

## Women in Business and Technology

Transcript of Episode 021 - Kicking off Microsoft Build with Corporate Vice President Charlotte Yarkoni

Featuring: Nina Baliga, Charlotte Yarkoni

**Summary:** Recorded at Build, Sonia speaks with the Cloud Developer Advocates—a team empowering developers to do more with the cloud. Colleen talks to Nina Baliga, the CEO of <div>ersity, a Glassdoor-type website focused on diversity and inclusion. Colleen interviews Charlotte Yarkoni, the CVP of Growth and Ecosystems, to talk about the importance of STEM education.

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

Colleen O'Brien, Sonia Dara

**NINA BALIGA:** We have more access, more computing resources today than we ever have before. It's a fantastic time to be in technology. But as you've heard Satya, our CEO talk about, those opportunities come with inherent responsibilities that we need to make sure we don't create problems with technical advancements more than we solve. We have to be very thoughtful about that. I think the only way you can kind of carry that responsibility is by having diversity.

**ANNOUNCER:** 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 industries more inclusive, and bringing you tips on how to build a successful career in a supportive community. Welcome to Women in Business and Technology.

**SONIA DARA:** Welcome to Episode 21 of Women in Business & Technology. I'm Sonia Dara

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** And I'm Colleen O'Brien

**SONIA DARA:** We're recording on the Expo floor of the Washington State Convention Center at Microsoft Build, our annual developer event that is completely full of product news and announcements, inspiring demos, and some great networking.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** The conference kicked off with Satya's vision keynote this morning, where he emphasized our joint responsibility to ensure that tech is empowering everyone.

One of the ways that this theme really came to life was the announcement of AI for Accessibility, a new \$25 million, five-year program to put AI tools in the hands of developers to ultimately benefit the billion-plus people with disabilities around the world.

**SONIA DARA:** And of course, there was a ton of technology on display on the big stage. Microsoft Director of Azure IoT Program Management Sam George showcased our partnership with DJI in his keynote segment. He had to bring a licensed commercial pilot onstage to fly a drone indoors, but the demo showed how Azure IoT-powered drones can help conduct work that might otherwise be dangerous for employees.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** And who could forget the love connection between Cortana and Amazon Alexa that we were able to witness. Microsoft's Megan Saunders and Amazon's Tom Taylor took the stage together to share some of the integration work that their teams are focused on right now.

**SONIA DARA:** We've already witnessed a ton of great stuff happening here at the conference, and we're excited to bring you even more in our dedicated Build episode.

First up, in our Community Connect segment, I'm chatting with a few Microsoft Cloud Developer Advocates. They're a team that's focused on gathering feedback from and providing support to developer communities.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Then, we'll hear from Nina Baliga, the co-Founder and CEO of <div>ersity. A glass door-type website where coders, engineers, and developers can share their personal experiences regarding the diversity and inclusion practices of the companies where they work.

And then, I sit down with Microsoft Corporate Vice President of Growth and Ecosystems for the Cloud and AI organization, Charlotte Yarkoni, for an interview about her career and her team's involvement with Build.

**SONIA DARA:** It was so cool to see Charlotte kick off the conference this week, and to set the stage before Satya's keynote. Needless to say, listeners, you're in for a great episode. So let's get rolling, and head over to the lounge.

**ANNOUNCER:** Community Connect, get involved and stay connected.

**SONIA DARA:** Just beyond the Expo floor at Build is a space called "The Lounge" where conference attendees are hanging out between sessions. The space has something for everyone, tables and whiteboards for getting work done, yoga mats and massage chairs, and even some therapy animals, bunnies, a dog, and three very gentle mini horses for attendees to chill out with.

Just after Monday's keynote sessions, I headed to "The Lounge" to chat with a few of Microsoft's Cloud Developer Advocates, a group of globally-distributed engineers with a broad range of technical focus areas. Their goal: to empower developers to do more with the cloud.

Seattle-based Senior Cloud Developer Advocate Alena Hall told me more about the team's roles and responsibilities.

**ALENA HALL:** Cloud Developer Advocates are, first of all, engineers who have focus in a specific area or who work in specific communities. For example, I am a Cloud Developer Advocate focusing on distributed systems, big data, open source technologies, and I know what is happening in the community. I work closely with other engineers. I try out tools and systems in this space, and I would say that the important is to notice what things are happening and bringing them into Azure and making sure that Azure is the best place where you can use those technologies. If something is missing, it's our goal to add support for it or work with engineering teams to advocate for the community to bring those things in our platform.

**SONIA DARA:** London-based Cloud Developer Advocate Simona Cotin emphasized the value of a team that is not only keeping a pulse on their developer audience, but also proactively collaborating with the community.

**SIMONA COTIN:** The best way of learning anything is learning with and from people. So just sitting at my computers many times it's much more boring and it makes my learning process less interesting. And I think that as a Cloud Developer Advocate, that's exactly what we're doing. We're speaking with a lot of people, and we're internalizing their experience and trying to make it better.

**SONIA DARA:** The openness and collaboration that Simona described is precisely what motivated Denver-based Senior Cloud Developer Advocate Sarah Drasner to join the team.

**SARAH DRASNER:** What I was really interested in was how Microsoft changed their internal phrase to be meeting developers where they are, and just thought that that was super awesome that instead of it being like, okay, everybody come over here, we're now speaking to people in the kind of setups and in the ecosystems that they're familiar with, and then enriching those environments rather than pulling people back and forth.

**SONIA DARA:** Golden, Colorado-based Senior Program Manager Allison Krug decided to join the Cloud Developer Advocate team after engaging with individual advocates at a few tech conferences.

**ALLISON KRUG:** I had been watching some of the Cloud Developer Advocates at conferences give talks, and I loved their approach in that they were so approachable, which is different. You attend a million tech conferences, and then sometimes they kind of start to feel the same, but their talks always stood out to me, and their willingness to follow up with you, answer questions, et cetera. I felt like that would kind of maybe be a team that would joining a large corporation wasn't my goal, but to have like a cool team within the organization that's really passionate about community progress, that made sense to me.

**SONIA DARA:** According to Brooklyn-based Cloud Developer Advocate Jasmine Greenaway, the approachability of her team is critical to product success. She explained that in an era of near-constant feature releases and functionality improvements, engaging and assisting developers through changes can be a differentiator.

**JASMINE GREENAWAY:** We want to be approachable. We want somebody to say, I'm having this issue with Azure, I'm having this issue with this line of code. And we want to be able to be approachable and be a resource for the community. We can get on Twitter all day and chat, and we can talk about all these things that might excite other developers, but also having an extra level of being personal and sitting down with somebody and working through a problem together, I feel like it makes a difference.

**SONIA DARA:** The Cloud Developer Advocates are incredibly accessible, at conferences, on LinkedIn, and on GitHub. A lot of their work is aggregated on Twitter at the handle @azureadvocates, and you can find their individual focus areas and personal Twitter handles at [developer.microsoft.com/advocates](https://developer.microsoft.com/advocates).

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Well, The Lounge is ultimately a space to hang out in in-between Build keynotes and sessions. The area is also playing host to some great programming over the course of the conference. On Monday night, the Cloud Developer Advocacy team hosted a women and nonbinary community happy hour featuring the founder and CEO of <div>ersity, Nina Baliga. I had the chance to sit down with Nina before the happy hour kicked off and learn more about her work to make tech a more diverse and inclusive space.

**NINA BALIGA:** The goal of our company is really to create equity in the tech sector, and one of the ways we're doing it is really about elevating the voices of people in under-represented groups in the tech sector. What we're building right now is, we want to build a platform that's kind of like a glass door for diversity. So it's really about talking to companies and giving them a place where they can actually highlight what they're doing to create inclusive environments, and also create a space where diverse tech talent can actually also share their experiences about what it's like to work at these companies.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** And what brings you to Build this week?

**NINA BALIGA:** So I've met some incredible women at Microsoft in the last couple of weeks, actually, developer advocates and the process of talking to them and seeing their commitment to diversity and inclusion, they asked me to come and speak to some of the Women in Tech events here that are happening at Build, so I was really honored to get the opportunity and I jumped on it.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Yeah, Sonia and I are both attending the happy hour that you're hosting later today. So we're really looking forward to that. What prompted you to found this company, to found diversity? It seems like it might be in line with some of the things that brought you to this conference this week.

**NINA BALIGA:** Its' kind of a funny story. Just to give a little background on me, I spent 10 years in the nonprofit sector before I pivoted into tech. During my nonprofit days I was working largely with communities of color, doing community organizing. I worked on political campaigns doing a lot of work with immigrants from all parts of the world. And I was always trying to find ways to elevate their voices and work on social justice.

After about 10 years in the nonprofit sector I got really burnt out and went and got an MBA and pivoted into tech. I taught myself front end web development and user experience design and started doing that and that's pretty much what I was doing for the last eight years.

I moved to Colorado from the D.C. area about two years ago and one of the things that I learned was that there's just not a lot of diversity in Colorado, I noticed. And so when I was going to all the tech events to network and meet people, I was finding I was usually the only woman of color in the room and usually just one of a handful of women in the room.

And I kind of got really angry about it and I was on a mission to change that. So I said I need to go find all the women of color in Colorado that are working in tech. And in the process of doing that I found out about this hackathon that was happening called Go Code Colorado. And it was a hackathon that was sponsored by the Secretary of State to promote business in Colorado in some form or another, using Colorado data.

I joined a team of women. I found out about a team of women that were getting together through Girl Develop It. And over the course of the weekend we built an app that would help hiring managers find diverse tech talent from Colorado's colleges and universities. And it was actually a chat bot that would serve up some information about subconscious bias while the hiring manager was trying to find out what they were looking for.

What we didn't expect was to actually become one of the finalists. We presented our app and even though we were all just there to like meet new people and build

something for fun, the judges decided that they really liked what we were doing and all of a sudden, we were in the running for \$25,000 to start a startup. We didn't win the competition in the end, but a lot of people came up to us afterwards and said we love what you're doing, keep us posted, we're looking forward to seeing where your business goes. And none of us were really thinking about starting a business, but two people on the team, myself and Kim, said let's give it a shot. And so that was kind of where <div>ersity was born. It kind of accidentally it was born out of the hackathon. We're just a bunch of people who were getting together to build something for fun. And in the process of doing that we ended up on a great opportunity.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** When I was preparing for this interview I spent a little bit of time on Census.gov and I learned that the population of Boulder, Colorado, where you're working on <div>ersity is 90 percent white. The population is also incredibly well educated, 94 percent of people are high school graduates and almost 60 percent are college grads. And there's a relatively low disability rate and low poverty rate, as well.

I wonder in this city that looks a lot different from where you are coming from, from Washington, D.C., did you have specific goals as a community organizer in Boulder, Colorado?

**NINA BALIGA:** So we started doing a lot of our outreach to build community in December, from my community organizing background a key component of the business we're building is understanding that we have to empower the voices of under-represented people. And so I've made a concerted effort to find and identify people from all kinds of marginalized groups and elevate their voices.

In the process of doing that I've been mainly using social media, because that's where a lot of tech talent exists. That's where they're having these conversations. That's where the dialogue is happening. So going out to Twitter, going out to Facebook, we started meeting people from all across the country and so we thought it was going to be a Colorado-based company, but even though me and Kim are in Colorado all the work we're doing is just kind of naturally becoming a national kind of agenda. We've even had companies in Australia reach out to us now and say they want to get engaged with us. And so we're actually working with folks who have international presences.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** That's amazing. Nine, I love the learning that a hackathon was such a pivotal point in your professional life. Can you provide any guidance or motivation for our listeners who are thinking about participating in a hackathon?

**NINA BALIGA:** Yeah, actually there's two hackathons that I've participated in that have really been life changing moments for me. And it's surprising. So it was about eight years ago I participated in the National Day of Civic Hacking, when I was living in Northern Virginia. And I was one of the people that's like, I don't code, what's the point of me going to a hackathon. You need to be a coder. What I did have was pretty good

project management skills. I'm pretty good at listening to what people are doing and figuring out how to kind of fill in the gaps and give guidance on how to make that happen. And I have a little bit of UX design experience.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Right.

**NINA BALIGA:** So I said well why don't I just show up and see what happens. I showed up and met another two developers there. And over the weekend I that case we built an app that helped low income families find access to farmer's markets in the area and kind of the quickest and easiest way to get there. And surprisingly enough we won that competition. That catapulted me into this idea that you don't have to be a coder to be a civic hacker.

So I became heavily involved in connecting local government to this group of coders who just wanted to do something meaningful with their lives. And I started building those bridges. So that was hackathon number one, eight years ago. And that just catapulted me into tech. That's kind of how I ended up getting really into front end web development and how I started building apps and websites on my own. And this second hackathon just a year ago at Go Code kind of catapulted me into my own business. So I think a hackathon is a great way to just go out there and meet new people and play around with skills and discover what you want and don't want to do.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** And you mentioned that you are self-taught when it comes to UX and front-end development.

**NINA BALIGA:** Yeah, so basically, it's the kind of stuff that I picked up on the job, back when I pivoted from nonprofit into the tech sector I started off as an account manager, project manager. But a lot of the skills that are now defined under the role of user experience were things that I was doing just as an account manager. And I never thought of myself as a designer and so in the process of being a part of building apps and projects from the management side I ended up spending a lot of time with the developers and designers to pick up all of their skills and see what they were doing and ask them a lot of questions about why they did something this way, or how did they do that.

And in the process of kind of just immersing myself and learning I would take on projects of my own on the side and start building things on my own and failing a lot and building things that were terrible. But it was fun, because I was just learning.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Nina, who is your audience?

**NINA BALIGA:** One of the biggest differentiators between us and what's currently out there is that I am really focused on elevating the voices of all the underrepresented groups that just don't seem to have a voice in the tech space. So looking beyond race

and gender I'm doing ours to the LGBTQ community, to veterans, to people with visible and invisible disabilities, looking at age diversity. There's a lot of ways that people get discriminated against in the tech sector specifically. And looking at all these different ways I've been doing outreach to people from all these different groups to find out what are their specific needs, what are they specifically looking for and helping companies learn what they can do.

And that's kind of what our platform really wants to do is not only elevate the voices of all these folks who have typically been unheard on the coder side, but also for companies that are doing innovative things to start sharing it. And the goal really is that by more people being on this platform, by more underrepresented coders, by more companies who are committed, the entire industry as a whole will learn from this, that we can actually shift the entire dialogue so that more companies are being more inclusive, and more coders feel more valued and welcomed and can actually contribute to the impact on the world that each of these companies have.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** What does success look like for your company?

**NINA BALIGA:** I always say I have this one-year, five-year, ten-year vision for diversity. Year one, which is where we're at right now is to really develop relationships with the companies that get it and are doing things to create inclusive environments. The five-year vision is that all these companies who I talked to right now that are like, yeah, diversity and inclusion is important, but we can't afford it, or we don't have the resources.

Right now I could tell them that you don't need a lot of money to create diverse and inclusive environments. But they're not ready to hear that. And so my goal is in five years all those companies are saying and now we'll be able to look at this platform and be like, oh, these are really easy things you can do. I don't have to hire a chief diversity officer in order to make my company inclusive. And they'll be able to go on a platform and start making those changes.

And then the 10-year vision is that every company at this very moment when the CEO looks at their staff and says give me the business case for why I should care about diversity, those 10-year companies I'm not working with them right now, but in 10 years it will just become a financial imperative. They would have lost out on the talent. They've lost out on the innovation. They've lost out on the understanding of the market. And they'll have to care about it, because the other companies have already taken care of it and have been doing it for 10 years. So that's kind of the long-term vision is that really every company out there will have diversity and inclusion built into the blood of how they run their business.



**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** I really appreciate that you have blocked it out in that way. It's not people who want to work with you and people who don't, but people who haven't realized yet the importance of diversity and inclusion. And we'll get to them eventually.

**NINA BALIGA:** Yes, absolutely.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Nina, where can our listeners find you on the Internet?

**NINA BALIGA:** So I'm pretty active on Twitter. So @NBaliga1 is my Twitter handle. And then the <div>ersity Twitter handle is putting out content every day. If you're looking to get information kind of the latest stuff around diversity in tech, we're posting articles all the time about that. So that's Diversity\_US. And we also have a blog and you can go to our website HireDiversity.us, those are all places to engage with us, because we're always looking to highlight more stories from people that just don't have their voices heard right now.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Nina, thank you so much for coming to chat with us today and for all the work that you're doing with <div>ersity.

**NINA BALIGA:** Thank you for having me. This has been great.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** We're rounding out this dedicated Build episode with an interview that I had with Charlotte Yarkoni. She's the Corporate Vice President of the Growth in Ecosystem team within Microsoft's Cloud and AI organization. Her team is home to the cloud developer advocates who we met earlier in this episode and she leads groups that are huge contributors to all of the work on display here at Build. Without further ado, let's get on with the interview.

**CHARLOTTE YARKONI:** I really spend most of my time trying to answer two questions. The first is how do we actually go out and attract more users and have more adoption of our platform and the broader cloud ecosystem out there. And then once we do that the second question I ask is how do we actually make sure that those new users are so super successful on our platform that they continue to grow with us?

So we tend to think about what are the best responses to continuously answering those questions as our business grows itself. On the growth side we spend a lot of time on advocacy and you'll note I have made a point to kind of talk about advocacy as opposed to evangelism, because I think we have been in a paradigm shift, both at an industry level, as well as at a company level, about it's not just about outreach. It's not just about talking to different communities. It's also about listening to them and understanding what their needs are and how do we evolve our products, our platforms, our services to better serve their needs.

And so it is much more of the two-way conversation. We spend time thinking about advocacy at an ecosystem level. So we have teams that look at students and what their needs are, what kind of skills and technologies are they learning as their education grows. And really how do they need to be equipped when they enter into the workforce, what skills do they need to have and how can we help participate in that. We think about startups and the new business models that they're inventing, the new innovations that they're actually focused on at a technology level. How do we make sure that those ecosystems across the globe are actually healthy and thriving, but also how do we need to adapt our technologies to better serve them?

We think about partners, what do they need to better get their solutions to market, whether it's on our platform, or integrated into our platform, how are the best ways to think about doing that. We think about industry-specific lenses that can be applied across all those communities. But they are all kind of grounded in developers and how do we think about developers. What are the needs in terms of the growing programming languages and technologies? How do you think about things like continuous deployment and what other tooling that we can add to our platform to actually add capability there?

So that's a big part of where we spend our time answering the first question. I think on the second question we spend a lot of time thinking about how do we make ourselves easier to do business with, not just ensuring that we have the most optimal set of technologies, but how do customers want to interact with us?

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Can you explain some of the ways that your team has contributed to the event this week?

**CHARLOTTE YARKONI:** Absolutely, you know, a lot of it starts with what are the new solutions, features, products that we're announcing? How do we actually help as part of those communications, whether it's doing demos, or labs for some of the keynotes, or holding some of the theater sessions, or the hands-on labs, where we can actually help demonstrate how to actually configure something, how to best use it, what are ways to optimize it if you're actually including that feature in a larger set of programs.

So a lot of our developer advocates have been spending time on the content, on the sessions, and actually you'll find most of them roaming the floors. We also have set up a few landing spots, though, so we can hold a little bit of office hours, if you will, for folks who are just looking for some assistance or engagement for projects they're working on, ideas they have. We have a community lounge that the cloud developer advocates are hosting. So I encourage everyone to please stop by and say hello and engage us and make some friends while you're there.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Sonia and I actually had a chance to speak with those cloud developer advocates at the lounge. And those cloud developer advocates are a community managed by your team.

**CHARLOTTE YARKONI:** A lot of the CDA initiatives to engage developers here at Build look a little different than your standard post-conference parties. Your team is hosting this women and non-binary community happy hour onsite this week, as well as a conversation with Lindsay Wilson of Unloop, which is a nonprofit working to get more individuals marginalized by conviction into tech. What is the motivation for your team to think about these under-represented communities and to engage conference attendees on these topics?

**CHARLOTTE YARKONI:** We really wanted to go access specific technical communities and we felt like the best way to do that was to go find representation that was already a thought-leader in those communities and have them become part of our family, if you will, so that we could start with a voice where those communities were, as opposed to trying to fabricate a community where we're trying to pull people in.

I think along with that it was also about empowering and enabling those thought leaders, what are our cloud developer advocates, to also have a strong voice back into our product and engineering teams for what those communities really need to be able to grow and thrive and be successful. If you look at the profile of our cloud-developer advocates, we love acronyms. So I'll call them CDAs, because that's what we call them internally. It just organically, and by definition when you think about that philosophy, is an incredibly diverse group of people.

And one of the wonderful things about having that kind of diversity within an organization is it just naturally kind of commands that the entire organization be thoughtful about diversity. And it is diversity of thought, whether it's by experience or background or by gender, or any other dimension that you would like to add. And they've been great at kind of thinking through what are all the different types of diversity out there that we need to tap into where innovation is happening, where there's a need for technology to help solve some problems, where there's an opportunity and also a responsibility for us to engage.

I think along with that we've had startup engagements, where we're bringing a lot of startups together that also come from a variety of different regions. We have startup investments at a global level. So we do everything from having accelerators, what we call scale up. We have community presence that those are usually housed in, what we refer to as reactors that are more neighborhoods where we also have CDAs holding activities and engineering teams holding activities.

But we also have been focused on how do we think through what innovation is happening where for those startups, and how do we get them better connected to our

product teams? And so Build is a great place. It is a point in time but it's a great place for some of that activity to be occurring, as well as I'm super pleased to say we have over 50 students from universities across the globe attending Build this year to kind of represent the interests of higher education and how we need to be thinking about cloud computing, machine learning, artificial intelligence for that particular ecosystem as we move forward as well.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** It seems like this commitment to empowering students is a really common theme in the work that you do. For example, last month Sonia and I had the honor of hearing your keynote address at the IGNITE Gala. Ignite is an acronym for Inspiring Girls Now in Technology Evolution, and it's a fantastic nonprofit that introduces girls in grades 6 to 12 to technology and engineering careers. In addition to the IGNITE Gala, you shared your story back in January with the University of Washington's Society of Women Engineers at their annual Evening with Industry event.

Charlotte, do you feel any responsibility to do that work of representation and to demonstrate that leadership and success is possible for a woman in tech?

**CHARLOTTE YARKONI:** Look, I will not lie in that it is a passion or mine to focus on better STEM education across the globe, and I will carry a particular affection for females in STEM. I grew up, and I won't date myself, although I am probably going to date myself with some of my comments. I'll try not to date myself. But I grew up a very long time ago in the education system and was part of one of the early electrical engineer, computer science and engineering curriculums, where there was very little female representation. And I feel like we've come a long way from those days, but I feel like we have so much more to go.

Aside from that, I'm the proud mom of two daughters, both of which technology is inherent to their everyday life, whether it's through their studies or through their social network, it's such a big part of their lives, and they have different types of passion that they apply towards it. I want to give them every chance of success that I can, and I think everyone deserves that.

So for me it is a responsibility, but I would actually say it's a little bit more than that. It is a point of passion. I feel very strongly about it. I encourage it. I'm super-excited about Microsoft's ongoing engagement in all these different areas and events that we sponsor and support, and I'm always anxious to do more, both at a personal level and at a professional level.

I'm really jazzed about some of the recent announcements we've made for student developers. We created Azure for Students, we launched that at the beginning of March. That actually allows anyone who is actually in a secondary institution that's accredited to be able to take advantage of an Azure subscription where they don't have to have a credit card for it. I think that's huge.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** That is huge.

**CHARLOTTE YARKONI:** And a big deal for us. And I was really proud to be part of that.

I also think, thinking more about how we can help get students first and foremost trained on cloud technologies and skilled in that, so that when they enter in the workforce, they come already equipped for some of the interesting jobs that are out there on the market. I have similar thoughts when we kind of expand that to data science, artificial intelligence. I just think there's a ton of opportunity out there for us to further and help progress. I feel like it's an important thing, not just for me, but for Microsoft and for the broader industry, quite frankly.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** You studied electrical engineering , computer science at UC-Berkeley, and received your Bachelor's of Science at the Georgia Institute of Technology, and that pedigree is very impressive. A background in computer science is a great foundation for a career here at Microsoft, but the company is also exploring some new channels through which we can source capable talent, including the Microsoft Leap program, which was born out of the Azure team. That's a point of pride for me.

Leap combines traditional classroom learning with hands-on projects to get more diverse talent onto our teams. Having witnessed the success of alternative models like Leap, what characteristics or experiences do you think are truly necessary to build a successful career in tech, and is there even a common denominator?

**CHARLOTTE YARKONI:** Well, first off, when I started at University and I was at UC-Berkeley, I was an electrical engineering, computer science. And the irony of my life is that I didn't like computers at that time and decided I wanted to focus on management science and industrial engineering, or as the double E folks called it, imaginary engineering.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Wow.

**CHARLOTTE YARKONI:** Which is how I ended up at Georgia Tech, which had a better program than UC-Berkeley at the time. But what I think is actually important as a foundational program and as well as a foundational skill set if you're a young person thinking about a career in computers, the love of solving problems is really the thing that I think gets everybody hooked on a career in technology. So when you're younger and videogames kind of rule the world these days, there are great assets like Minecraft, which I love, my daughter grew up playing Minecraft, actually was coding mods when she was very young on Minecraft. That teaches you kind of basis in computational thinking, which I think are important.

But understanding the applied science is really where it gets fun and exciting. And for me it was always grounded, I mentioned I didn't think I liked computers, I was in an academic curriculum where we were focused on building videogames and LISP at the time. See I'm dating myself now. I was like, god this is horrible, I want to go do something real.

And I really felt at the time that one of the things I loved to do was around solving problems. And my first job out of school, because I had been working on queuing theories, was understanding how to help a lawnmower manufacturing company load lawnmowers that came off the assembly line onto a tractor trailer so that when they drove round the country and delivered them they didn't have to unload the tractor trailer every time to find the right shipment for the right location.

And it was interesting because that is kind of a queuing theory problem to solve, but the most optimal way to solve it is through technology, and that was the first time that I really used technology to solve a real discrete and concrete issue. And I was hooked after that. I actually think if you enjoy those kinds of opportunities, and it doesn't have to be around lawnmowers and manufacturing, it can be around life sciences and curing diseases.

I think thinking about a career in technology and understanding how you use it as an enabler as opposed to what are the skills that I need to build for it, how do I need to think about what programming languages, all that stuff changes at a very rapid pace in our industry. So what's more important is what's the value of the technology? And if you get kind of hooked on the problem-solving aspect of it and understanding that technology is the enabler by which you can actually solve more problems quicker than you ever could before, you can get very excited about certain elements of technology and then things like computational thinking and certain skills can come into play.

But for me that's kind of the grounding rod. When I talk to people, we bring in a lot of interns from college, we hire a lot of people that are out of college, but they have very junior experience, the ones who really stick in our industry are the ones who are just excited about how do you go solve the problem? Give me a problem to solve and I know I can harness technology to do it.

It's a kind of a qualitative answer to your question, but that's kind of the grounding rod that I think about, and when I think about the programs that are built and how do they cultivate that skill, most of them are around learning how to actually solve the problems, learning how to harness technologies. The ones that are strictly skills based, I think are fine and good, but the ones who really cultivate great talent are the ones who actually focus on the problem-solving aspect of it.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** I think that is such a great note to end on. I know you have an incredibly busy week here at Build, so I'm going to let you get back to the conference. But before you go, where can our listeners find you on the Internet?

**CHARLOTTE YARKONI:** Oh, they can find me on Twitter, I'm @cyarkoni on Twitter, and I'm also, you can find me on LinkedIn. I'm pretty active there as well. So either one of those is a great place to go check me out.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Excellent, Charlotte, thank you so much for stopping by the studio today.

**CHARLOTTE YARKONI:** Okay. Thank you.

**SONIA DARA:** All right. Well, Colleen, it's been a busy few days here at the Washington State Convention Center. How was your first Build?

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** I have to say that the programming has been pretty awesome.

**SONIA DARA:** I see what you did there, programming.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** From dedicated sessions on replicating the Windows Insider Program model for your organization to Holograms 101, and of course, AI and Cognitive Services tutorials, this has been a great place to get up to speed on technology trends, and to learn the skills to help you capitalize on the market opportunity out there.

**SONIA DARA:** And I've really appreciated a lot of the networking opportunities that are built into the conference as well. On Monday night, you and I attended a dinner at The Riveter, our favorite, hosted by the Cloud Developer Advocates featuring Brianna Wu. Brianna is a game developer, computer programmer, and the co-founder of Spacekat, an independent video game development studio in Boston. She shared her personal story of dealing with aggressive online harassment and closed her address by encouraging all of us to be the heroes that we don't always see in video games.

Quick takeaway there, if you make sure that your female coworker gets the credit she deserves for sharing a great idea in a meeting, you are a hero.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** You are a hero.

Needless to say, this week has been chockful of inspiration for me. And I have a ton of new role models that I am following mostly on Twitter right now.

**SONIA DARA:** So we're heading out to the closing celebration, but, listeners, you can find a ton of recordings from Build at [Microsoft.com/build](https://Microsoft.com/build) or at Channel 9, that's

ch9.com. Please remember to rate, subscribe, and share to our show on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, or wherever you listen to podcasts.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** If you have any questions or feedback, you can write to us at [wibt@microsoft.com](mailto:wibt@microsoft.com) or tweet us at @MicrosoftWomen.

For all of our listeners, keep imagining, keep creating, and keep coding. We can't wait to see what we can build together.

END