



Finding your Passion: How Catherine Lacavera of Google Expanded her Horizons

Skills and Professional Development



"Don't aim for success if you want it; just do what you love and believe in, and it will come naturally," poet David Frost once famously said. Catherine Lacavera, Director of IP and Litigation at Google, embodies Frost's mantra as she explores the intersection between law and technology. Lacavera "just wanted to figure out how to contribute more" without giving up the job she loves. She certainly didn't set out to join a board of directors. Instead, she wanted to put her technical and legal expertise to work for causes that she believes in, like the advancement of women in law and technology.

To say that Lacavera has plenty on her plate would be an understatement. After all, she manages a team of over 25 intellectual property attorneys and technical advisors. She also oversees a global litigation docket that has included more than 1,000 patent infringement and other intellectual property lawsuits; including Viacom's copyright litigation against YouTube and Apple, and Microsoft and Oracle's copyright and patent litigation against Android. As if that wasn't enough, she also advises on complex licenses and acquisitions, including the acquisition of Motorola Mobility for US\$12.5 billion and the acquisition of Nest for US\$3.2 billion.

When Lacavera set out to explore what she could do in addition to her work at Google, she focused on doing things she had not done before. It began with opening her startup. The somewhat shy and reserved Lacavera took inspiration from her risk-taking brother and decided to open a beauty related venture. She wanted to experience entrepreneurship first hand in a way that did not compete with her day job and was just pure fun and entertainment. While trying out the life of a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, she quickly discovered that she didn't like running a beauty business. However, the complexities of starting and running a business were interesting problems, and she learned a lot from solving them. These experiences led to her renewed appreciation for entrepreneurs and how legal advice can facilitate entrepreneurship. "I also discovered that my skills are more than just reading case law or understanding statutes." That's a very narrow view of the skills that attorneys bring to the

table, especially if like Lacavera they are also graduate engineers with MBAs.

"I had the opportunity to exercise other skills such as managing people, budgeting, strategic planning, facing uncertainties and managing risk." Although Lacavera eventually decided not to pursue her startup, the experience of running it changed the way she approaches her work. Building on that experience, Lacavera looked for other ways to expand her experience and be more connected to her community. She agreed to serve as an advisor, and in some cases even serve on the board of a variety of educational, charitable, and other non-profit organizations that served her mission of advancing women in law and technology. She discovered that mentoring, advising, and serving as a board member are all great ways to pursue her love for technology and the law. While she began without any formal board training, she learned by taking action, saying "yes," and staying curious. Through her journey, Lacavera found that looking for ways to contribute, rather than following a rigid game plan, led to numerous different opportunities.

Lacavera's first adventure involved her alma mater, the University of Toronto. She joined the newly-formed board of the Edward S. Rogers Sr. Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering as an advisory board member in 2012. She speaks with great excitement about all the opportunities to work with students and to encourage young women in engineering. As part of this role, she lectured, mentored, hosted events, and even served as a judge at The Hatchery, an incubator within the University. Last year, she gave the matriculation lecture to the incoming class of 1500 engineers. "The affiliation with the university affords me access to incredible talent and cutting edge science. One opportunity led to another until I became more and more involved with the university. The connection has opened many doors." Lacavera values this connection not only for sentimental reasons, but because it allows her to work with students and gives her a view into the most innovative technology available. She notes, "A lot of interesting innovation happens at the universities. My board service at the University of Toronto gave me an opportunity to be part of the cutting-edge technology, which I absolutely love."

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About the same time, she was asked to give a keynote lecture for the California Women Lawyers (CWL), and that led to her becoming a founding member, and then a special advisor to the CWL In-house Counsel Network, a group dedicated to connecting and advancing in-house women attorneys in California.

Last year, Lacavera was approached to join the board of the Women's Audio Mission, a San Francisco based, non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of women in music production and the recording arts. "A lot of organizations talk about increasing women in STEM, but WAM is actually training young women and helping them find jobs in an under-represented field of sound recording engineering," she explains. While she always knew that technology could address social issues, by joining the board of Women's Audio Mission she discovered a new way to directly facilitate positive changes through the access to technology.

During her journey, Lacavera met numerous entrepreneurs and venture capitalists and offered her time and expertise on best practices in intellectual property. She expanded her network beyond the legal community. Not only did she find other ways to pursue her passion for technology, she also met new people outside of her immediate legal network. She discovered that her opinion was valued not only because of her extensive and deep legal knowledge, but also because of her other business

skills and experiences. Through her involvement she got to know better what CEOs, CFOs, VCs, and other professionals do and the challenges and opportunities they face daily.

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Through those connections she received a number of offers to join the board of venture-backed companies. She recently accepted the offer to join the for-profit board of TRACE Live Network because she found the technology compelling and interesting. The company combines elements of drones and high-quality connected cameras with a live-action content platform and global streaming capabilities. She looks forward to learning from and contributing to this new venture.

Lacavera, who joined her first board in her thirties, firmly believes that serving on a board of directors is not just reserved for those who have the benefit of grey hairs. She advises anyone interested in board service to "Start young. There are many young men and women serving on boards, loving what they do, and making a huge impact." She reflects, "I wanted to be active and do what I love, not create a retirement package. And through my journey I have discovered that there are many ways to get there by volunteering, lecturing, investing, and joining boards."

She recommends asking yourself what you'd like to do as a board member and why before joining any non-profit or for-profit board. "At the end of the day, the board service experience is as valuable as you make it. What you do and why you do it are important questions to answer before you join a board. It will give you a purpose, passion, and meaning. You are more likely to succeed and discover that you can make a genuine contribution if you join with purpose," Lacavera advises.

According to Lacavera, "there are other, easier ways to get gold stars on your resume than joining a board of directors." Lacavera began her board service because she had a genuine interest in the intersection of law and technology, felt compelled to share her intellectual property expertise, and wanted to make a contribution to advancing women in law and technology. In the process of pursuing what she loved she tried new ways to channel this passion, built important relationships with people outside of her immediate network, and pursued opportunities to expand her horizons. The key is to figure out the causes you are passionate about and what you can do to contribute to those causes.

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Olga V. Mack is a fellow at CodeX, The Stanford Center for Legal Informatics, and a Generative AI Editor at law.MIT. Mack shares her views in her columns on ACC Docket, Newsweek, Bloomberg, VentureBeat, Above the Law, and many other publications.

Mack is also an award-winning (such as the prestigious ACC 2018 Top 10 30-Somethings and ABA 2022 Women of Legal Tech) general counsel, operations professional, startup advisor, public speaker, adjunct professor, and entrepreneur. She co-founded SunLaw, an organization dedicated to preparing women in-house attorneys to become general counsels and legal leaders, and WISE to help female law firm partners become rainmakers.

She has authored numerous books, including Get on Board: Earning Your Ticket to a Corporate Board Seat, Fundamentals of Smart Contract Security and Blockchain Value: Transforming Business Models, Society, and Communities. She is working on her next books: Visual IQ for Lawyers (ABA 2024), The Rise of Product Lawyers: An Analytical Framework to Systematically Advise Your Clients Throughout the Product Lifecycle (Globe Law and Business 2024), and Legal Operations in the Age of AI and Data (Globe Law and Business 2024).

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