[MUSIC] Hi everyone, and welcome to the Women in Business and Technology podcast. My name is Colleen O'Brien, and I'm a marketer on the Windows team here at Microsoft. I'm joined today by my friend Sonya Dara.

>> Hey, Colleen, I'm also a marketer at Microsoft, but on the Surface team. Both me and Colleen have had our paths crossed a couple of times. We both went to Harvard College for undergrad and both have separately found our ways to Microsoft.

>> Yeah, that's right. We spend a significant part of our days now working with engineers to build Surface or build Windows. But Sonya has a background in economics and my background was actually in film production. So there are many ways to make your way into the technology world.

>> I didn't even take CS50 did you?

>> I didn't.

>> Zero coding classes but we found our way.

>> We have found our way. Yeah whether it's through storytelling or through financial model building. There are many ways contribute to the world of technology and to build your career here.

>> Actually, Colleen was the first person to pick me up at Microsoft and. She was coaching me and telling me all the ways to navigate not just the tech world, but also Microsoft specifically. So I'm really happy to have a familiar face sitting across from me in the booth today. And to kind of kick off the birth of this podcast.
Yes, it is great to have peer mentors, sponsors in the technology world and you’re right. It's great to have the familiar face and someone who's as passionate as I am about this subject of women advancing their careers and getting the support that they need from allies. Not necessarily women in technology, but the people supporting them, the hiring managers, the teachers, the mentors, as I mentioned.

Yep, and we're gonna have great leaders from the technology world in here, sharing their knowledge and their experiences, in hopes of broadening that mentorship to you, our listeners.

So Colleen, maybe we should share a little bit more about the details of why we're putting on this podcast to our listeners today. Maybe you can share a little bit more.

Yeah, absolutely, Sonya, you know that we've had access to great mentors throughout our careers so far at Microsoft, and one of our goals with this podcast is to scale some of that mentorship. Scale conversations that we've had with women internally at Microsoft. With women leaders in the tech field, outside of this company as well as their allies. And we'll also dive into some programs that are disrupting the tech pipeline trends that we see today. Getting more women and people of color into technology careers starting from a young age or just more inclusive ways to think about hiring at the company level. Whether you're just staring out in the tech industry, strategizing about how to get your next business role. Or even if you're managing a woman for the first time, we'll provide some great insights and support to help you build a great career and practice greater inclusion in the workplace.

Yep, and just like you mentioned, we're using this as a platform to share about opportunities for our listeners to get involved. And one very special one is Microsoft Ignite that's going to be coming up. It's the premiere event for the IT decision makers of the world. And, it's coming up September 24th through the 29th in sunny Orlando, which I'm very excited about. So I know you have a little bit of insight on how Microsoft Ignite has run in the past. Can you share a little bit more of what we're expecting this year?

In the past, there's been a luncheon and a welcome reception for women in attendance. But this year, there's a dedicated track. Microsoft is making a greater investment to women in business and technology attending the conference this year. And that will include everything from a welcome reception, dedicated speakers and the Hack for Innovation Challenge.

Yeah, that's one I'm super excited about. It's a crowdsourcing event designed to basically empower these women. And they get to foster a business development of a Microsoft patent. So the winner actually gets to receive the license to a Microsoft patent, which is the first time we've ever done something like this. So, I know,

It's so cool. [LAUGH]

Everyone's super excited, there's limited spaces. So make sure, if anyone is interested, you should definitely sign up sooner, than later. Yeah among the other things, you also then if you're in the top three innovations you actually get to present to Daymond John from Shark Tank, he'll be there on a Tuesday. And if yours is one of the top three you actually get to pitch it to him.

That is very cool I'm a huge fan of Daymond

He'll be one of the speakers, as well as Tarah Wheeler, the author of Women in Tech. Joy Chik and Ann Johnson will be on a leadership panel, and Ariel Aguilar will be speaking as well. So be sure to catch that.
I highly encourage everyone to check out microsoft.com/ignite for all the registration info you can get. The dates, hotels and more information about the session speakers. But [LAUGH] I can't believe I forgot to mention the most important part of this is the host of the WIBT track is our friend Donna Sarkar. Which I believe Colleen had just chatted with her. How did that go?

Yes, it was an amazing conversation. Donna told me everything from how innovative it's been building the future with the hollow lens team. She just got back from Africa, supporting the Windows insider program. And I could gush about this for days, but why don't we just have Donna tell her story? Donna, welcome to the Women in Business and Technology podcast. We're so excited to have you.

Thank you so very much.

So, Donna, I recently finished reading your book, You Had Me at "Hello World". And you talk specifically about your mother's influence on your demeanor. Can you tell us a little bit more about your background, and how that shapes the person you are today.

My ethnic background is that I'm part-Nepali. And one of the things that happens with many immigrant families, especially, I've noticed, with Southeast Asians is. We're taught to keep our head down, work really hard, and not draw too much attention to ourselves. So my mom is very, very outgoing at home. But at work, I interned at her company for a summer at work. She's very quiet. She tends to do as expected and not overstep, not raise too many questions. Not raise her hand for more than what she thinks she can achieve. And I found that really interesting because it's so different than who she is as a person. And we had a really good conversation about it when I was a teenager and I realized that. That's something that I carried with me into university where I didn't raise my hands when I had questions. I thought I had to figure it out on my own and I didn't question when I thought things were wrong. So I didn't have the best university experience. I studied computer science. I was one of very few women. I did not understand the concepts because I had never taken coding before. And I really struggled with it. I failed my first computer science class like with an E. I had to retake it. I had the choice at that point:, drop out of CS altogether, pursue something else, but I figured I've never been great at anything the first time. The first time I tried to ride a bicycle I fell down. The first time I tried to play the piano I was pretty terrible. The first time I took my driving test I failed. So, why just give up on computer science which was this amazing field with so much potential for creativity because I failed the first time. So I took it again, did okay, not great, but okay. But I always believed that 20% success is greater than zero. You don't always need to hit a 100. So I was pleased with my 20% success and moved on with my career. But I had to overcome that voice in my head that told me, just keep your head down, try to blend in, don't stand out too much, don't ask to many questions. Because it doesn't work. You don't get to stand out if you're blending in. It doesn't work that way and if you don't stand out, you're never going to be the one who is going to get those unique opportunities to succeed and go and do things that you really want to.

If you are thinking about your life now, freshly stepping off a plane from Africa, managing a team, that's thinking about in building some of the most innovative technology of our time. Think back to yourself as a young student, trying to get good grades or grappling with new concepts. Did you ever picture your life looking the way that it does today?

Not at all. Not in a million years. I don't even recognize the woman I am today, and that's a good thing. I always thought, okay, I'm gonna go get a job in company, I'll let you know. Do decently well, I like
my job, okay, but I'll have lots and lots of interests outside work that have nothing to do with technology. And I'll be making a decent income. But really, my true passion will be being an author. That's just not true. Because so many parts of life intersect, and bringing your whole self, whether it's to work or to home, is incredibly important. I am a fiction writer, I've been a fiction writer for about 15 years now, and the amount of my writing skills that I use at work is insane. I think I actually use more of my writing skills at work than my tech skills. Because fiction writing is all about grabbing the reader's attention. It's all about understanding who the hero of the story is, what is their goal, what is their motivation, what is their conflict? Who is the mentor, or weapon maker that can help them overcome their troubles, and what does that ending look like, that is satisfactory. That is a customer's journey. I tell everyone all the time that when we talk about building products for people, we have to think of the customer as the hero of the story. We, Microsoft, are not the hero of the story. Right now, one of the entrepreneurs I'm working with in East Africa, his name is Caleb, and he realized he's the hero if his story. The obstacle he has to overcome is that many parents in East Africa don't understand the value of technology, so they don't want to put their kids into this kids coding camp that Caleb runs. Imagine like an hour of code.org thing. They don't understand the value of tech because they didn't study it when they were in school. They understand the value of math or reading but, not technology. So Caleb has to overcome that obstacle, so that these kids stay in coding camp. So he introduced the concept of coding camp for kids and the adults who love them. So, parents and kids. Brilliant. So, now he is the hero of the story. He's got a very unique weapon by his side which is the technology that we built through Minecraft to actually help parents and children come together to learn coding. But, it's stuff like that. That storytelling is how I talk about Windows Insiders. There's no C++ coding in this story. This is all just pure storytelling but people are so invested in the story that they're willing to do the work inside Microsoft to make Caleb successful at achieving his goal. And when I go out there and talk to other customers, they resonate much more with Caleb than they do with Donna in Microsoft is trying to achieve a goal, no. Right? So I think it's incredibly important for people to realize they cannot predict what their future's gonna look like. And the specific passions they have when they're young, whether it's reading, writing, music, speaking, they should keep pursuing those because the skill sets they're gaining from those activities will overlap with their main career. And It will make them a unique contributor to whatever job they're doing.

>> You've mentioned the Windows Insider program. Can you tell us a little bit about your involvement in the program and maybe a snippet of your recent experience in East Africa?

>> Yeah, absolutely, so I took over as Engineering Lead of the Windows Insider program last year. And previously the windows inside our program was a community of people who tested pre release versions of Windows to make sure it fit their lives and needs before we shipped out to the public. But starting last year, my partner-in-crime Jeremiah Marble who runs the program architect and marketing side of it, and I realized that we have a very unique opportunity here. Because there's at community millions of people, they don't just take binaries of Windows, test them, and give us feedback. They're actually highly engaged with each other and with us on social media. These people already think of themselves as a community. They think of themselves as each other's really good friends. Every day I get probably a thousands of tweets from Insiders saying, hi Donna, how are you today? What have you been up to, send us a picture of your cat. So [LAUGH] these aren't send us builds of Windows, this is they want to engage. They want to feel a part of the community. So we said, let's actually use this desire that these insiders seem to have to want to help people. To go out there and actually make a difference in the
world. So we’re running a series of small experiments for these insiders for good fellowships where we launch in Nigeria last year. We chose 25 entrepreneurs to turn ideas into viable businesses that make Nigeria a better place for everyone. We always say that we fell in love with 25 ideas on paper and by the end of the fellowship, we fell in love with these 25 humans. We’re using their wits and their knowledge and networks to actually make their country a better place.

>> I love the focus on community as you’re thinking about the Windows Insider Program and in addition to some of your offers in Africa, I know that there’s been a specific focus on engaging women through the program, including last year’s women in tech breakfast at E3.

>> Right?

>> Why has recruiting and retaining women been a focus for you and the insider community team?

>> I don’t think of it so much as recruiting and retaining just women, so much as recruiting and retaining people from very different points of view. We know that the more diverse your teams and communities are in terms of points of view and experience that are different, the better products you’re gonna get. And we’ve realized that women just bring a more unique point of view to the table. Whether it’s their communities are very different, or their experiences are different, or the fact that women haven’t been in the workforce for as long as men. So the way they go about doing things is just unique and different. So having those diverse points of view, super important, very, very important. And we can’t just look at it in terms of gender or ethnicity. Because I identify as Nepali, but you can’t compare my experience with a woman who lives in Nepal, in Sembrol area. Completely different experiences. So, we have to actually look at geographically diverse people as well as gender differences. But that’s why I’ve been passionate about it, it leads to better products.

>> Absolutely. So early voice recognition technology did not hear women’s voices, and early video technologies did not see women.

>> Right.

>> But in October of last year, The Cut published an article positioning VR as the most diverse corner of the male-dominated tech space.

>> I think virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality, is the most fascinating technology in the world. Everyone will tell you that. I talk about mixed reality all the time. Part of the reason is that it’s emerging, and any time something is emerging, no one knows what they’re doing. Either you have two years of experience, or one year of experience. No one has 15 years of amazing mixed reality experience, that’s just not a thing, it hasn’t been around that long. And even people who think they have it, have out of date experience. So, everyone’s kind of at the same level. So a lot of times women feel like I haven’t been coding C++ for 25 years, so I’m behind. And that tends to be true when they go work at a company where people have been doing this for 25 years though. Like, how am I ever gonna learn about it? But I realize that for women, and people who are new to tech, go to where the emerging trends are. Because no one knows what they’re doing, and I find those fields to be just a lot more welcoming.
Donna, you're on the advisory board for iwantherjob.com and Tech++, two organizations that are supporting women in pursuing big careers. And on top of that, you're an active mentor. Why do you dedicate your time to these organizations, and to all of your men-tees, why is that important to you?

I believe that if I can unlock and empower women leaders, then they can go and unlock, and empower the next generation of women leaders. And a lot of times women don't understand that they're leaders. A leadership is not this crown someone puts on your head and say, now you're a leader. Someone does that because you've already been a leader for a long time, and they can just see your leadership qualities. Being a leader is just not being afraid to raise your hand, and say I'll take a stab at this. It might be wrong, but that's cool because no one else is doing it. That's all, you can just be a leader of yourself. It doesn't mean you're manager of 500 people, it's not being afraid of the blank page or the blank canvas, and saying you know what, I'm gonna give this a shot, I might be totally wrong. I want her job, iwantherjob, Brie the founder, and the Tech++ folks, just amazing, amazing humans. Because they said, you know what there's a gap in the market, I'm going to spend my extra hours to solve this problem. Because Brie has a full time job, she works at PR and social media and marketing, and Tech++ folks, they're very busy students of informatics at the University of Washington. This is something they're doing, because they can't not. They see this huge gap, and neither are huge profitable companies who are just like running this as giant profit centers. They're doing this out of the goodness of their own time, because they see a huge gap in the market. It's been amazing with, iwantherjob, because it really does solidify that idea I have that you need to understand that these jobs exist, and there's real people doing them.

The CEO of L'Oreal is a job.

It's not like a made up thing. That is a real job, and if you want to know how to get there, read the article. Because some human got that job, they didn't just like, they weren't born into it. One thing I always do in a room full of women, and I say how many of you want to be CEOs some day? Maybe like two will raise their hand people, and I said you're all dirty liars because at least, at least half of you want this. When I ask in a roomful of men, 95% raise their hand without fail. So I make the women do it again and again, until they're confidently raising their hand, and saying no, I want to be a CEO someday. There's nothing wrong with admitting that. There's nothing wrong with admitting it. So, I love that these two organizations really propagate for it, and push women to raise their hand and say, no I want to achieve the C suite. I wanna achieve that dream job of mine, and I'm not afraid to go after it.

What happens when an ambitious woman raises her hand, and clicks on that button that I want that job?

A whole lot of magic, go try it and see.

[LAUGH]

Good things happen.

Okay. I've often heard from women in leadership positions that they can't accept every mentor-ship inquiry that they receive.
Right. There are so few women in leadership opportunities, that they can't tend to everyone who wants that advice. And I thought a lot about how to scale mentor-ship. I know that you are mentoring, how many people now?

Easily hundreds, easily.

How do you scale mentor-ship? How do you make that work, given the confines of your outlook calendar?

I don't, because part of it is, of being a good mentor is being present, and being able to give that person the right amount of time that they need. Mentor-ship is not this Fairy God mothersque thing, where I need a mentor, I have a mentor in my life is amazing. It's understanding what exactly do you need coaching on. So I actually start to remove the word mentor, and think of it as coach, or sponsor. What are you looking for? Someone who understands your body of work, who can point you at opportunities? That's a sponsor. Someone who doesn't quite know your body of work, but has a skill that you want to also attain? That's a coach. So really being able to identify, what is it that you're looking for? If someone comes to me and says Donna, will you mentor me in public speaking? I say great, go watch these five Ted talks, and then come back to me with questions. But if someone just comes up to me and says, Donna will be you be my mentor, I say in what? And they're like, how to be like you. I say, what does that mean to you exactly?

So, they have to be a little bit specific. The other thing to do is to build up a pool of other mentors. My biggest success is if I can ping a group of people and say hey, there's someone asking for a mentor in Xuba, or uvideo. Really good at this, can you coach them a little bit on it, based on what you've learned. That is really powerful, because who I mentor knows everything I'm going to say. So they're able to overlay their own experience on it, because suddenly that new men-tee has two points of view, mine as well as someone who actually used my advice. That's way more powerful than me spouting advice that may, or may not work. One thing I encourage especially women to do, is don't just go get women mentors. Go get male mentors. Dudes are nice.

They're nice, there's never been a dude that's like I will not mentor you because you're a woman. That's never happened, 0 times in 15 years, it doesn't happen. You just have to be specific over what you're looking for. Cuz men honestly want to help, they just don't know how to help, because they feel like they don't want to man-splain. I don't wanna raise my hand to be creepy. So, don't be afraid to approach men to help coach you on things, I don't, my mentors are split 50/50.

I actually really appreciate that, because I'm able to get completely different points of view on how to solve certain problems.

As your job has grown a little bit bigger, a lot bigger over the years, and as you've taken on responsibilities with the insider community in addition to your day job. Thinking about HoloLens, it's
been surprising to me that you've continued to co-manage this blog, Fibonacci's Sequence. It's a blog that showcases diversity, and personal style in Staton. How did this project come about, and as your list of responsibilities grows, why has this project remained a priority for you?

>> My co-founder Beth Krane and I, who is one of my men-tees, and a good friend who I worked together on HoloLens actually. One day I was realizing that I get the same question a lot, which is do you dress like that everyday? And you can't see me viewers, but I'm in five inch heels, and that is just the thing that happens because I am short, right? And people ask me all the time, how do you taken seriously, I said because I don't change. If you change cuz someone told that they can't take you seriously, then they shouldn't take you seriously, then you don't know you. But what I tell everyone is, I've always appreciated fashion, and a lot of people at the beginning of my career is like, no one's gonna take you seriously if you look like a girl. And I said, well I I'm a girl, so that's not gonna change. But if I had changed, if I stopped being interested in fashion. Then the next person who showed up who was would also have to change cuz there's no one else to look at and band together. But if all of us are just authentically ourselves, whether that's into fashion or not into fashion, there's no archetype of a software engineer. That archetype needs to go away now because it's not real and we all just try to blend to it. And because we all try to blend to it, everyone who comes after us is forced to blend to it. It's a big hassle, stop doing it, everyone just be yourself. But the real point of the blog is telling people's stories. Who are you? Why did you join STEM? What is your advice to people who are just starting off in STEM and then the style question is just one. It's just showcasing the huge diversity of people in STEM, it's not just women, it's humans. And we as humans relate so well when we see other people who are like us who say the words we say, who believe in the things we say.

>> I love that it's another example of your commitment to scaling mentorship and such a great response to the standard, I don't have time to manage many mentees. There are ways for all of us to broaden to scale the guidance, the life lessons that we've learned in a one-to-many fashion. And it's really cool that you've explored multiple ways, multiple tactics through which you can do that. So I know that you'll be hosting the upcoming Women and Business in Technology session for attendees of Microsoft Ignite. What are you most looking forward to at that event?

>> I'm very excited to hear from Tara Wheeler, who's written the fabulous book on women and tech. She's very prolific. Love her work in cyber security. Love that she's a Seattle person. I'm also really looking forward to hearing from the folks at LinkedIn on how to really use LinkedIn to up your social and personal brand. All the programming looks really cool cuz it's not just one kind of person. It's different sorts of people and of course, the motivational speeches and such are really exciting. So this is the first year I'm such an active part of it. So I'm very, very excited to understand how I can contribute and do even more to help out.

>> Amazing and finally, Microsoft Ignite attendees will have the opportunity to participate in a pre-day hack for innovation. Which is specifically focused on empowering women in business and technology. What's the spirit behind kicking off this event with a Hackathon? Why is that so important?

>> I love Hackathons, and I've noticed that women tend to not attend them unless they already know people. In the vision of a Hackathon, you imagine a bunch of nerds sitting around drinking Red Bull in hoodies, and playing with wires on a motherboard. That's not what a Hackathon is. A Hackathon is actually a learning event. It's about letting go of this idea that the thing you create has to be this perfect product that's gonna ship to 1 billion people, it's not that. It's about learning how to put pieces of things
together that you may vaguely know about and try to solve a problem to see if you can make any traction. It truly is a 20 is greater than 0 situation. You're not trying to get 100% perfect here, you're trying to get to 20% learning. And I've noticed that when women do engage in Hackathons, they feel a lot more part of the community. Because you've already come together with other people and tried to create something. So you're going into the programming in the week with a bunch of friends. You're like, yeah, you're at the Hackathon, you're at the Hackathon, you're at the Hackathon so dear women going to Ignite, go to the Hackathon.

>> And male allies.

>> And male allies. I highly recommend male allies go. I'll be there for sure. So come find me, say hi. I love Hackathons. And I'd love to work with you guys and build something. I actually have a vision of what I wanna do so I'm always looking for people to come join my team. And yeah, it's gonna be used to make the lives of billions of people better so if anyone wants to help with, that come on over.

>> That's an amazing plug so yes, any women and male allies interested, please attend the-

>> Yes, I'll be bringing my male allies as my marketing counterpart. So-

>> Excellent.

>> Yeah.

>> We'll see you at Microsoft Ignite.

>> Yes, we will. [MUSIC]

>> Wow Colleen, that was an awesome interview. I love Donna. I had a chance to meet her at NexTech Africa in Nairobi, Kenya where she is launching officially, their Insiders for Good program as part of the Windows Insiders program. Really about fostering community and creating this conversation over now in Eastern Africa. And to something that I think we can use a inspiration also for this podcast. I think community building is such an important part and a goal for us and can start building off of her advice. She has some great insights in there and I personally can't wait to hear more from her at Microsoft Ignite this September.

>> Absolutely, ton of great guidance that we have from Donna on managing a great community. And making sure we're listening to your thoughts and ideas and the questions that you have.

>> So Sonia.

>> Hey Colleen.

>> There was a great campaign that launched this week, I think that you probably saw it, from HP to celebrate Father's day. It was this showcase of dads sitting down on the couch with their daughters and reading some generic interview guidance. Do you remember what some of those questions were?

>> Yeah, I remember they gave advice saying, don't wear perfume. Don't dress like a woman. Don't be too sexy. I was a little dumbfounded [LAUGH] when I was listening, and you can kinda see the reactions on their faces and seeing the dad's reaction. These are the allies right, allies you grow up with and obviously there's a family connection, but they are gonna be the ones who are helping us be vocal about
this. And hopefully changing these people who are perpetuating this stereotype and this ill advice, basically.

>> Yeah, the questions were really disappointing to me [LAUGH]. Instead of positive reinforcement, like feel confident in your skill set or review your resume. I was really surprised to see really strange guidance like don't look too much like a man [LAUGH] as a piece of instruction. And I think you're right. I think having men, whether it's your dad or your hiring manager [LAUGH] as part of the conversation as a way that we can work together to make that type of advice null and void to move past that conversation.

>> Yeah, I think everyone should share around that video. Definitely opened up my eyes that that still false information being perpetuated and shared online. They just searched for it. It was like the first generic responses. So I would recommend anyone listening in, if they can find that YouTube video. I think it came out on Father's Day too. It's just a great inspiring story.

>> Yeah, I stumbled across it. I follow Sheryl Sandberg on Facebook and she had shared it as sort of her Father's day Facebook post. I've actually found a lot of great unconscious bias training online. That was the message behind this video is that Hewlett-Packard, HP, is doing a lot to make sure that their human resources department is trained in this type of unconscious bias detection to make sure that their hiring practices are more inclusive. So, yeah, I'd highly recommend doing a quick search for unconscious bias training, sharing that around with your teams. With the people in your life that have hiring decisions to make, to make sure that we're making the technology world a more inclusive place. [MUSIC]

>> Sonya it has been great chatting with you today. And I wanna thank our audience for listening, for tuning in. And make sure that you get future episodes of this podcast, please subscribe. We are available on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts. [MUSIC]

>> Yup and if our listeners have any questions, you can also actually submit any feedback, any questions you might have that we can address during the show to wibt@microsoft.com.

>> Yes, please send us email, we'd love to hear your thoughts, we'd love to hear who you want interviewed on this podcast, let us know. You're a part of this community and we can't wait to hear what you think.

>> Big thank you from Sonia Dara and.

>> Colleen O'Brien, we'll see you guys later. I mean, we don't see you, hold on. [LAUGH] [MUSIC]

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