

## Digital Eve: Working to give high-tech world a human face

By DAWN HENWOOD

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THEY COULD have called themselves Digital Lilith. Like Adam's mythical first wife, who would not lie beneath him, they refuse to bend to sexist stereotypes. "They" are Digital Eve, a group of women from various fields of IT, and I've joined them for one of their monthly meet and greets at a downtown pub. Despite their rebel attitude, though, I soon learn that what brings these women together is not just their common complaints, but rather their community-minded outlook.

As the women of Digital Eve introduce themselves, it's not hard to hear the common note of defiance. The computer programmer across the table proudly tells me she used to drive race cars. The young woman on my left laughs over her college nickname of "The Pest." Grinning, another member of the circle describes how she recently flummoxed a software salesman who was shocked to find a woman running a company's IT department.

These women are conscious thorns in the side of an industry that's based in a notoriously testosterone-driven culture. Yet their networking group focuses more on nurturing than on protesting. An international not-for-profit organization, Digital Eve connects women who work in IT with one another, but its broader mission is to connect the IT world with the community at large. Sure, the group gives women a friendly space to whine about the hassles and headaches of working in a fast-paced, male-dominated field. But for the women with whom I speak, the real pleasure of belonging to Digital Eve seems to be the chance to "help," a word that comes up time and time again in our conversation.

Despite the good-natured grumbling, the members of Digital Eve clearly love what they do, even when a job situation is less than ideal. They come from a wide variety of IT-related professions. They are programmers, software engineers, network administrators, web developers, new media designers, IT consultants and technical writers. The common bond, says executive director Tracey Gant, is that the women of Digital Eve are all "very creative." Gant, a programmer/analyst with Nicom Ltd., compares her job to playing in a sandbox all day. "I don't get up and go to work," she says. "I have a blast, and they pay me."

Such enthusiasm spills over into Digital Eve's community work. Part of the group's mandate is to encourage women to become interested in IT. On an official level, this means that Digital Eve Nova Scotia supports educational events, such as the We Can Do IT Day for girls hosted by Mount Saint Vincent University. The chapter also runs a program called C.O.DE, Community Online DEsign, which provides web development for not-for-profit organizations.

On an informal level, Digital Eve provides information and problem-solving advice to women from all walks of life. I'm surprised to learn that the group's open listserv is not for techies only. Far from it. Over the years, Digital Eve's members have fielded calls for help from novices in the IT field, individuals considering a career in IT, or people simply struggling with a new piece of technology. Inquiries from neophytes are always welcome, even if they're questions about how to make a piece of consumer software work or how to use the web to help a child with a school research project.

Approximately 170 women belong to Digital Eve's Nova Scotia chapter, an impressive number for a province whose high-tech industry is still struggling to earn a permanent place on the map. Angela Granchelli, owner of the online pet boutique Hounds Around Town and the chapter's first director, offers a simple explanation for the group's local appeal: "Maybe it's a Maritime thing. People just like to help."

Maybe women just like to help. That's the opinion the rest of the group echoes. Women, they tell me, are natural bridge-builders and translators. They're innately good at expressing technical

material in user-friendly ways. They have sympathy for the technologically illiterate and the computerphobic. Perhaps they have some kind of "maternal instinct," someone suggests, for those who need a hand up.

As the women enjoy revisiting problems they've helped solve and friendships they've formed, I understand why Eve, not Lilith, is the group's icon. If Eve was the archetypal female rebel, she was also the first human mother. What makes Digital Eve distinct as an IT networking group is that it works hard to give the high-tech world a human face. IT is not the only field in which we need more of such progressive nurturing to inspire women to reach for new heights of creativity and confidence.

To find out more about Digital Eve Nova Scotia, you can visit the group's website at <http://digitalevenovascotia.org/index.htm>.

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