

## Women in Business and Technology

Transcript of Episode 022 - Defining work flexibility with Werk Co-CEO Annie Dean

Guests: Annie Dean

Summary: Colleen and Sonia debrief after Seattle Business magazine's Daring Women Seattle. The duo visits Lights, Camera, IGNITE!, a gala to support programming that introduces girls in grades 6-12 to STEM careers. Sonia interviews Werk Co-CEO Annie Dean about work flexibility. Our hosts discuss Backstage Capital's \$36M fund to invest in black female founders.

Find audio and more information at [Microsoft.com/WIBT](https://Microsoft.com/WIBT)

**ANNIE DEAN:** We're past even the era of technological innovation being a competitive differentiator for companies, we're now at a place where companies that are going to win are going to win through innovative people strategies. And those companies are going to focus on how to build companies that cater to the needs and motivations and circumstances of their employees.

**SONIA DARA:** Microsoft Inspire is the largest event for active and prospective Microsoft partners.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** This year the event is taking place from July 15th through the 19th in Las Vegas, Nevada. Microsoft Inspire draws roughly 18,000 attendees from over 140 countries together for a week of networking, creating leads and partnerships, and in-depth learning on business building strategy.

**SONIA DARA:** For more information about Microsoft Inspire visit [Microsoft.com/Inspire](https://Microsoft.com/Inspire).

**VOICE:** You are listening to the Women in Business and Technology Podcast from Microsoft. In each episode you will hear from women in amazing technology and business roles, as well as male allies who are helping make the industry more inclusive, and bringing you tips on how to build a successful career in a supportive community. Welcome to Women in Business and Technology.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Welcome to Episode 22 of Women in Business and Technology. I'm Colleen O'Brien.

**SONIA DARA:** And I'm Sonia Dara.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** We're kicking off this episode with some reporting from Lights, Camera, IGNITE! A fundraising gala that raised \$190,000 to support the mission of creating opportunities to spark girls' excitement about technology careers.

**SONIA DARA:** And then, we'll jump into an interview I had with Annie Dean, the co-founder and co-CEO of Werk. That's W-e-r-k, Werk, a company reinventing the workday with solutions that help employers embrace, assess, and showcase their flexibility.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Finally, we'll wrap things up in our Cutting Edge Segment with some recent news around a \$36 million fund to boost black female founders.

**SONIA DARA:** But before we jump in, Colleen, I'd love to hear more about the Daring Women event that you went to. How was it?

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** It was amazing. Daring Women was an event hosted by Seattle Business Magazine earlier this month in downtown Seattle. And fellow Microsoftie MJ DePalma was the MC for the event. She kicked off the day with this great presentation entitled "Dare to Be an Ally," which I loved. She spoke a bit about the Bystander Effect, this social phenomenon in which people don't offer any help to a victim if other people are present.

**SONIA DARA:** So like, if other people aren't helping that person, I don't have to either sort of thing?

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Right, or an alternative interpretation of the Bystander Effect is this thought that because there are so many other people around, someone else will help and, therefore, it's not my personal responsibility.

But MJ emphasized that in order to be great allies, we need to have a really ardent awareness of the Bystander Effect and do our best to keep it at arm's length by taking action.

**SONIA DARA:** That seems like an awesome way to kick off the event. Was there any other programming that was particularly awesome?

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Local entrepreneur Moorea Seal had a great session entitled "Dare to Value Yourself above Your Work" that I really enjoyed. She talked about this internal or personal website that she hosts that only she can see, where she puts buckets of professional goals on one side of the page and buckets of personal goals on the other side. And I really like that concept.

And then Dona Sarkar, our first interview guest on the show, moderated a panel of women in tech entitled "Dare to Change the Game." You can probably see that it was all

about daring at this Daring Women event. And, you know, I could go on for a while about how cool the day was, but for our listeners, you can find videos from the event at Seattle Business Magazine's Facebook page, and see all of this for yourself! Just visit [Facebook.com/SeattleBusinessMag](https://www.facebook.com/SeattleBusinessMag), and click on Videos in the left rail.

Let's get this episode rolling!

**VOICE:** Community Connect get involved and stay connected.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** On April 14, Sonia and I headed to Block 41, an event space in Seattle's Belltown, for Lights, Camera, IGNITE, a fundraising gala for the nonprofit IGNITE. We've mentioned this organization in our interviews with Cynthia Tee and Charlotte Yarkoni, but for our new listeners, IGNITE is an acronym for Inspiring Girls Now in Technology Evolution. The organization introduces girls in grades 6 through 12 to technology and engineering careers via panel presentations, field trips, programming and robotics workshops, job shadows, and more. The gala event, which featured a red carpet, silent and live auctions, awards, and speakers raised \$190,000 to support IGNITE in the mission to spark girls' excitement about technology careers.

IGNITE Founder and CEO Cathi Rodgveller brought me up to speed on the organization's origin story.

**CATHI RODGVELLER:** Back in 1998, I worked for the Seattle School District, and I was very fortunate to find a grant, and back then it was called the sex equity grant, to introduce young women to high-wage, high-demand career fields, and I grabbed that grant and I ran with it. I called up women in our community who worked at these high-tech firms, and STEM careers, and I said, would you meet me for dinner or lunch and coffee and tell me all about what you do, because I want girls to learn about what you do? And it all started from there.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Amber Zertuche is the IGNITE regional director of San Francisco. With Seattle as a blueprint, she's building the organization's presence from the ground up in the Bay area. Amber explains the importance of the gala to her work in California.

**AMBER ZERTUCHE:** One thing I'm looking forward to is getting the energy that has been being built here for the last 20 years and bringing that with me back to San Francisco, meeting everybody, seeing how things are done here in Seattle, and also hearing girls' stories. That's what I'm really looking forward to.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** I was also really looking forward to hearing the girls' stories. I caught up with a few IGNITE students on the red carpet to learn more about their STEM experiences.

High school senior Soy Sing Sue has been participating in IGNITE programming for four years. She explained that IGNITE has exposed her to career opportunities she didn't even know existed.

**SOY SING SUE:** IGNITE really introduced me to the technology field, and engineering, transportation, all the other ones that I didn't really know before exists, because before this I only knew the more generic careers, and so like dentist, nurse, those were the things I was going or, but now I know, oh, I can do something else better with STEM, because I really love STEM and math in general. And so now I know that there are other careers out there, and that's how I found out about environmental engineering.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Seventh grader Ava Feroones echoed this sentiment.

**AVA FERROONES:** I just thought at there were a couple boring jobs out there, but there are so many cool things you could do. So that's probably my favorite part about IGNITE. I hope to get a career in computer science, because I think it's so cool. IGNITE kind of inspired me to learn more about computer science and all the careers there are.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** To continue that theme of inspiring careers in computer science, Corporate Vice President of Growth and Ecosystems in the Cloud and AI group, Charlotte Yarkoni, was the keynote speaker at the IGNITE gala. Her speech covered her personal experience building a career in technology, an acknowledgement of the powerful problem-solving capabilities of technology, and the importance of pursuing technology solutions with an inclusive mindset.

**CHARLOTTE YARKONI:** As technology evolves, as we get closer together as a society, as we get more access to data and computing power and those innovations still come, it is super important to remember that the best way to go solve the problems that are becoming more and more global is with a collective mindset and not an individual one, which is why diversity is just incredibly important to me, and increasing in its importance every year that I grow in my career, and something I want to impart to the young minds of today to really encourage them to get excited about their future, but also be supportive of their community as they go.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** For more information about IGNITE, including photos from the spring gala, visit [igniteworldwide.org](http://igniteworldwide.org).

And now, let's get on with the interview.

**SONIA DARA:** I'm excited to welcome over Skype the co-founder and co-CEO of Werk Annie Dean.

Annie, thank you so much for joining us today.

**ANNIE DEAN:** Thank you so much for having me.

**SONIA DARA:** So, Annie, where are you calling in from today?

**ANNIE DEAN:** I'm calling in from New York, New York, Werk HQ, which is located in New York.

**SONIA DARA:** So Werk, for our listeners spelled W-e-r-k, is a startup championing flexibility as the future of work. Annie, can you tell us a little bit more about the company and the services that you guys offer?

**ANNIE DEAN:** I would love to. So Anna and I both came to the problem of flexibility and building a company to solve that problem, because each of us had had careers in professional services and really saw that flexibility was what we needed as women to continue to advance in our careers and through the leadership pipeline and particularly when we became mothers.

And so when we started to investigate what flexibility was and what the ultimate problem is, we realized that 80 percent of companies believe that they offer flexibility. On the other hand, 96 percent of individuals or employees report that they want access to flexibility and only 19 percent of that group actually had the access to the flexibility that they need.

And then if you look at another really interesting stat, which is that 30 percent of the most talented women are dropping out of the workforce today and 70 percent of those people would have stayed in the workforce if they had access to flexibility. There's this really big, undiscovered opportunity around flexibility and creating structured flexibility programs. What we realized the biggest problem was, was that companies and employees were really not speaking the same language around flexibility. And often conversations around flexibility were overly emotional and overtly personal. And we needed to invent a new way to talk about this and a new way to standardize flexibility.

So what we created first and foremost is a new taxonomy, a new language of flexibility that we call the Flexiverse. And we created six types of flexibility that represent standardized time and location-based modifications. And then we use that Flexiverse in a couple of different ways. So we operate a job board where companies give us flexible opportunities on our taxonomy and users can search for jobs with that criteria. And we also have a flexibility assessment tool and training program where companies can look at their entire employee demographic, identify what types of flexibility are needed for each of their different employees and basically power more flexible companies with the insights that we can provide them. We also train companies on flexibility. So we're really attacking the problem of flexibility from many different angles and it's all powered online through our website, Werk.co.

**SONIA DARA:** How can Werk exactly help job seekers? Is there a process for filling out the Flexiverse? Like what does that member experience actually look like?

**ANNIE DEAN:** We are working with the companies one-on-one to pre-negotiate flexibility, which is a really big, important thing, because there's nowhere else in the universe that you can go right now and search for jobs with pre-negotiated flexibility. But the thing that's really fun for users is all of our filters are through the flex types. So we can talk more about what those flex types are, but for instance, I use time shift and desk plus. And that means that some of my work is shifted out of traditional office hours and also, I often work outside of the office at a location of my choosing.

So if you're a job seeker who has the same criteria as I do, for instance, you can look at the job board and filter those opportunities by time shift and desk plus and get relevant opportunities for you that not only match your experience and your level of seniority and your industry, but also actually match and are compatible with your life. And that is really transformative for a lot of people.

**SONIA DARA:** That's awesome and you mentioned there were six different categories? What were those six?

**ANNIE DEAN:** These are time and location-based modifications and we had three main building blocks when we created the Flexiverse, which is where are you physically located when you're performing your work duties? What time of day are you performing those duties? And do you have access to these modifications on an ongoing basis or is it something that you take on an ad hoc basis? And so by looking at that framework we created six flexibility types.

Some of them are things that you would automatically recognize, like remote. We try to really emphasize the modern aspects of something like remote. So we never will use the word telecommuting. And these are places that potentially are fully distributed companies and just the companies that are really operating in a totally new way.

Desk plus is our partially location-independent product, which means that you're probably based in an office for most of the time, but for one or two days a week you are working outside of the office in a location of your choosing.

Travel light is our product where employees have minimal to no travel and are traveling at a maximum of 10 percent annually. So that's usually two to four days per month.

Time shift is when people are reordering their working hours to create a set of unconventional hours that maybe don't follow your traditional 9 to 6 pattern but allow you to work when you feel most productive.

And then one of our most popular is micro agility and micro agility is basically just a way to step away from your work to accommodate the unexpected for increments of one to three hours. And it's on the employee to make up the work when they get back to their desk, or back to the office. But it gives people the opportunity to say, hey, I need some micro agility right now, instead of, hey, my kid is throwing up and I need to run to the doctor. It just becomes a totally different conversation.

And then we also do offer part-time roles.

**SONIA DARA:** So, Annie, a little bit about you. You graduated from Syracuse University with a BA in Political Science and Art History all summa cum laude with a Phi Beta Kappa feather in your cap, which is very impressive. Then you went on to get your JD at Fordham University. You then spent almost six years closing real estate deals for institutional lenders and equity owners. How did that experience prepare you for the work that you're doing today?

**ANNIE DEAN:** It's so interesting, because I had my sights set on law school from when I was a young child. And it was something that I did immediately after I graduated. And I went directly working on Wall Street after graduation and didn't really think twice about that career path. It's something that I had really had my sights set on. And it wasn't until I really got into law that I realized that it wasn't this soulful career that I thought it was going to be. And it wasn't something that I ever really felt that comfortable doing. I mean in one way I loved it. I loved doing deals. I loved big closings and the mechanics and the operational complexities of all of them. And I loved learning about the law in law school.

But I feel like I haven't used the knowledge that I gained as an attorney until being a CEO. You just apply this logical reasoning to so many different disciplines it helps me think through product, it helps me think through brand and marketing and analytics. It helps me think through fund raising. And it gives me tools for communicating that I really don't think I would have had if I didn't have that legal background.

So it's turned out as somebody who totally complained about the amount of law school debt that I took on to go through that experience and went through a couple of years complaining about how much I hated being a lawyer, I'm so grateful to my law degree.

**SONIA DARA:** In addition to serving as CEO, I know that you're also a mother of two children.

**ANNIE DEAN:** That's right.

**SONIA DARA:** That's amazing. Was parenthood what sparked your interest in work flexibility? I know you touched a little bit upon that, or has this been more of an ongoing interest of yours?

**ANNIE DEAN:** It was absolutely parenthood. So when I was an attorney on Wall Street I was in a really difficult situation, because I was the top associate in my class, I was getting all of the best opportunities and I had my first son when I was 27 years old. And that was a very weird age in New York City to be having a child and to also try to pursue the partnership track at a big law firm.

And I had an experience where my commitment to my job and to my career was really called into question and that felt incredibly unfair to me. And it also felt like the circumstances, my ambition hadn't changed at all, but my circumstances had vastly changed. And it made it very difficult for me to continue putting in the work until 3:00 a.m. three days a week and never have the chance to see my son or to manage the different things that I was facing, like breast feeding. And it really, really changed how I looked at what my career opportunities were and what my career trajectory was, frankly.

And I started to think that I really only had two options and those two options were continue down the path as if I didn't have a child or quit. And I just felt like that was not a good answer and it felt like there was a different solution for me and that if I could have access to flexibility that I would have been able to successfully manage all of the things on my plate.

That's when I really became focused on it. This was also the time when Anne-Marie Slaughter was authoring her piece, *Why Women Still Can't Have It All*. I just realized today that it's only been five years since Sheryl Sandberg published *Lean In*. And I feel like our world has really transformed in a way that we think about women's rights in the workplace and how to structure roles to make them more accommodating to women. But at the time these were all very new concepts.

My son is four-and-a-half years old. So I was really thinking through these things deeply five years ago. And then I would add that my second son actually has a genetic disorder called kabuki syndrome. And it's a pretty significant set of special needs that he faces and a set of medical conditions that is just a top priority and it's unpredictable when I need to address those problems.

When he was born, my second son, I was still an attorney. I was at a different law firm than my first son. But it was a completely different set of flexibility that I needed. And frankly, in a circumstance that intense there was just no way for me to continue working without the flexibility that was granted to me by that second law firm. And it made me realize a totally different set of flexibility needs dictated by people who are facing medical conditions and disabilities and people who are caring for those people, as well.

**SONIA DARA:** That's super-important. And you mentioned a couple of these statistics, but I just wanted our listeners to hear them again. Your site states that 66 percent of



the U.S. work force wants flexibility, but only 19 percent of the workforce has access to flexibility. Another stat is one in two employees would leave their job for a flexible alternative and when you survey millennial women that number actually increases to 58 percent. So given these stats do you think corporate HR departments have the right amount of focus on flexibility? Why are they missing this trend?

**ANNIE DEAN:** I love this question. And the obvious answer is no, they haven't quite understood the strategic advantage that structured flexibility can bring to their companies, but they're getting it. I think it's a vastly different conversation today than it was two years ago when we were starting out. And I think the reason why this trend was missed, when we started this company, and again it was on the power of our own instinct that we needed flexibility in order to survive and that that would be a position that we felt many of our peers would also take.

And so we were looking at the data that was available at the time. Economists were saying that gender parity in corporate America was not going to be possible for 100 to 200 years, that there would never be an opportunity to meaningfully change the ratio of women in the Fortune 500 C-suite. And when we started doing the research we realized that many economists and leading thinkers were attributing this to women's own interest in remaining in the workforce and in the leadership pipeline.

And that the reason why women weren't succeeding was because they didn't want to be there, or because they didn't know how to negotiate effectively, or they didn't have the right networks. And, while all of those things are very important, I think all of those studies failed to acknowledge the structural barriers that women face in the workforce.

We created the standardized work day in 1914 as a result of unionizing, because of unfair conditions in factories. And we have held onto that standardization all the way through 2018 without really changing it at all. So we're been operating under this assumption that there's only one way to work.

But as we know we're past even the era of technological innovating being a competitive differentiator for companies. We're now at a place where companies that are going to win are going to win through innovative people strategies. And those companies are going to focus on how to build companies that cater to the needs and motivations and circumstances of their employees.

So when we think about flexibility, we're thinking about workday customization. And how we can look at the needs of an individual employee and get the best out of them, by customizing a schedule that fits their needs.

**SONIA DARA:** I can imagine some of our audience is likely listening and thinking, yes, this is what I've been saying. I need more flexibility. For those listeners can you share some advice on how to get their manager to say yes to flex time?

**ANNIE DEAN:** Absolutely and this is something that we're thinking about all the time. I would recommend looking at our Flexiverse and looking at the types of flexibility that you need and talk about them in a business first context. So the worst thing that you can do is to talk about flexibility in the moment of crisis.

And I always talk about when I was deathly ill in my second pregnancy and as a result of really having a very negative experience in my first pregnancy, I didn't share my pregnancy with my second law firm until after I was seven months pregnant. And I was incredibly uncomfortable and ill. And I finally blurted out to the managing partner in my department and it just was a messy conversation, because at that point I was so past the point of needing support that it was, frankly, a crisis.

And so I think as a result that conversation didn't go as well as it could have. I mean, did I get all the things I needed? Yes. Did I take a hit to my credibility? Yeah, I did. And so I think that we need to approach these types of things proactively. We need to talk about flexibility in terms of our business impact and deliverables.

So not, I have a child, so I need flexibility, but I believe that I am going to deliver better to our business goals if I have access to a desk-plus policy. I am somebody who needs the creative space to work outside the office from time to time. And I am happy to show you the results of my time spent outside of the office. I like to check in at 30, 60 and 90 days to make sure that you're comfortable. Do you have any concerns about the way that I might be working if I have access to a desk-plus schedule? Perhaps one of them is the ability to communicate or innovate with a team, propose the types of solutions that might overcome those concerns and then deliver on them.

I certainly think that the early adopters of flexibility are women. I say that, because women are failing without access to flexibility, whereas for other demographics it's more of an optimization than rescuing from a point of failure. And I think it's incumbent on us to speak about this as business first as possible, to deliver on results so that we can create a culture that is truly inclusive.

And the other thing I would say is that it, of course, isn't just women that should have access to flexibility. We need to, as managers, give flexibility to everyone in or organizations, so that this doesn't just become a personal favor for women or a women's-only solution. It's very important that this be something that's adopted by the company and the department at large.

**SONIA DARA:** So it's safe to say Werk is not exclusively for women.

**ANNIE DEAN:** That's right. And we started out; again, our DNA is about women in leadership, because that's a problem that we were trying to solve for ourselves. And so we'll never abandon that as our sort of North Star. But we are so certain after the

research that we've done and the time that we've spent thinking about this problem and how to solve it that it has to be flexibility for everybody and that we are in a much better position as women, in terms of getting the things that we need, by including men in the conversation and making sure that this is an intersectional conversation, frankly, that it's including people with disabilities, that it's including people of color.

There are so many different reasons why people need a customized workday schedule. And while, again, women are the early adopters here, I think it needs to be a conversation that includes all people.

**SONIA DARA:** Yeah and your website also mentions how it disproportionately helps them stay in the work force, but also reach the C-suite. Can you elaborate a little bit upon that?

**ANNIE DEAN:** There's been some great studies that came out even in the past couple of weeks really legitimizing the letterhead penalty and how that impacts the gender pay gap and how there is this critical period after women have children of women being forced into non-leadership track roles, which have a lower salary, their opportunities decrease. And frankly, a lot of times it becomes so expensive for them to work and maintain childcare, or it becomes so logistically impossible for them to do so that they end up quitting and never coming back.

And we ran this one really interesting study where we triangulated some existing data points and found that if you were able to keep women in the workforce as a result of flexibility, based on the amount of women who report that they would stay in the workforce, because of their access to flexibility and you multiply that number by the percentage chance that any individual would become a Fortune 500 CEO, you actually create 100 new female Fortune 500 CEOs.

**SONIA DARA:** Wow.

**ANNIE DEAN:** And so that changes the ratio from 5 percent to 20 percent. And you could do that in a generation just by implementing flexibility meaningfully and capturing the women who are currently at risk of dropping out and keeping them on their leadership trajectory. This is something that could have a really quick impact. So when we talk about economists who are saying that gender parity is not possible for 100 years, they're really not looking to flexibility or looking at the structural barriers of the workday and how we can make some simple changes to really have enormous impact.

We say all the time that every company in America should be thinking about what the workplace would look like if women had had a hand in designing it. And what would a workplace look like if it really met the needs of women? And we have workplaces that are meeting those needs. It's a no-brainer that women will raise to leadership. Women

are not failing to rise to leadership today because they don't want to be there. They're dropping out, because it's impossible. And so we just have to make it possible.

**SONIA DARA:** Speaking of leadership, your board of advisors boasts some very impressive names, including the president and CEO of New America, Anne-Marie Slaughter; Fran Hauser, who invested in HelloGiggles, Levo and The Wing, some of our WiBT favorites on the podcast; and also Alexandra Wilkis Wilson, who founded Gilt Groupe and GlamSquad. What has been your approach to building your board? I noticed that it's comprised of 80 percent women. So was that a conscious decision maybe, to make it majority women?

**ANNIE DEAN:** Yeah, I mean strong women have always had our back and in terms of our investors in this round I think all of our new money in our seed round was women-led funds, which was a very cool statistic to be able to brag about. But our strategy has honestly always been to bring the smartest, best people into our circle and we've gotten very, very lucky with the people who have been willing to support us.

It was not a conscious decision to make it all women. I think those are just the people who, again, talking about who is an early adopter of flexibility, the strong professional women, they get this, they understand that women are failing without access to this, and recognize that this is sort of a key cause of our time. And we've been very, very lucky to have the support that we've been able to collect.

**SONIA DARA:** So would you say your experience say CEO has a gendered lens? Like do you identify as a female CEO?

**ANNIE DEAN:** I definitely do not call myself a lady boss, I just call myself a boss. And my son, I have the best story. My husband told my son that I'm a boss, and so we are waiting online at the Met the other day, and my son looked up to me and said, how come we have to wait in line, mommy, the security guard doesn't know that you're a boss? I was like, yes, best comment ever from a four-year-old.

**SONIA DARA:** Awesome.

**ANNIE DEAN:** That said, I think that as women we run a very different company. We always say that as women we're at a disadvantage in fundraising. There's just no question. I mean, it's a long conversation that we could get into, but women face enormous barriers in terms of raising capital. But we will always be at an advantage in terms of recruiting people because we invest in people so deeply and so meaningfully, and I think our employees really understand how much they can trust us to be honest and candid with them, to be transparent about our business, and we run the business with a sense of honesty and openness and empathy that sometimes I think is more evident in female leaders than male leaders. I also think that women are really excellent at thinking about long-term resources strategy and how to make something sustainable

and that's at odds, frankly, with being a venture-funded company, it's something that we struggle with all the time, but it's something that we're really, really proud of.

And so do I identify as a female CEO? No, I don't. I just identify as a CEO. But I definitely think that there is a strategic advantage that Anna and I have being women.

**SONIA DARA:** So Annie, what communities have you invested in to find support and guidance as a CEO?

**ANNIE DEAN:** It's a great question. I think that, first of all, whenever you are a portfolio company of an investor, they tend to do a great job about creating communities at portfolio companies so you can kind of talk to a bunch of people who are going through the same issues, and have a lot of experience, but not necessarily experience running startups, you know what I mean, so it's an exciting way to kind of make mistakes together and talk to each other about the current issues that they're faced with.

But I think, again, it's been really important for us to be no ego in terms of the problems that we face, and to just find the smartest people at any given moment with any set of problems that we face and befriend them and talk to them and build meaningful relationships.

And then also to turn to the women who have done this before. It's an incredibly small number of women who have built companies, raised a lot of financing and exited their companies. You can count them on one hand. And so anytime that we get to interface with some of those women, it's incredibly inspiring and important to us as well.

And we also work with coaches, you know, all the time, to be able to have somebody to bounce ideas off of and constantly assess and give us feedback about our leadership. I think those are really important investments to make as well.

**SONIA DARA:** So Werk Life, W-e-r-k Life, is your company blog with incredible interviews and advice spanning topics from board-level gender quotas to how flexibility can facilitate lifesaving to one of my favorites social distancing during flu season. So I definitely recommend it to our listeners to check out Werk Life.

Annie, you are literally creating taxonomy around how to discuss work flexibility. How do you think about your content strategy in a world where we don't yet have a shared vocabulary around flexibility as the future of work?

**ANNIE DEAN:** That is the biggest challenge that we face as a company. So I think that our primary innovation is the development of our taxonomy. And we try to make it as accessible as we can, which is one of the reasons that we stated with the job board, so that people could actively experiment with filtering jobs through our taxonomy, for instance.

It took us a while to get comfortable with what our content strategy should be, and I will tell you that one of the reasons we had a reluctance to building a content strategy initially was because of the gendered lens that investors often put on content. You know, women are supposed to build content sites, and not technology, and that was something that really bothered us. So we didn't actually launch Werk Life until Q3 of last year, and it's been incredibly successful so far which we're very proud of.

And I think for us it's been about trying to take an elevated lens to all of the different things that we face and show how flexibility is sort of a key component of all of the things that we're talking about, because we think about flexibility and the structure of the work day as sort of the underlying issue, and as a society we're still talking about a lot of band-aid issues. So we can talk about the gender gap all we want, but if we're not going to acknowledge the motherhood penalty and the structure of work and the structural barriers that women face, then we can't really get anywhere. And so it's just about inserting our language and our ideas into all of the topical discussions that are happening naturally.

And also making it fun. I think one of the things that people love to see on Instagram is how members of our team are using flexibility. I just posted a story about how I used Time Shift. And I think it really makes sense to people. They can grasp it. And one of the things that we talk about every day internally is, what we've invented is so incredibly nerdy, and how do we make it fun and beautiful and something that people really feel empowered to use in their real lives.

**SONIA DARA:** So really quickly on, obviously flexibility has been our amazing buzz word today, flexibility and this concept of mass customization of the work day is a growing trend. So we see this with the rise of co-working spaces, and opportunities in the gig economy. How do you position your company in that landscape, and so who are your competitors and then also who are your partners?

**ANNIE DEAN:** So it's interesting. I don't think that anybody yet recognizes flexibility for the large size solution that it really is. And so I don't necessarily think that we have a peer competitor quite yet, but we will as people begin to realize the size of the opportunity. And so we are really excited by all of the change around building more accessible workplaces and places that more reflect the needs of modern society. Anybody who is really approaching work in a modern way is our partner.

And I think for us to date there's been two ways to work. It's been a binary choice. It's been the traditional work day, and like I said that's sort of the result of unionization in the early industrial era, and then there is the gig economy. And the gig economy is sort of an extreme rubber band effect to that traditional workplace, where we have disenfranchised employees from sort of the benefits that a traditional company can bring, like actual health insurance, and also the opportunity to have a predictable

revenue stream and the opportunity to leverage social capital into a promotion. And that's an incredibly important thing, especially as we consider how to advance women and people of color into leadership positions that have been traditionally overlooked for those opportunities. We can't relegate them to a corner of society where then they're not part of organizations and don't have opportunities for leadership, that can't be the answer.

So we feel like flexibility is everything that exists between those two tent poles. And we think that people constantly confuse us with the gig economy, which makes sense, because it's very topical, but nothing that we do is project based. We make sure that every opportunity, for instance, that we offer on our job board is a W-2 opportunity, because, again, we don't want people to miss out on the benefits of working for a great employer, like a great culture and an opportunity to rise to the top.

**SONIA DARA:** So Annie, prior to starting a Werk, you managed a very successful personal blog about etiquette, entertaining, and everyday glamour at AnnieDean.com. I noticed, though, those posts have trailed off, perhaps as you've taken a leap into entrepreneurship. Was that blog a fun passion project, or was there anything that you pulled from that blogging experience into your business today?

**ANNIE DEAN:** It's funny. We were all sitting around a computer earlier today laughing about the old blog.

**SONIA DARA:** It's beautiful.

**ANNIE DEAN:** Thank you. It was a really fun project for me because I was an attorney, and I was trying to build like five different businesses. I always knew that was going to be an entrepreneur, and what has always fascinated me, and the reason, frankly, I connected with Anna in my early conversations with her was, I've always been interested in taking relevant things from the past and making them modern. And I saw this confusion around etiquette, and all of the silliness that happened with the wedding industry and the way that we were sort of making -- we just had kind of lost track of how to treat each other. And so I wanted to take something old and beautiful and like an old hardcover book or a silver spoon, things that we just don't get to interact with very often and make them fun and accessible.

And it was a great experience in that I learned a lot about how to build a brand and how to build a digital product that was designed for growth. I definitely learned a lot about how to utilize the press to get my message out and I think that's something that has been a skill that's been very helpful in building Werk. But I also knew that it was something that was just kind of a short-term thing. I ended up abandoning it because I ended up getting a book deal, and they wanted me to write one sentence with an illustration. And I was like, no, I actually wanted to write a new encyclopedia of etiquette, and I could tell our interests were not aligned.

So I'm happy that I was able to experiment with it, and it was a really fun experience because all the whole project came about because my grandmother had a book, the 1948 *Vogue's Book of Etiquette* on her bookshelf. And I stayed with my grandmother while I was studying for the bar exam, and as I was reading this old book that like smelled like half a century old, I recognized so much of it from the things that I was taught as a child. And I just found it fascinating to have this social history about how we were expected to act, and what was relevant as a modern woman and what wasn't relevant.

And it's interesting to look at the blog, because you can see my impression as a new married woman and as a new parent and how I was clinging to sort of the traditional aspects of what I thought were expected of me. And by the end of the blog, you can kind of see how dissatisfied I am in my career, and how useless I find these traditional roles that I'm being forced into. And I think it was really that thought process that led me to a place of trying to discover what it really means to be a modern woman, and what it really means to be living and working well in today's society.

So it was interesting for me.

**SONIA DARA:** Nice. I'm picturing a lot of our listeners nodding their head along with you, like, wow, yeah. This sounds very familiar.

Annie, where can our listeners find Werk and you online?

**ANNIE DEAN:** So we are at Werk, W-e-r-k, on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and you can find us at [www.werk.co](http://www.werk.co), [werk.co](http://werk.co), to sign-up for the job board and learn more about what we do.

Thank you guys so much.

**SONIA DARA:** Awesome. Thank you so much, Annie.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Cutting Edge, our take on stories in the business and technology world. In this edition of cutting edge, we're discussing an article by Danny Crichton, published in TechCrunch earlier this month entitled "Backstage Capital Launches \$36 Million Fund to Boost Black Female Founders." This is big news and it was covered by many news outlets, but Sonia and I are going to focus on the TechCrunch article for now.

**SONIA DARA:** So the article explains why Arlan Hamilton built Backstage Capital. Her firm's mission is to provide early seed financing exclusively to founders who are women, people of color, and LGBT. These are groups that are massively under represented among Silicon Valley founders, especially compared to the rest of the general



population. This is an industry dominated by white men and it can be really hard for founders to find investors who look like them.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Hamilton points to the figure that less than .2 percent of all early stage venture funding goes to black women. That is mind-blowing to me. But her plan is to invest million-dollar checks into 15 to 20 companies over the next three years, with the remainder of the fund reserved for follow-on investments.

**SONIA DARA:** So yes, Hamilton sees a huge potential for ROI when it comes to this type of funded. She's quoted in the article saying: It is my firm belief that because black women have had to make do with far less for centuries, equipping them with early stage capital that is on par with their white male counterparts has the potential to lead to outsized returns.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Hamilton's firm, Backstage Capital, has invested in more than 80 portfolio companies to date, and we can't wait to see what she's able to accomplish with this next round of funding.

**SONIA DARA:** Listeners, thanks for tuning into another episode of Women in Business and Technology. We had such a blast at Lights, Camera, IGNITE. I loved the event. I got to casually sit next to Charlotte Yarkoni, a casual pinch-me moment. I loved hearing from all the other attendees there, especially the students, it was awesome.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** And, Sonia, I really enjoyed hearing your conversation with Annie about workplace flexibility. As a millennial, I totally agree that I look for roles where I can be more in control of my schedule and the location where I'm getting work done. I just think that that's such a forward-looking strategy when thinking about employee satisfaction.

**SONIA DARA:** Even just thinking aback to college, I wouldn't study at the same place every day. It was like I needed a change of scenery. And sometimes I would be in my room, or sometimes I would be in the library, or sometimes I would sit in the cafeteria. And it was just like how I was feeling that day, and I was able to get my work done. And I think that that should totally apply in the workplace.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Yeah. Flexibility is the future.

**SONIA DARA:** Yeah, right.

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**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Our website is [wibt.com](http://wibt.com), and if you have any feedback or questions, please email us at [WIBT@microsoft.com](mailto:WIBT@microsoft.com), or tweet us [@MicrosoftWomen](https://twitter.com/MicrosoftWomen).

**SONIA DARA:** Your mission for this episode, if you choose to accept it, is to find your flex-type or the type of flexibility at work that you need to really thrive in your job. Head to [Werk.co](http://Werk.co), and click on "Find My Flextype" to take the quiz. Colleen and I both got DeskPlus as our flextype. So we have desk space here at Microsoft but can work at a location of our choosing for some portion of our time. Take the quiz and let us know what your flextype is.

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