

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 222



Transcript – Fi Slaven on the intersection of governance, technology and risk

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, I'm speaking with Fi Slaven about governance, technology and risk. Before we start that discussion, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we record today. For me, I'm on the unseeded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and I pay respects to Elder's past and present, I acknowledge their continuing connection to land waters and culture. I support the Uluru Statement from the Heart and I encourage others in the Take on Board community to do the same.

Now let me introduce Fi. Fi is on the boards of Austin Health, Chair of the Spinal Research Institute and Crime Stoppers Victoria. She has previously been on the board of Vic ICT for Women. Fi as a diversity inclusion, equality and technology enthusiast, which he actively promotes through her roles as director for William Buck Victoria and her non executive board roles. He has an exciting career path that includes roles like intensive care nurse, Director of Nursing, national CIO, and Australian ICT Woman of the Year, in short, feed, genuinely loves working with people and enacting change. Welcome to the Take on Board podcast Fi.

Fi Slaven 1:08

I am delighted to be here Helga, I've been looking forward to it.

Helga Svendsen 1:11

It is so awesome to have you. And we've had already had all sorts of interesting conversations. And in fact, I should say shout out to Hannah Browne for sending you my way to have you on the podcast. It's not often, you know, it's a really interesting career path, nurse to ICT. So I'm gonna dig into some of that background. And then you might tell us about your experience with Crime Stoppers as well. But let's dig into some of the background. So tell me about your upbringing and the lessons that you learned. What did you get up to? And who were the leading influences on how you thought and what you did?

Fi Slaven 1:43

Oh, that's great questions. I was raised in a very rural Victoria. Small country towns. And unusually, my mother was university educated, but my father was not. And so I have two sisters. And we all went to university and we were pretty much raised with, you can do anything if you work hard enough, which probably is not true. But anyway, we were all involved. And we believed it at the time, so good one to my parents, so and they really encouraged us. And it was all about equality. My dad was surrounded by strong women, including the dog and the cat, there were women. So he had no males to bond with. But if he needed help, he came to us. So there's no waiting for a male to help, or you were just seen as being equal. And I think having those strong role models definitely helped, that you're in a small country environment where you need to be self sufficient. You need to look after yourself and help others and very strong on community, as such. So I thank my parents for all those values.

Helga Svendsen 2:49

You know, for your Dad, I'm kind of interested in how he came to be in that place, and was not, I'm hoping maybe, maybe I'm wrong, but wasn't threatened by that. Just, you know, here's how it is. And the women in my world are all strong, smart women, and I can go to them, I'm guessing that wasn't really common in that time. So what was it about him do you think that made him comfortable enough in his own self to be able to do that?

Fi Slaven 3:14

I think he was, he wouldn't like the term feminist. He's no longer with a spent I'm sure he would not like that. And he wouldn't view himself as that. I think he would view himself as tolerant. So tolerant of women that knew what they wanted what they wanted to do, and that they were willing to work to pursue that. And that doesn't always get you where you want to go. But he was very supportive of that. And because it was so strong in the community, is really hard to say, promote equality as such, and look after everybody equitably if you're not doing the same at home, and he would have been called on it. And there were things that mum really did have the strengths in and started way. And in fact, I remember helping Dad after you're retired because his work called him back and he said, I'll go back. I said, Oh, no, I'm going to negotiate far better deal. And he turned to me said, all that university really has started to pay off. It's like, I'm happy to help you Dad, because he was willing to link in where we had expertise.

Helga Svendsen 4:16

Well, I hope he's not turning in his grave for me calling him a feminist. My apologies to him.

Fi Slaven 4:22

I think if it was turning in his grave would be all the other things that I'm doing. So you're very low on the list.

Helga Svendsen 4:27

Excellent. Excellent. All righty. And so that community that involvement in the community has continued with you. You've been involved in a number of community organisations, including Crimestoppers, we were chatting just prior about your experience this morning. Maybe just the highlights or the lowlights of that that have happened this morning and your first interaction as a user of Crime Stoppers. So maybe actually a couple of things. Firstly, how and why did you get involved in crime stoppers, and then maybe just share us the little anecdote from this morning.

Fi Slaven 4:59

Very funny. Are they enough? I was contacted by a recruitment agency in regards to a board position. They didn't say it was Crime Stoppers to start off with but it became very evident it was. And it was linked through the networks that you have, someone I'd worked with said are we know someone that is community minded does technology she'd probably be interested. And um, I just stepped off the Vic ICT for Women board. And I wasn't looking for another board. But I really do passionately believe that we should support community and that we are stronger together. And so that Crime Stoppers adds an invaluable service, and it's independent of the Vic Police. So I thought that was a great thing. So funnily enough, as we're chatting this morning, I had never used the services of Crime Stoppers before. But this morning, when I was walking the dog at 6:30am, and listening to Take on Board, podcast, there was a car accident. And there was a single vehicle accident slipped in the wet and the person involved wasn't hurt, the car was badly damaged, but was very keen not to be there. And that seemed a bit strange. So I just took the car details the number plate, and I submitted a report. So it will probably go nowhere. But if it is, then I've helped with the community as well. But I'm pretty chuffed with myself. That's my first engagement on the day of this podcast.

Helga Svendsen 6:24

Oh, there you go. The governance roles that we hold come around, you know, pop up in our lives in weird and wonderful ways. And it's probably a good thing that you haven't had to use Crime Stoppers until now like not having to use it is actually awesome. I've never used Crime Stoppers and with all due respect to the organisation that you're part of, I hope I never have to, but I know it's there should I need it as do others.

Fi Slaven 6:49

And that's right. And it's all those little bits of information that make a difference. And if, again, like in life, in governance in anything, it's the behavior, short paths that you accept. And you think, oh, it's not important, but it might be and it's no harm. So it's a great organisation, because I'm clearly biased.

Helga Svendsen 7:11

Well, look, that tells us a bit about how you got on that board, I would love to hear a bit more about you've got such an interesting mix of skills, like I say, nurse to ICT and you're on the board of the Austin, which for them is gold, the Austin Health. It's a hospital, major hospital here in Melbourne. Like for them having those clinical skills and ICT skills. Oh my gosh, what a goldmine you are. So talk us through a bit about your journey to the boardroom and how you manage to mix that set of skills.

Fi Slaven 7:45

So it actually flows. I would say, though, you know, as a previous CIO, when people say, Oh, what was your journey, I wouldn't say take nursing, as a part of your way to become a chief information officer. That's not the way I would encourage you to do it. But I actually did nursing because I didn't know what to do. And mum encouraged me. And from day one, I knew I wanted to be an ICU nurse, I loved all the machines that go ping, which links in with technology, I loved the dealing with people that were the sickest of the sick. And that was just fantastic for me. And so I worked in ICU actually, at the Austin and I my specialties were spinal cord injuries and head injuries. So that sort of links in to where I am now. And I loved the nursing and I've learned so much, you know, the practicality, the risks, the governance, because that is life or death, which is very different to the things that I do now. However, I then wanted to make a change. And I've done quite a bit of study. But during my study, again, through networks and meeting people, there was a position going at a health group for business analyst, which I didn't quite know what it was, but I was pretty sure I could do it. So I went from at that time, a very senior role to a business analyst and dropped \$70,000 in a week, which was eye opening. And that started my second career in technology and I really loved it. So I still dealing machines processes, but they don't go ping so much. And if I have a glitch in the matrix, I'm not going to kill anyone, which is a great thing.

Helga Svendsen 9:32

That's true. It is an interesting thing being on a hospital board, often in the boardroom it's like well, you know, no one's gonna die as a result of this decision. It's like not quite the case in hospitals.

Fi Slaven 9:43

Yeah. When I took on the Austin Health it was before COVID And I can honestly say that, for me was a life changing experience because I was on a major teaching hospital board during a pandemic we had never seen before and the care requirement for all those attending and supporting and the staff, and the community was continually evolving. And it was just amazing, exhausting and inspiring. All the above. And I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have played a partner.

Helga Svendsen 10:18

Yeah, I tend to agree as hospital I was on the board of during that period, it was very different to one of the Austin it's a, you know, tertiary hospital or Women's Hospital. So very different. But I feel really honored in a way to have been part of that period.

I just want to flick back to something. So a moment ago, you said, when you were talking about taking this business analyst role, you said, I didn't know what it was, but I was pretty sure I could do it. So that is a beautiful confidence to have in something that you don't know anything about. We don't always hear that. What's your advice to people who, whether it's a board role, or something else, like often a board roles, people don't have that confidence to throw their hat in the ring when they don't know what it is, but they're pretty sure they could do it? What's your advice there?

Fi Slaven 11:05

I think that you have to be and that's a recommendation be a bit brave and a bit bold, you have to know the skill set you have. And quite often, and this is a generalisation. Women want to tick every box, but we can't. And you know, other people wait for us to tick every box. And that's not going to be the way and we develop and learn our skills. And when I joined the Vic, ICT for Women board, that was my very first board, I was so excited. It was definitely a working board. I had only been accepted that day. And the Chair phoned me and said, we would also like you to consider being the Director of Go Girl, Go for IT, which encourages recruitment, retirement and promotion of girls and women in it. And I was like, that's awesome. I absolutely want to do that count me in. And I hung up the phone, I said to my husband, I need to look up what that is. Because I don't know. But it's an event. I love an event. And I'm very organised. So let's jump on that road and see where we get to, and six years of amazing skills and learning and networking and getting to know people. And I absolutely got as much as I gave. And when I left and handed that over. And it's still a fantastic program running. We had over 2,000 girls attending from all around Victoria, free learning about ICT. And that's where our next generation of leaders that coming from, and I just think that's so terrific. But at the time, I really wasn't quite sure. But I knew that I wasn't alone. People would help me and I'd help them. So yeah, I like to say yes.

Helga Svendsen 12:55

Way back, when I started this podcast, I did an interview with the fabulous Michelle Shepherd, and she reflected on her year of saying yes, it sounds to me, like you've got a lifetime of saying yes, it sounds like Sure. Let's give it whatever that is. Let's give that a crack.

Fi Slaven 13:09

I think you can have amazing experiences by saying yes. And sometimes they may not be as amazing, or, you know, as positive. But that's a part of it. But in general, I have met so many truly fabulous people and saying things that I probably wouldn't have. If I hadn't said yes, taking a bit of a risk, you know, even moving from nursing. At that time, I was a director of nursing in an aged care facility to a business analyst. People thought I was mad with ICU qualifications, why would you do that? But here I am. And I'm sure I've got another career in me. Just haven't worked out what it is, when I grow up, I know that there'll be something else. So I love what I do. I love where I work now, but you never know what's next around the corner.

Helga Svendsen 14:03

It's interesting too, that you were managed to to package up those skills that you had as an ICU nurse around risk, and around governance, I guess and around probably communication and those sorts of things. Rather than inverted commas, just clinical skills, you're able to see that it those the skills that you had could be seen in a different way in a different format. Again, what's your advice to others in thinking about what they do whatever their role might be in chunking up those skills into a more governance type environment to get into the boardroom.

Fi Slaven 14:38

Initially, I didn't see those skills as transferable. I had to change my language a bit. So when we talk about prioritizing, I would have said triaging so, there are different terminologies in understanding the languages and sometimes it's even with industries. So in health, there's an SCI which is spinal cord injury in Crime Stoppers an SCI is a serious crime incident. I was aghast at how many spinal cord injuries Crime Stoppers were reporting. So I had to understand that different acronyms as such, which was, there is some fun in there when you get them wrong. But you've got to be also comfortable with saying, I don't understand that, you know, from my background, this is the norm. So it's being able to recognise those skills may not be exactly what people are looking for, because you haven't explained how they actually fit. So someone once told me, I got knocked back on a job, because I didn't have experience with dealing with difficult people. I worked in intensive care with the transplantation unit as well. And we had difficult conversations every day. And again, my specialisations were spinal cord injuries, which is the biggest difficult conversation you're going to have. And I was really surprised that I couldn't articulate that at that interview. So I've learned to use language that is across that industry, and also to have comfort that I do have some of those skills.

And I've already demonstrated that I can change careers twice. So I have the adaptability and flexibility to do that. And probably even more than that. And sometimes I get it wrong, but sometimes I get it right. And I'm always willing to share that with others, and have a bit of a laugh at myself of hooey. Maybe you took on too much. No, that can't be right. Just keep working.

Helga Svendsen 16:38

I want to pick up in there, it's a bit of a sideways in a way, but that adaptability and flexibility and communication, obviously key skills for board directors. Now your specialty around governance, technology and risk. Sometimes directors go, oh, technology and risk. That's not my bailiwick. That's not where I play. So I'll just let others deal with that. But we also know that, you know, directors need to be across all of those things. So what's your advice to directors that might think, oh, technology and risk? That's not me? What's your advice to them to use some of that, to use their perspectives and their insights into an area that might not be their deep specialty, but they still need to be across?

Fi Slaven 17:26

You need to look at the board as a whole, because you're all they're bringing different skills. And so you might have some, you know, a legal representative or a clinical or depending on what board you're on or an accountant, so many varied skills. You don't have to be an expert, but you do have to understand the ramifications. And you can't just rely on one person, or even two, your helping making those decisions. You're accountable and responsible. And risk is risk. You can't really say risk isn't for me, because every industry, every work has risk at varying levels. This can be your best friend, understanding your appetite and tolerances and their buzz words. But what can you accept? And what can't you? What will drive you? If you're feeling comfortable all the time, is that a good risk profile? So is your business thriving? No. Is it stagnant? Well, then you could look at risk sort of things, the governance and the technology again, I understand that technology can be quite scary, but you can avoid it. And if you're avoiding it, then you're part of the problem. So you can put in every firewall, every mechanism, every fancy contraption and software. And all we need is one person to enter their credentials. And we've just untired, all the great work of the technology team. Congratulations. So the biggest issue is always people, in communication, in risk in technology. So we have a responsibility, whether you're a board member or not, is being curious, understand, find areas or people that can help you podcasts, you know, resources, things that you're interested in, start small, get bigger. If you don't understand what multi factor authentication is, for example, just look it up and then say to someone, I don't get this MFA thing. Can you just give me the MFA for dummies and someone will and then suddenly you realise you are taking on things. If you want to take on the full cybersecurity you will blow your mind because there's so many things associated with it and it's forever changing. But you as a board have to be strengths and weaknesses and support each other but you lift everybody up. So that's my theory is don't be scared of it. If you're saying it's not for me, you're saying that because was, you know, you have that deficit in the area? So you have that responsibility to lift yourself? And it's okay to say, I don't know.

Helga Svendsen 20:09

And in fact, my punt is if you say, I don't know, in the boardroom, there will be others who are like, Oh, thank God, they've said that because I don't know, either. And that person was brave enough to say it back to your bravery theme.

Fi Slaven 20:21

And I think also Helga that at it's times, people talk technical, and you can do that in any industry or specialisation. And sometimes that's because that's where they're safe spaces. But other times, it's because they don't know either only if you can say, can you explain that to me in just simple terms, and if they can't, then that's a problem in itself. That's a risk. So if no one but the very specialised person can understand, then you're probably single point sensitive, and there's another risk. So it all ties in together.

Helga Svendsen 21:01

I'm wondering, in particularly in relation to technology for the boards that you're on? Where does it sit? Is it the risk and technology? For example? Is it the committee? Is it the finance and technology, so I'd love to know just where tech sits in the governance structures. And I'd also be interested to hear who's involved on those committees, as well, just to give some, you know, tips to others about where it sits, because it, it doesn't always have that natural place that some of the other risks might have. So yeah, just in practical terms, talk us through where it sits on the boards that you're involved in, and who's involved.

Fi Slaven 21:33

It varies throughout, but the tech sits everywhere. So if there's not a committee that a doesn't be involved with, so I'm on the people and culture committee, for example, at Austin, but you're looking at a HRIS system, you know, as such, well, then that's tech and still dealing with people but how do you make this system most efficient and effective, and compliant with legislation. Enterprise bargain agreements, you want to make that because it's a legal requirement. So that forms a part of tech, then you have clinical tech, and there are areas that are not my areas of expertise, but I love just so interested in that. And then you've got all the other areas of tech, you know, just phones having systems up and running, protecting yourself from others. Then when we had COVID, what systems can you quickly put in place to develop registers, booking systems? How do you make a system that has suddenly gone from nothing to having 1,000s of people require something? How can you do that with technology? So it is pervasive throughout and so to say you don't understand it is not okay. You don't have to be an expert. You're not designing it. But you need to understand and understand what are the risks associated, especially when you link to security. So even the the Spinal Research Institute has a system where they've developed a score, which is actually bringing

researchers from all around the world together, so they can collaborate. Because researchers in spinal cord injury are like a unicorn holding a five leaf clover, you want to get them all together, and really working together, especially in nations that where we are very fortunate compared to other nations that are less fortunate. So because anyone who's got a lived experience of spinal cord injury will then benefit. And so if you look at every board, and Crime Stoppers, well, you're taking phone calls, you're doing things online, you're linking de-identifying that information so that it's usable, but the people are safe providing that information. You know, that's tech. So there isn't a committee, and I'm on a few committees, who doesn't love a committee, and just doing that by teams, or Zoom or whatever method? That's tech, it's made our lives so much easier and better. So I don't think you can exclude tech from anything that we do.

Helga Svendsen 24:12

I love that and your reflection before about, it's all about the people. It's not a system. It's not a, as you said way back earlier about your ICU days, it's not the machine that goes ping is the person using that system or the person hooked up to that system, or whatever it may be. It's all about the people.

Fi Slaven 24:29

I often say to my team, when I'm having a problem, because just because I like tech doesn't matter I'm great at it. And I will start with I'm pretty sure it's the tool using the tools. That's the problem, which is me. So can you show me how I am ruining these very adequate tools.

Helga Svendsen 24:48

See, now I'm reflecting back to the very start of our conversation where I was a couple of minutes late because I was having a little battle with my standup desk that wouldn't go to stand up. Yeah, it was probably the tool using the tool. Yeah.

Fi Slaven 25:02

It's good to have inside. You can't control it. But it's good to have insight.

Helga Svendsen 25:09

Oh Fi so much gold in here. What are the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Fi Slaven 25:16

I think a couple of things. And we talked about being brave and being bold. And you know, no won't kill you being told no. And if you've just got a little bit of chest pain, or adrenaline, that's good for you. If you've got real chest pain, please call triple zero. Because that's not okay. I think that we use the term networking. And I'm an extrovert. I love meeting people. And it's a highlight. But I find the term networking quite difficult. So I always think of it as they're just friends I haven't met yet. So I'm going out to meet people that I haven't met yet and to in my collection of people that I really want to talk to, and I'm curious of, and probably the last thing I would really say is, be confident enough to identify what you want, and then tell people because then they're like your advocates and referrals. So it's not just Fi wanting something or Helga, it's just, we've got all these people working for us and then if they know what you want, they may hear something and we can have that women's network that is just so strong, which we should and we should be paying it forward and helping any other we can we should help anyone. But I'm really biased towards women, and just helping others. We may not be able to reach but we'll help others get there.

Helga Svendsen 26:42

Absolutely. And it helps everybody out then too. If somebody says, Oh, I need somebody who can do this. You're helping out both sides of the equation. I love it. Is there a resource you would like to share with the Take on Board community?

Fi Slaven 26:54

Oh, there absolutely is. And I'm saving it for local ladies. And I do know them, Anna Leibel and Claire Pales, who have written the secure board. It's a fantastic book on cybersecurity, with five elements. And it's just really simple to read. And I encourage anybody that's interested in board work or executives, anyone to have a read of the book, and the ladies are fabulous. And I've just made it quite simple and achievable to work through.

Helga Svendsen 27:25

Great. Sounds like we'll have a little conversation when we finish this about maybe getting introducing me to Anna to get her on the podcast.

Fi Slaven 27:32

Oh, absolutely. She'd be a gem. Excellent.

Helga Svendsen 27:36

Oh, Fi Thank you. Thank you so much for sharing your wisdom for sharing your marvellous enthusiasm for life. Your year of yes into a life of yes. Thank you so much for being here. Taking the call. Thanks, Hannah, for the introduction. And thanks for sharing your wisdom today with the Take on Board community.

Fi Slaven 27:53

Thanks. Helga, it's been glorious, and thank you for having me. It's been fun

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