

Melissa Di Donato, SUSE's first female CEO

 By [Evan-Lee Courie](#)

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Accomplished technology executive and former SAP leader, Melissa Di Donato, has been named chief executive officer of SUSE in a move that will herald the next phase of growth and momentum for the global independent open-source software company.



We chat to Melissa Di Donato, to find out more about her journey to becoming the first female chief executive officer of SUSE...

Could you describe a typical day in your job?

No day is the same and that's the way I like it! While my schedule varies day-to-day, I have to say – my days, since I started officially as SUSE's new CEO on 5 August 2019, have been truly fast-paced and fulfilling.

I recently kicked off my 100-day plan, which includes travelling around the globe to speak with employees, customers and partners. I call that my 'listening tour' – because that's what it is: listening. I want to understand their sentiment, what excites them, and what keeps them up at night. And ultimately, I want to be able to bring their feedback into our company – from innovation to culture – so we are acting upon their sentiment and improving employee and customer experience.

I take my role as SUSE's first female CEO very seriously. This job now gives me a megaphone to stand up for the deepest core of my beliefs: that is, diversity and that everyone should be accepted and enabled to succeed in all their beautiful differences. Some of the brand new initiatives I spend a lot of time working on with my team include the Women in Tech Employee Network, the LGBTQI+ Network, a SUSE Month of Giving, Mentor Programs and many more.

What thrills me is that these are just the tip of the iceberg – with many more to come.

■ ***What did you want to be when you grew up?***

Those that know me, say that I am not defined by convention. I have never been one of those people growing up with a distinct profession, like an astronaut or a doctor.

I have simply always drawn to the spirit of bravery, courage, and wanting to make a meaningful difference in the world. That has always guided my choices in what I wanted to do and eventually became. So, growing up, while I never had a predefined view of my career, I knew I wanted to make a difference, work with people and really push the boundaries.

This is the reason #daringtobedifferent matters. It has been a personal mantra of my life. And when I shared it with SUSE – the company wholeheartedly embraced it, rallied behind it, and began to share their own stories and journeys of how they have dared to be different. It has been a profoundly inspiring thing to experience.

■ ***How did you get into the ICT arena?***

Dreaming big and challenging the norm seemed to be my thing from a young age, making the technology space an ideal platform for me. I started in IT as an SAP R3 developer – the only female in my cohort and I am proud to have carved a longstanding career in technology from there.

■ ***What was the best advice anyone ever gave you?***

For me, it's been a few key takeaways, but the two pieces of advice that really hit home for me and that I live by are:

1. Keep daring to be different in everything you do
2. Give back more than you take

■ ***What advice do you have for the future generation of women wanting to get into the tech space?***

Don't be deterred by big dreams. DARE to be different; challenge the norm! Be you!

And make sure you build meaningful relationships – the technology industry is about relationships as much as it is about skills, if not more. So, build a strong, trusted network that is open, collaborative and inclusive. I always tell my team: BE the person you can trust.

Lastly, look for a mentor to offer intelligent and kind advice in new career situations or leadership questions. Mentors are a great way to develop your career and growth both personally and professionally.

■ ***Who or what is your biggest motivation?***

My biggest motivation has always been centred around changing lives. I am passionate about creating a better life for others especially through educating children and I certainly believe that technology has a crucial role to play here.

I am also motivated to raise awareness and interest in technology from a young age, especially for young women as there is plenty of room for women in this field. I am particularly keen on ways to develop opportunities for girls to focus on

Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects at schools, with the hopes that they will go on to consider careers in the tech industry.

When I joined SUSE, I was very pleased to learn that they see the importance and need to provide access to children who are less fortunate with and the partnership with the Limpopo Department of Education and the Graduation programme running in South Africa is a testament to this.

▣ *Are women across the globe getting enough of a chance to shine in the tech industry?*

I must say that there is still a long way to go especially in such a predominantly male-driven industry. However, each day strides are made. Women are getting recognised for the amazing work they are doing. What's more, those in positions of leadership in tech are creating networks/platforms/programs that further promote the inclusion of women in this space.

This is why, as I mentioned earlier, at SUSE we have created a Women in Tech Employee Network that not only focuses on empowering women in tech but looks at a holistic approach of creating a warm, inviting and welcoming tech community in the organisation that does not discriminate based on race and gender.

▣ *As a female business leader, what's the least and most exciting aspect of your workday?*

The most exciting part of my day is definitely meeting with customers. At SUSE we are open and integrated with our customers, delivering solutions based on values to be proud of and to develop lasting customer experiences. While meeting customers is my passion, the least exciting aspect of my day has to be the commuting!

▣ *Women are considered to be natural problem solvers. Why do you think this is perfect in the tech industry?*

Most of my career highlights have been in subscription-based businesses in high-growth cloud and transformation environments and I certainly believe my different view, problem-solving skills and EQ were critical to my success.

Additionally, being the eldest of five, and now a mother to three, has really helped me to prioritise understanding, empathy and keen listening skills which is perfect for such an industry.

▣ *What challenges have you had since starting out?*

As I mentioned earlier – since I started as the new CEO of SUSE, I have challenged myself to meet the SUSE team and 100 customers and partners in 100 days ensuring that I get to know the company and our technology, our customers and our partners as well as the open-source community.

I have also challenged myself to encourage and create programs that enable SUSE to be inspired by our openness and diversity, collaborate without boundaries, give back to our communities and learn from each other. It's a big challenge but the team is up for it.

▣ *How did you overcome these challenges?*

We will remain bold, dream big and challenge the norm. We will never stop daring to be different. We will prioritise purpose and passion that is grounded in our utter and unwavering conviction that the work we do empowers customers and benefits the community. When open source remains at the heart of our ingenuity, ideas are freed, innovation is multiplied, and communities built rapidly. The power of open source is customer and technology empowerment. It is continuous improvement. It is SUSE.

We will celebrate openness and diversity. In our open source world, the community is not bound by physical attributes or location. By nature, open-source spans geography, gender, political affiliation and life experiences. In that spirit, we must embrace diversity of thought, diversity of experience and diversity of opinions – recognising that these will present opportunities for us to solve problems and capitalise on new opportunities more collaboratively.

SUSE is open and integrated with our customers, our partners and our community. We will deliver solutions based on values to be proud of, and trust will be delivered in every relationship.

Finally, we will not be a follower and we will lead by example. We will not imitate others, instead, we will continue to dare to be different. We will define our strategy and our future not based on any other market player but based on dreaming big about what we want to be, how we do it and how we service our customers. We will learn fast and look for ways to improve and do better than anyone in the market.

Our customers will continue to be the heart of SUSE and they will be our focus, as they already are. We score top of class in customer peer review insights on Gartner, but we will not be complacent in our drive to further foster a customer-obsessed culture.

▣ ***What has been the biggest highlight in your career?***

In my last role at SAP, I was the chief operating officer and chief revenue officer where I was accountable for the worldwide revenue, operations, growth and customer satisfaction of the company's ERP, hosting and infrastructure solutions (many of which were built using SUSE).

▣ ***Could you list a few, if any, specific challenges females face in this industry?***

There are a few specific challenges that stand out for me. Today, I think there are four big challenges being faced by women globally: 1.) Not being taken seriously. 2.) The gender pay gap. 3.) Not having enough role models. 4.) Self-doubt or feeling like we need permission to stand up for our own success.

▣ ***What is your advice in overcoming these challenges?***

Networking, mentoring and education become very crucial in overcoming these challenges. And for those females that make it in this industry, it is important to always go back to the beginning or remember those that come after you. Plant the seed and give young girls an opportunity to dream bigger than you once could have. Always lead by example.

▣ ***What trends do you predict in tech in the coming years?***

- Blockchain will become actionable in industries beyond finance
- Open data will continue to pave the way for machine learning
- Machine learning will become the backbone of industries
- The public cloud landscape will diversify due to industry-specific needs
- Security will increasingly start at the developer level.

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