

Women in Business and Technology

Transcript of Episode 010 - Ambika Singh offers infinite style

Featuring: Ambika Singh, the CEO of Armoire

Summary: Sonia and Colleen aren't playing games in this episode, but Colleen chats with two coordinators of Women in Gaming, a community focused on celebrating women in the interactive and entertainment tech industry. Sonia talks to Ambika Singh, the CEO of Armoire, about how she is helping women take time back by offering a curated wardrobe subscription service. In the Cutting Edge segment, Colleen and Sonia discuss the impact of emotional labor.

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WOMAN'S VOICE: I think the data is really clear, there is no straight path to becoming an entrepreneur or becoming successful in the tech industry.

NARRATOR: Retail's big show, the 2108 National Retail Federation, or the NRF Conference, is returning to New York City from January 14th to the 16th.

For more than a century, NRF's annual convention has been an important gathering for industry leaders.

Microsoft is one of the largest sponsors of this event, and this year we are looking forward to having an in-depth conversation around home and online, front of house, back office, and connected supply.

For more information about the event, visit www.nrffbigshow.com.

NARRATOR: You're listening to the Women in Business and Technology Podcast from Microsoft.

In each episode you will hear from women in amazing tech and business roles, as well as male allies who are helping make the industries more inclusive.

We are diving into programs that promote greater diversity in the pipeline, 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 ten of Women in Business and Technology. I'm Colleen O'Brien.

SONIA DARA: And I'm Sonia Dara.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: We're starting the show in our community connect segment with a conversation that I had with Nicole Fawcette and Kathryn Storm, two awesome members of the Xbox team, and coordinators of the Women in Gaming community.

SONIA DARA: And then we'll jump into an interview I had with Ambika Singh, the CEO of the, quote, "Wardrobe as a service company," Armoire.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Finally, we'll wrap things up in our cutting-edge segment with a discussion about an article investigating emotional labor, from issue number one of *No Man's Land*, a new publication out of the New York headquartered women's coworking space, the Wing.

SONIA DARA: Well, I don't know about you, Collen, but I'm just about ready to head home for the holidays. How are these last few weeks of 2017 treating you?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: It's definitely a busy time of year. Of course you know there are a lot of parties to plan for, and gifts to buy, on top of already busy work schedules, trying to wrap up before the end of the year.

But you and I have awesomely carved out some time to do a bit of life and career planning as well.

SONIA DARA: Absolutely. We're using the *Girlboss Workbook* by Sophia Amoruso to guide some of that reflection and goal-setting. The book is a self-proclaimed, quote, "interactive journal for winning at life."

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I love that. I've been a fan of Sophia Amoruso since learning about her unplanned rise to entrepreneurial success as the founder of the retail clothing company Nasty Gal.

She had some recent stumbling blocks, including Nasty Gal's bankruptcy, but I really appreciate that she's continued to be a public figure, who talks about navigating those ups and downs of building a career.

I even went to the inaugural Girlboss rally in Los Angeles in February to try to really connect with that community in real life.

SONIA DARA: This *Girlboss Workbook* is an extension of the work that Amoruso is doing with her sophomore company, Girlboss Media, and a DIY version of her first book,

Girlboss. It's meant to get you thinking about your strengths, your weaknesses, role models, and the reputation that you really want to build.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: The workbook is a little bit scattered, it's kind of all over the place.

SONIA DARA: Totally.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: It has these prompts that will get you thinking about career building, but also romantic relationships, political activism, and even the strategy behind buying vintage clothing, which of course kicked off Sophia Amoruso's initial company, Nasty Gal.

But if you're headed into the new year looking for a new direction, this book will definitely help you diverge before you decide on a definite path.

SONIA DARA: So a few of my favorite parts of the book include a section where you can jot down the books you want to read, or another prompt was five things you want to learn to do.

The pages really encourage you to write directly on them. And articulating the things that I want to do, and documenting them in this way definitely helps me stay a little bit more accountable, which I liked.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: To find the closest independent bookstore selling *The Girlboss Workbook*, head to IndieBound.org.

You can find more great girlboss editorial content, including a killer podcast, and information about their upcoming events at Girlboss.com.

NARRATOR: Community Connect: Get involved and stay connected.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I'm joined in the studio today by Xbox Senior Product Marketing Manager, Nicole Fawcette, and Xbox Interaction Designer Kathryn Storm. Welcome to the studio.

NICOLE FAWCETTE: Thanks. Thanks for having us.

KATHRYN STORM: Thanks for having us.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Nicole, can you start off by telling me what is Women in Gaming?

NICOLE FAWCETTE: Women in Gaming is a team here at Xbox. We have about 30 volunteers, all women, from across the organization, from engineering, finance, biz dev, marketing, PR, you name it.

And really we're an organization that is working to empower women across the games' industry by growing the games industry, attracting women here to Xbox, and retaining great leaders and awesome women that we have already on the team. And then also trying to make a difference out in the community by doing some outreach to school and colleges and young girls who might be interested in coming to the game industry.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Excellent.

NICOLE FAWCETTE: Yeah.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And it sounds like you've addressed a few of these, but Kathryn, can you fill in a little bit who are the audiences that Women in Gaming serves?

KATHRYN STORM: We're looking at three of those: women who are working at Microsoft at team Xbox looking to provide community support and engagement, women in the larger industry promoting leadership and cultural change, and also women and young girls, so inspiring the new generation of women that are joining and contributing to the industry.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And Nicole, I'd love to hear why this community is important to you. I know that the state of gaming has not always been welcoming to women. Why do you invest so much of your time in building and maintaining this community?

NICOLE FAWCETTE: For me it really is about connection to others. For a lot of my career in the gaming industry I have been kind of that lone woman at the table, the kind of one woman on a game team of 40 men, and all the experiences that comes with that.

I've also been, you know, the one person playing Halo online with a very female gamertag, and all that comes with that.

So whether you're a player, streamer, you work in the industry, being a woman in the gaming industry is still very unique and comes with a lot of challenges.

And so connection is really what powers me. It's meeting other women that are just as passionate about gaming as I am, that are passionate about their career, that want to have a voice, want to have a seat at the table.

And despite a lot of the great changes that are happening in DNI space here at Xbox --

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: DNI meaning diversity and inclusion.

NICOLE FAWCETTE: Diversity and inclusiveness, yeah. There's still a lot of work that needs to happen, and we still need to rally together as a community to champion each other. And I really believe in the power of women to uplift each other.

And so that's really what drives me day after day is bringing the network together, and really sharing in each other's successes.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And how did this organization come about? Has one of you been here a little bit longer? Do you know about the origins?

NICOLE FAWCETTE: Well, both of us have not been along at Xbox as long as Women in Gaming have. It actually started over 20 years ago. I don't know, Kathryn, I can say we've been at Microsoft for 20 years quite yet.

But really our main founders have been Shannon Loftis (ph), who's not a GM of publishing, Bonnie Ross, who's a CVP at 343 Industries, and Kiki Wolf Kala (ph), who is also a studio head at 343 Industries.

And ultimately, Women in Gaming started with them and a few others -- it's a small group -- actually as a lunch at E3 one year. And really what ended up happening is they went as a collection of women to get together to talk about the industry and socialize. And then the next year, each woman brought another friend and another friend and another friend, and kind of culminated over these, you know, past 20-plus years, and now we have this really massive kind of Women in Gaming larger community that all feel connected to it, as well as our sort of core group here at Xbox.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And I know that that lunch at E3 has been a pretty persistent part of the programming. Can you describe some of the programming that Women in Gaming has expanded to coordinate?

KATHRYN STORM: In the last 16 months, we've held a variety of events, from things like leadership training to network dinners. And we've even had a self-defense class.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Wow.

KATHRYN STORM: So we're continually listening to our community to understand their needs, and how we can best support and connect one another.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And you have a big announcement, a big event coming up. Is that right?

NICOLE FAWCETTE: Yeah, we do. This is about the time every year that we announce our involvement at the Game Developers Conference, so GDC. That little lunch at E3 has really kind of shifted to Game Developers Conference or GDC.

What we're actually doing is we're taking that luncheon idea, and we're making it bigger. We've heard from our community that more people want to come to women-centered events. We're in the position to offer that to our audience.

And so this year, we're actually changing from a luncheon to a rally, which I'm super pumped on.

KATHRYN STORM: I love that word, rally.

NICOLE FAWCETTE: I know. And this is the year to rally around each other and uplift each other. This is definitely 2018 is our year.

So we're moving from this two to three-hour luncheon format that we host at GDC to a full day of programming, which includes some interactive panels, discussions. We'll have a keynote speaker. And it's really a day to come together with other women in the industry, connect, be inspired, and really uplift each other.

And so the 2018 Women in Gaming rally is going to take place on Tuesday, March 20th, in San Francisco, at the Contemporary Jewish Museum, which is just a gorgeous venue right across from the Moscone Center where most of GDC takes place. We're really pumped about it.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: So if anyone listening is interested in attending that event or is maybe looking to partner, what's the best way to get in touch with you or to find more information?

NICOLE FAWCETTE: Well, if you are listening from Xbox and you are going to GDC, definitely reach out to Kathryn and I, and make sure you get on the list to come.

If you are in the gaming industry or going to GDC, the cool thing is the rally is open to everyone. It's a free event, and all you need to do is sign up and let us know you're coming.

So we've announced that Tuesday, March 20th, is the rally. We'll be opening registration in the New Year, so stay tuned to that.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Is there anything else that you want to leave our listeners with?

NICOLE FAWCETTE: Definitely follow us on social. We've got some amazing social posts. We do Motivation Mondays, Women Crush Wednesdays. It's a really cool inside look at Xbox and the gaming industry. So definitely give us a follow. We want to hear from you, we want to connect with you.

KATHRYN STORM: Yeah, and we have some really great male supporters, too. And I know that a lot of them are not shy about like, hey, how do we get involved. And there is a place for you, too. So if you support Women in Games, be an ally for developers, streamers or even your friends, like we're welcoming to -- we're not like going to shut you out for wanting to help.

KATHRYN STORM: Absolutely not.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Well, thank you both for making the time to come talk to us today and sharing more about Women in Gaming. I'm incredibly excited for your rally, and I'll be following you on social in the meantime.

KATHRYN STORM: Thank you.

NICOLE FAWCETTE: Yeah, thanks!

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And now let's get on to the interview.

SONIA DARA: I'm thrilled to welcome to the studio the Armoire CEO or Chief Boss Lady, as she calls herself, Ambika Singh. Ambika, welcome to the show.

AMBIKA SINGH: Thank you so much. I'm so excited to be here.

SONIA DARA: So Colleen and I met you a few months back during the Create and Cultivate event, which is where we learned about your company. But would you mind filling in our listeners about Armoire?

AMBIKA SINGH: Absolutely. So Armoire is the dream closet for the power women. So what that means is the closet is infinite, but it doesn't live in your apartment, it lives somewhere else. It's guided by a personal stylist. So someone will give you recommendations on what to wear. And there's no maintenance, because we do all of the shipping and the dry cleaning.

And because we're here at Microsoft, I can't help but to make the connection between the Azure revolution, because this is exactly how we talked about it in the early days. I was also a Microsoftie, and so --

SONIA DARA: Nice.

AMBIKA SINGH: -- we talked about taking away the bulkiness of the servers, taking away the heaviness of serving them, and taking away the need for so much expertise around it. And that's exactly what we're trying to do with your closet.

SONIA DARA: So is it a subscription basis? How exactly does that work?

AMBIKA SINGH: So the way it works for a consumer is the basic subscription is four items at a time that you can swap out whenever you want. And that's \$149 a month. The clothes are high-end. Again like sticking with the idea of like really making this revolution work for people, we're carrying things that are super high quality, they're unique, so they're desirable, but not necessarily the things that you want to be cluttering up your apartment with.

And we also have a premium and a less item subscription, depending on what people want. We're really trying to meet women where they are.

If you really fall in love with the clothes, you can buy them, but we encourage you to buy less, live more simply.

SONIA DARA: So you have your undergraduate degree from Dartmouth in History, Economics, and Microfinance, casual. But after a few rolls in the tech industry, you decided to go back to school and get your MBA from MIT Sloan. Congratulations, by the way.

Sheryl Sandberg has famously said on Quora that, quote, "MBAs are not necessary at Facebook, and I don't believe they are important for working in the tech industry."

Do you agree with that statement? And maybe you can explain a little bit more why you decided to go pursue that degree.

AMBIKA SINGH: I think the data is really clear, there is no straight path to becoming an entrepreneur or becoming successful in the tech industry. They're varied, and people keep trying to draw strong lines that say like if you do this, you'll certainly get here, and it hasn't been something set we've been able to prove from a data perspective. So in that way I think it's still a very personal decision and it works for people, depending on where you came from and where you're trying to go.

So I think that I could have started a company without getting my MBA, for sure. Would I have started this company? Likely no. And that's because there's all sorts of happy accidents, and sometimes unhappy accidents that kind of add up on a path to a startup's inception and life.

And so I think that I ended up here because of my MBA. It's not necessarily the only path to starting a company. I don't agree or disagree.

SONIA DARA: So you've held a couple marketing and business development roles at TravelPost, Rover.com, Aditi Technologies, and, hey, even Microsoft, like you mentioned.

I was surprised, though, to see that you didn't have a background in fashion or retail. So what prompted you to pursue that industry after graduating with your MBA, and can you tell us a little bit more about the company's origin story?

AMBIKA SINGH: Yeah, and this is another great question where I feel like there isn't a right answer, there's only a right answer for you.

In business school we talked a lot about, hey, if you really want to be an operator, you should be able to run any company, and as a true manager your interests should be in building great teams and getting people to be energized and excited.

And for me coming out of business school particularly I wanted to find something that I was particularly passionate about. The team is what keeps me going and why I'm there, but working on something that was deeply interesting to me was motivation and passion around trying to figure out what it was I wanted to do.

So that led me to the Bosslady. We think a lot about the Bosslady. She is a professional woman, she's busy. You guys probably know the data; she takes on way more in the home, she takes on more at work, and is unfortunately normally less rewarded in both cases than the other gender.

And so I was really passionate about trying to figure out how do we talk to this woman. I like her, I know her, I want to spend my time thinking about helping her. So that led us to the Bosslady first.

Secondly, I had worked at Rover, which you knew, which was on the edge of kind of thinking about collaborative consumption beyond just apartments and cars. And so collaborative consumption was in my blood, and I liked it.

As a Millennial I'm very much in the "would love to pay for experiences over ownership." There's all the data around like instant gratification, that we seek those kind of like off-the-wall experiences, and that part and less so on the ownership model like really stuck with me. So that secondly led us to collaborative consumption.

And the fashion part is I think super interesting, because I liked clothes, and I had way too many of them. At that point, I was living in Boston, and I had literally a full closet at my parents' house on the East Side, one in Seattle and one in Boston. So I like them. It wasn't my passion space, but I did see how it was something that brought me joy, and let me express my individuality.

It also did positive things for my career, which is something that I think is one of those things that is a tough pill to swallow sometimes for me, but clothes are an important part of women's careers, for better or for worse. If you are dressed the part, that

means something very different than what it means for a guy who can own two pairs of pants and three shirts and swap them out.

SONIA DARA: It's so true.

AMBIKA SINGH: And if you do that, you can still do it, but you're making a statement instead of it being sort of like part of your professional. So there was that part of it as well where I was cognizant of this maybe undue burden on professional women.

So those three pillars, Bosslady, collaborative consumption, and this appreciation for fashion led us to what we're hoping we're solving with Armoire.

SONIA DARA: Was it a project you mentioned a little bit at MIT? That's where Armoire had kind of the birth of it. Do you mind sharing a little bit about that?

AMBIKA SINGH: So one of the great things about business school is you have some time for all of the other --

SONIA DARA: Really?

AMBIKA SINGH: -- holders of graduate degrees where I think there can be a lot more sort of classwork and intensity. There's a lot of encouragement in business school to spend time with your classmates, which can mean time in the classroom and also time out of the classroom.

And there's a lot of encouragement to work together. Most people have come there with some kind of professional background, and there's an understanding that you'll develop a professional relationship in the context of working on projects.

So I worked on lots of projects. One of the first ones was trying to figure out a digital community for older people who were becoming increasingly isolated. We worked on something related to that where it was caretakers, trying to figure out how to give them services and support.

So they were really --

SONIA DARA: It's a range.

AMBIKA SINGH: Yes, wide range.

And then started to like go down this path. And actually the way that we really zeroed in on this was that we interviewed 500 women, which is another great thing that business school gives you is that access to other people who have incredible networks.

So we put a survey out, and we did this both like from one step removed from like a Survey Monkey, as well as like in person, and just talked to people about like, hey, what are the issues in your life that could be solved, and like what bothers on you a daily basis.

This issue with the closet with women kept coming up. So that led us down this path.

One interesting data point, we asked people how do they feel when stand in front of their closet. And this is mind-blowing to a lot of men but not to women, the most repeated word was "guilty."

SONIA DARA: Yeah, not surprised.

AMBIKA SINGH: Women are very cognizant of the fact that there's so much stuff in there, and feel bad about it, but there's still the other counter data point is what was your favorite day in the life of a dress or when do you remember feeling great, and it's always, "Oh, tried this and it was new, and it was exciting." So the newness counterbalanced with the guilt of the full closet, these were things that we really learned through talking to people.

And so from there we started a small project. Actually a true but hilarious story is that about five of my full classes worked on Armoire in different capacities.

SONIA DARA: Nice.

AMBIKA SINGH: So like in finance --

SONIA DARA: Utilizing, yeah.

AMBIKA SINGH: -- in marketing, in operations. Hopefully, when we're rich and famous, these guys don't all come back to me. And even if they do --

SONIA DARA: Teachers are asking for credit, yeah.

AMBIKA SINGH: -- I'll get something.

So yeah, so tons of support from my classmates, and I think, I hope that's one of the places that led us to this rich solution, because we were able to get so many people involved at an early stage.

SONIA DARA: In the interview you did with Ypulse they proclaim Armoire to be the, quote, "anti-fast fashion Millennial startup," in direct opposition to inexpensive and trendy retailers like H&M and Urban Outfitters. Do you agree with this positioning?

AMBIKA SINGH: I absolutely agree with that positioning, because what fast fashion has done is they're trying to solve the same problem that we are, but the way that they're solving it is not great for the consumer, the environment, or the industry. And they're essentially the only winners in this paradigm.

And so we're also trying to give women the opportunity to try trends and the opportunity for newness. We know that it's exciting to try that stuff on. But we wanted to figure out a more sustainable way to do that.

And frankly, that's one of the messages that we see land most strongly in Seattle, which is no big surprise, but women are extremely conscious here of the fact that apparel is the second most polluting industry in the world, and that's already when fast fashion is still relatively new. So you think about if we draw the straight line out and nothing changes, fast fashion by the time we're looking ten years out is really going to be a huge problem. And so I absolutely agree with that positioning.

SONIA DARA: Who would you consider your competitors in this space?

AMBIKA SINGH: Ah, so anyone taking share of wallet from the consumer is a competitor. And that's actually an interesting thing. When we were conceptualizing this, a well-known competitor in this space, Rent the Runway, has been around for many, many years now. And we thought we might be coming into the industry to compete directly with them. In fact, and I don't know Jen but I think she would probably agree with me, we are not fighting a battle head on with any of the rental companies, we're fighting a battle against behavior change, that it is valuable to rent your clothes, and it's valuable to put the same kind of budget behind that as you would with clothes that are purchased.

Because something that is surprising I think to consumers is that it's quite expensive operationally for us to rent high-end clothes to you, because there is a real cost behind it. And fast fashion is training consumers that a shirt costs \$3. A shirt never costs \$3.

SONIA DARA: Never.

AMBIKA SINGH: Never. Like the costs are buried in all sorts of nasty places that if you thought it, you would not feel good about it.

So if we show you the real cost of operating this, which includes our fabulous drycleaner who is a small business as well, Capitol Hill, family owned, the real cost of the building that we work in that I know we're going to talk about, the real cost of our labor, which we pay living wages and our local all women from the area, all of that adds up. So rental is not cheap, it's a way to achieve what you're looking for with hopefully a budget that works for you.

SONIA DARA: So funding has been an incredibly interesting topic that we discuss with entrepreneurs on our show. It also seems like a very polarizing topic. Some founders are not interested in taking on the debt or the additional oversight, and then you have others who are only interested in crowdfunding. And even more can't fathom building a business without the additional capital. What has been your approach to funding?

AMBIKA SINGH: I think it's of course attractive to imagine that you could bootstrap your business. And I coming into this, having worked at two venture backed startups, really thought it would be great to bootstrap our business.

In actuality, one, our business is not a candidate for bootstrapping, because of the fact that we do own all of our inventory, and we are buying high-end clothes that we have to pay people for. So there's a real cap-ex requirement that doesn't allow us to be a bootstrapped company.

The other thing I didn't anticipate is that -- and this is a staggering statistic that we are extremely proud of -- 48 percent of our investors are women. Either the woman or the team that invested in us was led by a woman. And that is in complete opposition to what industry standard statistics are. And those women have been our biggest supporters.

SONIA DARA: That's awesome.

AMBIKA SINGH: So the micro team that actually is on the ground is our first line of sort of brand creation and what we're doing. Our investors are this like happy hug around us who have been huge supporters. And so that's something that I didn't anticipate and I'm super grateful for. And one of the reasons that I think we've been able to achieve that is because we're solving a core problem that resonates with them. I think it's very exciting.

SONIA DARA: Did you have people management skills prior to becoming the CEO of Armoire? What's your philosophy around people management?

AMBIKA SINGH: If my team was here, they would be like, does she have any?
(Laughter.)

SONIA DARA: That's awesome.

AMBIKA SINGH: I'm working on it, honestly, one of those things where everything in a startup is generally new, you've done a little bit of it before. I'd worked on some tech before, I'd worked on some operations, I'd sold some stuff, but I hadn't done it to this level, this deep.

And so my philosophy is essentially I am lucky and proud of the fact that we've hired people that are incredibly good at what they do, and I think my job is to hire well, definitely, and then get out of people's way. Like let them do what they are best at, support them if they need it, provide whatever air cover I can, but I very much try -- and this is where like it is tough, but I very much try to get out of people's way.

SONIA DARA: Diversity and inclusion is such an important topic in the technology world today, with large companies reporting on demographics and initiatives year over year.

As a startup CEO how do you ensure that you're building a team that represents different experiences and thinking styles, and how do you maintain a work environment that allows different individuals to bring their whole selves to work?

AMBIKA SINGH: On this topic of diversity and inclusion I think my perspective is shared by a lot of female CEOs and executives and people in the workplace. I include all sorts of diverse perspectives, not because I feel like it's a charitable thing to do or it's something that I should do, I do it because it's an arbitrage opportunity.

If people are somehow not included in the mainstream because of whatever reason, and I can give them a place where they feel happy and they can bring their whole selves to work, that's just me having an ability to hire people that other people can't.

So I certainly just look at that as a talent arbitrage. It's the same thing I feel like about female founded businesses that particularly are looking at the female consumer. You've heard lots of male investors -- and investors on both sides say, I invest in businesses that I'm passionate about or that I understand. Like if you're not passionate about the female consumer problem, and you don't understand it, that means that there's all this greenspace that I can go out there and solve a problem.

And so I think for people who are looking at problems that are looking at the female consumer or the female founded team or the female entrepreneur, you should look at her as an arbitrage opportunity.

SONIA DARA: So you mentioned the buzzword earlier, female CEO. Does your experience as a CEO have that gendered lens, and do you identify as a female CEO?

AMBIKA SINGH: I do. And I think it comes back to what I mentioned about the arbitrage opportunity. I think of it as an opportunity that I have, and it's a tool in my toolbox.

And I will say that that is like an evolution of my thinking, because if you would have asked me before starting this company, particularly having come from tech and an all-male environment, I would have said, hey, like there's nothing different about what I do

than what my male coworker does, so I don't understand why this gendered lens is being like placed upon me.

What I've realized, I think, as a startup CEO is like you should take any toolbox like add-in that you can, any kind of like side path or small road or cut-through or whatever.

And what that means to me is that, one, we looked at a problem that male CEOs weren't looking at and didn't understand. It gave me access to a network of both female talent. So we're 90 percent women on our team.

SONIA DARA: That's awesome.

AMBIKA SINGH: And it gave me access to this investor network that I wouldn't have previously had access to.

So I think of it as my version of being a great golfer who like hangs out with other golfers. Like would you run away from that? No. Like you would embrace it, because it gives you all of these advantages. So that's how I think about it.

SONIA DARA: You mentioned kind of those communities. Any other communities you've invested in to find support and guidance as a CEO?

AMBIKA SINGH: All of them. I'm like anyone that I have access to. Certainly, I'm Indian American.

So I grew up on the East Side, and so I've got a great Seattle network, which is one of the reasons that we brought Armoire back here. We started it at MIT, but we brought it back to Seattle. The Seattle community has been incredibly receptive to things that are homegrown, both on the investor and the consumer side. A lot of our customers are just really excited that we're a homegrown fashion experience.

Seattle's been amazing, being an Indian American has been amazing. That community has grown incredibly in my lifetime, very much thanks to Microsoft that we're here, and Boeing.

SONIA DARA: Amazon.

AMBIKA SINGH: Amazon, yeah. And so a lot of us have found a place here, and that community has been awesome as well.

SONIA DARA: So you mentioned your decision to bring it back to the Pacific Northwest. What should entrepreneurs be thinking about when it comes to potential destinations for their headquarters?

AMBIKA SINGH: I think you go somewhere that is home. Whatever home means to you, and it might mean different things, somewhere that you have some start of a community, because -- and again like I think this is particularly relevant if you're raising money and if you need access to a lot of customers, because both of those things for us were really effective.

A lot of our management team has lived in Seattle for a long time. So we found all of our early customers through sports teams, through high school networks, through college networks, through our husbands' workplace, like all of that stuff.

So going somewhere where you have a community -- and that's just on the business side. On the personal side, as I'm sure many of your guests have said, this is a hard road. And being able to have personal support around you so that you can take the Saturday afternoon off and just like do something with people who care about you and who know who you are and all that kind of stuff I think is very important in keeping the startup alive, both personally and professionally.

SONIA DARA: What would be your advice to entrepreneurs who feel that startup is synonymous with Silicon Valley and where you can kind of get that concentration of people as well? Like what would be your advice to them for that?

AMBIKA SINGH: That's a great question.

SONIA DARA: There's a pressure there, right?

AMBIKA SINGH: There is totally a pressure, and you'll definitely feel it from fundraising perspective, because it is actually a fact that the money that gets doled out in Silicon Valley is way more likely, especially at an early stage, to go to a local company.

That said, we are an example of where that didn't happen. We got a lot of angel money from Seattle, and we got a lot of institutional money not from Seattle.

SONIA DARA: That's great.

AMBIKA SINGH: So it's possible. And I would say that beyond getting wrapped up in the Silicon Valley thing, I would look at the other things that I mentioned about like finding somewhere that you feel good both personally and professionally.

It's also very expensive in the Valley.

SONIA DARA: Yes.

AMBIKA SINGH: Watch out for that.

SONIA DARA: Duly noted.

AMBIKA SINGH: Not that Seattle's cheap, unfortunately.

SONIA DARA: So you mentioned home base. Your office is currently headquartered at the Riveter, which is a coworking space in Seattle focused on women and wellness that's currently expanding to other cities.

Why did you decide to locate your office at the Riveter, and what are the benefits that coworking has offered to your organization?

AMBIKA SINGH: We had never considered coworking before. We were in a tiny apartment. And this comes back to why it's good to move home. It was like my buddy from high school who had -- there was a break in the tenants, and we just got in there and ran the business out of an apartment.

And the thing that we found was that it was very isolating. And this is again like good for consumer companies to think about. For us to get out and talk to our customers, we couldn't really invite them to the apartment because it's weird that we'd have to go --

SONIA DARA: Can you leave your shoes at the front door?

AMBIKA SINGH: Right, totally. This is somebody's bedroom; just ignore that.

So we'd have to get out and meet them, and it just was like it was a break in the day. It was somewhat artificial, because then they know they're coming to give you feedback instead of it sort of being like part of --

SONIA DARA: Conversation.

AMBIKA SINGH: Yep. So being somewhere where you can see them on a daily basis is super awesome.

The other thing about being at the Riveter is that it's incredibly motivating for us, because we are again like back to we're looking at the female consumer, we're surrounded by these investors who are women and advocates who are women, and they're all the Riveter has given them a home base.

And so one of the things, and I think this is like so related to all the questions you asked about the gender lens and stuff, WeWork is awesome for dudes, for bro working. There's dudes everywhere. And if you're working on a consumer problem that has to do with dudes, like you should go there and like be in your customer lab.

But what we are creating, thanks to the Riveter, is a place where we can do some she-working --

SONIA DARA: I love that.

AMBIKA SINGH: -- and work on problems that are particularly relevant.

And I can't tell you the value of having customers come by, literally all the time, with ideas, with feedback. We just see them live in our clothes, so it's like we can observe them all the time. It's awesome.

SONIA DARA: So last year, you became a board member with the Ministry of Supply, a company that produces radically engineered dress clothes.

In 2015, the Women on Boards report showed that women held just 19.1 percent of board directorships here in the United States.

It seems almost silly, given the catalyst data collected from Fortune 500 companies between 2005 and 2009, which shows that companies with the most women directors outperform those with the least, along with the parameters of return on sales, equity, and invested capital.

Did improving representation at all influence your decision to join the board, and what were your other motivating factors?

AMBIKA SINGH: My main motivating factor is that the management team at Ministry has been great friends to us since the beginning. And I'm super passionate about what they're doing, and about them as individuals.

And so we've talked a lot about female advocates, and how great our community of women have been. Our community of men have been just as lovely. I think --

SONIA DARA: Shout out to the boys.

AMBIKA SINGH: Yes, exactly. These last couple weeks and months have been rough for the good guys, and there's many more of them than there are the bad guys.

Ministry from the beginning, Aman has been a big supporter, but when all we had was a PowerPoint, he was encouraging. They came out of MIT as well, so they're a few years our senior from Sloan. And so he had a similar background, and just has always been a bit advocate. He was the first brand to sign on a partnership agreement with us.

SONIA DARA: Nice.

AMBIKA SINGH: And I mean, at that stage like when you -- they didn't need us, we needed them.

So my main --

SONIA DARA: You have to start somewhere.

AMBIKA SINGH: Yes. My main motivation was Aman felt like I could be helpful, and I wanted to do my part to be helpful, if I can.

That said, one of the reasons Aman felt I would be helpful is because Ministry launched a women's line a few years ago. I'm not getting the exact timeframe right here, but a few years ago. And at the time, they had no women on the board, and no women on the executive team. So it's tough to be -- and Aman, kudos to him, was very cognizant of that, and wanted to fix it.

So in the board meeting I don't represent the women's voice, I think I represent the voice of the operator, because I'm the only operator on the board. I'm also the earliest stage clearly, so I have a sense for what is plausible and what is a pipe dream.

And also I think I bring some of the optimism of the operator, because to be an operator you have to be somewhat radically optimistic.

That said, I have a perspective about the way that the women's line should and could land, particularly from a marketing perspective. That's my background.

And so I guess long story short, to your question, it didn't drive my decision to join the board. I think it is a value that I bring to the board that Aman saw in me before asking me to join.

SONIA DARA: Any advice you have for our listeners who may be considering an entrepreneurial venture?

AMBIKA SINGH: So I do have some advice, and this is particularly for female CEOs or would-be founding teams, because I think the founding team -- and I don't know if we covered this, but I have a big founding team, which I'm super grateful for. It's not just about being the CEO. Like being a founder of a startup, you're all equally insane.

SONIA DARA: How many founders to you have?

AMBIKA SINGH: We have four.

SONIA DARA: Four?

AMBIKA SINGH: Yeah.

SONIA DARA: That's awesome.

AMBIKA SINGH: And which I'm a huge advocate of, because there is enough work to go around. And if you're going to make it, you're going to make it big, and so there's enough spoils to go around also.

SONIA DARA: That's great.

AMBIKA SINGH: But to female CEOs I think there's a lot of talk of the data, which is scary. You get less money, you get less access. It's all like less, less, less -- less success.

But my point would be is that you also have these advantages that you just have to figure out how to turn into that.

For example, you've got these incredible networks. You may not even know they exist, but I promise you if you look deep, they're in there, of women who want to support you. And they will understand what you're trying to build in a different way, where all of you will be creating this arbitrage that we talked about that is just simply an advantage to you that's not available to someone else.

And I think this is our moment, and so I would encourage you to look beyond just the ways that things are done, and find those kind of like aha moments that maybe have been overlooked because people haven't been focused on this consumer set. And don't worry about the bad data, because it just means that it's our opportunity, and this is our moment.

SONIA DARA: Ambika, where can our listeners find you and Armoire online?

AMBIKA SINGH: So you can find us at www.armoire.style. You can also visit us if you're local anytime at 12th and Pine at the Riveter. It's an awesome building, so you should come by just to see it, but also come by to visit our stylist. And give our service a try, because I would certainly appreciate it. This is also how we help each other grow.

SONIA DARA: Awesome. Thanks, Ambika.

AMBIKA SINGH: Thanks so much.

NARRATOR: Cutting-edge, our take on stories in the business and technology world.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Sonia, as you know, I have a lot of interests.

SONIA DARA: That's an understatement.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Communities, stories about entrepreneurship, and supporting women are among them.

So I was really excited when I heard about the launch of the Wing just over a year ago. As you know, it's a coworking space for women, and a self-proclaimed "home base for women on their way."

Last year, I just so happened to be in New York in November for a Women at Microsoft event, and I was able to visit the Wing's Flatiron location. Thank you to my friend and wing-woman Roxanne for taking me on a tour of that space.

SONIA DARA: I've been fortunate to check out the space as well a couple of times, and it's absolutely amazing and beautiful. And it's also incredibly cool that they do so much programming in the facility.

Diane Von Furstenberg gave a talk there earlier this month, and they frequently have panels of women in different industries to come and speak to their members.

I keep up via their Instagram, being here on the West Coast, so definitely a good follow.

And today, we're going to talk about an article from a publication that is coming out of the Wing, entitled *No Man's Land*, the Fall 2017 edition, issue number one, launched November 13th.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Obviously, I bought the issue immediately.

SONIA DARA: Of course.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And have been working through some of the really great content there.

One of my favorite features of this publication is the inclusion of excerpts written by young women affiliated with Girls Write Now, W-r-i-t-e Now, a national literary mentorship program that pairs young women with established writers as they're working on their pieces.

There's also an article called *Stacking Bread* that I think is particularly relevant to our audience here. It features tips on money management from Call Your Girlfriend podcaster Aminatou Sow, Shark Tank Shark Barbara Corcoran, and media mogul Mona Scott-Young.

SONIA DARA: The feature we wanted to highlight in *No Man's Land* is entitled *This Women's Work* by Emily Friedlander. And it covers the point of view that women are shouldering an invisible burden of emotional labor in the modern workplace.

The author starts off the piece by defining how emotional labor impacts her life. For instance, she relays an experience when she missed a therapy session, because she got caught up coaching a friend on career strategy and responding to a Twitter DM from a freelancer asking for help.

Here, the definition of emotional labor is taking the time to attend to the needs of others before attending to your own, assisting, comforting, and nurturing people around you.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Friedlander's story is about personal emotional labor, you know this instance of not being able to make it to a therapy session on time, but she also references University of Akron sociologist professor Rebecca J. Erickson, who explains that there's research to support that women and men operate under different emotional rules in the workplace.

Women tend to be rewarded for expressing happiness and supportiveness at work, whereas men tend to receive a status bonus when they express anger or assertiveness. They also receive a humanized bonus when they express concern or fear. So obviously they have this much broader range of acceptable emotions in the workplace.

The narrower range of acceptable emotions for women can force us into proxy parenting roles, characterized by sugar coating, smiling, or even diminutive body language.

SONIA DARA: One of the most powerful examples of emotional labor in the feature is from a friend of Friedlander, who was managing young writers at a pop culture website at the time. To quote, "They're never going to say 80 percent of this will be convincing a sobbing editorial assistant that her career is not over because a reputable reporter made fun of her on Twitter. You're basically doing maternal babysitting as work to make money for a company and get the job done."

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Erickson, that University of Akron sociology professor, explains why this matter. One of the hidden injuries of emotional labor is the way it siphons off energy that could be otherwise spent hitting the sort of work milestones that are recognized in a boardroom and rewarded with a promotion or raise.

So keep an eye out, particularly in the workplace, for emotional labor traps, conversations or working relationships that require you to assist, comfort or nurture, instead of doing your job. Address your own responsibilities before you expend your time or resources to help others.

To quote the public speaker and educator, Eleanor Brown, "Self-care isn't selfish. You cannot serve from an empty vessel."

SONIA DARA: This was a fun episode to work on. I loved hearing from the team behind Women in Gaming and learning a bit more about the social science of emotional labor.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And of course you had a great interview with Ambika. I'm a super-fan of her company now. Big thank you to Britney, the head of styling at Armoire, who helped me look and feel great for last weekend's holiday party.

And of course thank you to everyone who made this podcast happen.

SONIA DARA: And to our listeners, this is a reminder to rate, review, and subscribe to the show. If you think a friend might enjoy this content, please let that person know.

As always, you can find us on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts.

If you have any feedback or questions, please e-mail us at WIBT@Microsoft.com, or tweet us at Microsoft Women.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And finally, your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to do some of your holiday shopping at a local minority or women-owned business. The marketer in me wishes there were a simple call to action here, but frankly this is going to take a little bit of searching.

I had the best luck when pairing the search term "MWBE," and acronym for Minority or Women Business Enterprise, with "city and state name." Look for a dot-gov search result, and narrow your directory search to see the minority or woman-owned businesses that your location and shopping list needs.

Vote with your dollars and happy shopping, and -- happy holidays [in unison].

SONIA DARA: Happy Holidays [in unison].

END