RISE

ISSUE 01

Message to the Reader

Bre Carodine

When Rise was created, our goal was to reach as many people as we can, wherever we can. Some of our goals were to work with the local community and POC within our company, but we wanted to make sure that this was reached beyond the city we are based in.

That's where the idea of this newsletter was born. We wanted to shine a light on the wonderful people of color who are succeeding and exceeding in the tech industry and make it possible for anyone and everyone to hear their stories.

Being able to see someone who looks like you achieving their goals is one of the most empowering feelings. It's low effort but has a high impact. It's no secret that growing up as a person of color, you are presented with more limitations than opportunities but we, as Rise leaders, want to do what we can to fight against that. When I think of myself as a young girl, I think about how exciting and inspiring it would be to see something like this newsletter in front of me. Hearing the stories of other people's struggles, but witnessing their journey to success would mean more

than you know. It shows first-hand accounts of rising above adversity and sets a positive example to all youth that anything is possible with hard work and perseverance.

We stand behind our core idea that tech is for everyone, but I hope that by creating this newsletter, we can help people understand that you can do anything, you can work anywhere, and there are no limits.

As the Black Lives Matter movement continues to open everyone's eyes to the systemic racism in our country, I hope we can move in a positive direction towards justice and equality everywhere for all underrepresented racial groups. I am lucky to work at a company that supports these initiatives and intend to use my platform to empower, educate, and inspire people as much as I can.

Thank you to each person who agreed to be profiled today and to you, the reader, for listening to these stories. Share this with anyone and everyone.

Interview with Jason Geolingo

Interviewed by Bre Carodine
Profile compiled by Jazmyn Brown

Geo is a Product Manager for the Support team here at Flywheel. Support experience, migrations, referrals, and affiliates all fall within his team and he runs the roadmap for each of them. He often finds himself working and reaching across multiple areas of the business, but always stays focused on the support experience itself.

What was your driving factor or your inspiration for getting involved in the tech industry?

My good buddy T'Shaka Jackson actually introduced me into tech. I was a help desk manager long ago and he was one of my team members. At that time T'Shaka Jackosn or "Shock" as he likes to be called, was taking Cisco networking classes. I had always been somewhat computer savvy but really never saw it as the path for me. Over time, Shock twisted my arm enough to get me into the Cisco courses with him and the rest is history. I've now done desk side support, network and telephony administration, system administration, and now through sheer luck or timing, have found myself in the product management space.

Jason Geolingo
Product Manager at Flywheel

What excites you about tech?

I love when tech not only helps us as people, but makes the experience of life better. Flywheel is like this. Our product offerings are in a way, making the lives of creatives easier because of how simple they are to use. With the previous company I was with, it was the same thing. The products that we were offering was making the lives of people in the construction industry better; it was making their jobs easier and making them more efficient. That's what inspires me and keeps me close-knit to tech, is when it enriches our lives and makes life easier.

Are you learning anything new now or what are you excited to learn next?

I've only been in the product space for three years now and I would say that I'm continually growing in my craft. There will always be ways to sharpen my sword and hone in on my game. I genuinely love learning; almost about anything and one of my favorite quotes is actually from Gandhi, "Live as if you'll die tomorrow but learn as if you'll live forever".

Outside of Product Management, Savannah and Sean got me into Kombucha making and my skills are getting better with each batch.

What advice would you give your younger self?

I think everything that I tell my kids now, that I wish I would've listened to more when I was younger. When you think retrospectively on things that you could tell your younger version, the possibilities are endless... don't hold that firework so long, wear a helmet before riding a dirt bike, don't make a habit out of eating mexican food at 3 am...

Seriously though, continue to experiment and explore. Don't get locked into one thing because the world is a big place. I once had this vision of what I was going to be and where I'm at today is nowhere near that. Just because I don't find myself in my original career path, doesn't mean I failed. Everything happens for a reason. What will be will be. Through luck or timing, I found myself in the product space and it was all through encounters with people that entered into my life. Just experiment and don't get locked into one thing when you're young.

Have you ever experienced racial bias in your current career or in other careers and how have you overcome it?

I can't necessarily say that I've experienced racial bias. My friend, Shock is African American and he (over the phone) had experienced it and so for me, that was indirectly, the few times that he had experienced it with our customers, was when I (indirectly) experienced it through him. The frustrations that he would go through...it was hard to see that and experience it even though it wasn't happening to me directly.

My dad is from the Philippines and my mom's parents were from Mexico which means I'm a mix.

I don't have caucasian in me, but at the same time in Arizona, where I came from, I was lucky enough to not ever experience racial bias. My dad however, well he's a different story. I know when my dad first came over from the Philippines, he had gone through a lot of racial bias because he had an accent and he had a hard time acclimating to life in California and he got a lot of ridicule and experienced racism more so than I.

My grandparents felt this even more when they first came over and they were off the boat. They definitely felt it a lot more than I have in my past. One of the reasons why I joined this ERG, was because of those experiences that they had told me about or I experienced indirectly through Shock.

Do you think there's anything else we can be doing in Rise or in the tech community to be better allies for underrepresented racial groups?

After our first Rise meeting, I immediately reached out to my Aunt who's African American as she's heavily involved in black women in business, black women in tech organizations and her old sorority AKA. I knew she had been to Omaha a couple of times for events and wanted to see if she could put me in contact with people she knew from those orgs.

I think continuing to advocate to the younger group through outreach efforts and focusing on being active in the discussion of anti-racism in Omaha. The interactions from people at Flywheel lets people know that we are a diverse group and that we do genuinely care. I also love the idea of our senior leaders engaging other business leaders to challenge them on what they're doing about diversity and inclusion.

Are there any local organizations that you're currently passionate about?

Joining a group like Rise is new for me and while I wish I could say I'm active in my community, I have found myself not nearly doing as much as others at Flywheel. My friend Shock and his wife started like an outreach group for urban youth and it was based in downtown Phoenix. They held some cool events and some I even helped organize like a cornbag tournament to raise money for charity. I think me getting involved in Rise is going to help me start again to give back to my community.

What's your favorite flavor of La Croix?

Key Lime! No doubt. It tastes like pie.

Which Flywheel value do you relate to most?

Be excellent to each other. I love how people at Flywheel genuinely care for one another. During retreat last April, I was in tears when DFIUFEE sang, "Lean on me". I truly felt like a part of a family and that was a remote retreat, which is crazy to think that I felt all those emotions through screen interactions with coworkers and not an in-person interaction like I would with my real family.

Would you rather smell like ranch for the rest of your life or have cheeto fingers for the rest of your life?

Cheetos. I might end up looking like an Oompa Loompa at the end of the day but why not?

Interview with Tiffany Gamble

Interviewed by Amanda Martinez
Profile compiled by Autumn Rodeheaver

Tiffany Gamble is the Chief Innovation Officer and founder of Emerging Ladies Academy, an Omaha non-profit that empowers young Black girls to pursue education in technology through after school programs. She is incredibly passionate about providing a safe space to mentor and prepare her girls to find their place in the world of tech.

Can you elaborate on what Emerging Ladies Academy does?

Sure! Emerging Ladies Academy (ELA) empowers Black girls in technology. We have three tracks that we work from: Computer Science, Engineering, and Biomedical Science. Right now we are facilitating a Black coding program called She Code, where the girls will become junior software developers at the completion of the program. They'll learn web development, computer programming, and then mobile applications.

Tiffany Gamble
Owner at Emerging Ladies Academy

Right now, we have six young ladies going through the program and they're on their second module, which is computer programming. They're currently learning Python, and then we're going into creating mobile apps through Apple software. Things are really exciting! I also have been creating after school programming for five middle schools. Within the last three years, I started off with one middle school and then have transitioned into five OPS schools. I'm really excited for this year, we're moving right ahead and are virtually providing She Code, so things are going good right now.

What was your inspiration for starting ELA?

Okay, backstory: I had been working as a social service expert for my whole career—twenty plus years. Working with people in the urban community, so I know my community pretty well. And I knew that education was lacking. So I had this epiphany in January 2017 about this organization. I didn't know what it was, but I'd always had a passion for working with girls in my community. So as I started writing it all down—like a mad scientist—everything from my professional life, personal life, my educational life, and all these pieces of a puzzle started clicking together and Emerging Ladies Academy came about.

I started in one OPS school; I created a proposal over the summer, July 2017, it got accepted and I started an after school program. It was originally focused on STEAM, but as I started developing the organization, I really looked into tech. I'm sort of a tech nerd, little do people know... I'm just really curious about things! So we pivoted. I looked into different areas for what the focus should be, and it's everywhere. Technology is everywhere. So that's why we have three tracks.

I wanted to give those girls an option to figure out who they want to be in this tech space and not limit them to certain aspects of technology.

It's a purpose for me to do this work, it's not monetary-driven or anything like that. This is my passion, this is my purpose. From working in the human services field and looking at the disparity in education, I know this would be a great pathway for the girls to be successful.

ELA have done a really great job of doing the pivot to being virtual.

Super kudos to you for being able to do that! Just because everything is in this Zoom world doesn't mean your kids have to miss out.

Exactly! It was very seamless to transition to virtual learning. We just needed to add Zoom. Because what we're learning is all tech based, it was already on the computer. The added value was the physical connection that we've sort of lost out on, but I've tried to do as much as possible. I go see them every Friday, give them incentives, we have speakers, we're going to have virtual tours, so I'm still trying to add those elements that we had when we were meeting physically into our virtual space.

I'd love for you to talk about the other things you teach the girls in ELA. I know it's not just tech, and those other pillars are super important.

I developed five pillars of education: Leadership, Social Entrepreneurship, Financial Literacy, Etiquette, and Career Readiness. So as we go through the different tracks, we're also looking at the five pillars. We're talking about what leadership looks like, talking about what an entrepreneur looks like and how you should use your business to solve social issues. We talk about financial literacy—now you may make more money than your parents, how do you deal with that generational wealth? How do you deal with that money? And also the future of money, like cryptocurrency and where we're going from a tech standpoint. Career readiness, of course—what does the tech industry look like? How do you get into those industries? How do you adapt to the culture? And then etiquette. How you conduct yourself, how to be able to communicate and have manners. Those soft skills.

So it's not just teaching them a skill, I am developing skilled workers in a space where they can hold their own.

As you know, there's not a lot of Black women in the tech space, so there can be challenges coming into it. I want to make sure they are ready, they are strong, they are bold, they are determined, to be able to not only go into the tech space but to stay and thrive. A lot of times, from what I've heard and researched from Black women, they go into the spaces and then come right back out, because they don't feel valued. So I want to make sure that, while those issues may arise with these girls, that they have tools in their tool kit to be able to persevere.

Have you experienced racial bias in your career and how have you overcome it?

Working in the social service space, I just didn't see a lot of "me" in that space, so I had to own me, own who I was—own who I am, still even now. Even in tech, I'm not experienced. I felt like "I don't know what you're talking about, I don't know why I'm here." But I'm here because I have a passion. So understanding that I don't have to know everything to be heard, I'm just as equal as anyone else, I deserve to be at the table. Even if I have to pull my own chair up to the table.

I call racism what it is, I speak out when I feel like I'm being discriminated against. I pick and choose my battles, though. I just know how to maneuver in those spaces, but I'm very aware that it's there. However, we need to have teachable moments all the time, so when I do feel very uncomfortable I know how to pull someone to the side and have a teachable moment.

Understanding that there's few of us Black women in this space, we have to protect each other, we have to be on one accord. Then we need to have safe spaces for us to go and vent when there's discrepancy and things going on in the industry.

I've been very blessed so far to not encounter racism working with ELA, but I have dealt with racism working in Nebraska and Iowa as a social service expert. But I just call them out. I'm not afraid. It is what it is and you just have to use your voice.

How can we all be better allies and friends to underrepresented groups, not just specifically in tech, but in general?

Gain knowledge about people. Don't judge people off physical appearance—the color of their skin. Don't assume we all share the same experiences. Be open to having those hard conversations and look at situations through another person's perspective. We all have our different perspectives, we live in our different worlds, and we may be quick to judge and that's not good. You need to be quick to listen—you don't have to always agree, but just understand and be respectful of someone else's perspective and their journey as a person of color.

What advice, if any, would you give to young Tiffany?

Don't doubt yourself. You don't have to fit in to be successful.

What are you learning now or excited to learn next?

When the girls learn something new I'm learning too! So I now know how to build websites, I'm dabbling with Local and WordPress. Now I'm learning Python and I can't wait to create mobile apps! The sky's the limit in tech. I tell the girls that I'm not an expert either, but I'm super excited to learn the same material they're learning.

It's college material, and I tell them they're college students even though they're ten and a half.

What is your favorite LaCroix flavor?

The first time I had LaCroix was at Flywheel! And I can't even remember what I had, but I'm a strawberry girl, so if there's a strawberry one then that's it.

Would you rather smell like ranch for the rest of your life, or have Cheeto fingers for the rest of your life?

Oh my goodness! Both would drive me crazy! I cannot stand ranch dressing, so what do I do? I can't touch anything with Cheeto fingers. I don't even know, it is a toss up! I guess Cheeto fingers, because ranch, I can't do.

Is there anything else you'd like to add? Anything you'd like the world to know?

I just have a passion for Black girls. I just want to see them succeed. They're like daughters to me. I expect excellence from these girls. The bar is high and that's where it's staying. So the parents are very impressed, and as long as they're happy, my girls are happy, and I'm happy. That's what drives me. I'm not an egotistical person, I'm not here for no fame, or to benefit in any way, I just want to see these girls succeed. Technology is where it's at.

To follow Tiffany's journey with Emerging Ladies Academy you can check out emergingladiesacademy. org. They also have a presence on both Facebook and Instagram at @ELAOmaha.

Interview with
Pooja Shah

Interviewed by Erin Welsh
Profile compiled by Ellie Bruckner

Pooja Shah considers her career path somewhat untraditional. It started with an education in mechanical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the dream of designing cars. Graduating with her bachelor's in 2012, Pooja started with an internship at General Motors to pursue that dream. A few months in, she realized that mechanical engineering wasn't as picturesque as she had initially thought and needed a change. She was in love with design and problem-solving, but missed the human aspect of the work. Today, she is an independent consultant, sharing her passion for innovation with companies and nonprofits.

Pooja, you're an innovation consultant for a couple of groups. Your background is mixed with venture capital, finance, and engineering. How are you consulting them?

It's a mix of different items. Thanks to my mixed background, I've been able to dabble in a bunch of different areas which I now get to use. With one group, I'm helping move some innovation initiatives forward and evaluating startups. With another, I'm helping them scale their group and create some standardized procedures.

Pooja Shah
Independent Consultant/Mentor

What got you into the tech world?

My background before my career was in mechanical engineering. My dream was to design cars. I worked at General Motors for a summer, and sort of realized that what I pictured working on cars to be like wasn't quite what it lined up to be. The design aspect and the problem solving aspect led me to start my master's back at the University of Wisconsin at Madison for mechanical engineering and thermodynamics.

I ended up going into finance pretty last minute when I got a call from Barclay's and within a span of 36 hours, I took a job with them in their healthcare division. I worked there for about three years and realized that I liked problem solving; I liked engineering, but I also really liked working with people. I realized that I just didn't like investment banking. I quit and went back to get my master's in engineering management at UW-Madison. During that time, I came across QBE Insurance and worked in their Innovation Lab. I started to help identify opportunities within the business internally and figured out how new technologies could help improve access to new segments. I was much more on the coding side, at the time, working with the business. As I transitioned into a full-time role there, I started working more with the business partially on change management.

We launched QBE Ventures, which is QBE's corporate venture arm. I loved working with startups and new businesses to help define how those two can pair up and benefit from each other. I continue to do that on the side, to this day. I still work with startups and do mentor sessions for entrepreneurs to help them figure out the design process, pitch practice, stuff like that.

After that, I ended up joining Gener8tor, which is an accelerator mostly focused in the Midwest. I helped launch their On Ramp Insurance Accelerator, which is an insurance-focused accelerator, and ran that for about six months. I did one full cohort and ended up leaving to just take a break and do my own thing. I kept working with startups. The two groups I'm working with now really came up because of the connections I had and people pointing out some areas that they needed help with.

Is there anyone that inspired you or opened the door for you?

Most recently, Ted Stuckey at QBE. He's the one that brought me on board with the venture capital group and he's pushed me to think about my career in a more focused way.

My mentor, Amy Gannon, her group is one of the groups that I'm currently working with. She passed away a few months ago, but she was one of those people that pushed me to really think about what I wanted out of a career and not get complacent in a career either. There have been people that have inspired me in the space of engineering. My whole career path has been non-traditional so that's a little difficult to view a lot of people as mentors.

Do you have any advice you'd give your younger self?

The biggest piece of advice I'd give my younger self is, "don't get complacent". I did that at a previous employer and I think I regretted it at the end. If you're not challenging yourself, then you're not really growing. It's okay if it's uncomfortable, that just means you're learning. I really enjoy learning and I enjoy being in a role where I'm pushed to learn and to do multiple things at once. Traditional roles tend to bore me quickly.

Have you experienced any bias in your career? If so, how have you overcome it?

I've experienced a mix of racial, gender, and age bias at some point and it's been frustrating. I think in a way I'm naive because my reaction to it is to always put my work forward and let my work speak for itself rather than react. With everything that I've grown up with culturally, as well as coming from the Midwest; that's just how I tend to react to it. Especially with the gender bias, it's just something you have to deal with. The thing that's helped me the most is having women mentors that have gone through it. The woman mentors were the most important part because they affirmed that what I was feeling wasn't a lonely feeling.

I never felt it until I started working, even through undergrad. I think I had a unique experience. Gender was not an issue in school growing up. After entering the workforce, I started having to deal with some of those tensions, nothing malicious, but there would always be moments where I would have to work a little extra hard or I felt the need to push myself a little more. I'm also an introvert, so I naturally prefer being in the background rather than at the front. It

was something I didn't realize until later, how difficult it really was and how unfair it was. At the end of the day, you just need people who are going to be there to support you and be your advocate when you can't. You just need to find those people. There will be times when you just can't do it for yourself and I think that's okay as long as you have someone to turn to.

How can we all be better allies for underrepresented racial groups?

Be honest about your experiences. I had a friend who was recently going through something pretty similar to some issues I had gone through early in my career. She was reluctant to talk to anyone about it, but you should be able to talk to other people and be honest about how you feel. If you're on the other side, just accepting that feelings are feelings, you can't affect whether it's right or wrong. At some point, you just have to be open to listening with an open mind. I don't think anything's going to change until everyone's able to empathize with all the issues and realize how prevalent the issues are. Initially I hated talking about it, and I'm not good at asking for help.
I never was. Asking for help is kind of a blow to your pride and that's what people tend to cling to at moments like this. Saying something doesn't mean you're weak.

In your area, are there any local organizations that take on these kinds of harder topics that you're passionate about?

One of the groups, Doyenne (definition: a woman who is the most respected or prominent person in a particular field) is one that focuses on women.

They are a group by women, for women and specifically for women entrepreneurs. They started in Madison and they really focus on areas that are not the typical, flashy tech scenes. Their focus is on those underserved areas and to focus on women in those areas.

When you think about the startup world or entrepreneurs, women are the ones that struggle the most to find funding. You don't see a lot of women investors. Even when I was on the side of being an investor as a woman, it was still rare to find someone else (a woman OR a minority) that was in a leadership position. People tend to get excited about things and people understand things better that are familiar. This group is building a support community. They help women investors find women entrepreneurs. They help women entrepreneurs pair up with mentors that have gone through the struggles that new women entrepreneurs have gone through, and it's a pretty awesome group.

Do you have a favorite La Croix flavor?

I'm one of those people that absolutely hates bubbly things so I don't like La Croix. I love chai and that is what I drink all the time. My go-to energy drink is cranberry juice.

Can you relate to any of the Flywheel values?

I think I can relate to almost all of them.

Data-informed not data-driven: I personally tend to go back to data as my safety net whenever I'm struggling to make a decision.

In the end, there's an art to it and I think that's true for any big business decisions you're making. At some point, there's some sort of a gut feeling or art to it that you can't pinpoint in data. Data is important to know what's happening, but also helps with understanding the bigger picture.

We embrace weirdness: I think you need whimsy in your everyday life. It's really the only way that I survive. When we had to work late at a previous job, some of us would play Pictionary on the boards when we just needed a break. Having a little bit of fun gives you some sanity.

We are hungry: This one's important to me because I'm always looking to learn and always looking for something new to do. If I'm doing the same thing over and over again, I get really bored.
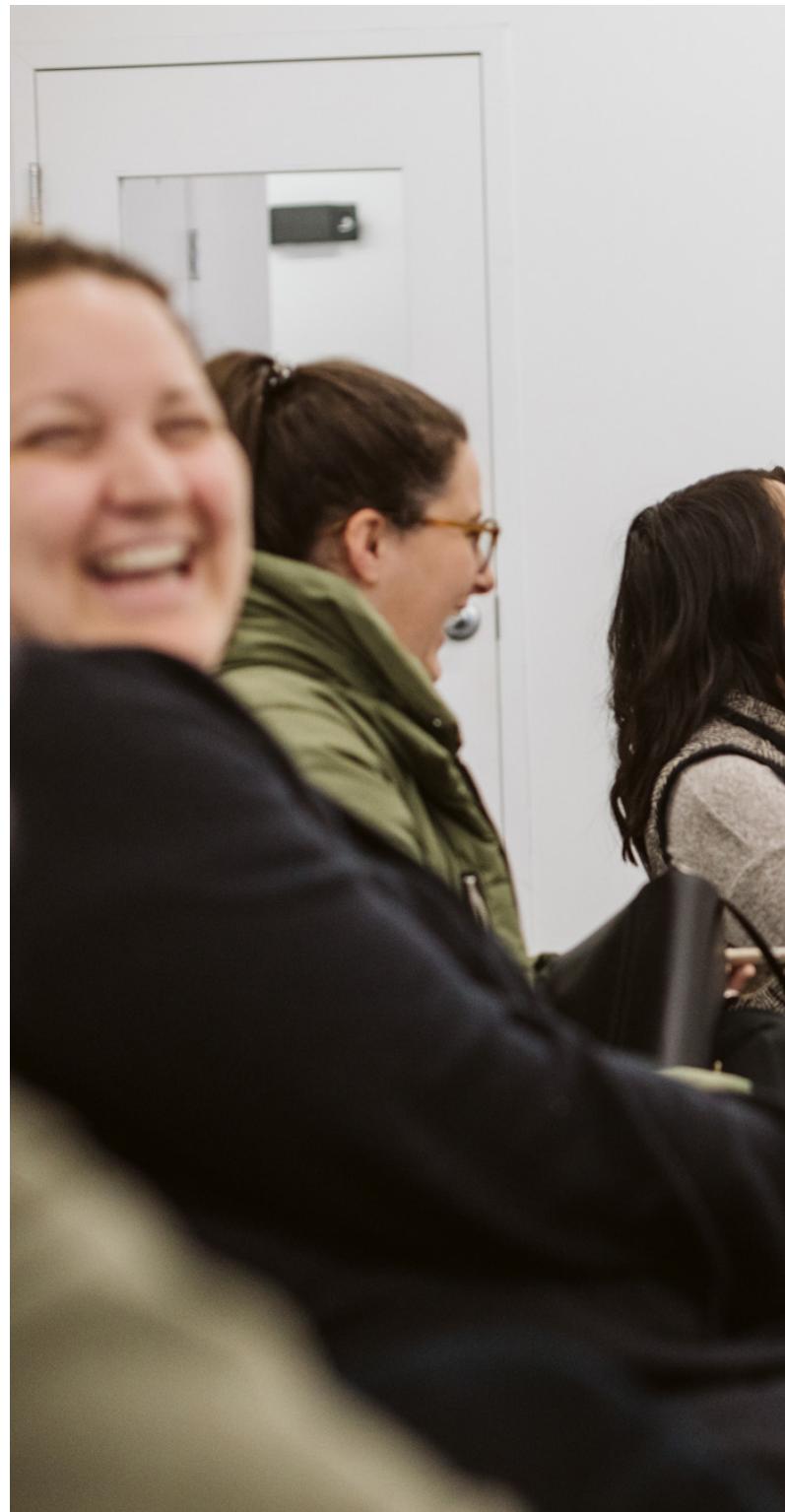
Be excellent to each other: You should always treat someone the way you want them to treat you, to just pay it forward. I think you always get something back when you give something, so that's a good way to live life.

Would you rather smell like ranch for the rest of your life or have Cheeto fingers?

Cheeto fingers. I think I would gag if I had the ranch smell.

Would you rather sweat orange juice or milk?

They're both sticky. I have no idea, maybe orange juice.

Message to the Reader

Jazmyn Brown

I hope reading these stories has been inspiring, eye-opening, and most of all, you've gained a new perspective from a person of color succeeding and exceeding in the tech industry. Thank you.