

Women Leaders in the Courts: Christine Sisario

John Caher: Welcome to Women Leaders in the Courts, a new program created and produced by the New York State Judicial Institute. I'm John Caher, Senior Advisor for Strategic and Technical Communications.

The Women Leaders in the Courts program features interviews with just a few of the many, many remarkable women who sustain one of the largest and most complex court systems in the nation, if not the entire world.

Today, we're joined by Christine Sisario, the Director of Technology for the New York State Unified Court System. Christine has been working on technology in the court system for over 26 years. She's a graduate of SUNY Geneseo. Christine also has a master's degree in public administration from Marist College. She started with the Office of Court Administration back in 1995 as a network administrator helping to roll out CourtNet a statewide private network use for all of our communications and shared computer systems. She then rejoined the court system in 2014, after 14 years as a Director of Technology for the Center for Court Innovation. She was promoted to director of technology in November 2018.

Christine, thank you for joining us. First, what does the court system Director of Technology do?

Christine Sisario: Well, the Director of Technology is overall responsible for every bit of equipment that we use court system wide and by that, I mean not just computers, but I also mean all of the telephones, all of the recording equipment that is used in the courtrooms such as the FTR system. We supply all of the computer equipment to all of the town and village courts statewide. We maintain the entire network, and that means a lot of behind the scenes dealing with different vendors, of negotiating the lines on which all of our data runs around the state.

We also write our own computer applications here. So, all of the case management systems used by every court in the state, and that includes the town and village courts as well, is all-written in house by our own staff. We have probably over 50 programmers here on staff and a number of analysts, dozens of analysts, that get to know the business of the courts. We have folks that staff a help desk and they answer all of the questions seven days a week that come in from all over the state to

answer questions. Currently, during the COVID outage, we're also handling a public COVID hotline phone number that the public can call; it's advertised on our website. My staff has actually all of the calls that come into that and that is also seven days a week until late into the evening every day. That's the basics of everything that we have to support every day.

John Caher: That's an awful lot of moving parts. So, what is a typical day, or is there any such thing as a typical day in your life?

Christine Sisario: Well, I'm working with the other managers on my staff quite frequently, checking in, having to see what's going on with new assignments that we've got, new legislation that gets passed that we have to do technological work for.

So, I spend a lot of time meeting with my folks. I'm sometimes sad that I'm not doing the hands on work anymore that I used to do in my previous positions, but I'm making sure everything just keeps moving and any outstanding questions we have or legal issues we're looping in the other offices here within the court system, such as counsel's office, the courts themselves.

I also deal with all of our administrators, anything going on that I need to help support. I'm always available to them and meet regularly. Again with COVID there are daily meetings now just because everything moves so, so very quickly. Daily I'm in several meetings with folks such as the DCJ offices, both outside and inside New York City and lots of other administrative meetings throughout the day. In addition to still keeping up with my own staff's workload. So, it's a lot of meetings.

John Caher: I bet it is. I want to follow up on something you said that that surprised me a little bit. You mentioned that legislation has an impact on our operations technologically. Why is that?

Christine Sisario: Well, here's a good example. Two years ago, there was legislation passed for the criminal justice reform in the state that a lot of people know about. It's often referred to as "bail reform" and it had in there a requirement that there would be electronic notifications for everyone who has an upcoming court appearance in a criminal court, and we built that. We built that whole thing ourselves.

It sends out electronic messages to people to remind them to come to court. Text messages, robo calls emails. We also have a contract with a vendor that sends out regular snail mail letters to people that's also used

by our jury office. So there's a lot of technological impact with legislation. A lot of it is reporting and posting stats on our website as well. Often, it really impacts our court research group, but it has to do with the data we collect in our system. So sometimes, we have to change our systems or adapt our systems to be able to meet the legislation and its requirements. So there's constant work going on in that regard.

John Caher: I hadn't realized that and I have to wonder if the legislators who draft the legislation understand the impact it has in that regard.

Christine Sisario...: Well, we do our best to really bug everyone, to let us know beforehand, before it passes, so that we can give our feedback. In fact, I'm attending a meeting I believe tomorrow morning about a new round of proposed legislation that is all about technology and automated translations and I'll be interested to see where that ultimately lands. But I'm part of a group of people reviewing and providing feedback to the legislature, which is wonderful because we like to have that opportunity to weigh in ahead of time.

John Caher: Speaking of bugs, you also mentioned in passing the coronavirus and obviously that's impacted all of our lives, but could you speak a little more about how it has impacted the court system from a technical point of view?

Christine Sisario: Well, it's safe to say it's not a hundred percent about technology, but it's a pretty high percent about technology since we went from in-person court appearances in courthouses to everyone doing court appearances virtually, using our in-house video conferencing software called Skype for Business all within a very short timeframe. That involved my department, making sure that there was enough equipment out there, that all the judges, all the clerks, all of the court staff needed to support the operations of the courts to go virtual, that all of them had laptops. We shipped, over a short amount of time, over 3,000 laptops out around the state.

We also have had to make sure that Skype is set up and working properly. So we have an in-house Skype support group that takes calls from attorneys and litigants, as well as our own internal staff to support them and help them to make sure they know what they're doing before they have to call into their court date. Then there's often technological problems that they're experiencing. So, we help them through it and make sure they're comfortable and know what they're doing.

We also, so that everyone could work from home, had to very quickly adapt our what's VPN or "virtual private network" so that everyone can connect over the internet and come in privately to our court network without any security risks. We had to very quickly adjust the whole setup and hosting of that so that we could have unlimited concurrent connections and make sure everyone was still able to do all of their work that they needed to do.

John Caher:

As one of those who's been working from home using the VPN, and occasionally relying on your staff when I couldn't figure something out, I have to say that they've been absolutely phenomenal. Super helpful, super prompt. Everything that would have gotten done in the office is getting done in my basement. Thanks in no small measure to your people.

Now, there was a time when women were not encouraged, and maybe were discouraged, from pursuing careers in technology. What led you on that less than traditional path?

Christine Sisario:

Well, I don't really have the world's most exciting or interesting story there. It may have just been luck of the timing of when I went to college. I was not really sure when I went to college, this was in the mid-eighties, what I wanted to study, what I wanted to end up doing for a living. I was taking all kinds of different things and in my senior year, the business school actually introduced a new major, which was information systems, management information systems degree, and already I had the majority of the credits for that and it was all the things I liked. There was certainly technology involved, there were programming classes required, and I was always taking those just because I liked them. But also other aspects such as public speaking, a lot of math classes, a lot of business management classes preparing you not just for the technical aspect, but for kind of a bigger picture aspect of it all.

Really before that, I honestly think the only real technology degrees out there were like a general computer science or a programming degree. So, it just sort of fell into the areas I was best at and that I liked the best. From there, I've always had jobs exactly in that round of classes that I took as an undergrad and then once I started working at OCA through a program they had, I got my master's degree and OCA supported some of that, and I'm forever grateful and I got my master's in public administration. So, clearly I'm still doing what I went to school for. Very happy about that.

John Caher: That's good to hear. Now did you encounter any gender-related pushback in your field of technology, or as a female administrator, in your career or more importantly in the court system?

Christine Sisario: Well, certainly not in the court system. I think certainly folks who work in the private sector and I had a very, very brief amount of time in the private sector and even there, it was in technology and I had no issues whatsoever, as far as my gender or anything at all. But in the public sector, I feel that the gender issue is not an issue and that there are so many women that are in senior positions here in the court system, thus this interview series you're doing, which is wonderful and I've never been discouraged. I've never had any pushback. I hesitate to say I've been lucky because I don't like it when people say luck. I've been fortunate. I've been very fortunate that I haven't experienced any issues. Perhaps I'm in the minority, but many of my colleagues, we often discussed it being in technology and being female really hasn't been an issue for us.

John Caher: Now you've been in the working world a long time and my guess is you've had managers, administrators who were outstanding and you've had managers, administrators who were less than outstanding. In your mind, male or female, what distinguishes a good manager from a not so good manager?

Christine Sisario: Well, I think a good manager is somebody who is seeing themselves as part of the team, part of that whole group, not a dictator, not the person who just lays down the law and doesn't listen to others in the group. So I've always felt that those that have solicited my feedback and the feedback of others, who've been collaborative in their process, who are respectful, who are not really assuming they know it all and understand that no one person can know it all.

So here in my position, for example, I'm not a programmer. I'm not someone who has all the expertise in many of the things we do around here, but the people that are the experts in that area I 100% trust. I have to call on them to help me answer questions, to help us make decisions about how we move forward. I couldn't do it by myself, even if I wanted to. I just think that being respectful and collaborative are probably the two words I would use to say that make the best recipe for a good manager.

John Caher: It sounds like you're saying respectful, collaborative, and secure enough to yield to those below you who may know more about a particular topic.

Christine Sisario: I've never pretended that I know more than anybody. So exactly. Yes.

John Caher: Let me switch gears a little bit. You're a mother with two young children. Are the work plus family obligations and expectations different for a woman than a man?

Christine Sisario: Perhaps when your kids are really, really young, I think they are. I was fortunate I was able to take a good amount of time off. I have twins so right after you have twins, you need to take a good chunk of time off just to adjust to that whole process. I was able to have a more flexible schedule early on when they were babies. I think for a lot of women, depending on their responsibilities at home and how things go, it can be very difficult to balance all of it. I think anyone has a hard time balancing a full-time demanding job and being a good parent and being a good spouse and so on. I would say that same answer would apply to many husbands in the world, but it can be very hard. I think there are days when it's awful and there are days when it's really, really easy. It's a day by day thing.

John Caher: Now you've been with the court system a long time as a woman department head. What do you know now that you wish you'd known then?

Christine Sisario: Similar to what I said a few minutes ago, nobody knows everything. There isn't somebody who is watching everything you do every second of the day, because everybody has something else more important to do. They've given you a job. They trusted you to do it. They trusted you to do a good job. And as long as you do that, you're in good shape and you shouldn't worry so much. You should just work your hardest and work your best and your career moves forth. Occasionally, you have to advocate for yourself, but overall I would say, relax, and if you don't love what you're doing, go find another job.

John Caher: Good advice. Christine, thank you so much for your time and please stay safe and healthy we really can't afford to be without you.

Christine Sisario: Thank you so much, John. I really appreciate this opportunity for the interview.