

High-powered tutors for female executives

Top IT chiefs will provide 12 months of mentoring in a new program, writes **Rachel Lebihan**.

Catherine Dickson will draw on her experience working for an employer who was unsupportive of women taking maternity leave as she joins a program that will help her further her IT career.

Ms Dickson, a legal counsel at Dell Australia, will be one of the first women to be mentored by a senior IT executive as part of a 12-month cross-industry initiative, launched today.

Eight technology powerhouses, including Dell, Intel and EMC, are

taking part in the pilot program, under which up-and-coming female executives will be mentored by the managing director at another firm.

The program is being introduced at a time when women account for just 20.5 per cent of the IT workforce, yet comprise about 44 per cent of the labour market.

In comparison, women make up 42.2 per cent of the accounting and finance profession, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

"Women have naturally a unique set of responsibilities, balancing career outside the office particularly when they have children or other carer responsibilities," Ms Dickson said.

She will find out today who will be her mentor and hopes to

exchange ideas with him or her about the challenges women face, as well as learn from their experience.

The local managing director at Dell, Joe Kremer, said diversity of skills was important in business.

"I think the best team is a diverse team with lots of voices from lots of different people," he said.

One of the lessons he hoped to pass on was how to treat others in a team.

"By putting your people's careers ahead of your own you will build and inspire confidence more than anything you can do," he said.

"People moving around the ranks often don't see that."

Mr Kremer said men and women did not necessarily bring different gender skills, but EMC Australia

managing director David Webster was more blunt, saying men and women were "wired differently".

"One thing men and women joke about all the time is that men are sequential in their thought process and women are parallel," he said.

"Women can do multi-tasking that men just can't deal with."

He hopes to provide a "sounding board" and to open up networking opportunities.

The marketing communications manager at EMC Australia, Selena Adams, is hoping that her mentor, Mr Kremer, will help her access some of the industry's male-dominated informal networks.

"Because the industry is not evenly balanced with men and women, those networks have been

around men and the relationships they build; women haven't had access to those networks," she said.

The challenge for women was to uncover opportunities to advance their careers, although Miss Adams stressed it was important that they progressed on their own merit.

The managing director at Intel Australia, Philip Cronin, said he hoped to impart one of the main things he had learnt about running a business: how to deal with people — "having the ability to empathise with people . . . so that they feel comfortable in putting forward an idea without it being shot down and diminished, that sort of thing".

The managing directors at Altiris, Cisco, Ingram Micro, LAN Systems and Lexmark are also involved.