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Neelie Kroes On Women, Startups And The Digital Agenda

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Neelie Kroes likes to quote former U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright: “There s a special pale in hell for women who don’t help other women,” she tells me during an interview for this blog at the [Next ngIf: ticker Gen tech](#) conference in Amsterdam in May. “And I don’t buy the argument when someone tells me he can’t find women to hire,” she continues. “I tell them ‘go see your eye doctor!’”

Neelie Kroes has been a champion of and an example for women in her long career – first as a commissioner with the European Union, in charge of competition and then overseeing the EU’s digital agenda. Then, at an age when many have already retired, Kroes was asked by the Dutch government to act as special envoy for [startups](#) and scaleups; in short, as special ambassador for StartUpDelta – the massively successful tech startup effort in her home country of the Netherlands. She agreed, but stipulated she would hold the position for just 18 months (until June, 2016, to be more precise), after which time the results would be assessed and a decision made to continue the efforts...or not. Kroes was setting herself yet another challenge and yet another deadline. She seems always to be working where her efforts are most needed – on the uphill slope, where nothing is easy. And she’s good at it.

Coming From Nowhere

Since January 2015, under Kroes’s leadership and vast network, along with the efforts of Director Sigrid Johannisse and her team, StartUpDelta’s first phase catapulted the Netherlands onto center stage, going from nowhere (literally) to no. 4 in the EU according to

Compass (2015), no. 1 on the Startup Nation Scoreboard, no. 1 and no. 2 for both startups and scale-ups on the Digital Cities Index, and becoming the fifth fastest-growing ecosystem in the world. This year, Amsterdam was named Innovation Capital of Europe, ranks in Europe's top three for Venture Capital investments (2015) and is the only ecosystem with two incubators in the top 10 of the UBI index.

Other efforts spearheaded by Kroes and Johannisse include linking all of the tech hubs in the Netherlands into One Single Hub – the largest and best connected in Europe. She has, along with Commissioner Moedas from the European Commission and the Dutch State secretary of [science](#), Sander Dekker, been working on a special EU-wide startup visa, streamlining the visa requirements for tech startups, and she has overseen international outreach to attract talent and ideas from other countries, such as the exchange initiative championed by Amsterdam Deputy Mayor Kajsa Ollongren and Startup Amsterdam with New York City and its Deputy Mayor Alicia Glenn.

All that was enough to convince the Dutch political leaders to continue funding StartUpDelta beyond its initial 18 months, with the Kroes handing the scepter of leadership to a member of Holland's Royal Family, Prince Constantijn van [Orange](#), who was her right-hand man while she served as the commissioner in charge of the EU's digital agenda. Van Orange took over in May as Kroes announced her "retirement."

A Role For Older Workers

One has to use quotes around that word where this woman is concerned because Neelie Kroes just doesn't stop. It's also not surprising that she has an eye out for older workers, and not just workers like herself; she's thinking of the future awaiting today's younger generation. "These people are going to be living to 100," says Kroes. "What are they going to do – play golf every day for 40 years? In general, retirement age will have to be later because most societies can't afford anything else."

This is not to say Kroes foresees an extended working life of tedium for today's 30-somethings. She believes older workers can be useful as mentors, on boards, perhaps working part-time. "With a smartphone you can work from anywhere anytime," she reminds me, while at the same time cautioning against "working more than

fulltime because you're always connected.”

Kroes herself could very well fall into that trap. She'll be an active board member of the taxi-booking company Uber – where she is part of a public policy advisory board to help the company navigate regulatory roadblocks. Kroes was a vocal supporter of the “disruptive” company while serving as an EU commissioner. She's also on the Boards of tech services company Salesforce.com, the Rijksmuseum and the London Open Data Institute, among others. At a time when Boards are indeed looking for a few good women, Kroes is a godsend: someone with political and private sector experience, a lengthy track record of success...and female.

She's acting out her philosophy, therefore, as she keeps putting off her own retirement. Kroes believes women should grab every opportunity they can, including in politics. “That means being less modest,” she advises me, “and taking more risks and not being afraid to fail. If you're not failing, you're not learning enough.” Her close colleague, Sigrid Johannisse, has obviously taken this advice, as she has now moved from StartUpDelta into the role of Counselor for Innovation, Tech & Science in Washington, DC, and in charge of the Dutch innovation attache network in the US, which is also present in SF and Boston.

It's interesting to remember that Kroes served as the EU commissioner for competition during her career in Brussels. But she believes the future for the digital world lies in cooperation, which in turn can result in better competitiveness. “Every ecosystem is as strong as the cooperation between the partners.”