of all, again, congratulations, but tell us what's going on there and your thoughts. You've got some really interesting ideas that I think are really relevant for today's time.

Miruna Sasu:

Thank you. Yeah. Thank you very much. It's been such a pleasure. My son is an amazing addition to our family. We're so excited to have him. So I did take my current role, which is a very senior role while I was pretty far along in my pregnancy. It was a career decision I made with my husband. I have been very lucky to have an incredibly supportive husband and someone in my life that I absolutely could not live without. But I think one aspect of what I'd like to convey is your support system doesn't have to come from necessarily a significant other. I also have a very supportive family. I have my brother and my mother at this point as well, who have always been huge supporters. And I would say, even if you don't have any of those things, the network that you create can be a supporting network.

And, building that supporting network is the number one step to doing something, for example, moving from Johnson and Johnson, who a lot of folks said, why are you moving from Johnson and Johnson?

Laurie McGraw:

Right.

Miruna Sasu:

That's crazy, right? You're at the peak of your career. Johnson and Johnson is the place to be. And that's true for a lot of folks. And for me, it was a calculated risk. It was a calculated decision that I made with my support system. And I would say you cannot live without that aspect of it. Create yourself a support system that you can trust when you're making decision in your life to give it to you straight. So that's the number one piece. The second piece is for me, I've always been a bit of a risk taker.

People hire me for a couple of reasons, right? One is, if you're looking for big ideas, Miruna's your girl. If you're looking to change something drastically, Miruna's your girl, and I've always been a bit of a risk taker. That may not be you, right? But you have to make the right decision for you. For me, it's always about being intellectually stimulated and being fulfilled on several different levels. My family certainly is one of them, but I need to be doing something with my brain. I need to be stimulated in an intellectual way. And so when I have done something and I feel something is complete, I need to move on to the next endeavor. And that's where I was in my career. And this was the opportunity for me. And when I made that decision, it was all about being fulfilled on those levels. Motherhood is certainly one, but intellectually is another.

Laurie McGraw:

I love the way that you talk about motherhood. And just to read a quote from you, this is what modern motherhood should look like, strong, determined, supported, and fulfilled. And I think that those are very powerful words and a terrific description for others to hear as everyone's navigating. That's always a big part of a life change with motherhood. So Miruna, there's so many different angles to this that I'd love to talk you about, but just in the time that we've got, as you are at this next level, executive level of your career, as we close out Inspiring Women, I'd just love to get your closing thoughts of advice you might have, the things that meant the most to

you, whether it was a book that you read or a person that was influential in helping you establish the next steps of your executive career. Would you mind just giving some comments?

Miruna Sasu:

Certainly. The one thing I want to make sure our listeners understand is that no matter what dream you have, no matter what inspiration you might have, it's all okay. It's okay to pursue it. You should pursue it. Whatever that is. That may be different for me than it is for others as well. So I do have a couple of very big supporters in my life. My husband again is someone I could absolutely not live without. He is my rock and someone that I trust just absolutely completely and helps me make decisions that are best for me and that are best for us. That's a really big, important part in having someone you trust to run your ideas by and to say, does this make sense? How do we go about this? I would also leave you with this.

Truly, there's never a right time for these moves to be made. Becoming a mother was not necessarily something we were planning on exactly at this moment in our life. Me moving to COTA in an executive role, it was not exactly something that we were planning on at this point in my life necessarily. But when it comes, you should have the courage and fortitude and the support system to be able to make a call. And I think that is truly, truly freeing. There's never a right time. And if you go after it, when you go after it, is the time that is right for you. So I will just leave our listeners with that. There is never a wrong time. You should go after your dreams and always pursue your desires and your potential future.

Laurie McGraw:

Those are really strong words and terrific advice, as well as having the trusted support from others to help you on that journey. This has been an excellent Inspiring Women conversation. I have been speaking with Dr. Miruna Sasu. And Miruna, Thank you so much.

Miruna Sasu:

And thank you, Laurie.

Laurie McGraw:

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