BREAKING BARRIERS IN TECH ENTREPRENEURSHIP

DISCUSSION GUIDE

CHM

Entrepreneurship is tough. And the legacy of bias in the tech industry can make the path to success even harder for underrepresented entrepreneurs. Those that do make it have stories to share about their personal journeys and advice for aspiring founders who hope to follow in their footsteps. CHM hosted five diverse tech founders and investors on stage to do just that.

Ruben Harris, cohost of the podcast Breaking Into Startups and cofounder and CEO of job training startup Career Karma spoke with venture capitalist Eric McCarthy. Shanea Leven, cofounder and CEO of startup CodeSee, which helps software developers visualize their code, shared her entrepreneurial journey. Stephanie VanPutten, founder of Blendoor, a diversity analytics and hiring software, and founder of Visible Figures, the largest network of venture-backed Black women in the world, was interviewed by Joe Hurd from venture capital firm SOSV.

About This Guide

This guide introduces provocative questions for reflection and conversation to enhance and extend what you learn through watching the video. It is suitable for mature high school students and college and adult learners in an educational, professional, or social setting. It may be particularly interesting for people who are curious about bias in tech hiring and entrepreneurship.

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For Discussion

Seismic Job Shifts (8:51)
Ruben Harris says that over their lifetimes, people will change careers five to ten times, and between now and 2030, 375 million people will switch careers.

1. How can people prepare for tech jobs that don't exist yet? What help is available and from whom? Do you think these strategies will work for everyone? Why or why not?

2. What might be lost as people shift careers frequently and no longer identify with one particular occupation? What might be gained?

3. How do you feel about the idea that you will likely have to switch careers in the not-too-distant-future? What have you done to prepare yourself?

People Matter (12:35)
Ruben believes in treating everyone with respect—no matter what their title or the advice he's received about the "right" people to connect with.

4. Describe how Ruben's approach helped him in two specific instances in his career. Do you think anyone can use this strategy? (Consider his comments about Black people and non-technical roles.)

Super Skills (20:12)
Ruben says he gets the same feeling from reading a biography that he gets from watching a superhero movie.

5. In what ways do you think reading biographies may have helped Ruben's entrepreneurial journey?

Succeeding in A New World (23:38)
Ruben notes that the landscape of post-secondary education is changing rapidly, along with changes in the world of work.

6. What does Ruben mean when he says post-secondary education is "unbundling"? How does that pose problems and opportunities for job seekers? Are there some groups who might be affected more than others by these changes? In what ways?

7. What kind of communication and on what platforms does Ruben recommend becoming proficient? Who might find this advice difficult to follow? Why?

Asking Questions (30:34)
Shanea Leven says that her experience asking herself questions has guided her entrepreneurial journey, starting when she was a child with, "Why not me for president?"

8. What was Shanea's reaction to the question, "What would you do if you had no constraints?" Why did she feel that way? How would you feel if asked the same question?

Inspired By a Bug (33:36)
Shanea's experience failing to solve a bug in the software code of one of her company's products made her aware of a universal problem with code.

9. Shanea says that being able to visualize code is a critical skill for a coder. But who may be left out of developing spatial reasoning skills? Why?

10. Shanea believes that better tools can help everyone succeed. What assumptions lie behind her belief? Do our social systems seem to have different underlying assumptions? What are they and how do they manifest themselves?

11. How do you think we can make coding or computer science more accessible to a greater range of people?

What's In a Zip Code? (42:26)
Stephanie VanPutten says your zip code tells more about your future economic path than any other factor.

12. What does the reality of shrinking opportunities for upward mobility in America say about the country's foundational idea that working hard will bring success? Which groups are most affected by these changes in mobility? Why?

13. What resources was Stephanie able to draw on to help her succeed as a young person? (Consider both material and socio/emotional resources.)

Not Technical Enough (46:01)
Stephanie founded Blendoor to try to bring equity into the hiring process. She was motivated to start the company, in part, by her experience applying for a job at Google.

14. What does a recruiter *really* mean when they say that someone is "not technical enough" for a job? What assumptions are being made about what a technical person looks like?

15. What is a "pipeline problem" and how does it hinder diversity in the workplace?

The Hardest Thing (48:09)
Fundraising for her startup was "by far the hardest thing" Stephanie ever did in her life. At the time, there were only 12 Black women in the world who had raised a million dollars.

16. What strategies does Stephanie suggest can be used to combat unconscious bias? Which one(s) resonate most with you? Why?

17. Do you ever find yourself playing the "comparison game"? How does it affect you?

Visible Figures (52:33)
Stephanie founded Visible Figures in 2017, and it's now the largest network of venture-backed Black women in the world.

18. How can networks like this help to promote equity and diversity in the workplace? What can they provide to their members?

19. Do you think that requiring companies to report diversity metrics can be an effective way to improve the situation in general? Do you agree with Stephanie's suggestion for how to implement them? Why or why not?

Additional Resources
Educating the Planet with Social Entrepreneur Sal Khan (video)

Should I Stay or Should I Go? (blog)

Tech Founders Breaking Barriers (blog)