

Innovation at the Core

An Interview with Jane Possell, Senior Vice President and Chief Information Officer, CNA

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to joining CNA in 2019, Jane Possell served in a number of senior positions at Liberty Mutual Insurance. Earlier in her career, she spent more than 20 years at Accenture where she ultimately served as a Managing Director. Possell earned a bachelor's degree with dual majors in finance and communications from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.



Jane Possell

What excited you about the opportunity to join CNA and made you feel it was the right fit?

At the time, CNA had a relatively new CEO who was making some very interesting cultural changes both inside the company and to the way CNA interacted in the market. I was not actively looking for a new opportunity, but when I spoke with the senior leaders at CNA, I was attracted to the talent and leadership at the company and felt that there was a great opportunity to join an organization that was focused on future-forward as well as addressing the challenges and opportunities in the industry.

What was your priority as you assumed the CIO role?

Technology is a people business, and my focus was initially to meet and get to know the team. When I arrived, I spent the first few months getting to know the organization and meeting with the people, asking basic questions about how it was going and what they needed. This was so valuable to understand what type of culture we wanted to create and how we defined our shared values. All companies talk about shared values, but it was important for CNA to really live these values. As an example, we created a monthly award that highlights an employee who is living the values, which is very effective in getting our people engaged in the culture we want to build together.

My experience with culture journeys is that while it is important to talk about and communicate it, you need to live it and create trust in order to build true and lasting engagement. This is a journey that CNA has been on for a few years, and it is wonderful to see the way the organization has responded.

Will you elaborate on your view that technology is a people business?

You cannot separate technology from where a business is headed and while

words like automation create a concern that it is going to displace people, the reality is that no matter what you are building, technology is enabling – whether that is enabling people to perform higher level tasks or enabling simple processes so someone is able to do more. Technology is not intended to replace people. We see it as augmenting what people are able to do and allowing them to focus on what they do best.

How critical is innovation to CNA's business?

Innovation is critical to every business. At CNA, we have a strong belief that innovation at the edge, such as in a lab or off to the side, is not effective. We believe in innovation at the core, which is about empowering people and teams to try new things while they develop solutions to a business or technology problem. This starts with the culture and response that a leader takes to new ideas.

At CNA, we feel that it is critical to build a learning and growth culture in order to drive real change. It's about taking risks and understanding that failing fast to learn what doesn't work and what does is a strength. So a leader needs to encourage experimentation. We use quarterly cycles to experiment and get new products and solutions to our business customers so we can receive feedback and measure to ensure we are achieving the desired results. We can then effectively evaluate if the solution is working or needs to be adjusted. We try to focus on learning in a short period of time and adjusting which is key to innovation.

How proud are you to see the way your team adapted to address the challenges caused by the pandemic?

I am extremely proud of how CNA and its people at all levels of the organization showed strength and resilience during this unprecedented time. In a very short period of time, we came together across multiple functions, from technology to business continuity to human resources, and put together a plan to enable 6,000 employees to work from home – and it happened seamlessly. We had a cross-functional effort across the entire company to address how we were going to make this work and identify all the different areas we needed to think about to be successful. I am so proud

of the technology organization in its ability to empathize with our employees and networks outside of CNA in understanding that things had to be different, and developing solutions to meet the needs of this time. In the area of risk control, for example, the function moved to remote and developed new practices for our clients that will continue even after we return to the office because they are effective, and the technology and the processes have resulted in strong outcomes and a continued high level of client service.

Do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women to grow and lead in business?

I definitely feel that the opportunities are there for women. The important focus for success is on mentorship and allyship from leaders for women who are coming up inside an organization. There are a number of reasons why women may not reach their potential such as preferring a different path or wanting to take time out to focus on family as is the case with many men in business today as well.

I also believe that it is important for women to not focus on whether they see other women at a certain level in the company and assume that this means the organization is not open to advancing women. They need to stay on the path and show through their talent and skills that they deserve and have earned the opportunity to lead.

Will you discuss CNA's commitment to diversity and inclusion?

CNA has been focused on how to take the next step on its diversity and inclusion journey for quite some time, and we have aligned our philanthropic and community efforts with our diversity and inclusion efforts. A small example of this is CNA's work with an organization in Chicago called Genesys Works, whose mission is to provide pathways to career success for high school students in underserved communities through skills training, meaningful work experiences, and impactful relationships. CNA has partnered with Genesys Works and each of the past two years we have brought into the company two high school seniors from underserved communities to do real work and expose them to various career pathways, while also providing us with access to these talented individuals who only need an opportunity. ●