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# Silicon Valley Startup Companies: A Question of Culture

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Silicon Valley Startup Companies:  
*A Question of Culture*

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In Partial Fulfillment  
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by  
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Silicon Valley Startup Companies:  
*A Question of Culture*

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***Abstract***

In recent years, Silicon Valley has become virtually synonymous with startup companies. These companies are defined by their famous “startup culture.” An interesting and unanticipated outcome of my research was the finding that the discourse of Silicon Valley startups is framed centrally in terms of *culture*. I use discourse analysis to understand the way people create and perpetuate structures of power, gender, and culture. By studying the way people in startup companies talk about their expectations and experiences, this analysis hopes to gain a deeper understanding into the normalized cultural discourses surrounding startup organizations, as well as the way individuals negotiate their subjective realities within this sphere.

### ***Acknowledgments***

First and foremost, I would like to give heartfelt thanks to Professor Lynn Thomas for being the best mentor and advisor I could have asked for. His patient guidance, energetic encouragement, and endless optimism helped transform this project from a daunting task to a joyful endeavor of academic and personal growth.

I would also like to thank Professor Audrey Bilger for her constant support in the writing process: from day one, her steady encouragement and dedication helped me keep my thoughts and writing in perspective, and allowed my passion for this topic to grow even stronger throughout the process. This is a true and rare gift Professor Bilger has given me: even though this project is written and bound, I continue to want to keep exploring and writing about the topic.

My most sincere gratitude, as well, to the many amazing people who agreed to be interviewed for this thesis: without you, this endeavor would have swiftly fallen short. Deep thanks as well to the Kravis Leadership Institute and to the Berger Institute of Family and Work at Claremont McKenna College for their generous support that made my fieldwork possible.

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## ***Introduction***

Congratulations were in order: my cousin had landed her first job, working in the communications department of a startup company in Silicon Valley. The company she would be working for, like many in the region, was a tech company focused on providing a new database management service for large corporations. I was thrilled for her: the Silicon Valley startup world has become an increasingly popular post-graduate destination for young mid-twenty-somethings drawn to the appeal of being part of a fast-moving industry, to the freshness and excitement a new company provides, and of course to the famous startup “culture.”

“So you’ll be like riding scooters around the office and playing ping pong all the time, right?” I ask her. I, too, have heard the stories about endless perks, flexible working hours, and tee shirt and jeans dress codes that have come to represent Silicon Valley in the public eye. My cousin concedes with excitement that she has similar expectations: “We even have a gym and fully catered meals in our office!” she adds.

Two weeks later, when I call to see how her new life is unfolding, the excitement has been drained from her voice. Yes, everything she had expected was true: the perks really were that great, and the non-existent dress code was fortunate, because sometimes people stayed so late that they changed into their pajama pants. After two grueling 80-hour workweeks, however, my cousin had begun wondering if it was all worth it. Weren’t they supposed to have “flexible hours” and a famously supportive “work-life balance?”

Her experience made me begin to question the assumptions I had made about what it was like to work in the Silicon Valley startup world, assumptions based largely on popular media and enthusiastic hearsay. What was it *really* like to live in that culture, I wondered. All cultures necessarily have general descriptive stereotypes that take distinctive patterns, but not absolute uniformity (English-Lueck, 2002). “In studying culture,” says anthropologist J. A. English-Lueck, “it is important to look for the patterns—the footprints of commonality—while also documenting the variation within the patterns” (English-Lueck, 2002). So what were the experiences of startups that were *not* being told? What were the famous—and the not-so-famous—components of this startup “culture,” and why did these young companies find it worth their time and money to promote the appearance of a cohesive culture? Did everyone experience startup culture in the same way or were there those, like women or people with families, who faced a reality that stood in contrast to the espoused cultural narratives?

A cursory review of existing literature on corporate culture and startups in Silicon Valley reveals that no critical examination of the nature of Silicon Valley startups had yet taken place, particularly not through an anthropological lens. English-Lueck’s ethnography of Silicon Valley offers the closest approximation to begin answering my questions but my curiosity persisted. In order to examine the lived reality of those working in startups in Silicon Valley it became clear that an effective way to understand the important nuances was through the words of those who experienced the culture intimately in their own work.



Based on classic standards of Anthropology, the ideal approach through which to gain an understanding of startup culture would be to conduct long-term ethnography understood as participant observation, by living and working in the companies to gain an intimate understanding of life from the perspective of those who work there. Barring this undoable approach, however, and working under the time and resource constraints that dictated my study, teasing out the nuances of startup culture through detailed examination of interview discourse is a viable approach—viable in part because I am, broadly speaking, a native speaker of much of the same language common among the “natives” of Silicon Valley. In addition, although fieldwork has often been considered a source of anthropology’s strength, it has also long been evident that it has also been a source of weakness.

Ethnographies have sometimes produced stereotypes of cultures studied as integrated, unique experiments in human possibility, minimizing individual diversity, conflict, and change while exaggerating stability and separateness (Thomas, Class Notes, 2009, citing Roger Keesing, 1976). In my examination of the rhetoric of Silicon Valley firms, I have taken steps to recognize variation and discordant voices in an effort to avoid overgeneralization. I have also taken steps to increase the likelihood of frank, honest discussions by ensuring that interviews are, for the most part, private and in a comfortable setting.

By using discourse analysis to unravel some of the power differentials hidden within the words of my interviewees, I hope to be able to reveal a multifaceted view of startup culture. The goal of this study is not to villainize any particular party or to place accusations; rather it is to begin to understand why people in startup

organizations rely so heavily on the culture concept in their corporate discourse. Such analysis gives a window that reveals the multiple frameworks within this small subsector of the American working population, and facilitates exploration of the discrepancies between cultural narratives of these companies and aspects of the lived realities of those working within these morés.

This paper will proceed as follows: Chapter 1 provides a review of the literature of discourse analysis and frameworks of power and gender, as well as providing an historical and contemporary context of startups generally and Silicon Valley in particular. Such historical and theoretical context established, Chapter 2 then presents a discussion of the “culture” of Silicon Valley startups using popular media, culture documents<sup>1</sup>, and interviews to qualify the meaning of culture in this context. In this chapter I also discuss the challenges and nuances of self-conscious culture talk, and the implications of the term’s constructed and politically situated boundaries. Such boundaries necessitate the use of *frames* within discourse analysis in order to understand the situational aspects of culture from the perspective of different actors: such framing is the goal of the following two chapters. Chapter 2 will also discuss the importance of the use of the culture concept in startup discourse, and will begin to unpack the implications of such terminology. In Chapter 3, interview and observational discourse<sup>2</sup> is analyzed through a framework of power and authority, discussing the distribution and signaling of power in startup organizations. There is a central contradiction that

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<sup>1</sup> These include websites, slideshows, posters, and physical books that act as the cultural manifestos of many startup organizations. Culture documents can be extremely extensive, and employees are often expected to memorize extensive lists of values and mottos. See Chapter 2 for more details.

<sup>2</sup> In the form of fieldnotes from first-hand experiences at startup companies and recruiting sessions.

appears in the discussion of culture in relation to power: the interview discourse seems to state, “We’re all equal here (according to our culture), but some are more equal than others.” Chapter 4 deals with a particular power asymmetry that proves particularly divisive within startup culture, that of gender. Gender is the most significant breach of the equality concept in startup culture, and interviewees also seem to separate the topic out of the otherwise consistent cultural frame in their discourse: in the discussion of gender, speakers shift into cultural *analysis* mode, what is striking is how interviewees suddenly do *not* talk about gender in cultural terms, they do not engage the culture concept but rather rationality mode of discourse. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes with a consideration of personal positioning and possible bias, as well as of potential real-world implications of the conclusions of this analysis.

## ***Methods***

In order to begin exploring the answers to these questions, I set out to gain a broad, first-hand understanding through a diverse set of field-work and web-based ethnographic research involving people's experience of startup culture in Silicon Valley. In studies of corporate culture, "ethnography in industry typically consists of an eclectic mix of face-to-face and digital, technology-supported methods" (Jordan, 7). This study was no different: I utilized such diverse methods as onsite visits, remote and in-person interviews, informational recruiting sessions, informal conversations, and exploration of various websites and company culture books.

Throughout the interviews, I attempted to keep questions open and create a conversational atmosphere. Although I worked from an initial set of questions (see Appendix), conversational flow allowed for the discovery of unexpected discursive components and patterns.

From September 2013 through January 2014, I visited six startup offices in San Francisco and Silicon Valley. I chose to include San Francisco as part of my study of the greater "Silicon Valley" area after speaking with my first interviewees, who explained to me that over the past few years the city itself has increasingly become a hub for startups<sup>3</sup>. These visits took place over two one-week periods; each visit lasted between one and three hours. While visiting each company, I interacted mainly with a host who showed me around the physical layout of the office and introduced me to various employees throughout the office. I was often able to attend meetings and eat meals with employees as well, interacting in a more

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<sup>3</sup> This has also introduced some fascinating demographic shifts and conflicts in the region, discussed later in this work.

natural setting. The companies ranged from 15 to over 5,000 employees, and were in such diverse industries as file sharing, taxi services, and on-demand cleaning. All companies were either entirely technologically based or had some technical component integral to their operation. For example, even companies that offered non-technical services as their product had an application or online site for ordering such services. This relative homogeneity of firm type was interesting in analyzing the roles within each company, because many similar positions and relationships of power existed across seemingly diverse companies. Although I do not claim that sharing a technological component makes companies fully comparable in all aspects, the fact that startups in Silicon Valley had a common denominator was helpful in assessing the relatedness of discourses from each individual firm.

While in the offices I also conducted in-person interviews with my hosts at each company, and had informal conversational interviews with those other non-host employees whom I had the opportunity to meet. Twenty-seven additional interviews were conducted over the phone (seventeen) and in person (ten) with current and former startup employees. Interviews ranged from twenty minutes to two hours long, and remote interviews were recorded using the iPhone application "Call Recorder," and in-person and Skype interviews were recorded using the iPhone application QuickVoice.

My interviewees were as diverse as the companies for which they worked. Seventeen out of the twenty-seven were females, all between the ages of 21 and 55. In order to gain a broad understanding of startup culture, I interviewed employees who had worked in their position for as few as four months, or as long as seven

years. Employees ranged from human capital (HR departments), to engineering, to founder or CEO. In addition I interviewed several “experts,” such as professors and venture capitalists who had been involved in startups in the past and were still integrated in the startup world in some capacity.

Below are two tables describing the companies and individuals I visited or spoke with for my study.<sup>4</sup> For firms, a “small” firm is defined as 1-20 employees, medium is 20-75, medium-large is 75-200, and large is over 200 employees. The types of firm are classified as tech (pure technology company), non-tech, or mix (a non-technology company with technology playing a crucial role in their operations and sales).

<b>Firm Name</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Age</b>
Cleanerz	Small	Mix	3 years
Sizzle	Small	Tech	2 years
Spiral	Medium-Large	Tech	5 years
CoinUp	Small	Tech	1 year
Theory	Large	Tech	7 years
Wedu	Small	Tech	1 year
Payer	Large	Tech	4 years
PlayPal	Large	Tech	5 years
Pinga	Large	Mix	14 years
TechSell	Medium-Large	Mix	6 years
AdMe	Large	Tech	7 years

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<sup>4</sup> All names and identifying details have been changed to protect identity.

Atlasstay	Large	Mix	5 years
SmartStart	Medium-Large	Tech	5 years
Grandios	Large	Tech	9 years
Ultra	Large	Mix	4 years
GeoTrace	Medium-Large	Tech	7 years
Papered	Medium	Tech	3 years
Preen	Medium	Tech	2 years
Fireside	Medium	Tech	4 years

Interviewees are categorized by name, age<sup>5</sup>, gender, and position: HR/customer service (non-engineering, non-sales jobs), sales/marketing, management/CEO, tech (engineering or creative design), or expert (non-startup employee with other experience in the industry through journalism, research, or past experience).

Erica	25	F	HR
Jake	27	M	Tech
Maria	66	F	Expert
James	27	M	Tech
Brittany	30	F	HR
Steve	55	M	Expert
Mindy	25	F	Tech
Rose	33	F	HR

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonym and general, not specific, age.

Julian	21	M	Tech
Sam	23	M	HR
Crimser	56	M	Expert
Jenna	34	F	Expert
Natalie	32	F	Expert
Kathleen	28	F	Tech
Ethan	26	M	Tech
Mary	45	F	Manager
Jennifer	28	F	Sales
Jordan	22	M	HR
Evelyn	26	F	Sales
Lori	32	F	HR
Marie	45	F	Expert
Hannah	28	F	Sales
Annelise	26	F	Sales
Rob	25	M	Tech
Jacqueline	32	F	HR
Chase	46	M	Manager
Jared	30	M	Tech
Adrienne	21	F	HR
Annabelle	29	F	Sales
Olivia	26	F	HR



Daniel

45

M

Manager<sup>6</sup>

Initially, I contacted startup employees through connections at the Claremont Colleges, particularly through the Claremont Alumni Database and Career Services at Claremont McKenna College. From these initial contacts, I used snowball sampling to widen my network and speak to startup employees unconnected with the Claremont Colleges.

The data—fieldnotes, interview transcriptions, and websites— from this period were coded using Atlas TI. Codes included: *Culture, Perks, Roles and Power, and Gender*. While these codes are designed to accurately represent major components of startup culture as revealed through discourse and the issue of gender and leadership in Silicon Valley, it is important to note that this particular analysis may not be generalizable to all Silicon Valley startups in the future. The startup space is, by definition, in a constant state of evolution, and future citation of this study should keep in mind the possibility of transformation. Particularly in regards to the discussion of gender, which is currently a hot topic among media sources and startups in Silicon Valley, efforts at increasing equality are being implemented at this very writing, and the situation may soon find itself in a largely different cultural context. In addition, my position as a young, female college

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<sup>6</sup> Creating a 2 by 2 table shows a tidy correlation between gender and corporate role.

	HR	Tech
Male	3	5
Female	5	2

While it is important to acknowledge that the selection of interviewees for this study was non-random, I believe there is good reason to suspect that these correlations may generalize to represent the “world” of Silicon Valley startups as a whole.

student likely affected my interactions with those I interviewed, and may have influenced the information they chose to share with me.

All of the following data uses single apostrophes to indicate paraphrased quotations. All names and identifying details of both interviewees and companies have been changed.

### ***Literature Review***

The term “culture” has come to be considered a dirty word by some post-modern anthropologists who have begun to express hesitancy over the value of the word (Brightman, 1995; Bennet et al., 2005). Particularly as it has been appropriated by popular understanding and casual usage, “culture” has gone from being a richly complex analytical notion to a sometimes overly-homogenizing colloquial object that groups of people “have,” an ironically essentializing notion. The transformation of the popular usage of this term has created particular confusion in the study of startups, as media and experts alike discuss the famous “startup culture” in a universal and generalized sense. Interestingly, even startup employees seem to echo this word in their understanding of their workplaces and life experiences, and the homogeneity the term implies creates a sense of expectation that may or may not be fulfilled in the lived reality of these workers’ experiences.

How, then, do we attempt to understand the “culture” of a startup? If employees themselves are using this decidedly vague verbal characterization to understand their own experiences, it suggests that the best way to unpack these

experiences from an analytical standpoint may be through their words as well. In every conversation that I had for my thesis, the word “culture” was always present, and discussions of culture and its nuances often became the focus of conversation. How different people framed these cultural aspects, however, varied depending on the particular social locations from which they were speaking. The workplace is, necessarily, a highly political and power-fraught context, and the way that issues get framed within this environment are revealed through what people say and how they say it.

The field of discourse analysis provides a lens through which to begin to unpack the meaning of the “culture” of startups in Silicon Valley, and to understand how different individuals might experience the nuances behind the dangerously simplistic term. Once people are embedded in social formations, they develop commitments and stances within those structures, often working up sometimes unjustified rationales to maintain them.

Through discourse analysis, this study examines those core tensions or contradictions faced by every social anthropologist: the ideal versus the real, the official versus the actual. Among Silicon Valley startups, how are the cultural narratives put forth by popular opinion reflected in the lived experience of those who are most intimately connected with the startup world as part of its workplace? And how do those expectations shape how those in the startup world talk about their own culture?

At the risk of sounding meta-analytical, the present analysis is at its core a discussion of about the culture of culture talk. Although this may carry a suggestion

of paradox, it is nonetheless essential: The discussions give a sense of where startup employees are and what they make of their own experiences. My goal is simply to show the role that culture talk plays in framing the experience of startup employees in Silicon Valley, and through analysis of these discourses to reveal the dichotomy between the cultural narrative of Silicon Valley startups and lived experiences of those operating within this cultural sphere. By combining theories and processes of discourse analysis, framing, and cultural narrative, I take a multifaceted approach to understanding the implications behind my interviews and fieldnotes, as well as popular media articles surrounding startup culture in Silicon Valley. I hope to examine the following: To what extent and how is culture-talk sustained, varied, and contradicted? What reality is invoked and maintained through the discourses of startup employees and experts? To what extent and how is cultural discourse part of the interpretive repertoire of the people in the study? <sup>7</sup>

### ***Discourse Analysis***

It may at first seem that the idea of “discourse” is as vexingly elusive as the culture concept that we hope to use it to explain. Scholars of discourse analysis have such varying opinions on the meaning of the term that there is sometimes little to no overlap between their definitions. Even those who utilize discourse analysis confess that “the word discourse has... no agreed-upon definition, and confusingly many uses” (Alvesson, 2000). However, accusations that take the criticism further and claim that “discourse sometimes comes close to standing for everything and

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<sup>7</sup> The idea of “interpretive repertoire” is borrowed from Alvesson, 2000.

thus nothing” (Alvesson, 2000) go too far. In fact, the flexibility that discourse analysis affords may actually be quite useful, particularly when attempting to understand what people are thinking and how they are constructing their own personal realities. Discourse analysis, in the end, is nothing short of the use of words and texts to create a portal to the mind of the subject. The use of discourse analysis in this study is helpful as a lens through which to examine the wider world of startup culture, as “language (and language use) is increasingly being understood as the most important phenomenon, *accessible for empirical investigation*, in social and organizational research” (Alvesson, 2000) (emphasis my own).

Indeed, every individual uses discourse of some kind to shape his or her own reality and self-perception. As Alvesson and Karreman point out in their overview of discourse analysis studies, “discourse drives subjectivity (our sense of ourselves, including our feelings, thoughts, and orientations), presumably in an all-embracing and muscular fashion” (Alvesson, 2000). In the present study, I hope to use its methods and frames to understand discourse as a “context of revealing the ambiguities of social constructions and the interdeterminancy of organizational experiences” (Alvesson, 2000). In doing so, I make every attempt to avoid what critics of discourse analysis refer to as “gross categorization”<sup>8</sup> while still organizing discourses into meaningful frameworks to enhance understanding. After all, as Alvesson and Karreman point out, “rigour should sometimes be downplayed for the benefit of social relevance” (Alvesson, 2000).

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<sup>8</sup> Here, meaning an inappropriately a priori notion of a group into which supposed meanings are forced.

The word “discourse” has meaning far beyond the spoken word, encapsulating “multitudinal and heterogeneous forms of material inscriptions or verbal utterances occurring in space-time... aggregately produces a particular version of social reality to the exclusion of other possible worlds” (Chia, 2000). According to linguist Barbara Johnstone, discourses “involve patterns of belief and habitual action as well as patterns of language. Discourses are ideas as well as ways of talking that influence and are influenced by the ideas” (Johnstone, 2008).

Scholars in various fields have used discourse analysis to gain an understanding of their subjects and their worlds. Irene Pollach (business studies analyst) uses discourse analysis to examine the words and layouts on company websites to study opinions on corporate social responsibility (Pollach, 2003). Sheri Ortner, an anthropologist, delves into discourse analysis to examine how discourse in social work shapes the constructions of class and race (Ortner, 2008). The present analysis uses a multidisciplinary approach to analyze discourse from the workplace—specifically, the workplace of Silicon Valley startup companies—as social institutions.

In their overview of discourse analysis, Alvesson and Kärreman assert that there are two main categories of discourse, variously titled local vs. general, micro-level vs. mega-level, or close-range vs. long-distance discourse. While a micro-level analysis might approach discourse through a detailed study of language, a mega-discourse would be “presented as an integrated frame” (Alvesson, 2000). In other words, “local construction of discourse treat discourse as an emergent and locally constructed phenomenon, while the study of Discourses [global] usually starts from

well established a priori understandings of the phenomenon in question” (Alvesson, 2000). The present analysis is a combination of these two approaches, as I attempt to explore broad global concepts such as “ideology” and “culture” through frameworks. In addition, I pay particular attention to discordant and contradictory voices that disagree with the standard frameworks outlined by startup firms in Silicon Valley. I look at both “grand discourses” and overarching themes as they operate in particular situations, as well as the “close range” analysis of what people chose to say (or to *not* say) in our (socially situated) conversations.

The latter parenthetical is important: part of the significance of a piece of discourse is necessarily embedded in the interaction which produces it. Who is talking to whom? Why? To what end? Where are they? Particularly in discourse generated through interviews, such contextualization can be revealing in suggesting reasons for how an interviewee presents him or herself. In the process of analysis, therefore, I make every effort not to get too narrowly focused on language, but not get too broad and “jump over” language use and contextualization to simply look at discourse at a “mega-level.”

Understood in a Foucaultian manner, then, discourse is “a mode of organization of knowledge in relation to material institutions, and is thus not primarily a linguistic concept. Rather, it has to do with practices and configurations of power, often rooted in organizations which both control and are structured by distinct disciplinary knowledges” (Bennet et al., 2005). According to a Foucaultian interpretation (1972, 1980), discourse is both made of and makes people’s reality. According to Johnstone’s analysis, “conventional ways of talking that both create

and are created by conventional ways of thinking. These linked ways of talking and thinking constitute ideologies and serve to circulate power in society” (Johnstone, 2008). In other words, the *way* people express themselves—whether through spoken words or other mediums, such as clothing or art—and *what* they choose to express reveal insights into the cultural positioning in which they operate (cited in Johnstone, 2008). Discourse is people’s way of making moral frames through which to categorize and understand their own experiences.

Far from being exclusively relegated to the realm of linguistic study, then, discourse analysis is an opening invitation to explore certain social worlds. Scholars seeking to understand culture through discourse analysis must go beyond the words of conversations and use the context and its implications to help answer deeper questions, such as social relations, dominance or oppression (Johnstone, 2008). In his work on *Discourse Analysis as Organizational Analysis*, Robert Chia observes that, often, the most potent discourse involves communication that circumnavigates the issue at hand, necessitating a “careful listener or observer to surmise where the hidden or unspoken core of the question lies” encapsulated in “subtle hints” within the discourse (Chia, 2000). Thus, discourse analysis involves going beyond the content of the words and phrases and deriving their *meaning* in a situational, contextual sense.

Chia asserts the Foucauldian concept that discourse has the power to *create* new meaning, or to cause an evolution in existing understandings of a word or phrase: “social objects and phenomena such as ‘the organization’, ‘the economy’... or even ‘the weather, do not have a straightforward and unproblematic existence



independent of our discursively-shaped understandings. Instead, they have to be forcibly carved out of the undifferentiated flux of raw experience and conceptually fixed and labeled so that they can become the common currency for communicational exchanges” (Chia, 2000). Such “forcible carving” of new meanings from existing phrases is particularly potent in the world of startup organizations. When working in—or indeed founding—a new company, individuals must attach previously established labels in order to engage in constructive communication with others about what the company is, believes, and values. Particularly when initial founders are pitching to potential investors or communicating their mission to future employees, the only option is to use previously established labels. Such usurpation of already-defined terms may in fact change the reality of the companies themselves. Thus, what has come to be defined as startup “culture,” and all that has come to be implied in that label, must be reflected in the actions and principles of the actual company if they hope to capitalize on using that particular discursive signal with others. As Chia goes on to clarify, this process of “differentiating, fixing, naming, labeling, classifying and relating” is systematically implicated in the course of social relations (Chia, 2000).

In her discussion of power and solidarity, Johnstone explains that “social groups are often divided into subgroups with different statuses and differing access to economic, cultural or political power,” citing examples such “social classes,” “castes,” or “cliques” (Johnstone, 2008). In the present analysis, such groups are just as clearly defined, and I have categorized them according to “age,” “gender,” and

“corporate role,” following their various discourses in order to examine the negotiations of power and solidarity within and between groups.<sup>9</sup>

The group categorization of *role* is also particularly interesting in startup culture. Divisions between CEO’s, engineers, and “non-creative” employees (such as human resources and customer service) mirror the wider “class attributions” within the United States discussed by Claudia Strauss and many others. The power given to the upper class is reflected in popular American discourse, which emphasizes agency to suggest that those with higher-class status must have “earned it.” (Strauss, “the culture concept and the individualism-collectivism debate”). The assumption that certain classes are inherently more valuable than others—in the case of startup companies the CEOs and creative side (engineers) are the valued subgroup—is reflected in the discourses of my interviews, a categorization of statuses and roles that will be discussed at length in Chapter 3.

Belonging to a subgroup may be expressed through usage of particular language, and “styles thus emerge when particular patterns of language use become ideologically linked with locally relevant social meanings” (Johnstone, 2008). In the present study, some uses of specialized verbal repertoires are emphasized. Many people cited the Valley as having its own language, emphasizing that “you need to learn how to speak it if you want to be part of it” (Fieldnotes). Such lexical particularity can lead to the creation and maintenance of power relationships

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<sup>9</sup> In a Marxist sense, we can look at the categories of “corporate role” as “social class,” in the sense of peoples social relations to their means of production. There are, much as in Marxist analysis, owners (CEOs and founders), middle workers (engineers and creative designers), and lower workers (in this case, HR and customer service). It is important to note, however, that these distinctions are drawn only *within* the context of Silicon Valley startups: even the “lower working class” is still a highly privileged one, when compared with the larger economy.

between startup organizations and the larger environment of Silicon Valley or even the United States as a whole.

In addition, there are often prescribed styles of speaking for people who occupy different groups and roles *within* startup companies, and “there are situations in which social roles are relatively fixed in advance, and in which people are expected to use and interpret discourse in relatively pre-set ways” (Johnstone, 2008). In my own study such lexical group differentiation becomes clear particularly in regards to gender. Female leaders in startup organizations are often criticized for using “harsh” language, while the same repertoire is considered natural for males in high-level positions. The forms of language people use, both in the office environment and in the context of interviews describing their experience of the startup workplace, helps “create, change, or reaffirm a social relationship, in addition to indexing a set of conventional expectations” (Johnstone, 2008).

Thus, in the interplay between discourse and meaning, the former frames the latter. One increasingly popular methodology of framing has been entitled “critical discourse analysis,” or CDA. CDA, too, assumes that discourse is “socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned... the way in which discourse is being represented, respoken, or rewritten sheds light on the emergence of new orders of discourse, struggles over normativity, attempts at control, and resistance against regimes of power” (Blommaert, 2000). Where it diverges from (or at least narrows within) the broader methodology of discourse analysis is in its use of power and dominance as frames for understanding discourse and thus culture. Some scholars are adamant that this is the only true framework for CDA, such as Teun A van Dijk:

“In our opinion, CDA should deal primarily with the discourse dimensions of power abuse and the injustice and inequality that result from it” (van Dijk, 1993). A more textured use of the term CDA claims that the method “offers clear and rigorous linguistic categories for analyzing the relationships between discourse and social meaning” (van Dijk, 1993). It is these *categories* that sets CDA apart: structured frameworks, particularly in the realm of power and relations, are the heart of CDA.

CDA is used in the present study to gain an understanding of the relationships and power differentials between those of different roles and genders in startup organizations. However, we must be careful to examine the possibility that power and dominance are “jointly produced”: “when dominated groups are persuaded, by whatever means, that dominance is ‘natural’ or otherwise legitimate.” (van Dijk, 1993). I find this phenomenon clearly communicated among many of my interviewees, particularly among human resources employees at startups who readily admit to providing perks in order to “keep” and “get” valuable engineers.<sup>10</sup> In my own study, the group/social power division is among “creative” and “noncreative” employees, as well as among CEOs. This social power, van Dijk claims, “is based on privileged *access* to socially valued resources, such as wealth, income, position, status, force, group membership, education or knowledge” (van Dijk, 1993). These are the small groups that van Dijk would call “power elites.” Such a term, however, should not suggest that this analysis frames groups in terms of “villains and victims.” Rather there is a joint production of power relations that leads to significant differentials between those occupying particular social locations.

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<sup>10</sup> More on this in Chapter 2.

Clues to power asymmetry are embedded in the very words people use. People in an institutional setting occupying higher-powered positions have more *options* as to how they chose to speak to others, even if they choose not to employ their most professional manner of speaking.<sup>11</sup> Van Dijk terms the lexical options that each person has a “discourse access profile:” “rather surprising parallelism [exists] between social power and discourse access: the more discourse genres, contexts, participants, audience, scope and text characteristics they may actively control or influence, the more powerful social groups, institutions or elites are.” (van Djik, 1993). Among those working in Silicon Valley startups, this discourse access profile becomes very clear: many CEOs and Founders—arguably occupying the highest power-level in the companies—consciously choose to speak using a lexicon usually reserved for employees. In my interviews, many employees mentioned going out to coffee with CEOs, or chatting informally in the lunchroom. It is at the same time made amply clear that this type of discourse is a *choice* on the part of the “power elite,” whereas the lower-powered individual could never chose to interact in this manner without the implicit permission of the higher. Indeed, the very act of “flattening” the hierarchy by choosing to utilize a “lower” register of their discourse access profile serves to enhance the visibility of the power dichotomies present in interactions.

### ***Morality as a Frame***

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<sup>11</sup> Although it is certainly true that even CEOs feel pressures on their mode and manner of discourse, as they are expected to speak for the company as a whole, or at least for the management of such entity.

Beyond frameworks of power and dominance, I also employ moral frameworks to categorize and understand the discursive narratives from my interviews. Alvesson and Karreman's analysis of discourse suggests that interview accounts are good examples of "moral story-telling" where their interviews with managerial firms revealed that in interviews with those who were *not* managers "being in a technical role is constructed as being morally superior to being a manager...in interviews subjects present themselves in a positive light." (Alvesson, 2000). In my own analysis, I attempt to understand people's social locations within the workplace and what kinds of conflicts these statuses and roles introduce.

### ***Gender as a Frame***

Perhaps the most challenging, but no less essential, approach is to analyze Silicon Valley startup discourse through a gendered frame. In using gender as a point of comparison one must make assumptions about gender roles within a culture in order to use it analytically. Making these assumptions while "recognizing the multiplicity and variability of gendered identities across time (history) and space (context)" leads to a delicate balance between the risk of over-generalization and the potential for valuable understanding (Keerfoot, 1998).

From a constructed and necessarily generalized viewpoint, then, we begin to unravel the tensions of masculine and feminine qualities in the Silicon Valley startup world. In a striking reflection of a study on gender and management roles by Keerfoot, the discourses in my study revealed struggles to achieve the ideal of "womanhood" in "behaviors which deny the value of self and autonomy, and define

meaningful existence as achieved through the care of others, and through displays of social and sexual passivity” (Keerfoot, 1998). In Silicon Valley one sees this in the contentious decision that a woman must make between working for a startup and being able to have a family: in many contexts, the two are very clearly framed as incompatible. Among my 30-plus interviews, the issue is argued heatedly from every imaginable position by males and females alike. While some argue that there are not enough females in startups, particularly in leadership roles, others suggest that females who *have* undertaken such roles are denying their families and are posing a reprehensible example for the rest of society. The discourses of my interviews further reveal that even the way men and women are allowed or expected to *talk* differs dramatically.<sup>12</sup> In order to occupy high-level or male-dominated positions (such as CEO or lead engineer), women in startups are having to mimic “masculine” qualities to get ahead. In the meeting room, women mention having to “fool” men into taking their side on controversial issues to avoid being considered too “bossy” and losing their support. Perhaps more than any other topic, discourse on the topic of gender reveals variously blame, denial, concern, and confusion. There are some who see no gender inequalities, some who see it and ascribe blame to wider societal phenomena such as education, some who see it and call it blatant and unforgivable discrimination. Whatever conclusion might be drawn from these opposing discourse frames, the issue of gender in the startup workplace is clearly a contentious, and by no means simple, question.

### ***Expectation as a Frame***

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<sup>12</sup> A prime example about discourse about discourse.

In her book *Framing in Discourse*, Deborah Tannen uses discourse analysis to understand how expectations shape people's perceptions of reality: "At the same time that expectations make it possible to perceive and interpret object and events in the world, they shape those perceptions to the model of the world provided by them" (Tannen, 1993). This methodology applies well to the current analysis, as we can examine the effects of these "structures of expectation" on verbalization in the telling of stories in interviews about the Silicon Valley startup experience. When people express themselves, it becomes clear when their expectations are not met: they have a perception of their own world and it is only when that perception does not play out that they must confront their expectations and realities. This becomes a key to understanding my findings, and the dichotomies revealed between the cultural narratives of startup organizations and the lived realities of those working in the Silicon Valley startup world are often striking and worthy of note.

### ***Cultural Narrative as a Frame***

Such expectations as discussed in Tannen's study are formed in large part by existing cultural narratives. The importance of narratives in the world of startups cannot be ignored. In an unstable environment such as a startup company, having a concrete cultural narrative is one of the most effective ways to bond employees together in a shared understanding of their everyday experience. In their ethnographic study of a first-year startup company, McLarney and Chung (2000) point out that "underlying the concept of culture is the idea of shared meanings, which allows individuals to collectively make sense of a world that would otherwise



be arbitrary and chaotic.” In my own interviews, employees at companies with ambiguous cultural values expressed dissatisfaction with their work, and some even considered leaving for another company with a more explicit identity (Fieldnotes).

Such a shared understanding can be important not only in the experience of individual employees, but also for the success of a company as a whole. According to O’Connor, startups must create stories that “enable founders to justify the existence of the company, convince others to devote funds and other key resources to the company, and make key decisions in the intermediate term” (2002). Without a compelling cultural narrative, new companies in Silicon Valley are unlikely to even gain the initial support they need from venture capitalists to gain footing in the region. Indeed, according to several founders I spoke with, the ability to present an inspirational story is more important in gaining funding than providing raw data and analytical proof of success (Fieldnotes). Cultural narrative, as it is expressed through discourse, can help position a startup community in terms of power and identity in a way that directly affects the experiences and goals of those operating within it.

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Beyond using narrative to gain outside support, organizational studies suggest that the lack of a cohesive culture can create conflict within a company. One researcher identified large companies as “multicultural” systems with sometimes conflicting and “ethnocentric” factions within them (Gregory, 1983). In a startup company, where a misunderstanding could spell disaster for the entire company, the delineation of a single, homogenous culture is all the more imperative. This necessity of a cohesive “monoculture” has interesting implications for the demographic diversity (or lack thereof) among startup employees, discussed at length in a later section of this study

Even among startups that successfully create a cultural narrative, however, not all are successful in making it a cohesive one. O’Connor’s ten-month ethnographic study of a high technology startup revealed multiple corporate narrative that she categorized into six basic types. In her findings, the interaction of these multiple narratives often created a culture that contradicted itself, and led to a divide in the way that employees experienced their workplace (O’Connor, 2002).

Although her work reveals important insight into a multiple-narrative startup

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<sup>13</sup> On-site resources, human and otherwise, must be marshaled effectively, despite the challenges of starting up and operating in uncertain environments.

culture, what O'Connor's study fails to explore is the manifestation of such contradictions in terms of the lived experience of people within those companies. The present study seeks to fill this gap by giving voice to those individuals who experience a disconnect between the cultural narrative of their startup workplace and their own lived realities.

### ***Considerations***

In undertaking any study using discourse analysis, particularly one in which power and gender play such complex roles, it is important to acknowledge that such frames by necessity create overgeneralization. At the same time, we must acknowledge the "primacy of vagueness or undifferentiatedness as the aboriginal 'stuff' of reality" (Chia, 2000). We may accumulate concrete research in the form of interviews and other discourse, but "addressing what may go on in peoples heads and hearts is another issue, disrupting discourse analysis, and may only be carried out in a speculative manner" (Alvesson, 2000). That discourse analysis leaves us with *relative* knowledge that is necessarily "outside" what we are trying to understand through discursive symbols is similarly unavoidable: we will, as anthropologists, *always* be outside, and we are just trying to find a window into the world in question. We may undertake our analysis as long as we understand that our "window in" that we shape through analysis is just that: a window, not a panoramic view.

That being said, in order to analyze in a manner that enhances understanding in any way, some sense of framework must be employed, despite the fact that such

framing may collaterally confine certain groups in a manner that may not reflect perfect reality. We must paradoxically, but necessarily, use discourse to analyze discourse.

Finally, my own identity and the different associations and verbal skills of various interviewees might produce different accounts that have little to do with a reflection of startup culture in general. The interview is necessarily a negotiated and relational social encounter, with both sides engaging in pre-conceived notions of the role and position of the other individual involved, and taking up stances based on these expectations. Although the limited time and scope of this paper prevent an entirely thorough investigation of this discursive factor, my position as a university aged, educated young woman taking the stance of interviewer, and the interaction of this identity with the register from which the particular interviewee speaks is essential to keep in mind.

## ***Background***

### ***Startups and Cultural Narrative***

Startups, particularly in modern-day Silicon Valley, became a hot topic among businesspeople and popular media alike in recent decades. Everyone, it seems, wants to be part of the industry that gave birth to the colossal international successes of Facebook and Google. As one tech company in the Valley proclaimed on its recruiting page of its website: "Startups in Silicon Valley: So Hot Right Now." Such romanticization has led to a proliferation of startups in the region, leading to a confusion as to what a startup company actually *is*. As one startup employee

pointed out to me, “*everyone* wants to claim they are a startup in Silicon Valley right now... even Google and Twitter are [still] referred to as startups” (Fieldnotes).

So, how do we sort between the “true” startups and the “wannabes”? The American Heritage Dictionary defines it as “a business or undertaking that has recently begun operation.” But how recently? In the startup world, “revenues, profits, and employment numbers shift drastically between companies and industries,” making it difficult to fix a hard and fast number to the definition. Other startup employees have variously defined the end of the startup label as “acquisition by a larger company, more than one office, revenues greater than \$20 million, more than 80 employees, over five people on the board, and founders who have personally sold shares” (*Forbes*, 12/16/13).

There is good reason for competition over the label: being defined as a startup carries with it implications of freshness, growth, and thus attraction for top talent in the recruiting process. Many even argue that the very definition of a startup is based on its culture. In a recent interview with *Forbes Magazine*, Adora Cheung, cofounder and CEO of a Silicon Valley company, stated: “Startup is a state of mind. It’s when people join your company and are still making the explicit decision to forgo stability in exchange for the promise of tremendous growth and the excitement of making immediate impact.” Others cite the perks that have become synonymous with startup culture as the definition, or at least the implication of the label: “[Startup] may even help companies to cash in on a “cool” factor when hiring, allowing them to snap up qualified staff on the cheap who are attracted by the promise of innovation and a ping-pong table.” (*Forbes*, 12/16/13). There is,

admittedly, a sharp division in the startup industry between those aiming to “cash in” to the new industry and those who have joined simply because they needed a job, and the massive growth of the industry seems to provide endless opportunities for employment. Such a divide is also certainly reflected in people’s relationships to their company culture as well.

Although the proliferation of startup companies in Silicon Valley is a relatively new phenomenon, there is a growing body of academic literature surrounding their structure and corporate culture. The literature spans academic fields, from organizational studies to psychology, business, and anthropology. Of particular interest to our current analysis are anthropological studies of the constructed narratives of corporate cultures, both in established firms and in startup companies.

In his discussion of startup organizations, sociologist Arthur Stinchcombe asserts that in order for a young company to realize success, “generalized skills are important, but... norms and attitudes are even more important” (Stinchcombe, 1965). Such norms and attitudes in a company are generally learned over time as employees are exposed to varying internal and external environments, creating “learned, shared tacit assumptions on which people base their daily behavior”(Schein, 1999).

In his explanation of structure and agency, William Sewell also insists that cultural accumulation must take place over an extended period of time (Sewell, 1992). However, because startups are, by definition, extremely young companies, this process of cultural accumulation is less gradual. Instead, many startups choose

to explicitly create a cultural narrative at the moment of their founding through cultural documents and carefully delineated “value lists” that employees are expected to memorize and promote.

Despite this growing body of knowledge surrounding startup culture, there remain many gaps in our understanding, particularly from a sociological or anthropological standpoint. Given the increasing significance of startups in American society, it is surprising to note that among anthropological studies of entrepreneurship found on JSTOR and AnthroSource, only around 5% are of American companies. The remaining 95% focus on non-American startups and cross-cultural comparisons of entrepreneurship and small businesses. Research topics such as the emerging Mexican startup industry (Nardi, 2013), comparisons of small businesses in Norway and South Africa (Mtidgwe, 1995), or the growth of Arab startups in Israel (Sofer, 1996) abound, as well as examinations of cultural factors in shaping entrepreneurship (Stevenson, 1983; Stewart, 1999; Shapero, 1982). This tendency towards “otherization” within anthropology is woefully common, and marks a failure among researchers to fully capitalize on the powerful tools that ethnographic study and anthropological analysis provide. By bringing these studies to Silicon Valley, arguably the most important startup hub in America and perhaps in the world, this study provides essential insights into our own culture and into the challenges and opportunities presented to Silicon Valley employees on an everyday basis.

### *Silicon Valley “Culture”*

No culture develops autonomously from the wider sociocultural context in which it is situated, and startup culture is no different. Silicon Valley, in particular, is situated in a powerfully influential context in its history, geography, and major industries. Originally known as Santa Clara County, California, the label “Silicon Valley” was applied to the region in the 1970’s as the high-technology industry began to dominate the economic and social infrastructure of the community. The new name transformed the region in the public imagination, portraying it as the “brave new world” of high-tech innovation (English-Lueck, 2002). Drawn to the underlying discourse behind this mythic characterization, immigrants from Asia, India, Europe and all over the United States came to join the increasingly globalized community. This complex range of cultural identities was not without division, however, particularly between those who worked in the burgeoning high-tech industry and those who did not.

In many respects, the dichotomy between cultural narrative and reality in startup companies in Silicon Valley mirrors the diverse cultural milieu of the region as a whole. Just as startup companies formulate their own cultures at their genesis, Silicon Valley was a region explicitly “created” as a center for technological innovation, largely through the efforts of Stanford University and the United States government. Although the presence of a major US Naval base was an initial catalyst for research and development in the region starting in the early 1900’s, it was not until the mid 1950’s that the region began to develop into the entrepreneurial epicenter that it is today (Sturgeon, 2013). Researcher Stephen Adams argues that “the perceived exploitation of the West at the hands of eastern interests fueled...



attempts to build self-sufficient indigenous local industry” (Adams, 2003). Such “regionalism” led to an intense specialization in tech-related businesses, granting the region its title in reference to the large number of “silicon chip” manufacturers and innovators who flourished in the area.

The entrepreneurial bent of the region developed just as suddenly, when the availability of venture capital exploded after the successful \$1.3 billion IPO of the Apple Computer in December, 1980 (Adams, 2003). The dot.com bubble of the late 1990’s and early 2000’s brought in a flood of entrepreneurs and thus venture funds, peaking at an astounding \$32.3 billion in 2000 (Luo and Mann, 2011). Although the bubble’s deflation by 2003 brought venture capital and firm establishment back down, last year still saw \$6.5 billion in venture capital investment, and a 90% increase in angel investment from the previous year (*Silicon Valley Index*, 2013). Silicon Valley remains one of the leading regions for innovation and entrepreneurship in the world, boasting 1/3 of all venture capital investment in the United States (*PWC Money Tree Report*, 2010).

Today, Silicon Valley is virtually synonymous with entrepreneurship. Recently, dramatic increases in the number of startup companies in Silicon Valley have drawn attention from media sources and academics alike, garnering both positive and negative feedback. Last year, there were over 8,926 startups listed in the Valley (*Angellist*, 2011). These companies play a pivotal role in the economy of the region, adding 42,360 jobs last year for a total of 1.22 million jobs provided by the Valley (*Silicon Valley Index*, 2013). The region’s computer and electronic exports alone generated \$12.24 billion last year, and last quarter Silicon Valley startup

companies pulled in a total of over \$1.5 billion in funding and deals (Schubarth, 2013).

Of the 3 million people residing in the Valley, some 286 people out of every 1,000 are estimated to be employed by startup companies (*Cybercites*, 2008). One study by the BDS claims that the *only* job creation in the United States comes from startups: well-established firms actually lose jobs on average, while startups add an average of 3 million jobs in their first year. Most notably, the study says, job creation at startups remains stable even in recessionary years, unlike at established companies whose job creation is tied closely to the business cycle (*US BDS Census*, 2005).

Although these statistics seem to paint a picture of unparalleled opportunity and near-guaranteed success for startups in Silicon Valley, this glowing narrative of patriotic development does not reflect the economic realities of the region. While it is undeniable that Silicon Valley startups are a source of job creation for the nation, two-thirds of degree-carrying professionals working in science and engineering in the Valley were born outside the United States. This number is more than twice the national average, 64 percent compared with 26 percent nationally (*Silicon Valley Index*, 2013).

In fact, the economic reality for many American-born Silicon Valley residents is much harsher than for those arriving from abroad. The statistics of average income in the Valley once again seem to paint a rosy picture, with an average household income of \$84,724, 45 percent higher than the average income in the state of California as a whole (*Silicon Valley Index*, 2013). However, the reality

experienced by many residents of the region is drastically different. The massive amount of money available in the Valley has dramatically worsened income disparities in the region. Income differs by education level: median income for those with graduate degrees is 5 times higher than for those with a high school degree, and the median income for the latter demographic has fallen every year since 2009. Silicon Valley employees are some of the highest paid workers in the country, averaging \$3,240 per week, or three times the national average. At the same time, a study by Working Partnerships USA reveals that “about 31% of jobs in Silicon Valley pay \$16 an hour or less; and that from 2000 to 2010... the number of households making less than \$10,000 more than doubled, and the cost of every major household expense category increased faster than wages” (*Life in the Valley Economy*, 2012). The shrinking middle class and rapidly increasing income gap stand in stark contrast to the self-created image of the Valley as a center of the American Dream’s promise of prosperity for all.

The apparent wealth of the region—captured by a select and elite subsector of the population, many of whom are not even native-born Americans—is just one of the disparities between the popular perception of Silicon Valley as a place of high-class living and the certainty of the American Dream with the lived reality of those who call the Valley home. Although the culture of the region is ostensibly regarded as free, egalitarian, and holistic—evidenced by proliferations of farmers markets, yoga studios, five star restaurants, and an expectation of “moral living”—a study by English-Lueck finds that there is an implicit message in the culture of the Valley that employees are constantly on duty. The technological bent of many startup

companies allow this sense of obligation to persist, as employees can work from anywhere and can thus never leave the “workplace.” “Technology permeates everyday life and the very metaphors of community,” English-Lueck’s study finds, and companies transform this cultural identity into constant productivity (English-Lueck, 2002).

Such dramatic cultural disconnect is certainly worthy of further examination. Through a critical examination of the region’s most important industry, this study offers an initial discussion of participant discourse surrounding the disparity between the narrative and reality of the region both economically and socially.

## Chapter 2: “Culture” in Silicon Valley Startups

### *What is Culture?*

Raymond Williams noted that culture is “one of the two or three most complex words in the English language” (cited in Eagleton, 2000). Its complexity was increased as it became incorporated into various academic disciplines,<sup>14</sup> as well as adopted into casual popular lexicon.

According to A. L Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, writing in 1952, “few intellectuals will challenge the statement that the idea of culture, in the technical anthropological sense, is one of the key notions in contemporary American thought” (Schweder, 2001). Culture informs people’s beliefs (what the world is like) and normative standards (definitions of “good” and “bad”), and is thus a central aspect of all human societies. Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s seminal definition of culture states that “culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand as conditioning elements of further action” (cited in Schweder, 2001).<sup>15</sup> While this definition may appear unwieldy in its bulk, considering culture from such a detailed perspective is beneficial for the present analysis. By taking Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s definition apart piece by piece, it is

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<sup>14</sup> Including but by no means limited to politics, sociology, anthropology, psychology.

<sup>15</sup> For those bogged down by the long-windedness of the above definition of culture, Robert Redfield offers a more succinct conception of the term: “Shared understandings made manifest in act and artifact” (cited in Schweder 2001).

becomes clear from where my startup interviewees draw their various culturally-based discourses. In the case of startups, the “behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols” inherent in culture take the form of perks, which act as physical manifestations of a company’s values and thus take on symbolic import. Because startups are so young, companies tend to emphasize “ideas and especially their attached values” rather than history in their cultural formation; indeed, the concept of “historically derived and selected” culture is notably missing from the discourse of startup employees.

“Culture,” as described by anthropologists from nearly every persuasion, is made up of customs and traditions. It is not a reified object that people in a society can simply invent or create. At least, not culture understood in its classic sense. In recent decades, a self-conscious discussion of culture has moved into popular and corporate discourse in efforts to promote corporate objectives. The version of culture used in startup discourse is a different beast, one verging on the vacuous yet retaining undeniable aspects of the original culture concept, a veritable “Culture Lite” in the world of discourse. Rather than evolving through history, “Culture Lite” is created, flaunted, and manipulated by startups through discourse.

Redfield, Kroeber, and Kluckhohn would likely be surprised at the emergence of such a popular and casual use of the culture concept, formerly relegated to the libraries of academia. The new use of the term (“Culture Lite,” as we have deemed it) is not without its shortcomings. There is certainly some superficiality to the idea that a few individuals founding a company can “make up” a set of values that can hold people together. Indeed, in many cases startup founders have discovered that

such explicit constructions of culture are not able to overcome the classic Durkheimian problem of social solidarity. Particularly in a wider societal atmosphere that is hyperindividualistic in nature, startup organizations in the Valley suffer from high employee mobility, inequality, and frequent firm mortality. Although my interviewees were all sourced from currently existing startups in Silicon Valley, it is essential to remember that three out of every four startups in the region fail in a business sense.<sup>16</sup>

In startup companies in particular, various roles within the company and positions in outside life create different understandings of the physical and discursive aspects of company cultures. The discourse that startup employees use to discuss their culture is both *part of* and serves to *create* the very experience of the culture itself. “The borders and the contents of ‘culture,’ in other words, are understood to be constructed rather than discovered” (Alan 1996, cited in Park, 2005), created by the beliefs, understandings, and experiences of those actors living within the cultural bounds.

In considering the culture of Silicon Valley startup companies, the social boundaries are conveniently delineated for us: either someone is member of a startup company, as an employee, investor, or expert, or they are not. To examine the phenomenon of startup culture both in and out of the workplace, I turn to the literature of other “organizational culture” studies. Mumby (1988) explains the methodology of his study: “this approach conceptualizes organizations as cultures in order to examine the ways in which organization members engage in the *creation*

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.thewire.com/technology/2013/04/welcome-silicon-valley-where-all-start-ups-are-failures/63844/>

*of organizational reality*. Such research generally takes organizational symbolism—myths, stories, legends, jokes, rites, logos—as the most clearly visible articulation of organizational reality” [*cited in communicating gender in context*] (emphasis added). The essential factor here is the *creation* of organizational reality by those positioned within startup organizations through shared meanings and sense making. The very use of the term “culture” by startup employees signifies a certain sense of othering, of setting their own experience apart through their discourse. Culture’s function as a “powerful category of identity” has been examined by many of the leading scholars of anthropology and other disciplines (Appadurai, 1996; Bhabha, 1994; Bordieu, 1991; Foucault 1972; Said, 1994), but few have brought the term into the workplace. Even more specifically, despite the ubiquitous usage of the term “culture” in reference to startups by contemporary media, to my knowledge there have not yet been any anthropological studies of the particularities of the term in reference to startup organizations.

In order to begin teasing apart such a heavily loaded term as “culture,” it seems appropriate to use a study of words themselves through discourse analysis.<sup>17</sup> As Park (2005) points out, the methodological challenge of studying culture stems from “the difficulty in determining the right variables to represent the category/construct at hand.” Critical discourse analysis helps overcome this obstacle through “de-naturalizing occluded assumptions, the taken-for-granted context of discourse” and understanding identities and realities as cultural aspects *constructed* through discursive practices (Park, 2005). In the case of startup

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<sup>17</sup> It is incredible that enough meaning can be contained in seven letters that it takes x-hundred pages to understand and explain. The power of language is a paradoxical beast.



companies, the task at hand is simplified through the study of “commodified culture: “if culture can be claimed in objective terms, that is if ‘culture’ is conceptualized as an inventory of set traits or identifiable markers, it can also become classified as a body of knowledge which can be studied” (Park 2005). The first step is to catalogue this “inventory of traits” through discourse, including employee and expert interviews, fieldwork, and media portrayals. In addition, I examine “culture documents” created by startup companies<sup>18</sup> and the physical discourse conveyed by the layout of offices themselves. Through this discursive evidence I attempt to tease out some of the common customs, conventions, reference to sharedness, and traditions<sup>19</sup> in order to study which markers people associate with the “culture” of their particular startup in their discourse. I also seek to understand how these expectations or perceptions of culture play out in reality, and how culture is transmitted to new generations joining the startup’s cultural sphere.

The present chapter seeks to understand what “culture” means to those actors positioned within the Silicon Valley startup sphere, both its “cloudy vision of perfection” and the lived reality. Through discourse analysis I attempt to recognize how the use of the culture concept in startup rhetoric creates an identity, and what that identity feels like to different participants within the wider startup social group. Some of the questions that are worth teasing out of the cultural discourse are: what are we trying to get at when we talk about culture? How is it embodied? What are

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<sup>18</sup> Described more in detail later in this chapter.

<sup>19</sup> Although this is odd with startups because they are, by definition, so young... usually traditions purport to give “a time depth” to a society (Thomas, class notes, 2009).

the stories that people tell about who we are here and what we do? What is this “cultural value” that we are talking about?

### **Expectations**

Before delving into the catalogue of traits associated with startup culture, it is helpful to begin from the popularized discourse surrounding the region. The expectations associated with startup culture have, particularly in recent years, taken on a life of their own through sometimes sensationalized media portrayals of offices such as Google’s, with its ping-pong tables, catered meals, and free massages. The discourse surrounding these perceptions has included startup culture as a term, enabling take on a life of its own, identified in popular lexicon with a very particular set of ideas and expectations.

Media portrayals play into these perceptions, perpetuating them on both a local and extra-local scale. However, these portrayals are often selectively sensationalized in order to capitalize on the imagined glamour of the Silicon Valley startup world: “Journalists capture the story of the day, often highlighting the rich, the famous, and the exotica of Silicon Valley,” ignoring the lower class, non-startup employees, and often women in the quest for “newsworthy” stories of glamour (English-Lueck, 2002). If culture consists of “socially transmitted ideas” (Appadurai, 1996), then there is no more prominent avenue for the creation and perpetuation of these ideas than through the sensationalizing global media.

Startup employees in Silicon Valley seem to be nearly universally aware of such popular perceptions of the culture to which they belong, and although they may experience the reality of their own culture to be parallel to such expectations or

at odds with it, most had a notion of this public version of “startup culture” before even joining their companies. One young woman who had worked at a startup for the past three years declaimed her perception of the popular perception of startup companies in Silicon Valley:

J: I think that the thing that’s probably most important to understand about a startup is that the, your stereotypical, what people imagine startups to be is rarely an accurate depiction of what they actually are. Like I think people have this perception of what a startup is, and I totally had that perception before I started working here as well, but that perception is rarely accurate.

N: What do you think that perception is?

J: I think the perception is you know, people, there’s like you know, 15 college kids in a room and there’s a CEO yelling and a lot of beer being consumed and, but it couldn’t be further from what most startups are trying to accomplish. It’s less about the work environment and more about the product than most people probably understand who don’t work in a startup... they’re passionate about what they’re working on and so a lot of attention goes to that and less kind of goes to the Silicon Valley mumbo jumbo. (Jessica, 1/23/14)

Jessica feels the need to explain the “misperception” of the culture of which she has become a part, claiming that people in general, including *herself* before working at a startup, have a fairly unified perception of the components of startup culture. The components she describes, “college kids in a room,” “a CEO yelling,” “a lot of beer being consumed,” are indicative both of her idea of the popular concept of startup culture and mark aspects that she does *not* witness in reality.

Jessica’s reference to “Silicon Valley mumbo jumbo” suggests a discursive lexicon unique to the region and, although I have no data on other areas, I would expect this lexicon to apply to startup organizations as a whole. One employee I

spoke with referred to the name of her role as a unique title to Silicon Valley: “I was a strategist, we can call it, they called us optimizers” qualifying that “none of those words really mean much to most people” (Lori, 10/14/13). Her statement shows her own creation of “othering:” there are startup employees like herself, and then there are “most people.” The lexical gaps that she embraces serve to form the boundaries for these groups and set her own company culture apart as a distinct entity.

Popular media have also influenced the Silicon Valley startup perception, creating a distinct cultural entity in which only positive components of the culture (real or imagined) are included. At a recruiting session for a Silicon Valley tech startup, the first slide of the presentation read, “Tech in Silicon Valley: So In Right Now” (fieldnotes, 10/14/13). Other interviewees with whom I spoke mentioned that similar perceptions acted as the catalyst that inspired them to come to the Valley to work:

In Silicon Valley it’s like, startups are just celebrated. It’s like if you start a business in like Iowa, and you have a startup and you tell your friends about it they’re gonna be like, oh interesting. Why are you doing that? Whereas if you do the same thing in Silicon Valley people are going to be like, yeah you go girl! Or, You can do it! And it’s just like, it’s celebrated here, it’s appreciated here. (Kathleen, 12/06/13)

So I started looking and I actually was I’d say if I was being really honest with myself and self-aware, I was just really eager to get out of banking and I took one of the first job offers I had from a startup. I thought the whole startup world was super sexy and it was the thing to do in the Valley, and that was in 2009. (Olivia, 10/07/13)

By referring to her feelings about “the whole startup world” Olivia asserts a perception of a common culture connecting all of the startup companies, at least in

the Valley. In her view, such a culture was “super sexy,” and although she does not elaborate, Kathleen’s discourse describes a similar perception in more concrete terms. By comparing startup culture in Silicon Valley to the culture associated with startups in a randomly chosen comparative region (Iowa), she creates a discursive boundary around the Silicon Valley startup world as a distinct cultural entity. Her reiteration of how “celebrated” startup companies are in the Valley, and her imagined discourses with people supporting her work serve as further indications of a distinct cultural perception of startups in Silicon Valley.

Other employees had more explicit descriptions of their *own* expectations of startup culture, and the way those expectations matched up after joining a company. One 30-year-old long-time startup employee who worked in a special department of a larger startup company told me that before joining she had “huge” expectations for what her life would be like at her new company:

N: Did you have any expectations of Grandios before you started working there and, if so, how did they match up to what you’ve experienced?

A: Yeah, hugely. I mean I’ve read a number books about the company and also just I used to follow tech... so yeah, my expectations going into it was like this is going to be a fun place to work, it’s going to be a place where they take care of their people, this is going to be a place where a real emphasis is placed on making awesome stuff, and I think I got very lucky.  
(Annabelle, 12/20/13)

For the most part, she goes on to explain, her expectations were met and exceeded: it is notable that this employee’s perception of startup companies includes not simply perks but an “emphasis on making awesome stuff,” on the product. Unlike the *perceived* perceptions of startup companies, which focused on perks and “a

bunch of college kids” drinking beer, Annabelle both expects and is gratified by the product itself. She does mention her expectation that it would be a “fun place to work,” without qualifying what this means: “fun” is a vague but important term that came up with great frequency throughout the descriptions of startups that I gathered.

Another young man left a job in finance to work at a startup company in Silicon Valley, and explained his reasons for leaving in terms of a more “laid back” culture:

N: Did you have expectations of what it was going to be like and how did those expectations either get met or how are they different?

R: I expected a more laid-back atmosphere, more than anything, which was fulfilled. Like going from wearing a dress shirt and slacks every day to, you know, jeans and a tee shirt is pretty awesome. And I mean, funny to say that’s one of the top reasons, but it definitely was. And then it’s like... I don’t know just the mentality, it’s like everyone is stiff in the finance world but it’s not as bad, it’s very much looser and laid back. (Rob, 1/15/14)

Although it may seem trivial, jeans and tee-shirts<sup>20</sup> have become iconic of Silicon Valley startups, and the importance that Rob puts on them is less surprising than it may at first seem. Clothing is in itself a form of discourse, and the “dress code” of Silicon Valley startups speaks about the culture (or at least a perceived culture) of a “laid-back,” fun atmosphere where work isn’t really “work.”<sup>21</sup>

Those who had been a part of their company for some time were eager to share stories with me that they felt exemplified their company culture. These

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<sup>20</sup> “Silicon Valley Has a Dress Code”

<sup>21</sup> For more about clothing as a representational state, see Sinclair, 2007: *Propositional Clothing and Belief*.

stories often involved outings, rituals, perks, and, nearly universally, free food. Such descriptions act as cultural narratives that set their company apart and create a boundary between “us” (the people who experience these stories) and “them” (those who do not participate in such events). One employee even went so far as to describe his company culture as “cultish”:

E: So cult is a strong word but I’ve heard people say at times it feels cultish or churchy. So that’s an interesting thing, I don’t know there, I don’t know if this is inherent or only true to A but I think at a lot of companies people are naturally drawn to either the brand or the culture so they try to maintain a very strong identity in that sense. So we have, yes we do have weekly like Friday meetings where we’ve got like a ritual for introducing people, it’s nothing weird its just... we introduce...

N: You put on your hoods and you light some candles?

E: Yeah [laughing]. It’s just, yeah, its fun, people get on stage, they say fun facts about themselves, they try to make it entertaining, and actually I cant speak to what is it like at a different company because A is the company I’ve worked at the longest and it’s like not an internship. But I don’t think other companies do that, like you’re not going to get the entire company of like 300 people to go sit upstairs in like the cafeteria and say almost the same thing on a week-to-week basis and introduce new people. But you like want to like welcome these new people to the group because I remember when I was being introduced and it was a great experience. So I think like that and there’s a whole bunch of other fun things that they build into the weekly routine. Its both things that are important for like the business, they bring in speakers, actually this week we had Marissa Mayer come in, which is like one of the best talks we’ve had come in, but like...Yeah, so things like that they program into the week and it like stimulates conversation and like challenges you, like it’s always great content, challenges you to think about how we can make A better. What else. The most fundamental daily routine is the, there’s a full kitchen upstairs and a staff of people that feed us three meals a day, almost seven

days a week if there's randomly people in on the weekend. And that's I think just the idea that you show up to work and you eat with these people that, it feels very family like. (Ethan, 12/08/13)

His final statement that "it feels very family like" is an interesting contrast to his initial qualification of "cultish" or "churchy" culture. Both qualifications suggest a community atmosphere as central to the company culture, but the latter descriptions suggest a very hierarchical, almost forced connotation, while "family" denotes more equality, or at least relaxed familiarity. The rituals that he mentions seem to be the impetus for the "cultish" description, while "working and eating" with the same people seven days a week makes it more of a family culture.

The perks that Ethan mentions are notable as well: on-boarding rituals with the rest of the company and programs to bring in speakers, rather than ping pong tables or massages. These are community-oriented activities and speak to both the "churchy" and "family" aspects that he identifies with their culture.

In addition, it is interesting to note that he asserts that his company "*tries to maintain a very strong identity*" because they know people looking for jobs at startups will choose where they put their energy based at least partially on that elusive concept of "culture." The more explicit and visible a company can make the manifestations of their particular "culture" or "brand," the more likely they will be to draw interest from those individuals looking for work in a startup.

As concretely as these manifestations of cultural ideals are in the proceeding discourse, culture is always evolving, and it thus seems intuitive that people's expectations of culture are constantly evolving as well. [David], a middle-aged CEO



at his third startup, told me that perceptions of startup culture have changed dramatically over the past few decades:

D: And so what you have though is there is this totally new expectation about what work-life balance is defined as. And what work should provide you versus what you should provide work. And so Google really sort of threw the whole thing for everybody.

N: And why do you think they did it in the first place?

D: Because they have more money than God. (Daniel, 11/22/13)

Daniel expresses a sense of bitterness about this new cultural expectation through phrases like “Google really sort of threw the whole thing” and sarcastic comments, “Because they have more money than God.” Beyond the feelings conveyed by his word selection and tone, the meaning of his assertion is important to consider as well: startup culture has been “re-defined” by the provision of a different “work-life balance,” which he goes on to describe as flexible (though equally arduous) work schedules and seemingly endless perks. If such a conception can shift over a few short years, it raises the question what the cultural perception of startups will be a decade from now: in an industry where speedy adaptation means survival, change can happen seemingly overnight.

In considering the perceptions of Silicon Valley startup culture, a definition of what is *not* included in startup culture is equally revealing. One startup employee in a high-level management position told me that they worked hard not to be like “other startups” and defined their own culture as the “antistartup”:

I ask Jared about their culture and he describes them as “anti-startup.” He says they “avoid fluffiness” and aim for “no bullshit.” I ask him to elaborate on this and he says that he thinks that the issue he is talking about comes from the Venture Capital phenomenon. Venture Capital is largely

unsuccessful, he points out, but every once in a while you just might hit it big. “It’s very California, very Hollywood, gold rush,” he says. As a result, many companies exist because they have grand ideas, but they have no revenue streams or concrete plans to get there, he says. This yields a culture that is not tied to reality. The result is ball pits in offices, he says, “I don’t get why that is necessary. We are very anti-that.” Sunil, too, is very outspoken about this no-bullshit culture, Jared says. “We are building a real business that helps people and ultimately we hope it changes the way people think about work.” (Fieldnotes, 10/22/13)

It is particularly notable that he refers to his company as a “real business that helps people,” implying that most startups are *not* real companies and exist for some other primary reason. His other descriptions of what their culture is *not*—“fluffy,” “bullshit,” “gold rush”—imply that these, in his perception, are common components of other startup companies. The “ball pits in the office” that he sarcastically mentions are representative of startup perks in general, and although most startup employees spoke glowingly of the “fun” atmosphere created by such perks, to Jared they are an indication of a “culture that is not tied to reality.”

Another young man working at a startup used discourse that paralleled the “gold rush” mentality of startups mentioned by Jared, describing his company culture as “very Wild West.” When I asked him to elaborate he explained that there is more freedom, you can define your own job, and you can look out for yourself more and define and accomplish your own goals (Fieldnotes). As compared with larger companies where there is more of an opportunity for training and mentorship, startups have much more of a frontier spirit and culture. This is particularly interesting considering the Silicon Valley startup world’s location: on the “hither edge” of both our nation and our economic sphere.

### ***Cultural Components***

Having gained a sense of the broad perceptions of startup culture through analyzing the way people speak about them in an interview setting, I now turn to the task of “cataloguing” the ideologies that make up startup culture in the experience of those that work there. One of the easiest ways to form an understanding of the ideologies associated with startup culture (or the perception thereof) is to look for symbols and rituals associated with the culture. These may be the stories that people tell about who they are there and what they do, or they may be tangible manifestations of the cultural values of the company. In this section I seek to determine the underlying assumptions and experiences that people have that further contribute to the culture.

### ***People***

One component that was cited nearly every time I asked about startup culture was the *people* who worked in the office. It is possible that the near ubiquity of this particular reference to culture stems from a reaction against the perceived perception of the people as college kids drinking a lot of beer. Alternatively, it could be a way of using discourse to create a reality that plays down the importance of and simultaneously justifies the perks associated with startup culture. Certainly, it is more “appropriate” to talk about something “wholesome” like the quality people in an institution when asked about company culture, rather than saying your favorite thing is the free food. Finally, it is possible that this discursive pattern is simply a reflection of what people actually look for in joining a startup: the people within a startup company are typically around the same age (young) and with similar

interests, making the “people” aspect of culture a self-perpetuating cycle: if you seek out an office environment where people are similar to you, you will most likely cite the people there as a major factor in the company culture. In addition, startup offices are by definition small, allowing employees to actually get to know all of the people who work there, unlike in a larger company where employees may have more limited interactions.<sup>22</sup>

One need not necessarily be so similar to the other people working at a startup to consider people an important aspect of startup culture. One 30-year old woman working in the HR department of a small startup mentioned that, although she was one of the oldest people at her startup, she nonetheless felt that the people were the “best part” of working at a startup in general.

I think the best part is the people that we work with, cause we've got talent from MIT and from Duke and sort of just super intelligent folks who are super innovative and always sort of pushing you to think outside of the box, and to educate yourself and to think bigger and better things. And so that's what I would say is really the best part of working at a startup. And I imagine that most startups sort of have that sort of situation where it's a bunch of smart people trying to make something really awesome. (Jessica, 1/23/13)

In particular, Jessica mentions their intelligence, creativity, and drive. Her discourse around the “startup people” is another instance of othering: people who work at a startup, she generalizes implicitly through her discourse, are all this way. In addition, the fact that she “name drops” the schools that the people at her startup have attended shows an emphasis on status and “proof” of people’s quality.

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<sup>22</sup> One is reminded here of the self-conscious ethos of small liberal arts colleges: see the interview with Lori on the following page for a more detailed discussion of this concept.

Another young woman explained that her favorite part of working at a startup was not only people at the company itself, but in the Valley as a whole:

Yeah, um I think I'm just it's kind of like college, there's just a ton of extremely smart people here, and regardless of what you're working on that makes such a huge difference in your life if you're surrounded by smart people at every turn. And of course they're still human so everyone has their quirks and strange characteristics but in San Francisco I interact with the normal average population as well and it's amazing, this network of thousands and thousands of human beings who are so bright, is insane to be able to be a part of that." (Lori, 10/14/13)

Lori qualifies that the people she appreciates are "still human," but in her usage of the phrase it serves to make them seem all the more impressive. Her statement that she "interacts with the normal average population as well" is again an implication of "othering," where she considers the "extremely smart people" at her startup to be in a class separate from the "average" population. Her comparison to *college* is also important here: again, this discourse brings about a sense of a very young company (and city) of highly-educated people: a fairly homogenous sense of a community that in reality has much more diversity. Silicon Valley as a whole is highly diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, and social-economic class, and Lori's understanding of the region seems indicative of a cultural bubble in which startups situate themselves in the region. Her words imply a situated meaning of the word "culture," rather than one that might be stable enough to transcend the local context. This is not to say that such a "bubble" is a negative thing: her reference to a "network of thousands of human beings" is part of what has allowed the Valley to become so successful economically in recent years. However, it is important to draw from this discourse

the narrow view of life in the region and keep it in mind in the analysis of real world implications of cultural constructs of startups in the final chapter.

### *The Ownership Metaphor*

Although slightly less ubiquitous than *people*, another commonly mentioned cultural aspect that people considered to be unique to startup company culture was having “ownership” over their product and over their working environment. This type of autonomy described in discourse seems to reflect the “gold rush” or “California” mentality mentioned earlier, acting as a fairly standard form of speech used to express the cognitive experience of employees within the culture.

Adrienne, a young startup employee in Silicon Valley, mentioned the physical components of startup company perks, but also highlighted the sense of ownership inherent in her experience.

A: I mean yeah, but the culture is just better. They feed you, you feel like they want you to be happy, you have ownership over something. I know a lot of my friends from home are bankers and it kind of sometimes makes them feel like they're really just a means for their bank to get something done, and they work really long hours, they have no ownership over their projects, whereas at tech that's really not the case: You will have ownership over a project, because at a startup especially, if they hire you it means that they think you are capable of taking ownership of something. And that's a really great part of the culture. (Adrienne, 11/04/13)

By comparing her own experience with people working in banking, she conveys a distinct definition of the culture of tech startups, exemplified by the factor of ownership. Comparisons like this one may be used in part to *create* her own social reality as well: by determining what she is *not* experiencing, she is better able to express what she is.

Similarly, a young man who came to his startup company from a former job in finance also cited ownership when I ask him to compare the “work life balance” at his old company and new.

R: Um, it’s definitely.... It’s different. Because like you’re an owner in a sense, you have an equity in the company, you have this sense of ownership and you want it to do well, so it actually incentivizes you to work harder sometimes, and more frequently and you’re more involved in the product. As opposed to some place where the company does good or bad like, yeah that’s great, but you don’t really feel a sense of ownership. And so like in a world where you do own, like the direct success, there’s a high correlation in the success of Papers and my personal success.

N: That’s interesting.

R: So like, while sometimes I may be working more frequently I’ll be more plugged in working in a place like this, it doesn’t bother me because I know what the outcome will be. (Rob, 1/14/14)

The phrases, “owner *in a sense*” and “a sense of ownership” suggest that ownership is not *really* widely shared in the firm. The interviewee’s reference to the “success” of Papers and his own “personal success” also seem to exemplify the individualist component of startup culture mentioned by the employees who cited being able to define and accomplish your own goals as a major positive factor in startup culture. This description of startups, with its emphasis on ownership and individuality, seems to be a role-based discourse particular to the register from which the speakers convey their lived reality. All of the people who cited “ownership” were in engineering departments: people in advertising, HR, or other supporting positions

were more likely to mention work as repetitive, and few mentioned a sense of ownership over their projects.<sup>23</sup>

### *Perks*

The first thing that many people think of in popular perception of startup culture is the (sometimes extreme) perks. Perks range from the standard (free snacks or meals), to the surprising (scooters in the office), to the absurd (heated toilet seats and free massages). No matter what combination of these a particular company might choose to employ, perks in some form or another were ubiquitous across the startups in my study. Even the employee who claimed that his company eschewed the perk-saturated culture associated with startups did so over a free catered lunch served in a dining area in their office.

The way people speak about the perks they get from their jobs is as telling as the perks they describe. Throughout my interviews, startup discourse seemed to classify perks as a physical manifestation of “culture,” as integral to the company as its values or even its product. One young woman described the outings and activities provided by her company in excited, but casualized lexicon:

H: Yeah, so right now we have basically every month, Ultaverstiy happy hour... And then otherwise kind of like regular events, I don't think there's anything like too solidified, but we do a lot of social kind of outings. Like we did a team trip to the Sonoma Coast one day, and went to the house for like 2 nights. And we do... actually I guess this is kind of ritualistic in a way, we do what we call “Work-cations” so we travel, but because everything we do is from our computers, people are working. So when we went to the Sonoma Coast...

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<sup>23</sup> For a more thorough analysis of how discourse reflects and reinforces the registers, roles, and power structures in startups, see Chapter 3.



N: That's an awesome idea.

H: Yeah, no, it is amazing. So we were all like you know, we woke up, spent a couple hours working in the morning, and then we went to the beach. We're actually as a company going to Miami at the end of the month and we're going to have the same kind of thing, where there's a lot of planned activities, we're still going to be working and then hanging out in Miami together. And for New Year's Eve actually, one thing that I guess is kind of traditional, I haven't experienced this yet but I know they did it last year and the year before, is people pretty much travel to like a foreign country. And because New Years is like one of our busiest nights as you can imagine [because our company runs taxi cabs], people are working on New Year's. So it's like if you have to work on New Year's let's work together in a fun place, so we can hang out there later. So for example some people in San Francisco went to Bali last year.  
(Hannah, 10/11/13)

Although she is describing extreme perks (flying to Bali on the company dime), she conveys the information quite casually by using lexical phrases such as “hanging out together” and “I guess is kind of traditional.” Giving the event a name, “work-cation,” also legitimates it as a tradition and brands it as a part of the cultural discourse of her startup. Although she justifies this perk as an offsetting benefit to compensate for having to work on holidays, it is clear that such a “tradition” could be perceived very differently from someone speaking from a different register. An employee with a family, for example, might feel doubly used by first being forced to work on a day most people have off, and second not even being in the same country as their family for the holiday. Thus it is important to keep in mind Hannah's positioning as a single young woman when assessing her excitement over the prospect of holiday “work-cations.”

Although not every company provides trips up the Sonoma Coast or to Bali, every company I spoke with involved food in their perks in some way. Many offered catered meals three meals a day, and even those that offered full meals only two or three times a week had full kitchens and unlimited free snacks. One employee jokingly told me that it was a hard and fast rule at his company that no employee should be more than 150 feet from food at all times.

Beyond simply *having* food, the quality of the food was spoken of as essential. One young woman who had worked for the same startup for five years told me that a major draw to her startup was the high-quality food they provided:

E: Yeah, they do a lot of that. So I mean, to get the talent that we want and to compete with big people like Google and Facebook, I mean we can't always offer the same salary, although I think they're pretty good, but we can't always offer the salary, but a lot of that you can make up in culture. So our culture has like, there actually have an HR consultant coming in now to check on our culture cause we're getting so big now we're going through growing pains. They bring in, our food is like super, super healthy, always organic and they have been really picky about that and we have like, really good raspberries, all the time. And—

N: I'm sold I would work there.

E: Right, so like I don't buy raspberries cause they're like \$5 a thing at the grocery store. So they do like high quality, when they bring in like catered food—we have another startup that shares our building and theirs always looks like kind of greasy and unhealthy and ours is always like top-of-the-line, gourmet super nice stuff. So that's kind of... they do a lot of food, and then what they have kind of done is that people at the company are in charge of like creating the party and organizing the events. (Evelyn, 9/27/13)

The discourse embedded in the physical provision of *good*, not “greasy and unhealthy,” food is the important aspect behind this narrative. Having the highest-quality food conveys that the company both has the resources to purchase such food *and* that they care enough about their employees to do so: we have top of the line food, thus we are a top of the line company worthy of top talent.

Although such an implicit discourse conveyed by the perks that startups provide clearly is effective in drawing top talent, one startup employee pointed out that the pervasiveness of perks, combined with the heavy competition for talent in the Valley, has led to what he terms a “nomadic workforce” who travel from company to company based on what they can “get” from them:

D: And so what happens is you have... and there's a lot of articles around on this, and it's really prevalent in the Valley because of the wealth creation in the last decade. So what happens is you have unrealistic expectations in the younger workforce around how long you have to work and how rare it is to actually get one of those Yammer, Salesforce, Facebook events. So what happens is they become very nomadic. And so the problem is that they can be bought. And what's fascinating about this is what a lot of us look for are the perks, and they completely arose with Google. Google was the first company in the valley that really changed the standard with which everyone else now is forced to compete in terms of the perks that they offer at the office, everything from free lunch, free dinner, you know on site doctors, on-site day care, on site dry cleaners, on site massage therapists, blah blah blah.

N: Right.

D: So, but what's interesting of course is the less you spend on perks the more you can invest in the business, and actually have a better opportunity for that wealth creation outcome. So I think the millennial are very schizophrenic in wanting all the money but wanting all the perks and you know it's really hard to spend a ton of

money on perks and also be a really profitable company that tends to have that huge liquidity event and less dilutive fundraising rounds along the way. And so culture has become very very different because of the whole Google phenomenon and the millennial phenomenon. (Daniel, 11/22/13)

Daniel's claim that the younger generation have "unrealistic expectations" based on a few highly publicized successes, and his assertion that young people can be "bought" by perks, places him in a position of power, clearly positioning himself as the experienced, older CEO looking at this generation from a 500 foot view. In this way he enacts and exhibits his power and expertise in order to persuade his audience—me—of his hypothesis. In grouping together "the millennial" as a distinct and unified category, he is clearly aware that I, his interviewer and discursive counterpart, am part of this group, and asserting his power over this group as a whole also places him in a position from which he may speak to me without contradiction.

From such a position he speaks flippantly of the perks associated with startup culture in popular narrative, listing a few and then trailing off into "blah blah blah:" it is not even worth explicitly delineating further because that is not the point of his argument. Finally, his use of the medical term "schizophrenic" gives a negative connotation of how widespread (shall we say "endemic"?) the phenomenon of "nomadic workers" has become. His criticism of the dual demands of "the millennial" carries beneath it's claims the irony that he, as a CEO, is the provider of many perks and thus perpetuates the dual demands that he eschews.

*Work-Life Balance: A Discourse in Conflict*

One of the least unified discourses I heard in the course of my interviews involved that elusively phrased concept of “work-life balance.” Many employees claimed a good work-life balance, but their following explanations often contradicted these claims.<sup>24</sup> Others are less enchanted by their experiences of work-life balance (or lack thereof) and are quick to express their dissatisfaction.

One employee I spoke with hesitated and pondered the question carefully when I asked about work-life balance.

E: Um, yeah I think it's hard to say, I'm like working right now kind of, the last couple of hours putting together these product newsletters. So I don't feel like it's out of balance, but I feel like, I don't know where the work-life line is drawn so to speak. So I do I probably work between like 50 and 60 hours a week, which is like, my roommate is from CMC and he works in banking and he works so much more than me, so comparatively I'd say I've got great balance. What makes it, or perhaps what's unique to a place like A is that when I'm there it doesn't always feel like I'm working, so I don't get burnt out if I'm there for 12 hours, I wouldn't rather be anywhere else, for the most part. So yeah, it's I think I have good work-life balance but when I try to explain to other people or like my parents that I'm answering emails like way late into the night and then like doing other crazy shit they like wonder, but I wouldn't have it any other way. So for the most part, if you ask me on a random Wednesday after something stressful happens I'll probably say like just like anyone else, like fuck this job, but for the most part I can't really complain. (Ethan, 12/8/13)

His ultimate decision, that there is no balance because work *is* life, is a clear discursive play on the clichéd term. However, he is careful to frame his work in a positive light, even while admitting that “other people” might have trouble understanding why he is satisfied with the balance he has. In expressing this level

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<sup>24</sup> See “Cultural Narratives” section later in this chapter for more.

of difference between himself, a startup employee, and “other people,” he creates the concept of a cultural reality that is different between the two groups, and which is difficult to convey between them.

Another employee, a young woman who joined a startup four years ago, similarly expressed her passion for her work, almost avoiding the work-life balance question entirely.

E: And, um, I just had been used to working all the time as a teacher and doing [lots of work] and so I got there and I just like, all this time I had been spending developing lesson plans and stuff, I just threw it at learning the product and answering teachers questions. So I probably worked 7 days a week, I worked all hours of the night, I was the only person, I worked with the founder he helped me sometimes, but I just ran this support department and made it so important to get back to teachers within 24 hours of their question.

N: Right.

E: Um, and so it like was a good time in my life where I didn't have like kids or a boyfriend or anything where I like could just work all the time. (Evelyn, 9/27/13)

Saying that it was a “good time in her life” to work at a startup because she had no other obligations and could “just work all the time” reveals that although she speaks positively about the work environment, there was little to no balance in her life as she worked “7 days a week, all hours of day.” Although she was by no means complaining, this discourse breaks from the stereotypical work-life balance discourse of startups, and also differs significantly from the earlier conversation in which such working hours were carefully justified.

This particular young woman was later moved to a recruiting and hiring position and mentioned to me that she looks to hire people who are used to working

long hours. Investment bankers are ideal recruits, she says, because they can handle the amount of work that it takes to go above and beyond in a startup. She also looks for people who are willing to sacrifice their outside life to take a new opportunity: if a particular project arises that could advance their career, they need to be willing to take it and to figure out some other time to get the rest of their standard work done, even if that means staying later or working more days. Such a mentality also stands in contrast with the “work-life balance” narrative of startup companies, but in this case unapologetically so: the employee makes no effort to fulfill the standard expectations and even seems to get more extreme in her expression of startup work requirements to emphasize this point.

Another young woman had a similar experience with the long working hours, but expressed her disappointment with a reality that stood in sharp contrast with the expectations she had had before beginning work at her company.

J: Yeah, you know to speak very frankly just between the two of us, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I really took it at face value when my boss said the 9 to 6 workday, I really didn't realize that really that was sort of the minimum that was expected.

N: So what is your workday?

J: I definitely stay later, probably until about 7, and that's just a normal workday. I'd say that there have definitely been probably since I've been here... I've been here 11 months and in that time there's been nights when I've been here until midnight, working on something that needs to get done or... you know it's sort of like, for me, if I'm going on vacation for a couple days or for a long weekend, it's not like I really have anyone to cover for me so I've been here a couple nights really late and it's been before I'm about to go for a three day weekend, you know, nothing big but it was sort of like even though I get to take a vacation day, I almost work a

double shift the day before because there's no one to sort of pull your weight when you take time off, it's sort of like it's just you especially in a small office environment. So yeah, so I didn't realize sort of how much you do have to go above and beyond. But it also goes, it's sort of a balance between the things you love about being at a startup, you know the casual work environment, the more fun laid-back vibe, but there's other things like there's no one to pull your share of the work when you're gone, or you know something needs to get done, oftentimes you'll be asked or get an email to do things after work hours, because that's how it works, everyone is pitching in and doing all they can, hopefully for what will be a successful venture.  
(Jessica, 1/15/14)

The fact that Jessica feels that she has to qualify that she is speaking "very frankly just between the two of us" before criticizing her work-life balance reveals that she knows she is going against established discourse of startup culture and is at least slightly uncomfortable with doing so. Her individual experience of work-life balance, however, is not unlike the great majority of the other individuals whom I interviewed, and the fact that she has the sense of saying something private or controversial by criticizing work-life balance is indicative of just how deeply ingrained this particular element of cultural discourse has managed to become, regardless of social reality.

### ***Physical Discourse***

In the field of organizational studies, one methodology involves studying the actual workplace: physical space, organization, social interaction, work-flow, formality and informality. Many of these are things that are visible with a visit to a company office: floor layout, lighting, noise, greenery, decorations. These serve as



forms of more implicit, or physical, discourse and carry with them just as much meaning as the words people use to describe their company culture.

During the course of my fieldwork I was able to visit ten startup offices in Silicon Valley, and there were some commonalities that were immediately noticeable. One aspect that was common among every startup I visited was a lack of offices, or even true cubicles: instead, people worked at desks (some sitting, some standing) with little to no separation between them. Such an open floor plan clearly conveyed and encouraged a similarly open work environment, perhaps living up to the “flat” power structure that is included in much of the Silicon Valley cultural discourse. The lighting in most of the offices was bright and natural due to large windows (most, but not all offices featured this), and in general offices were decorated with bright colored paint, colored floors, walls, and ceiling tiles, and other more quirky decorations such as stuffed animals, cardboard cutouts, and spray-painted company logos. The discourse behind these decorations seemed to be an effort at conveying “fun” and lightheartedness. Similarly, many of the offices featured what I will generally categorize under the title of “quirks,” including treadmill desks, ping-pong tables, “themed” conference rooms decorated like beaches or sports teams, in-office gyms, and in-office kitchens. Sometimes, these physical decorations go over the top, as in one startup office I visited where the entire ground floor was video games, Fozzball, and ping-pong tables, and the elevators going up to the seven floors above were designed to look like rocket ships (Fieldnotes).

Although I did not stay long enough at any of the offices to get a true sense of work flow or social interaction—most of my visits were under four hours long, and many involved me following a “host” or tour guide, which no doubt altered people’s interactions in my presence—what interactions I was able to visit often included banter, sarcasm, and humor. People’s dress and manner of speaking was casual, with tee-shirts and curse-words being as common as not.

### ***Why “Culture”?***

Underlying the discourse about startup culture—whether exemplified by perks, people, or ideology—is a shared understanding that culture is essential to the success of a startup company. In the economic world of startup companies, culture is no longer an academic, or even purely social, concept. Instead, “culture” has become an essential commodity and in the startup folklore, it is held that companies must explicitly possess and exemplify it if they are to survive.<sup>25</sup>

One startup employee told me that the culture of her company existed before the actual product was developed.

O: Yeah, that’s I’m glad you asked that actually because SmartStart has like worked from literally day 1 to establish a culture when it was just our two cofounders in a kitchen in Palo Alto. So culture can make or break a startup. Its what brings great talent, and the talent is what builds a company. If you have great people the product will figure itself out. (Olivia, 10/07/13)

Her assertion that “culture can make or break a startup” is followed up by her reasoning, “it’s what brings great talent, and the talent is what builds a company.”

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<sup>25</sup> Although there are certainly some startup employees, like Jared, who would argue that placing too much weight on the idea of “culture” in a company makes the organization “fluffy” and prevents it from doing “real” work (page 57-58).

Through this form of carefully structured argumentative discourse she takes culture from a vague, multi-definitional concept to one that can more easily be analyzed, argued, and proved.

Chase, a middle-aged startup CEO, also pointed out the importance of culture in its self-perpetuating cycle with success.

C: Um... I don't know, one of the things that we didn't talk about at all and that I think is really important in terms of morale at companies and also culture depends on the success of the company. So you know, the most powerful thing, I think that you can have to drive a positive culture and a positive morale is a product and a company that's having some success in the market, that is growing, where customers like the service or the product and it's having success. So that company of is [*sic*] greatly, is hugely important in the culture, and in turn, the flipside is also true, that the culture does help success. If everybody's really positive and everybody's working really hard, that could really help the company have success. But it's not sufficient—it's necessary for success but it's not sufficient in that you also need to have a good market, you need to have a good plan, it needs to have some other things in addition to having a good culture. *So they do impact one another, culture affects success and success affects culture*, and so that's really important too, to the overall mix of what culture is and the morale and things like that. (Chase, 1/22/14) (emphasis added)

This cycle, as he defines it, is an essential ingredient to “what culture is,” in this view, a tool for furthering startup success and improving employee morale. This analysis of culture once again objectifies the concept of culture into an entity, but this particular discourse allows for a sense of culture as process to remain when Chase cites its interactive nature with success. Culture, in this definition, is not so rigid that it cannot change, but if it changes it is a changing *entity*, like the weather. In addition, his repetition of “*positive culture*” and “*positive morale*” reflects what

many, if not all, other interviewees suggest: that culture, in the way they refer to it, is an entirely *positive* aspect of a company. Rarely is culture referred to in terms of negative impact: even when certain practices or perks are criticized, these perceived failings are never framed as being the fault of the “culture” itself.

Another middle-aged former startup employee, still highly involved in the Silicon Valley startup world, says that culture is important for all companies, but particularly for startups. This necessitates a “Culture Lite” that is explicitly created, rather than gradually developed over time.

Steve points out that being explicit about culture is very important for a start-up. “When they do start young if they really think about the culture from the beginning, it becomes easier for people to uphold it. That’s the beautiful part of a startup: you can get right from beginning if you’re really thoughtful about it.”

The fact that he expresses the belief that startup companies can “get it right” if they are “really thoughtful about it” is particularly intriguing: once again, a reference to culture as a strategic tool, but this time with the added concept of culture that can be “created” out of nothing.

Another 30-year-old startup employee in a management role states a similar opinion of culture as a tool, but approaches it from the opposite experience: his company *lacked* an explicit culture, and although he could name the values he deemed important in an employee, he emphasized that they focused on the product over the culture.

When I ask him to specify their core values, he nods and says that’s actually an issue they have been working through. They have not done a great job communicating their mission, vision, or core values, according to employee surveys. They want to hear the

identity of the company laid out in a more formalized way. One employee even said this in her exit review: “This was fun, but what are you?” He says it is a priority for them to try to make that clearer in the near future. His take on their mission is to improve the quality of writing on the Internet. They really care more about executing and building real things, though, than delineating their culture. “The Valley sways toward vision over focus,” he says: startups are good about the big picture but have trouble with the details and execution. (Fieldnotes, 10/22/14)

The anecdote he provides about the employee asking “*what* are you?” implies that without a culture, the company does not fully exist, even though it produces a viable product. His explanation of the Valley-wide preference of “vision over focus,” or in our terms, culture over product, is conveyed in a way that implies his own company’s superiority. They focus on building “real things” which implies that others do not. This also implies that “culture” as referred to in this particular interview is necessarily *not* a “real thing.” However, even from this stance of power, he still admits that his company is not able to fully function in the existing atmosphere without a clearly delineated cultural concept: after all, some of his employees have voiced dissatisfaction with their workplace environment, which could suggest a less efficient company.

The reasons for the necessity of culture are not entirely due to the “vision over focus” mentality of the Valley, however. As one middle-aged startup expert points out, creating a culture is actually “smart business,” and perpetuating the transmission of such culture is invaluable to the growth and success of the company.

Steve went on to explain that he thinks this is wise business. The people in Silicon Valley, he says, are coming from a place where they want to keep corporate culture as thin as possible. This way, they can empower

people to do what they are hiring them to do. For example, there are 30,000 Google employees, and each receives a “20% time” where they get to spend 20% of their time on a project entirely of their own choosing. So how do you get all 30,000 people to spend their 20% time on things that are really productive? How do you inspire people to do that and also not take the company in a direction you (as a CEO or leader) don’t want it to go? “Either they have tons of faith or a really great educational program for their employees. Or they reiterate goals often in the way average person cant see, or all the above,” Steve posits. (Fieldnotes, 9/18/13)

It is particularly interesting to note the terms “faith” and “educational program” in his description of passing on cultural values to new employees. Such terms call to mind the “churchy” stereotype of other startups, and convey culture as a learnable creed. The transmission of culture is undertaken by startups in various manners, ranging from casual to highly structured, a phenomenon I explore in the following section.

### *Transmission of Culture: Recruiting and “Evangelism”*

If culture is so important to the success of a startup company it follows that making sure that the culture persists over the generations of employees in the company is equally essential. Particularly in the startup world, where growth is anticipated and new employees hired on a continuing basis, companies have taken great pains to ensure that their carefully “crafted” culture remains a center-point of each new employee’s experience. One startup I visited had reached a point in its growth where it had begun to open global offices, and for each new office that opened, executives from the headquarters would travel there to “go and impart the

culture.” In addition, she said, every new employee was carefully screened for “cultural fit” before hiring.

Visiting campus recruiting sessions was instrumental in helping me form an understanding of some of the ways companies conveyed and transmitted their culture. Among the five sessions I attended, every company had at least one slide on their Powerpoint presentation talking about “culture,” often outlining their official company values. In addition, all but one provided branded accessories, from tee-shirts to earbuds to sunglasses, for the students who attended. Interestingly enough, the recruiters for several of the companies were referred to not as “campus recruiters” but as “evangelists.” Re-titling their recruiting team with a term that implies convincing others of a core set of beliefs shows the emphasis these companies place on the cultural side of their organization. Finally, after hiring, most companies mentioned “on-boarding” rituals for new employees, traditions that were designed to give them common ground with the others in their company and brought them into the community through pranks, food, or other traditions (Fieldnotes). The fact that startup companies claim to use such events to enfold new employees in their “culture” is further indicative of the “Culture Lite” phenomenon, because the culture concept is shallow enough to be acquired simply through participation in a tradition.

Having a shared history is an important aspect of “culture,” and because startups generally have very short histories (5 years is an “old” startup), the founder’s story becomes the major historical narrative of the company, a founding myth. Nearly every startup employee I spoke with was able to promptly and with

great detail outline precisely how their company got started. Below is an example of a classic founder's story, as told by a young startup employee:

A: Yeah, so actually there were these, there was a whole team of them working at Cisco, and they were working on an internal startup at C that was producing this product for gaming companies, so basically casinos. And have you seen that show Las Vegas, at all?

N: No, but I've seen the ads for it.

A: Yeah, so like basically suddenly somewhere along the lines I think people started, in gaming and casinos and hotels, thought that their security systems should be like super high tech. So they should be able to track peoples footsteps, identify where culprits were, whatever they needed to do. Just basically people tracking. They started doing this and realized what was being asked of them was kind of beyond the scope of technology and the product that they were going to build wasn't really something that they wanted to build. So the head of that internal startup, Alexi, he's a CMcer as well, he and his team decided to leave. And instead of doing this for casinos, do it for retail institutions. So it was just 2 of them, the CEO and CTO kind of picked up and just like lived in a coffee shop for months. The CTO coded everything and Alexi basically flew around trying to collect money to build it. And they got their first customer before they had a product, they had a meeting like a month later and they didn't have a product, so the CTO is freaking out in a coffee shop trying to build a product that they promised to someone that doesn't exist. Eventually they got it done and I guess it went well, and then I think some more people joined them from C. A lot of people that worked at their company were big company people who were just looking for a small company transition. They'd had enough—they spent a lot of their time talking about how much they disliked C or big companies. The amount of time they spent in meetings that they just didn't get anything done in, they talked about the infamous full day meetings that they used to have sometimes, and they just wanted to go to a place where that just was not a thing. (Jordan, 11/18/13)



Although this is only one story, it shares many common components with other stories I heard throughout my research. What is important in this story is both what is *said* and what is *unsaid*. The spoken words, the great detail involved, shows that the employee, even after having worked for only four months, has found it worth his while to learn this particular narrative. It could also suggest a repetition of this story among employees, ingraining the tale itself as part of their culture, an inspiration to remind them where their company came from, and a point of pride. The unspoken part of this discourse conveys a reverence for the founders that borders on hero worship, a “rags to riches” tale that implies that these men *earned* their success. In a way, these stories can be seen a justification for the massive amounts of money that enters the startup sector of Silicon Valley, even while other economic spheres in the region remain impoverished.

Beyond these implicit transmissions of culture, some companies go so far as to create explicit “culture documents” to create, preserve, and transmit their culture. These are normally written documents that enumerate the company’s values, goals, and core commitments. Some culture documents are written by the founders before the company is even producing a product, while others are composed of phrases written by employees themselves. The form these documents take is almost as important as their content: whether the document is physical or digital, fun or serious, written by founders, CEOs, or employees says something about the culture with which it is associated. For example, Zappos’s culture document is a physically printed, hard-cover book in which every employee records their experience of Zappos culture. Inside, bright colors and photos make the book as cheerful and

disjointedly zany as the Zappos office itself (Fieldnotes). Netflix, on the other hand, has a massively lengthy Powerpoint as its culture document, which is published online and expresses their values in a serious, almost analytical manner. Facebook CEO has called the Netflix culture document “the most important document to come out of the Valley,” highlighting the importance of not only the presence of culture in Silicon Valley startups but the explicit expression of cultural elements.

At other companies, the culture documents took the form of a set list of values that employees seemed to have committed to memory. One company had printed out these philosophies in artistic fonts and had them hanging in frames all over the office walls (fieldnotes). The values were phrased in fun, catchy, and memorable ways, perhaps to encourage employees to memorize (and thus ostensibly embody) the company culture as the founders had envisioned it.

Another startup CEO expressed his desire to create a culture document in the near future:

C: Yeah we haven't documented, we haven't really documented any kind of cultural elements like our values or sort of, we do have like a mission statement on our “About Us” on our website, so if you go to our website About Us you'll see like a mission statement. And I try to... you know at some point we probably will publish written documented values and things like that, I think that could be helpful. But what we've done historically is sort of lead by example, and try to show people just through example the types of things that are important to me, and the types of values that I believe are important. And you know I would say I personally value certain things: I value hard work, I value some risk taking and people being comfortable trying things out even if they fail and having sort of an experimental element to what we do. I value people who, I value people's nature and innate characteristics much more than I value their experience. So I want to work with

people who are smart, and creative, and cheerful much more than I want to work with someone who has a certain resume and a certain set of experiences on their resume. I'm much more interested in people kind of who they are inherently as a person than what their experience set is. (Chase, 1/22/14)

Although he can already articulate the values that he looks for in his company, and claims to pass on this culture by example, he still sees the value in writing up this culture in a document. This shows how important physically writing out the components of culture can be for a startup. However, even the concept that a culture can be "written" is indicative of a very particular, objectified version of culture, one that leaves little room for evolution or change. In addition, the CEO expresses solidarity issues through the sudden transition from speaking in the "we" perspective at the beginning of his statement to the "I" point of view as soon as he begins to talk about specific cultural values. This is indicative of a power shift as well, showing that he considers himself to be a purveyor of "culture" within the company, worthy of determining who does and does not fit into the society.

The idea of a "culture" that is solid enough to be created out of nothing and recorded in physical form is a very particular one, and its importance for the success of startup companies in Silicon Valley is reflected in the pervasive use of the culture concept in startup discourse. In this case, the documents mainly serve to show what the company wants and how they expect their employees to act. However, this explicit "culture" is necessarily operating in a broader, more vague cultural atmosphere, one that would be impossible to write down because it depends entirely on the individual experiences and positions of each member of the startup company social sphere. Some employees will find that the "culture" of their

company manifests itself very differently in reality than others, and it is this dichotomy that I explore in the following section.

### ***Cultural Discourse vs. Lived Reality***

Company culture goes deeper than just symbols, rituals, stories and heroes: those are just the aspects that are directly observable through physical or verbal discourse. For example, nearly every company I spoke with provided catered meals at least a few times a week, and the majority provided gourmet food three meals a day, every day. Instead of taking the food at face value, the next step is to ask what this *says* about the company, to ask *why* they have chosen to provide this particular perk or host this particular event. What are the assumptions that people hold about the company's provision of such an event? Providing employees with free meals is not simply so that they are not hungry: it also symbolizes family, community, and a mutual respect for employees who are expected to put an equal amount of care into their own work. It is also possible to consider that providing food for employees at the office also reduces lunch hours and increases the amount of "productive" time an employee spends at work.

However, the way that "perks" are experienced depends on the person's positioning in the firm and their other commitments. When a company provides a catered dinner for all of their employees, an individual could either think, wow the company really cares about keeping me happy, or if they are positioned differently—say they have a family they want to get back to—they could think, the company is keeping me late after work, and feel pressured and used.

In one of my discussions with a former startup employee, this variability in perception became amply apparent. After listing off the perks of her company, including massages, free food, and frequent company outings, she spoke of them with a deep bitterness in her voice and with folded arms. In her view, the company provided these perks solely to keep people at the company longer: dry cleaning services and gyms were obvious ploys to keep you at work rather than going about your normal daily activities. As a young woman with a year-old baby, the employee was also bitter about the shuttle the company provided to bring her to and from work. The bus was comfortable, with large leather seats and wi-fi internet, and it saved employees from having to drive or take public transportation for what was often a long commute. However, the shuttle only started running back into the city at the end of the day at 5:30pm, and this bus was nearly always close to empty. Although many people expressed gratitude for similar shuttle services, for this young woman the shuttle meant being chained to the whim of her company as far as her working hours: if her baby had a doctors appointment at 5pm, there was no way she could get home for it, barring driving her car for the hour-and-a-half long commute. Thus she saw the shuttle as a divisive technique forcing employees to work longer hours, while saving face as a company and claiming that they were providing a service for their employees. In other words, the company service “said” something different to her than it did to other employees who were differently positioned. “You can keep your massages and your leather seats,” she said angrily, continuing that she would gladly give up those perks for being able to go home in time to see her family (Fieldnotes).

Clearly, gaining an understanding of the elements of startup culture is not enough, we must dig deeper to determine the individuated *meanings* of those elements and how they might differ in people's experiences of their culture: "ethnographers investigate peoples' lifeworlds... we need to focus our attention on the concretely lived experiences of people, rather than abstract culture out of the lifeworlds" (Lynn Thomas, class notes, 2009). No amount of cataloguing of ideology can give a true understanding of the way a culture is felt and experienced without seeking out the contrasts between the ideal/real, the said/unsaid, the discursive/practical, perceptions/"realities" (Thomas, class notes, 2009).

When I ask one serial startup employee in her late-20s if she feels that the cultural narratives of the companies she has worked at play out in reality, her quick response indicates that she has thought about this subject before.

A: yeah, no I think that's super interesting. Because you can certainly be the type of company where there's like companies that really value fun, and then there's companies that put up a sign on the wall that says, "We value fun!" Right, you know what I mean? It's like a different thing. (Annabelle, 12/20/13)

Although she later goes on to use the existing discourse to describe "fun" offices with Lego-themed kitchens, she does not immediately and unquestioningly buy into the existing cultural discourse. By recognizing that verbalizing an ideal does not mean embodying it, she draws a distinction between discourse and reality and emphasizes the role of cultural discourse in creating and reinforcing the experience of those within startup companies.

Other employees conveyed that their lived experience diverged significantly from the cultural narratives constructed by their respective startup companies, and

particularly from the popular perception of startups in general. Although many referenced a “fast paced environment” and constantly changing work as major components of startup culture, this seemed to depend largely on the positioning of the speaker within the company. One young woman at a tech startup in the Valley had joined a few months earlier on the support team:

N: Great. And do you think that your day-to-day work on a daily basis or do you find yourself doing something very different every day?

A: I wish that was the case, no it’s pretty consistent. At first it was really exciting because I had never done anything like this before, but yeah day-to-day is pretty consistent. On Mondays I’m pretty call-heavy just because I’ll have had at the end of last week I had a lot of places I wanted to reach out to, tomorrow will be pretty email heavy, but on a day-to-day basis, or week-to-week it’s all the same. (Annelise, 12/9/13)

The way she frames her experience with the work over time, “at first it was really exciting,” suggests a disillusionment with the gap between her initial expectations and her experience.

Another young woman who had worked at various companies in the startup world for almost seven years showed a similar familiarity with the perceived discourse of exciting and diverse work in startup culture:

A: What is the day to day work like... well I’m going to probably say what every single other person that you’ve interviewed has said which is, “well, there’s no typical day.” Because nobody wants to pretend like they have a typical day. I guess I’ll start with Ginger. Ginger was my own company, I was on the founding team, so being an entrepreneur is a little bit different than working in an office, like a traditional office, in the sense that you never really have to be working, but you always have to be working. You know what I mean? It’s like a very weird, it’s a weird dichotomy there. So I actually would

sleep in a little bit, I probably didn't get started with my work-day unless I had to for a meeting or something until probably like 10. But then I tended to work late and I worked a lot of weekends as well, so kind of whenever anything came up, or whenever I had any downtime instead of thinking, "Oh, I wonder movie I could watch?" it was, "Oh, let me fire up my laptop and see what needs to get done." And I think probably more so than in like a traditional office job at a big company, because it wasn't totally clear what my role was, it wasn't like, oh here's my role, and here's like the 5 things I have to get done this week, it was like an infinite role, you know what I mean? The work could expand to fill the time allotment so you know if I had extra time it was like well lets think a little bit more about what new partnerships we could do or how we can change the product or, you know, whatever it is. (Annabelle, 12/20/13)

Annabelle, too, comments on unstructured, casual environment of a startup, and seems to initially appreciate the ability to set her own goals and make her own schedule. However, she also points out that such a lack of structure leads to a *lack* of work-life balance, because if, as the cultural discourse goes, "you're never really working" then one can never really be *off* work either. In addition, the anecdote she tells illustrates the way that technology allows her work to permeate her life, making "down time" a thing of the past.

In fact, recent studies have shown that the tech world and globalization makes it harder to ever actually be off work. In a conversation I had in the Valley, one young man said he used to work for his startup's Global Offices division and would have to get up at 4am to make marketing calls to south America. Another startup employee somewhat paradoxically claimed that she had a good work-life balance at her company because the work they did on the weekend was "mindless," just responding to emails on their phone, so even though she worked nights and



weekends it was from home, implying that such work that didn't really "count." No matter their relationship with the additional hours or how they framed their work-life balance—whether forgiving or frustrated—it is fascinating to note that every person I interviewed claimed that they worked nights or weekends on a consistent basis.

Other startup employees made fewer excuses for the work-life balance. One young woman spoke positively about her experience, but pointed out that the perks that made her job fun were *necessary* to keep up morale because employees were expected to work so hard:

Erica says it's important to keep it fun because people are often in the office on the weekends, and need to be willing to stay until 10pm if needed. There are not that many people, so the people who know how to do something have to be willing to show up and do it. That's the work hard component, she says, particularly when they try so many new things that can backfire and then need fixing. The play hard also includes great perks such as the aforementioned events, free house cleanings, and lunch and dinner every day. Erica says despite the fact that everyone is so young it's a pretty diverse group as far as nationalities, and the fact that they're all around the same age makes it even more fun. (Fieldnotes, 10/22/13)

This observation from a support-team employee is an interesting parallel to what a startup CEO mentioned about the importance of culture and shows that even people speaking from very different registers can see the same true implications of the perks provided by companies. Thus, although the startup discourse focuses on the positive, "fun" aspects of perks provided by companies, it seems that there is an underlying but unspoken rationalization of these perks as offsetting mechanisms for the extreme hours and work that people are expected to give to their company. The

spoken discourse, in this case, has shared meaning, even if that meaning remains largely unarticulated.

Another unarticulated understanding seems to underlie the discourse of the loose structure of startup companies and the autonomy granted to employees. More freedom, as one young woman pointed out, was grated because there was no playbook and very few resources.

There's really not a lot of resources at your disposal at a startup, you have to be super scrappy. In banking it was like, get this presentation ready and do it the way we do it. And like you know, you send it off to our presentations team in India overnight and they'd send something back and you know there were templates and there was a process set up. In startup land, its like, just do it no matter how, whatever you have to do to get it done just do it, there's no right or wrong way. You're probably going to do it wrong a couple of times and then eventually figure out what the protocol is. And by the way you're on your own. So I'd say that is a big difference. I'd say that the level of stress and responsibility for me personally was always bigger and greater in my startup roles because you kind of, within a large institution, there's just a lot more like checks and balances in play to make you feel like you're not totally and solely responsible for things. And within startup land you kind of get this like, you start to have this feeling once you're on board that's like, oh my god I'm the only person that's doing this and if I don't do this it's going to have this impact, and we could blow things up in a month if this doesn't get done. So my sense of urgency and my feeling of responsibility and therefore stress, because I'm the kind of person who turns that into stress, has always been much higher within a startup. So while people like always talk about startups being like awesome work environments and what have you, I think it's really not everyone's cup of tea because you have to work way harder, failure can be a lot more real and close to home, and yeah, I mean its funny, even with at SmartStart we have the most amazing perks like we get all of our meals paid for, they pay our public transportation, we have these amazing group outings all

the time, our office is like tripped out, its crazy. You know at the large company I worked at we had like free pretzels and that's it. And like a Christmas party.  
(Olivia, 10/7/13)

Again, she uses the work required in order to survive this level of stress to justify the perks that companies provide their employee. By drawing the dichotomy between her banking job and her startup work, both in terms of stress and perks, the implication behind the parallel is that she has *earned* the “amazing perks” she delineates. Even after a glowing descriptions of “crazy” perks—free meals, free transportation, group outings, a “tripped out” office—she qualifies this with the assertion that startup work is “really not everyone’s cup of tea.” The offsetting dangers of failure, increased levels of stress, and amount of work balance out the perks described.

### *Chapter Summary*

Although each individual has both a different expectation and experience of startup culture, the parallels between their narratives are helpful in drawing out information about the real vs. the ideal, the narrative vs. the lived reality from discourse about Silicon Valley startup organizations.

The use of the culture concept in the discourse of Silicon Valley startup employees is strikingly pervasive, although the “culture” they refer to may be more accurately categorized as a “Culture Lite” that is able to be described by shallow indicators verging on the vacuous. “Culture” as termed by startup discourse can be created by culture documents and transmitted by rituals and language. Perks are

framed as physical manifestations of company culture and are another important mode of cultural transmittence.

This begs the question: *Why* do startup employees use the term “culture” at all in their discourse? One possible explanation is the weight of history and institutionalization that the word carries with it, a history that startups are by definition lacking. Most importantly, delineating a “culture” creates an immediately relatable *identity* for a newly formed company that can help create a sense of solidarity among its members that is crucial to the success of a firm. As the following chapter will discuss, however, not every member of a startup experiences company “culture” in the same way, and the byproduct of using “Culture Lite” as the social scaffolding for a new firm can be power differentials.

### Chapter 3: Power and “Corporate Class”

No matter the social setting, discourse is often a tool used to create, enforce and re-enforce power hierarchies. According to Park (2005), “discourses are understood to be central modes and components of the production, maintenance, and conversely, resistance to systems of power and inequality; no usage of language can ever be considered neutral, impartial, or a-political acts.” This is not to imply that language is necessarily used by one party to assert dominance over another, or conversely to accept domination. Power is not a reified object, but is necessarily a negotiated relationship between actors.

It is important to note, however, that this analysis seeks to understand a joint production of power relations among those of differing social locations: indeed, the creation and occupation of an identity is so important to many that they enforce their own status even when it is not the highest. Leadership roles, such as CEO or management, are based on the relations of power and influence and existence of asymmetry in these spheres. Power differentials can take the form of domination, dependence, compliance and cooperation, or any combination of these within the relationship in question. In addition, the use of the culture concept in startup discourse can create and naturalize such power differentials.

Some academics of critical discourse analysis claim that CDA should be used *primarily* to deal with discussions of power and inequality (Van Dijk, 1993). In this analysis of power structures and relationships in startup organizations, I use CDA to examine the words that people use to both form and understand their social realities.

Although Park's study focuses on discourse's role in creating and maintaining power structures among categories of race and ethnicity, such a consideration can be equally helpful when looking at corporate structure within organizations. In its purest form, power is simply a structural phenomenon created by the processes by which the members of an organization engage in "organizing activity" (Wodak, 1997). In Ruth Wodak's study of female leadership styles, she points out that the discourse used to create and affirm power may take the structure of organizational symbolism: "Power manifests itself in hierarchies, in the access to certain discourses and information, and most certainly in the establishment of the symbols: which myths are considered to be relevant, which ideologies, norms and values are posited, relates directly to the groups in power and their interests" (Wodak, 1997).

Bent Flyvbjerg's analysis of political and administrative behavior contrasts two dominant theories in regards to the rationalization and misuse of power: the "discourse ethics" of Habermas and the "power analytics" and ethics of Foucault. Both theorists argue that at the heart of any administrative relationship is a tension between consensus and conflict, ideals and reality (Flyvbjerg, 2000). However, Foucault's ideas of power as a relational, local dynamic make it more applicable to the understanding of corporate power and the present analysis. At the same time, Flyvbjerg points out, we must keep an open mind so as not to overlook "more generalized conditions concerning... institutions, constitution, and structural issues." By using discourse analysis focusing on both micro- and macro-level understanding of startup culture, this analysis hopes to maintain this broad view

while still being local enough to understand the tension between those “ideals and reality” of corporate power in startups that Flyvbjerg constructs.

Before continuing on our exploration of power asymmetry among individuals and corporate roles in startup organizations, a few definitions will be useful to lay the groundwork for understanding. First and most essentially, there is the difference between a “social identity” and a “role,” where the former is a capacity for engaging in institutionalized social relationships, while the latter describes appropriate behaviors. In other words, “identities” refer to what kinds of actors there are in a given social setting (e.g., CEO, engineer), and “roles” have to do with the expectations about what the actors do (lead the organization, create the product). Both of the former are purely *relational* constructs: for example, a physician (as a social identity) would not exist in the absence of patients (with whom he/she carries out his/her “role”). So, social personhood is understood through our individual statuses and roles and their relational status-sets (professor-student, mother-child), which may be vertical or horizontal in terms of rank or power differential. Roles can also be understood as the enactments of statuses or status-sets (Thomas, Class Notes, 2009).

Social groups may also have *direction* and *momentum*, in that they may be rising in power, declining, or remaining in their current power position in relation to the groups around them. In the case of startup organizations, positions and roles are in a constant state of evolution, and even groups that have no currently perceptible momentum may have an awareness of mobility. Groups also use discourse to create momentum and direction, as with the case of “titling” new roles,

discussed further in a section below. All such new terms which are to become defined roles in an organization go through a process of *institutionalization*, or the solidification and concentration of meanings, social relations, and practices in particular groups through space and time (Thomas, class notes, 2009). Using these definitions as a starting point, the present analysis is a study of how discourse implicates statuses and roles, and how the use of the culture concept allows such roles become naturalized in startup workplace environments.

*Corporate Startup Structure: "Flat" or "Hierarchical"*

The term "flat power structure" is often associated with the culture of startup organizations. Particularly among people who are not directly involved with startups—such as the media or the casual observer—the corporate structure of a startup is held to be far less hierarchical and to grant more autonomy than in "typical" firms to employees at every level and role.

To some extent, this assumption is based on accurate perception of various components of startup culture. Many companies offer "20% time" to their engineers, meaning that for 20% of their total work time developers are free to work on any project they wish. The fact that 20% time has become a common phrase among startup circles shows the pervasiveness of the idea, constructing it as a titled and thus viable part of startup culture. Many employees also mentioned that in a startup, unlike in an established organization, there is no "playbook" to work off of, and roles are thus very flexible. This can also lead to an increased level of work for employees who feel obligated to "wear many hats" (and to demonstrate their



loyalty), but also allows for the possibility of role mobility and flexibility, as well as greater autonomy for employees.<sup>26</sup>

As common as these apparently non-hierarchical elements have become in the discourse around the structure of startup culture, there are also interviews which break with the prevailing discourse. There are many ways in which startup employees indicate divergence from a positively-framed “flat structure” discourse. Some employees asserted in their interviews that the flat structure did, indeed exist, but was a detriment to their experience. Others claimed explicitly that there was no hierarchy but revealed through their comments and stories that the structure was in fact far less flat than they claimed. Still others explicitly rejected the very idea that startups were non-hierarchical in structure. In each of these cases, the *way* that people speak about their relationships and experiences reveal as much as the words themselves, giving insight into both individual and group reality within the structure of startup organizations.

The “flat” structure for which startup companies are famous may have come about as more of an accident than a conscious social experiment. One startup CEO suggested to me that, in fact, the nature of a small company combined with a massive proliferation of communications technology<sup>27</sup> has influenced the way that startup organizations are set up.

D: And so with all of these different vehicles for communication now it absolutely changes company cultures, and in a very good way because what it does is it flattens them. It makes you the kid out of college, much closer to me the CEO, because you have a lot of

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<sup>26</sup> See Chapter 2, “Work Life Balance,” for further discussion of such dichotomies.

<sup>27</sup> This interviewee cited Facebook, Twitter, email, video chats, and texting in particular.

different ways to communicate with me. And you can do it in much more public ways, where email is very private. Other than distribution lists which people typically don't use a whole lot anymore, you can communicate to me in a much more frictionless and open way than you could in the past. So that flattens organizations, it really takes a lot out of and fundamentally changes the middle manager role in companies, which really affects culture. Because as a middle manager, my job is to make sure that I'm keeping you, somebody below me away from somebody above me, because if you say anything bad about me I'm at risk. But in the old model, I have the ability through a heavy top down structure to command and control what you do and who you have access to. I don't have that anymore. So the biggest role that we see changing is the middle manager role. (Daniel, 11/22/14)

The way in which this interviewee conveys the technological and structural changes among startup companies shows that he finds these changes to be universally positive. By defining the "old model" as "heavy top-down structure to command and control what you do and who you have access to," the speaker sets up a comparison implying that the "new model" is the antithesis of this description: that is, "flat" or "bottom up" and relatively uncontrolled access.

By bringing the discourse into the sphere of conversation through his use of the second person—"you, the college student... me, the CEO"—he paradoxically both proves and disproves his own assertion of flat structure. He is, indeed, taking the time to speak with me, "the college student," which shows that there is access to those in higher positions. However, by mentioning such role titles and pointing out the fact that he is speaking with me, the CEO draws a line between us as individuals, reinforcing traditional power structure by implying that this conversation is worthy of remark.

Continuing this implication, the interviewee goes on to remark on “middle manager” role, another traditionally constructed title. By suggesting that the role of the middle manager is experiencing mobility, increasing in importance, the CEO reveals that there is a definitive hierarchy within a startup. Even while he claims that such structure is subject to change and evolution, the idea that the “middle manager” could increase in importance and power clearly shows a tiered power structure within startup organizations in his understanding.

A young woman asserted that there was a largely flat structure, but that such a structure created friction and inefficiency:

A: And then just the process of getting anything to happen went through like 6 levels. And so you kind of felt like everything had to go through so much approval, which is weird given that they did so much diligence on everyone they hired, it seems odd that they had to get everyone to sign off on it. So there's a lot of things I did as an intern that [the CEO] signed off on which is just a little... it seemed kind of like a waste, and it really slowed down the process for a lot of things. And a lot of people just kind of felt like it was a little too micromanaged, and that they were being watched and people were waiting for them to screw up on things. And that was kind of a problem in the culture there. It was... it's really open and people try everything and are invested in the product, but at the same time it feels like there's friction in things where there shouldn't be friction, and at a startup people don't expect that.  
(Adrienne, 11/04/13)

Her experience of startup culture reflects some of Daniel's from the previously cited interview in that she “as an intern” directly corresponds with “the CEO.” However, she frames this as “odd” and “seemed like kind of a waste.” Her complaint that having the CEO involved in intern projects “really slowed down the process” speaks to a tension between multiple cultural aspects of a startup: the desire for equality

and the need for efficiency and speedy production and reaction. This is useful in our analysis of startup culture in that it reveals not only what employees and companies value in a company, but also suggests the challenges of creating an organization that can fulfill all of the sometimes-contradictory requirements it sets for itself.

In addition, this employee mentions that “some people” felt that the flat structure was a form of micromanagement rather than an increase in freedom.<sup>28</sup> One action can convey contradictory messages depending on the register of the recipient. Seeing the CEO look over an intern’s work is empowering from one view, if the employee sees the action as saying “we care so much about each of our employees, regardless of their role, that we are willing to spend our valuable time looking over their work.” Or, from the perspective that the interviewee puts forth, the same action could say, “we are watching your every move because we don’t trust that you are able to do your work unsupervised without screwing up.” In this way, the actions of those in various roles in a startup company are in a way their own form of discourse, understood by various actors to mean different things, depending on their positioning in the startup society.

In a similar manner, some traditions that have become integral to the culture at particular startups can convey varying messages depending on the interpretive frame through which they are regarded. At a recruiting session for Spiral, a small tech startup in Silicon Valley, the recruiters proudly mentioned their Wednesday night company dinners at which each employee gets the chance to talk about the

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<sup>28</sup> Using “some people” allows her to criticize the structure without fully taking responsibility for the claim or criticism.

projects they have been working on. If there is a particularly good project, the employee who has undertaken it can get “knighted” by the CEO, who is always in attendance (Fieldnotes). In one interpretation, this is clearly meant as an incentive for people to work hard and be creative, and is a mechanism of recognition and support. Through another interpretation, however, this is a creation and enforcement of a strongly hierarchical power structure. Getting “knighted” by the CEO makes him, at that moment, the “king,” and keeps employees beholden to him for recognition of success. In addition, “knighting” certain individuals places some employees above others, opening the system to further power stratification.

The Spiral recruiters went on to tell us that as an employee you “bump into [the CEO] regularly around the office.” Although they doubtless meant to suggest a flat power structure with this assertion, the very fact that they bring it up conveys the opposite of what it is saying. Deeming such an event to be worthy of mention in an information session reveals that seeing the CEO is a big deal, and furthers the divide between “us” and “him” in the power discourse of the office.

Another woman tells me directly that her particular startup is heavily structured and hierarchical, or “corporate.” At least from her perspective—in the HR department—there are four degrees of separation between herself and the CEO, and she has never interacted with him directly. She frames some of this hierarchy in a positive light, however, stating that, “unlike Netflix,” her company is a “meritocracy” and “will reward hard work with bonuses.” By referencing Netflix as a foil, and using the word “reward,” she suggests that other companies might instead *ignore* hard work in the name of creating a flat structure.

The variety of discursive frames that are used to understand and convey the power structure of a startup organization further emphasizes that it would be ridiculous to try to define startups under a single cultural element such as “flat structure.” Not only does every company have a different structure, but every employee within that company will experience the discourses of power within their particular office differently. Generalization on this point would have to be carefully crafted so as not to overly reduce the idea of structure and power. In this paper, the modest aim is to discover through discourse analysis the underlying subjectivities and experiences among various roles in startup companies, and how they interact with one another.

*Empowerment or “Empowerment?”*

One prevalent discourse pattern surrounding the structure of power in startup companies is that of employee empowerment.<sup>29</sup> Media and popular discourse have re-framed this term to reflect the flexibility in work schedules and project ownership that many Silicon Valley startups espouse in their cultural constructions. As employee empowerment tends to be generalized as a claim of cultural universality in startup discourse, I was interested to understand how employees and managers understood and experienced the broad concept of “empowerment” in the workplace. Again, I found a broad range of responses and

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<sup>29</sup> Note that, in order for an employee to be able to be “empowered,” there is necessarily a refusal of the flat power structure: who is to empower them if not someone in a position of authority over them?

rationalizations, ranging from a definitive sense of empowerment to claims that there was little to no individual empowerment in startup organizations.

In speaking about employee empowerment and goal setting, one recently promoted manager referenced her use of the well-known “20% time” common at many startups.

E: The thing is like I’m motivated by that and I assume most people are, especially the ones that I’m hiring, so the question of how do I recreate that for them in a different way but I still get out of them the work I need. So what we usually do is, 20% of their time in the course of a year is spent on leading a specific project that will make the company better. So that’s sort of how I keep the, kind of the entrepreneurial stuff alive on my team specifically. Not all teams work like that.

N: And do they run that project by you?

E: Yeah, we kind of come up with our goals, I kind of create the vision for the quarter, and then I allow them to come and like kind of submit what that project should be to fit it, and then they kind of outline it on their own, manage it, like let them come up with the outline, I look at it with them, we decide like, yes, this looks good, this is what we want this project to be and then like kind of since we agreed on what the outline should be they just go. You know, because that way I don’t feel like I’m micromanaging. And it’s been pretty successful so far. (Evelyn, 9/27/13)

In this case, however, it is what the interviewee is implying that is of interest, rather than what she seems to be describing. By saying that she wants to make it so that it “doesn’t *feel* like” she is micromanaging, the interviewee suggests that, in fact, she does keep managing the projects from afar. By “allowing them to come up with the outline” she not only reinforces her own power position in her role as the manager, but also reveals that the outline is as far as they are allowed to go on their own: the

real meat of the project will still be largely directed based on where *she*, the manager in power, wishes it to go.

In a much more explicit description of “empowerment,” one CEO I spoke with explained that really what mattered was a *sense* of empowerment, not the actual freedom itself.

D: I did actually, you know one of the things you should write about that’s sort of interesting is there’s this notion of what’s called “unlimited vacation policy.” So rather than what’s typical you have ok you got 2 weeks a year, 3 weeks a year, a few companies, and my last few have done this and we do it here, is we just say, look Nora you’re an adult. We know that you work hard. You need a vacation, take a vacation, I don’t care. Don’t worry about how much you’ve accrued. What’s fascinating is that if I tell you that, you’re actually going to take less vacation than if I tell you you get 2 weeks a year.

N: That doesn’t surprise me.

D: Which is great. But the other thing that’s really helpful for me as the guy running the company is if I give you 2 weeks a year, that’s a liability I have to carry on my books, and it gets really big over time. By saying, hey you’re not going to accrue vacation, but take whatever you want, I don’t have a liability to accrue on the books anymore. Which is a huge advantage for me as a business owner. But that goes to culture, right, because it’s a sense of empowerment. Rather than me dictating how much time you can and can’t have every year, now I put it in your hands, you’re in power to make that decision. So that’s a whole other thread you can talk about which is employee empowerment.  
(Daniel, 11/22/13)

By revealing his reasoning behind an “unlimited vacation policy” as a tool—a disguise—to grant a “sense of empowerment,” the CEO shows that this is not really a policy undertaken with the interest of the employee in mind. Such practices also



benefit him as a CEO and the company as a whole. In addition, even if employees do benefit from such practices as compared with companies that offer little or no vacation time, by referring to the policy as a “*sense of empowerment*,” the CEO implicitly creates a distinction that suggests that this is not *actual* empowerment, that it is in some way not real. By following up this phrasing with an explanation that the policy actually manipulates people into taking *fewer* vacation days furthers the power dichotomy between himself and his employees, in suggesting that he is able to “trick” them into doing what he wants by giving them a “sense” of what they want.

### *Titles*

New meanings are created through to fit novel situations. Many Silicon Valley startups that I studied had special “titles” for their employees, which they used to describe fairly standard roles in a non-standard way. Such usage of labeling can cause an “evolution” in existing understandings of a role (Chia). Many startup companies, whether consciously or unconsciously, create such novel understandings of corporate roles by applying new titles to old roles.

Sometimes, the opposite occurs, and new roles are created under already-used titles, as one of my interviewees explained:

H: I’m a community manager. And a community manager is interesting because it’s sort of a new job in tech; I think it started maybe four years ago or something, still kind of a pretty new type of role. And community manager kind of varies at different tech companies, what it means. So like Grandios, community managers basically monitor the help forum, and post like the help forum, and that’s pretty much what they did. Their job was like managing this community of like top contributors and helping them using the help forum. At Ulta, we’re very different. (Hannah, 10/11/13)

The fact that “Community Manager” can mean different things at different companies shows how arbitrary such titles are. Yet, at the same time, they are still important in creating a sense of identity. As the young woman says, “at Ulta, we’re very different.” Referring to Community Managers at her company as “we” shows that the very existence of the title successfully creates a community identity among the group of individuals working under it.

One company I visited introduced their HR department as the “fungineers” of the company, in charge of morale and events (Fieldnotes). By attaching a technical suffix to the title, “-gineers,” the role is, at least discursively, elevated to the status of technical employees, and suggests that there is skill and expertise needed in order to help promote “fun.” Although the term is no doubt meant humorously, there is an element of power division behind even such a seemingly-lighthearted phrasing. Creating an entirely new label for this group of employees also creates a sense of difference and identity for that particular startup: “we” have fungineers while “everyone else” has an HR department.

Similarly, a young woman who had worked in several startups indicated the clout associated with engineering-related terminology:

C: Yeah, and that’s I was thinking today about the term “Growth Hacker” which is this term that’s being used fairly frequently now, it’s like a buzzword, but it’s often used by startup markers to describe themselves, because I think they’re trying to claim a little bit more power and ownership over the job and the implication of being a growth hacker just because of the “Hacking” part of it makes you seem a little bit more valuable and stress that you’re more driven by data and metrics than people might think. (Christina, 12/20/14)

In a startup sphere dominated by prominent tech companies, it may seem unsurprising that such technological terms are popular add-ons to classic titles. However, such labeling carries with it another underlying discourse of asymmetrical power in startups. The application of engineering related terms to lend relevance and importance to other departments is a clear demonstration of the value that companies place on the “creative” side of their organization. The dichotomy between “creative” and “non-creative” roles in a (tech) startup is the clearest power differential visible in the discourse, rivaling the power differential even between CEOs or management positions and employees.

### *Non-Creative Roles*

The variety of identities and roles encompassed by the term “non-creative” is almost endless: marketing, sales, customer support, advertising, bloggers, to name but a few. However, many of the employees in my interviews who worked in these roles mentioned feeling underappreciated, or indicated their sense of a lack of value through the unspoken discourse underlying their words. One young man decided to leave his job in marketing at a startup and return to work in the finance industry after a few months of work:

J: I don't know I think that at a startup you're trying to provide as much as possible: if the company doesn't need what you have or vice versa then that relationship isn't made. So as much as I enjoyed working there, I think that in my particular case and in the case of the other intern who also didn't go back for a summer or whatever, I think it was the skills that we had or wanted to use for our first job weren't exactly the skills that

they wanted...also I think if you really think about it the people who are most valuable are the people who are building the product. And you can't have a tech company without marketing or without business operations or accounting, you need those roles, but I didn't feel like I was contributing enough to the actual output. (Jordan, 11/18/13)

Without explicitly saying so, Jordan reveals that engineers are more valued, or at least that he perceives them as being so. There is no explicit mention of a power disparity in his verbalized discourse, but his sense that his company undervalued his work was enough to make him decide to work in finance again instead of continuing to work at a startup, even though he confessed earlier in the interview that working at a startup was a "happier" environment. This indicates that there must be an underlying discourse around his particular individual experience of belonging to a non-engineer role—it shows that he expects these power structures to be an aspect of startup cultures in general, because he won't even try another startup company, preferring instead to leave the industry entirely.

*CEO/Management: Head Honcho or Best Buddy?*

As discussed in the section on hierarchical structure, startups are perceived to have a flat culture in which CEOs are readily available to employees of any role. CEOs, in startup discourse, are often portrayed as "just another employee," or even as a friend. A young man working at a tech company discussed his experience of acclimating to the role of the CEO in his company:

J: Yeah, I mean whenever he wasn't traveling he'd be around, he'd take us to coffee, and at first it was very cool like, oh the CEO is taking us to coffee! After that it was just like, hey I'm just going to walk over and ask A a

question about some stupid thing I'm doing that he probably doesn't even care about. (Jordan, 11/18/13)

By expressing his initial surprise at the CEO's availability and familiarity, this particular employee implies a distinction between the roles of CEOs in startup culture and in every other corporate environment. Similarly, a young woman working at a different tech startup mentioned how open, physically and in the sense of power dynamics, her company was:

A: It might be, I just and it could have just been the places I interviewed in Silicon Valley but just the spaces were really open and really easy to... you know I hear everything that goes on at the company which is great, you know I'm learning so much. I can listen in on the CEOs, they're probably not that important of calls because I can hear them, but I'm getting this great feedback from these really bright people who are sitting right next to me, and everyone is so willing to share their insight and to... you know the VP of sales sits right behind me and he said, you know what, next time I would say X Y and Z rather than whatever, blah blah blah. (Annelise, 12/9/13)

The fact that she mentions the availability of the CEO's at all, however, implies that it *is* in fact a big deal for them to be so accessible. Following this up with the idea "they're probably not that important of calls because I can hear them" shows her own interpretation of her experience and provides clues to the wider social reality she experiences as far as power structure within her company.

On the other hand, CEOs themselves seem to have a more self-important perception of their role in the company. One CEO spoke to me for several minutes about how many hats he wears in the company, carefully detailing every task that he undertook on a daily basis to demonstrate how hard he works and how critical he is to nearly every department within his company. The detailing of these sacrifices

create a role for his identity that is crucial to the very function and survival of his company. While part of the disparities between these illustrations is doubtless caused by differences between particular companies and individual leadership styles, the patterns of discourse suggest a broader underlying implications for understanding the roles and status of CEOs in startup organizations.

*The Creative Side: Power to the Engineer*

Unlike most corporate structures, where the CEO or management position is the role commanding the highest level of respect and power available, startups seem to value engineers to the point of near-worship. One startup employee working in a non-creative role even suggested that engineers have their own culture distinct from the broader culture of the company:

J: You know that's primarily for engineers, so I don't. But it's really an important part of the engineering culture. And I think projects like Gmail originally spurred from 20% time. So yeah, its I think a really important part of Grandios's culture that it's retained.  
(Jake, 10/6/13)

By suggesting events and perks that are meant only "for" engineers, the interviewee creates a distinct discursive line between the role of engineer and the role of "everyone else," as well as implying differing benefits for each.

One startup CEO whom I interviewed suggested that engineers not only have their own culture, but that they are considered more valuable than other roles, perhaps even more valuable than management or the CEO himself.

D: And, you know, as a guy running a company that selfishly, I want my engineers working all the time.

N: Right.

D: But I also want them really happy, if they're on a critical dev cycle, it totally screws me. So at the end of the day, here's sort of the crazy logic that as CEOs we sort of have to think through now, so Nora you're a great developer and you're working on a really important project for me, if I lose you I'm going to have to go recruit a new Nora, which is going to cost me 30,40 thousand bucks, it's going to force my project to slip, and this market is moving so fast if you miss by six months someone can come in and trounce you and take the market. So at the end of the day Nora, I'm happy to spend 10 grand and make sure that you have a beer refrigerator in your desk, make sure we get you massage therapists every afternoon at 2, make sure I buy you a \$2,000 chair that's ergonomically correct, that I handle your dry cleaning for you, I give you a gym and all that because frankly you're also not going to go home, because you're probably a 26 year old guy who doesn't date girls much and just loves to code and you don't have a life anyway, so if I can take all of the things that require you to go home away so you don't have to go home, I probably get 2-3 solid hours of coding out of you tonight, and that's a good thing. So it's this sort of weird mentality that we get the perks really, in the Valley, are mainly for the engineering side of the organization. You make them available to everybody because you sort of have to, but at the end of the day if you're a sales person I could tell you shut up, sit in the corner, make your calls, and if not I'll go find another sales person. But it's not so simple when you have engineers. (Daniel, 11/22/13)

The indication in this CEO's statement that perks are for engineers exclusively, and if he didn't have to get them for everyone he wouldn't ("you make them available to everybody because you sort of have to") exhibits the importance of engineers in his eyes. Although he is the leader of the entire company, he is willing to engage in corporate activities and expenditures that he would rather avoid for the benefit of a

single group. In addition, by saying “everybody” he draws creates the distinct categories of “engineer” and “everyone else” with vastly different values placed on their respective identities.

His discourse further legitimizes the dominance of engineers over all other roles in a startup company through economic terms. The idea that an employee can have a precise monetary “value” attached to them, a value that can be balanced out with how many perks he is willing to provide, shows his effort to persuade his audience (me) that such asymmetries among startup roles are rational. Other employees, on the other hand, are commodified as well, but are “expendable” if they are anything but an engineer.

In addition, the relational aspect of startup power structures are different for engineers and for “everyone else.” Anyone but an engineer must respect the hierarchical structure of power that would allow the CEO to tell them to “shut up, sit in the corner, make your calls.”

The fact that the CEO is so blunt and unapologetic in this discourse indicates that he does not believe he is saying anything particularly remarkable or contentious. He explains it to me using the example of “me” as an engineer, putting the interview into the second person to make it more conversational. This casual attitude toward what I, as an outsider, heard as surprising and almost shocking claims suggests a norm of thinking that may underlie assumptions about value of various roles in startup organizations generally



This particular discourse is, admittedly, only applicable to tech startups, but since the majority of the startups I studied had at least some technical components, it is reasonable to extend it at least to my own sample.

### *Demographics of Startup Organizations*

Although the power asymmetry between corporate roles in a startup is clearly demonstrated through the discourse of startup employees, racial and ethnic power structures seem to be largely non-issues, at least in the discourse. One startup CEO claimed: “You know one of the things that’s really interesting about tech is there’s really no gender or race issues. It’s really all about intellectual elitism. People get judged on their intellect, not on their color or gender or anything” (Daniel, 11/22/13). Indeed, many startups boast a great deal of ethnic diversity, and a significant number of startups in Silicon Valley were in fact *founded* by non-native Americans.<sup>30</sup>

However, the number of countries and backgrounds these individuals hail from is still quite homogenous. East Asian, Eastern European, and South Asian/Indian backgrounds—cultures that tend to place a heavy emphasis on technology and mathematics in education—are heavily represented. There is a distinct “intellectual elitism,” with most (if not all) employees being highly educated. One startup employee mentioned being intimidated by all the “Ivy League” backgrounds at her startup, and felt that she had to “prove herself” because she came from a small liberal arts school. Such intellectual elitism also creates a distinct

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<sup>30</sup> See Chapter 1, background on Silicon Valley.

disparity in economic backgrounds: most startup employees come from middle- to upper-class families who will be able to support them should their company fail.

One startup employee at a company I visited explained that the homogenous demographics I saw in the office were actually a *good* thing, and helped everyone in the company get along because they all had so much in common (Fieldnotes).

In addition, there was a tangible absence of African American individuals in the startups I studied, and the distinct lack of any mention of African American or Hispanic participation in the Silicon Valley startup sphere made their absence all the more noticeable. Although such a discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper, it is an important consideration to be aware of and worthy of future study.

### *Ageism*

Even operating under the assumption of diversity and equal opportunity in the startup world, it is impossible to ignore the massive homogeneity in age. The perception of a startup as “a bunch of college kids” mentioned in Chapter 2 is, at least on the age front, not so far off. Most of the companies I visited had employees who all were under the age of 30. One interviewee told me about the age demographics at her company:

J: I'm 34 years old and out of our 25 employees I think I'm the 5<sup>th</sup> oldest. So a lot of our group are in their 20s, so in a lot of ways I've kind of taken on a team mom role. So for me that really is a role that fits me well and that I enjoy. And that part has probably been my favorite part, being able to sort of help people out, or being able to plan the monthly outing or monthly, we do like a monthly social thing and so planning those has been a lot of fun. (Jessica, 1/15/14)

Her description of her position in the company, older than 20 of the 25 employees, and the fact that she feels “old” at age 34 reveals how normalized the discourse around age homogeneity has become. Rather than dwelling on the (rather remarkably skewed) sense of age in her company, the interviewee embraces the status quo and takes on the role of “team Mom,” further emphasizing her difference from the rest of the company.

Such disparities, although normalized, cannot pass by unnoticed. At the same company, the CEO mentioned that the topic of age homogeneity was a matter of discussion in the startup circles:

D: So part of that’s right, part of that is tech, we were just having this conversation the other day, tech is the one area that there is massive bias is age. The younger the better.

N: Oh, interesting.

D: And so if you’re 50 years old, you are done in tech. You are obsolete and there is no value to you. The only exception to that is if you are a CEO of a big company, so you know like Meg Whitman, Larry Allison, Steve Jobs. But Meg aside, Larry Allison started Oracle, so it’s his company, no one’s going to kick him out. Steve Jobs, no one’s going to kick him out of Apple. But for the most part unless you’re in HR or finance, those are the two exceptions, CFO, VP of HR, you’re obsolete and no longer relevant in tech after 50.

N: Wow.

D: So that is the one area... and just go look. Go look at all of the companies out there. Go look at all of the executives, and you know... so that is one area and I think that that’s simply a byproduct of the fact that technology changes so quickly that it’s really hard to relate. And we just talked about why. So a 50 year old used email, that’s how they think. Whereas what we have to build products for now are people like you that

use Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Chitchat, Hangouts, Skype... and so I think it's just really hard to keep up and relate across 20 years of technology changes, or 30 years. So that's where there's a big bias, and I don't think it's a conscious bias it just is what it is. But when you pull from a global workforce I would say Caucasians are the minority in tech at this point, if anything. (Daniel, 11/22/13)

Initially, this interviewee seems more critical about the “massive bias” in age in startup organizations. Although he later insists that the bias is not “conscious,” the terminology he uses—including “obsolete,” “no longer relevant,” and even the word “bias”—suggests that the discrimination is at least semi-conscious. The fact that he, as a CEO is highly aware of the age disparity in startup organizations, yet also has an employee base that is entirely under 50 years of age further contributes to the sense that there may be some degree of acceptance about the bias surrounding age in startup organizations.

In addition, after admitting to the bias (and implicitly, to his own participation in such ageism), he goes on to “justify” the decision to skew toward younger employees, that older people are just not able to catch onto the quickly emerging technologies.

Other startup employees, speaking from various registers, also put forth various arguments to justify hiring mainly younger employees. Another high-level manager at a startup I visited told me that ageism was a “real problem in this world, particularly in startup companies.” When I asked him why the issue presented itself so blatantly in startup organizations in particular, he explained that many startups wanted people who could throw themselves into the work all day, every day, and that those tended to be people who did not yet have families (Fieldnotes, Sizzle).

Another CEO who had worked at several startups gave me a similar line of reasoning:

N: And do you think that's one of the reasons that there are so many young people in startup companies, just because it takes so much time out of your life?

C: Yes. Yes. I think that's exactly why, I think that it's not coincidental that a lot of founders of startups like Mark Zuckerberg or the guy from Snapchat or Twitter, probably 9 out of 10 of successful internet companies and mobile companies in the last 10 years are started by guys that are in their pre-family years. And you know my first company that I started was S, and I started it when I was 25 and I was single, and it was really successful and that's not just a coincidence. It's the perfect time to start a company because you can work 80 to 100 hours a week and you don't have a wife and you don't have kids and you don't have anything holding you back. So work-life balance doesn't matter as much because you don't really have external commitments (Chase, 1/22/14)

The particular position from which this interviewee speaks is important to keep in consideration: although he was in his mid-forties at the time of the interview, with a wife and children, he continued to make the choice to work at a startup that he admitted took away much of his family time. Looking at the speaker himself as a counter example for his own words, it is possible that mindset is as much to blame as age in the ability to keep up with the lifestyle associated with startup work and culture.

Another CEO and founder of her own startup mentioned that having to "manage the rest of your life" was more difficult when you got older and were still trying to run a company:

M: I have 2 children who are in school, and I have a husband who until December of last year worked and

lived 2 states away Monday through Friday. So I was a single mom Monday through Friday... so yeah, just kind of managing it all. I wrote a blog about whether or not young people are better suited for entrepreneurship, and they in many cases are. Because you know Mark Zuckerberg didn't have to worry about food on the table for his kids, or being at their soccer game, and he didn't have to worry about stupid thing like I have to dye my hair now. You know? Like there are things that... you don't sleep as well as a woman when you are pre- or post-menopausal. Like, I never worried about sleep or whether my hair had to be colored in anticipation of a meeting... or whether you HAVE hair! You know? Your hair falls out as you grow older... there's so many things that just weren't factors when you're, you know, your age. [laughing] it's a different time. So that's the biggest challenge. (Mary, 9/29/13)

Bringing the conversation to the second person and mentioning that there were factors that weren't an issue when "you're, you know, *your age*" is a way of opening the interview to a more conversational status, yet also draws a distinct line between the speaker and the interviewer. By framing it in this way instead of just saying, "in your twenties" or an analogous phrase, the speaker suggests that there are some things that I will not understand even if she explains them, giving her discursive power in the exchange. Although she, too, cites age and family as a large challenge in the startup industry, she is also able to surmount these challenges and continues to run her company, further exemplifying the counterpoint to her very argument.

So if ageism is not the result of time constraints, energy, or family obligations, why is it so pervasive throughout the startup world? One employee suggested implicitly that having a relatively age-homogenous population of employees actually created a better work environment:

E: Exactly, I think it's this whole very abstract idea of like what is a culture of the workplace. I'm like

surrounded by people that are very smart, it's like a stimulating place to be, and it helps that it's a very young office, which it just naturally like I can relate to a lot of people in ways that if I was to work at a, I'll say more traditional, air quotes, office with perhaps a different age demographic, I think it would be harder for me to be friends with someone who's at a very different stage of life than me, but I'm working with people that are in their mid-20s, early-30s, for the most part, I could have gone to school with them it feels like.  
(Ethan, 12/8/13)

This interviewee cites ageism as a phenomenon with at least some redeeming factors. The manner in which he describes his fellow employees—"I could have gone to school with them"—is reflective of many of the insights regarding various perceptions of startup culture as a fun, activity-filled atmosphere with an emphasis on learning, willingness to pull all-nighters to finish a project, and the consumption of beer.<sup>31</sup> The parallels to college are perhaps drawn in order to attract young engineers right out of school, and the age demographic is yet another factor.

Another way that startups mirror college culture, and a way in which startup culture creates a divide between older and younger employees, is in their very lexicon. Ageism and the dominance of youth was exemplified throughout my interviews, in which phrases such as "shit tons of work," "kick ass people," "bad asses," and "head up its own ass" were tossed into the conversation with the easy flippancy of youth (various interviews). One information session even showed the company motto in the form of a meme about "how to draw an owl." "First, draw 2 circles," the first picture is captioned. The next picture, a fully drawn, highly detailed pencil sketch of an owl, reads "Step 2: Draw the rest of the fucking owl."

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<sup>31</sup> See Chapter 2, Perceptions of Startup Culture.

The idea that a curse word, without any apologies or censoring, is integral to the company motto is indicative of what is considered normal, acceptable discourse and shows the youth of the company (Fieldnotes). Such language use is a powerful indicator of cultural identity and social values, beliefs, and subjectivities.

Whether ageism is an intentional bias in order to create a particular startup culture or is a byproduct of ability, responsibility, or desire matters little. The discourse surrounding the massive age disparity in Silicon Valley startups reveals a deeply ingrained divide between ages that extends so far that it pervades the very language the those in startup companies use. Additionally, there seems to be little concern expressed about these disparities, an absence of discourse that is as palpable and telling as the factors that people do choose to discuss.

### *Chapter Summary*

Power structure in Silicon Valley startup companies is idealized in a manner that does not always match up with the stories that employees tell about their experiences. Many CEOs, engineers, and HR employees alike use the culture concept in their discourse around corporate power in startups with the effect of naturalizing and perpetuating the existing structure. While not all employees or firms have precisely parallel experiences, it is clear that many discursive constructs such as “employee empowerment” or “equality” may not manifest themselves in reality in the same manner in which they are described and idealized.



## Chapter 4: Gender

Although the culture of Silicon Valley startups is discursively framed a meritocracy, recent news has focused heavily on the highly masculinized, or “brogrammer,” technology culture in the region. According to an analysis of 237,843 Silicon Valley firms, only 1% of high-tech companies were founded by women (Wadhwa, 2010). As a recent article in *The Atlantic* documents, “while 57 percent of occupations in the workforce are held by women, in computing occupations that figure is only 25 percent” (Khanna, 2013). Indeed, the inequality is so blatant and pervasive that one can scarcely open any news source without hearing a new perspective on it: TechCrunch, Wired Magazine, The Huffington Post, The New York Times, and The LA Times have all run recent features highlighting their take on the gender gap in Silicon Valley.

Defenders of Silicon Valley startups assert that this disparity is due at least in part to the smaller *supply* of female engineers: significantly fewer women graduate from college in technology and engineering related fields than do men. From 2007 to 2012, the Taulbee Survey conducted by the Computing Research Association reported the percentage of computer science degrees going to females was between 11 and 14% (Klawe, 11/20/13). However low this number may be, it seems highly unlikely that this “pipeline” effect is the sole reason for gender disparities in the startup world. After all, the question remains *why* there are so few women graduating with engineering degrees: could it be because, for deeper “cultural” reasons, women are uninterested in the jobs that they might be recruited for after receiving a technological degree? Whatever the reason, it is important to keep in

mind that the people interviewed for this study are most likely aware of this baseline data in regards to gender disparities both in college degrees and in technological roles within Silicon Valley startup companies, and that these facts (consciously or unconsciously) play into their discussions.

When Twitter's recent IPO emerged with only a single woman executive officer (and no women on the board or in the group of investors), many media sources expressed outrage at this blatant gender disparity. Particularly at Twitter, where over half of the users of the technology are women, it seems shocking that the female voice is all but absent from any position of power. A New York Times article reporting on the IPO states: "Twitter's male-dominated cast shows how stubbornly difficult it has been for women to make their way into positions of power and influence in tech" (Miller, 2013).

Tech entrepreneur and writer Vivek Wadhwa is one of the most outspoken critics of Silicon Valley's brogramming culture. On the surface, he says, "Silicon Valley looks like the perfect meritocracy. Half its startups are founded by immigrants. You see people from all over the world collaborating and competing" (Wadhwa, 2013). However, Wadhwa says, this level playing field comes with one extreme exception: gender. In a recent VentureBeat article about Twitter he fumed, "Silicon Valley is a boys club—a fraternity of the worst kind—stacking the deck against women" (Wadhwa, 2013).

Wadhwa does not place blame on individuals for sexist actions, but rather points at the culture of Silicon Valley as a whole: "[the sexism] was reflecting a behavior common in Silicon Valley, where power brokers proudly tout their 'pattern

recognition' capabilities" (Wadhwa, 2013). He is referring to the fact that venture capitalists think they know a successful executive or entrepreneur when they see one: however, this "pattern recognition" is skewed almost exclusively toward young white males. "To me," Wadhwa continues, "Pattern recognition is a code name for sexism and racism. It must end." Not only do the companies not have female leadership, he points out, they clearly do not care, because the culture in which they operate has developed a set of norms that allow their sexist practices to continue without consequence. As Rachel Sklar, cofounder of a media company for women in business, points out in a recent New York Times article, "When something is a priority [in these companies], they move fast and break things... it is not a priority" (Miller, 2013). Why waste money and effort on increasing gender equality when there are no incentives to do so?

Others, however, are not so forgiving of individuals perpetuating the system of gender inequity in the valley. The sexist culture of the Valley extends to their very lexicon, and comments by a recent male startup founder calling the weather in San Francisco "lie a woman who is constantly PMSing" and referring to the 49ers as "the girls who are obviously 4's and behave like they are 9's" sparked outrage on social media sites (Guynn, 2013). At a recent TechCrunch hackathon in the valley, two male programmers created a "parody app" involving photos of men staring at women's breasts. The "titstare" app sparked outrage among some, and rebuttals from others. The implicit discourse behind its very creation is one that not only commodifies women's bodies, but also asserts that such commodification is not serious but something that may be laughed about.

A recent LA Times article stated that “It’s no secret that the tech industry has a shortage of women” (Guynn, 2013) and the reasons for this dearth of female leadership can often be traced back to the—real or perceived—culture of tech startups in the Valley. Whether or not the image is accurate, “the tech industry has an image problem—think geeky man alone at a computer—that repels girls from pursuing it” (Miller, 2013). The perception of Silicon Valley’s culture as a male-dominated culture further drives women away from pre-IPO startups in the region. “Women tend not to join start-ups during the high-growth, pre-public offering period, often because the workplace environment is unwelcoming or they perceive it to be that way,” says a young woman who was the first engineer at a finance technology startup (Miller, 2013).

According to a journalist with whom I spoke, there is some reality to the perception of Silicon Valley culture as a “boys town.” In her conversations with startup employees in the Valley she heard the culture described as “drive fancy cars and fuck bitches” (Fieldnotes). She hypothesized that this stems from the fact that many engineers in Silicon Valley startups are young men who were “nerds all through their life, and suddenly find they have money, power, and women.” Faced with this sudden turn around, there is a cultural shift that dramatically overcompensates for what may have seemed like a lack of masculinity earlier in life. Whatever the reasons, “a sexist engineering culture often dissuades young women in the field, as does the small number of women role models” (Miller, 2013).

Some critics have taken an ironic, almost humorous view of the situation. One Silicon Valley engineer pointed out that there were more people named “Dave”

on their engineering team than there were women (Fieldnotes). Others have noted the difference in the length of bathroom lines in front of men's and women's bathrooms at technology conferences, and have ironically called for the goal of promoting women in technology to the point where "we can achieve the ultimate goal of having to wait in line at a software conference" (Guynn, 2013). As satirical as these comments may be, the gender inequality in the Valley is a striking phenomenon, and the barriers presented to women are all too real. In a recent LA Times article, a former tech startup employee claimed, "women leave the industry at much higher rates than men, and there really isn't a single one of them that I'd blame... it's pretty toxic" (Plunkett, quoted in Guynn, 2013).

Both women and men in many of my interviews reflected these ideas. While speaking with a middle-aged woman who had spent her early career working in Silicon Valley startups, I told her that some of my interest in the Valley sprang from my own interest in becoming an entrepreneur some day. Shaking her head, she replied, "You might want to be an entrepreneur, just don't go to Silicon Valley." When I asked her why not she replied, "It's just such a boy's town... you really have to work harder as a woman. There are barriers." I asked her what kind of barriers she was referring to, and she told me that it was less individual barriers, and more the general culture of the Valley that made it a difficult environment for women to advance. "It's a really cutthroat culture... there's a real power struggle about it. It [the culture] is very masculine in a way." The only women who can succeed in this environment, she tells me, have to be "almost butch. Not in their sexuality, just... rough. Masculine." (Fieldnotes)

*Gender and Discourse Analysis*

Although discussions around gender may require careful analysis to tease out the true implications behind them, language remains one of the best approaches to understanding gender as a social frame. In studying language as a framework for gender we are asking: “What persona is being created and how are linguistic strategies functioning to create that alignment?” (Kendall and Tannen, 1998). To do so, it is helpful to consider the “social construction” paradigm referenced by many linguistic and sociological scholars (Crawford, 1995; Hall and Bucholtz 1995; Johnson and Meinhof 1997). This paradigm asserts that gendered identities are maintained and created (or *recreated*) through social practices, language practices being included under this broad purview. In other words, individuals do not simply passively reproduce pre-socialized gendered behavior; rather, they are *active* producers of gendered identity through their interactions with one another and the discourse positions they embody.

For the purpose of this study, a background of literature on gendered discourses in general would prove so broad a scope as to create an encyclopedic volume rather than a single paper. I therefore narrow the frame even more tightly to encompass specifically the role of gender in discourse in the workplace. According to linguists Deborah Tannen and Sheri Kendall, inquiry into the relationship between language and gender in the workplace has historically fallen into three main categories: first, studies that address how men and women interact with each other at work; second, studies that focus on how women and men enact

authority in professional positions; and third, studies that investigate the effect of men's and women's language on how they are evaluated and reacted to" (Kendall and Tannen, 1998). The following analysis will attempt to address all three of these realms of investigation through a gender-focused discourse framework. What sets it apart, however, is that these are not discourses from any workplace, but from the uniquely situated position of Silicon Valley startup companies. Thus it is important to take note of what position the interviewee is speaking from: are they male or female? Do they work in engineering, support, or management? Each of these registers carries within them the consequences of power and authority discussed in Chapter 3, and we must therefore consider the implications of such positions as we unravel the reactions to the topic of gender displayed in various discourses.

### *Distancing*

No matter who I am speaking to, or how the discussion has proceeded thus far, there is always a moment of polite hesitation when I bring in the topic of gender in startup companies. The inevitable, even if nearly imperceptible, pause is followed by a careful removal of personalization, a tendency to rationalize or "academicize" the topic. My question of whether or not they notice gender differences in their startup company prompts initial phrases such as:

"Yeah that's a really interesting issue." (12/06/13)

"Yeah, that's a good question." (10/11/13)

"Yeah, I love this question because I think it's so interesting" (10/07/13)

"Yeah so its an interesting dynamic there" (9/27/13)

By framing the introduction of gender into our interview as an "interesting topic," the men and women responding place a layer of distance between themselves and

the discussion at hand. This type of introductory turn of speech happens so consistently among my interviews that it becomes almost symbolic, clearly a discursive tool marking a fairly pervasive *pattern* of local thought.

When people did not immediately turn the conversation to an academic discussion, they often displayed hesitation or hedging before responding:

“You know...” (9/29/13)

“Yeah, like I don’t know, like I---“ (10/14/13)

Although hesitation is normal in an interview setting, in this case it proceeded a topic traditionally considered delicate or off-limits and so might be considered a tool used by interviewees to create distance from the topic.

Even after this initial response, the desire for “distance” on the subject seemed to continue. Rather than addressing gender in the workplace of Silicon Valley head-on, there was a tendency to refer to “the issue” as a whole, to point to statistics about numbers of women in tech and in startups in the Valley, to cite studies that had delved into the issue. Although the issue of gender in Silicon Valley startups is a hot-button topic among contemporary academic and media sources, this alone cannot explain the sudden turn to theoretical discourse when I ask about a highly personal topic.

One particularly stark example came in the form of an email interview that I conducted with a woman who had, in fact, been highly successful in technology startups in Silicon Valley as an engineer. I asked her if she had experienced a gender divide in Silicon Valley and, if so, how she thought that affected her. Her response:

“Hi Nora,



It's definitely true that women are seriously under-represented in computer science and computer engineering undergraduate and graduate programs, and these are the disciplines that provide most of the people going into the tech industry. For example from 2007 to 2012, the Taulbee Survey conducted by the Computing Research Association reported the percentage of computer science B.Sc. degrees going to females was between 11 and 14%. Several universities and colleges including Harvey Mudd, MIT, CMU and UBC have shown that it's possible to dramatically increase the number of female students majoring in computer science by a number of approaches, e.g. making introductory (and also more advanced) courses more interesting and less intimidating, taking female students to the annual Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing conference, and providing research opportunities.

However it's also true that women in the tech industry are about twice as likely as men to leave the tech industry in the first ten years. The Anita Borg Institute did a research study a couple of years ago on how mid-career men and women perceived large company tech industry work environment. Men generally thought that rewards and recognition were merit-based. Women thought they were more based on who you knew. More recently there has been a lot of stories about women finding many start ups work environments unfriendly. Clearly there is improvement needed in some work environments as well as in academic programs.

Hope this is helpful. (Maria, 11/30/13)

Not once does she delve into her own experience, and although she does take on the topic, she does so only through a layer of academic distance. When she mentions that there have recently "been a lot of *stories* about women finding *many* start ups work environment unfriendly," she is tactfully placing the mouthpiece onto other women, women uninvolved in the present conversation, rather than taking on the topic herself. The statistics she cites, "women in the tech industry are about twice as likely as men to leave the tech industry..." or "the percentage of computer science

B.Sc. degrees going to females was between 11 and 14%” may also be a method of distancing: by citing “hard evidence” rather than asserting softer opinions, she removes any possibility of an emotional or politically loaded discourse, offering bare “facts” that are seemingly unarguable. Finally, although her conclusion, “Clearly there is improvement needed...” does assert a personal opinion at last, it still maintains a careful distance through the word “clearly.” This implies that she has made a logical argument through the use of facts, making the conclusion that improvement is needed an analytical, rather than personal, decision.

Another woman, also successful in the technology industry in Silicon Valley, removed herself from the discourse no matter how many times I re-framed the question in our conversation. This particular interview, unlike the previous one, took place in person, and I could see the body language associated with bringing up the topic of gender change as well.

I would say gosh I haven't counted the entrepreneurs... so the biggest studies, I'm not sure there are any studies in angel investing, it might be fun to do. I'm not sure.... I'm not sure what the data... but there have been studies in venture financing, and the studies usually go, oh some small percentage of venture funds go to women-led companies. And then the biggest question back that nobody I've heard ever has an answer to is, well, what percentage of companies that applied to you are women led? So is it that 4.whatever% of applicants are women and you fund like totally without bias? Or is it that 20% of companies that so there's some prejudice going around? And I don't know the answer, I don't even have a gut sense of what the answer is.  
(Marie, 10/7/13)

Similar to many of the interviewees, the speaker makes the topic of gender purely analytical or “interesting.” Rather than discussing her experiences, she turns immediately to what “studies” and “data” exist, turning the conversation to the

*reasons* there might be fewer women in Silicon Valley. Her hesitation, evidenced by many pauses and re-formations of sentences, and reliance on facts rather than feelings show that she is placing herself in a different register from which she can speak rationally, removing herself from any subjectivity in her expression.

Such carefully constructed and consistently replicated structures of talk show an eagerness to remove personal feelings from the discussion, moving the interview from a story they are telling me to a more academic, broader conversation that is more professionalized.

### ***Reactions***

Although the initial response upon broaching the topic of gender followed a nearly universal pattern between interviews, any semblance of similarity in reactions ended there. When people did move beyond the academic discourse and begin to allow the topic to become more personal, the anecdotes and emotions that revealed themselves covered an amazing diversity of reaction. Whether implicitly or explicitly, the discourse surrounding gender disparities in Silicon Valley startup companies ranged from outright anger (*"There's a special place in hell for women who refuse to help other women"*), to denial (*"So it never really crossed my mind"*), to relocation of blame (*"It's just a very male dominated pool of talent right now, and I think it just has to start earlier in school"*), to confusion and contradictory statements. In order to better understand these various discursive positions and their possible underlying implications, we take each of the following reactions as a case study.

*Anger*

When in the course of my interviews I bring the conversation around to the topic of gender in Silicon Valley, one of the reactions that is immediately obvious is frustration or anger. The words they say and how they say them reveal that they do indeed notice gender disparities in the valley and that this social reality affects them personally and negatively. Their statements say something about both their *individual* and *socially shared* “subjective reality” in Silicon Valley startup companies.

One young woman brings up her negative reactions to gender disparities in her office without my even bringing up the subject:

N: And tell me a little about the culture of G, in your office. How many people are working in your office in Mountain View?

A: So just about, I want to say 180.

N: Ok, that’s a lot!

A: Yeah, it’s a big sales floor, so if you can imagine just a big open area, no cubicles, there are a couple of side conference rooms.... The culture, so there are I would say mostly men, I don’t know what the breakdown would be, definitely at the C-level it’s all men. The VP of HR is a woman but she’s very new to the company she just came on last month. So mostly men, I like to say it’s a little bit of a frat scene, there are a lot of... I guess that in sales they look for people who are, at least at this company you have to be a team player, because not only are you making sales for yourself but you’re working within a team. So they look for really smart people who are team players. So that ends up being many male athletes. Because... not specifically males, but people who have played on a team before. So there’s a lot of the Ivy League, male athletes. Which creates an interesting environment, it’s definitely a little

competitive, and it's definitely a little bro-ey, or very bro-ey. (Annelise, 12/9/13)

By immediately bringing up gender when asked what she thinks of the "culture," the interviewee shares through discursive framing what her own experience is like: highly dominated by gender and gender differences. Because her experience is thus, her discourse is dominated by the subject of gender difference as well. By stating that it creates an "interesting environment, it's definitely a little competitive, it's definitely a little bro-ey, or very bro-ey" the interviewee begins to reveal some of her own dissatisfaction with the "very" noticeable masculine culture. Had she been satisfied with the environment she would be unlikely to use the word "interesting" to describe her experience, and would have used a positive description or none at all.

Although she does not assert an opinion about the gender difference that she witnesses in the masculinized culture of her startup at first, when I ask her to tell me the hardest part of working in Silicon Valley, the topic once again comes around to gender:

N: If you could change one thing.

A: Um, you know something that was difficult at first, in my position they bring in a number of people every two or three months, and when I came in there were 11 people, I was the only person, I was one of two females and the only person not from an ivy league school.

N: Wow.

A: And I felt like I had to prove myself, a) because I was a woman and I would say things, we had 3 weeks of training about business development and it was like business 101. And people would say, oh you went to a women's liberal arts college. Like I was the token

woman, and that was really difficult, and I felt like I had to prove myself. So my first three weeks I just went all out, and did really well, and I'm still doing really well but I like went insane those first few weeks just to prove myself. I don't know why I felt like I had to prove myself. (Annelise, 12/9/13)

In this case she not only demonstrates her understanding of her own social reality through her discourse, but explicitly reflects on its impact on her own cognition. In saying, "I don't know why I had to prove myself," there is an implied "*but I did*" which suggests an underlying tension in her own social experience.

In an in-person interview with a woman in her mid-thirties, I was able to perceive not only her verbally conveyed anger in her discourse, but also the emotions she conveyed through body language, clutching her chest, clenching her fists, and scowling as she ranted about her frustration with the gender discrimination she had witnessed in Silicon Valley.

In an even more extreme example, a friend of Jenna's is the CFO at a recently founded startup, where the CEO is also a woman. The CFO recently had a baby and took maternity leave until December. Once on leave, however, the CEO (her friend and co-founder) decided to start looking for a replacement, and the CFO was told that her job would not be there when she returned. Jenna advised the CFO to get a lawyer and sue, but said that that's not the worst of it: the fact that it was a *woman* who so heartlessly took her job away because she had a baby is what infuriates Jenna (she clutches her chest and shakes her head, scowling). "There's a special place in hell for women who refuse to help other women," she says. For example, Marissa Mayer hasn't done jack for women, she goes on. She is an engineer by trade, and frankly she is only focused on Yahoo and on herself. When I ask why she thinks this happens, she thinks that it may be because there is so much money to be had in the industry that it really brings out the greed and competitiveness in people. (11/23, Jenna, fieldnotes/interview)

In addition to her violent body language, her choice of harsh, almost crass phrases like “hasn’t done jack,” “special place in hell,” “greed and competitiveness” further emphasize the passion she feels about the social reality she experiences in relation to gender in Silicon Valley startups.

### *Denial*

Even while the women in the previous case studies expressed intense anger about the perceived injustice of gender disparities in Silicon Valley, just as many people in my interviews insisted that gender was not an issue at all in the region. While the individuals interviewed all broadly share a geographic environment (Silicon Valley) and work environment (startup company), the interpretations of their experiences differ widely. The statements in the following cases are illustrative of individual vs. socially shared subjective reality, where similar experiences can lead to the development of diverse beliefs, values, or feelings.

Kathleen is already a serial startup employee and tech entrepreneur, although she is only in her late twenties. When I ask her about gender, she insists that, throughout her work at different offices, she has not felt that gender affected her:

N: Did you notice being a woman, do you notice it when you’re trying to... well I don’t know if you’ve started fundraising at all, or venture capital pitching. But between that and E and then M.

K: Yeah, that’s a really interesting issue. I haven’t. I mean of course I notice it, but I think a lot of it has to do with mindset. And like, I haven’t started, I have heard it’s harder for women to raise money. *But also I believe I guess in the power of belief.* And so at M it was never an issue because I didn’t define myself as a woman. I

defined myself as a product manager first, and a woman second. At E, I defined myself as a designer first, and a woman second. When I joined E I was the only woman there, I was the only woman when there were like 10 people in the company, I was the only woman. And at my own company obviously its not so much an issue because it's just me and a guy, so its like I don't really think about it, about being a woman in that circumstance. I mean in E and M, I was in the minority, yes I would notice, I'd walk into a room full of like 10 or 20 people and be the only woman there, but if you do not think it's a big deal and you carry yourself that way, then other people will just know it, and they also will think it's not a big deal. *And I think there's a lot of like talk about women in Silicon Valley, and I think if you can hold yourself on the same playing field as everyone else, not just the women but everyone else, and you come across that way, then I think that's honestly the best way to advance women is just to view them and treat them and behave as equal.* (Kathleen, 12/6/13) (emphases added)

Kathleen first makes sure that I know that she is an expert on this topic, by repeating her experiences several times: "When I joined E I was the only woman there, I was the only woman when there were like 10 people in the company, I was the only woman." By being insistent about this point, she reveals that she knows she is not buying into the existing discourse around gender in the valley, and needs to assert the validity of her claims. Her conclusion about "there's like a lot of talk about women in Silicon Valley" also suggests that she knows she is coming from a different position than many others.

Another discourse structure that this particular interview utilizes is a repetition of the structure "I define myself as xyz first, and a woman second." By repeating this phrase, Kathleen speaks through a different register, not as a woman but as a startup employee. If we consider discourse structure as the mediator



between discourse and cognition, this positioning produces the interviewees own autonomy and power by creating a reality through her words.

Similarly, her admission of the existence of a gender gap in the Valley while insisting that it does not affect her asserts the individual experience in the Valley and the register from which she is speaking. Kathleen subtly implies that people who talk too much about gender in the Valley or insist that it is an issue are bringing the challenge upon themselves: “Of course I notice... *But also I believe I guess in the power of belief*” (emphasis added).

Employing a slightly different discursive structure, a middle-aged male CEO argued that there was no problem of gender disparity in the Valley using *evidence*. Citing both his own company and the existence of high-profile female leaders in tech startups, he approaches the topic analytically.

D: But on the non-technology side, sales, marketing, finance, HR, HR has always been gender balanced or maybe even skewing towards women over men. But we've seen it a lot, half of my exec team at my previous company that I sold to Microsoft were women, my exec team here that I'm building right now is more male dominated but will be absolutely balanced within 3 months. I think you're seeing with the Marissa Mayer's and the Sheryl Sandberg's I think you're seeing role models maybe, I don't know if they're role models, but you are seeing more women in positions of power. Meg Whitman is another one as well. But what I frankly I'm starting to see more of now, which is really exciting, is women entrepreneurs, women starting companies. And I don't know what the answer is there to see more of that, but you are definitely starting to see it. And I could be totally wrong here, my teams have always been very gender balanced, but I don't really see an issue in the Valley of any prejudice towards gender. You know one of the things that's really interesting about tech is there's really no gender or race issues. It's really all about intellectual elitism. People get judged on their

intellect, not on their color or gender or anything.  
(Daniel, 11/22/13)

His assertion that “HR has always been gender balanced or maybe even skewing towards women over men” is a common rhetorical argumentative structure: not only does he deny that there is a gender disparity in the Valley, he states that at times the *opposite* argument is true, that women are better represented than men in certain instances. Broadening the scope again, he concludes that people get judged on intellect, not on “race or gender.” His use of race as a parallel to gender is an interesting one: ethnicity had not been brought up in the interview thus far, and his use of these particular categories implies a comparison beyond the local context of conversation.

Lori, who has worked in a Silicon Valley tech company in a non-engineering role for the past seven years, makes a similar claim to Kathleen by stating that although she notices a lack of female leadership, it has never directly affected her own career aspirations or daily life. Again, her discursive structure draws a line between individual experience and socially shared reality.

L: Yeah, um I think when I started in my first 4 years when I was in the sales org, there were a lot of female leaders in the sales org particularly at the time, so SS was our VP of online sales at the time. So I had just been introduced and grown up in this world of female leaders, not only S but a number of others. So I didn't really think about it, to be honest. And also the sales org in general I would, I don't know the numbers breakdown and I guarantee G would never release anything like this, but from my personal experience and the coworkers that I had and the team that I was on was like 75% female. So it never really crossed my mind. But I also was still figuring my own priorities out, and as it started to become more of a sales organization and more uncomfortable as a path for me long term, I had

no interest in even attempting to identify with the leaders that we had at the time. So had I been interested in the business aspect of sales in a large company like G I might have paid more attention to S and been like, wow, I'm really inspired by her ability to do xy and z, but I honestly was just like, I'm starting to feel really out of place and I need to figure out something...But I guess that said now I'm starting to think more about female leaders, particularly because there aren't any here. For the most part, and our organization is kind of getting shuffled around, but really we only have a female leader in the Y marketing role. And I also, I know personally now that I don't strive to be anywhere or attain some kind of C level or high level management role or director level role or something major, which is what like C level or director level or something like that in a large company, so I don't particularly feel the need to identify with leaders here either, because I'm just not as interested in the business organization aspect, and like, being in that position, but I'm definitely noticing more and more that not only does Y not really have a ton of female leadership, G doesn't either. So... of course, now I'm thinking more about it, I've had lots more conversations about it recently, and have certainly noticed more and more the types of personalities and attitudes of a male-dominated leadership world, and what those people can be like, and don't particularly strive to be like that myself. So I don't know, I mean if we want to dig more into that I'm happy to talk more about it, I'm at the office, so I might want to take part of that conversation home if that makes sense.

N: Ok, not a problem at all. (Lori, 10/14/13)

It is notable that she stops herself midway through the discussion and states her preference to "take the conversation home" instead of continuing to speak about it in the office: such phrasing reinforces the notion that the topic of gender not considered an appropriate public discussion, and is appropriate for private settings but not for the workplace.

Before stopping herself, the way the interviewee reiterates that she is “not interested in being a leader,” “didn’t really think about it,” “never really crossed my mind” seem to be her way of shaping her individual understanding of what she admits to be a socially shared reality. Even while she insists that it does not affect her, she is “*definitely noticing more and more*” the lack of female leaders in Silicon Valley.

“So... of course, now I’m thinking more about it, I’ve had lots more conversations about it recently, and have certainly noticed more and more the types of personalities and attitudes of a male-dominated leadership world, and what those people can be like, and don’t particularly strive to be like that myself.” Again, the interviewee uses a structure of speech that implies gradual realization over time, “more and more.” By stating that she has been having more *conversations* about the lack of women in the valley, Lori takes the onus of accusation off of herself, framing gender disparity as a common discourse even while she remains uncomfortable speaking about it at work. In addition, subtly criticizing women in power separates herself from that world, insisting that she is satisfied with the position she finds herself in and again separating her individual experience from a socially shared one.

### *Blaming*

Among those that did assert that gender disparities existed in Silicon Valley, many insisted that the problem was one with deeper cultural roots that extended far beyond the sphere of the Valley. Placing blame on wider social structures acts as an illustration of discursive formation of culture issues. In this case, it may likely be a reflection of a process of normalization in which people try to make sense of the

social reality in which they find themselves and justify their own relationship with the social structures in which they operate.

Although Lori mentioned that she might rather continue the conversation at home, she continued to speak after a brief pause. This time, she contradicts her earlier conclusions:

L: If we want to dig more into it then I guess... you know in some of my conversations and then just thinking about it, it doesn't particularly surprise me that *its just more... it's a more natural fit, or almost easier, and its stereotypical and may be stereotyped, but from the, from my, from what I've observed has often been true is that men who end up in positions like that often have just kind of an overarching confidence and a lack of the need to second guess...* and G also even recognized the fact that men the percent of men who put themselves up for promotion is much much much greater than the percent of women who put themselves up for promotion. So... men are just more, a little more aggressive at I don't know, getting themselves to that phase, whereas women are sort of waiting to be recognized.

N: Right.

L: So I don't necessarily think that it's the company's misstep in not choosing female leaders, I think it's just the nature of sort of how it happens. (Lori, 10/14/13)

The italicized area of text shows Lori's discomfort in trying to make her new claim, that men are inherently better at leadership roles than women. Because of the sensitivity of the gender topic, she does not directly and make her claim, but qualifies nearly every phrase with "a little," "sort of," "almost." Her final assertion that "I think it's just the nature of sort of how it happens" includes many hesitant qualifiers, "I think," "just," "sort of," and attempts to make a claim that nature, rather

than society, is responsible for any gender disparities in leadership positions at startup organizations.

Re-placing the blame in this way is a common discursive tactic from interviewees who wish to avoid asserting their own feelings about gender disparities in the Valley. A common discursive pattern in my interviews was for the speakers to cite the broader culture as the source of blame; in particular, several of my interviewees placed blame on the educational “pipeline” to explain the lack of women in tech.

In the following example, I am speaking with a middle-aged male CEO. In considering his response, it is particularly interesting to keep in mind his unique positioning.

D: And now the last one is let's get to gender. So huge issue in tech. there are very very very few women on the development side. I don't frankly know what changes that, other than when you're 9 or 10 years old and I'm your dad I'm starting to get you interested in why math is cool. I don't know what it is, I think it's gotta start earlier. I certainly don't see a bunch of women coming out of college wanting engineering jobs and not getting them.

N: No, yeah.

D: It's just a very male dominated pool of talent right now, and I think it just has to start earlier in school, I think you have to have a teacher that pulls you aside and says, hey you're really smart, and coding is not for just boys, you know? I don't know what it is.  
(Daniel, 11/22/13)

As a CEO of a tech company, the desire to re-allocate blame onto the education system is quite rational: the other place for the blame to fall is squarely on his own shoulders. His response came after avoiding the question of gender for most of our

one-hour interview, and in his rapidity and insistence of speech it was clear that he was taking up a defensive position. By concluding with “I don’t know what it is”—a phrase that he has repeated earlier in his discussion—he employs a discursive technique to end this particular topic of conversation, suggesting that he has no more to say on the topic.

### *Confusion*

Considering that my interviews take almost every imaginable position in their responses to the topic of gender disparity in Silicon Valley startups, it is clear that no consensus exists about the reasons for the phenomenon—or even about the existence of a gender disparity at all. Perhaps because it is such a politically and culturally loaded topic of discussion, conversations about gender in Silicon Valley often contained self-contradictions and 180-degree turns in opinion. In the following case studies, I attempt to interpret accounts in terms of what they *accomplish* rather than what they *mirror*. In other words, what is not being said is as important as what is being said: the clues of understanding lie in the confusion of contradiction.

In my conversation with a middle aged woman who had recently founded her own tech company, an initially soft take on gender disparities in the startup industry turned to direct assertions only after encouragement:

N: Yeah. And so the other thing that I’m really curious about is I’m wondering if you’ve noticed any effects at all of being a woman as you’re making these cold calls and these meetings, if there are challenges, if there are benefits, if you just don’t even notice gender at all.

M: You know, if you notice it or anticipate it you just kind of have to put that aside because it's not going to help you. If that's part of the world, you're going in with a chip on your shoulder is only going to harm you in your goals. So I mean, is it out there? Without a doubt. Particularly in the world of raising institutional capital, talking to Angel Investors and Venture Capitalists, without a doubt. But you just have to grin and bear it. They're all men.

N: Yeah, absolutely.

M: It's a boy's club. It's totally a boy's club. It's all about who they know. (Mary, 9/29/13)

In this case, both what Mary *says* and *how* she says it reveal a conflicted expression in regards to her experience of gender working at a startup. She initially states that "*If you notice it... you just kind of have to put that aside because it's not going to help you:*" the translation here is, "if you *act* on a basis of noticing." This also suggests that some people may not notice it, that it is not an issue for everyone and perhaps gender inequity in startups occurs infrequently enough that one might not even notice. However, moments later she repeats insistently: "It's a boy's club. It's totally a boy's club." By repeating this phrase and adding the qualifier "totally," Mary is now conveying that the issue is pervasive, not simply an occasional one. In this instance, it is possible that these contrasting expressions of discourse are again reflections of wanting to come off in a more philosophical manner initially, perhaps for the benefit of the interviewer (myself). It is notable that she only becomes vehement about the pervasiveness of this "boy's club" after I encourage her gentle hints at the fact with a response, "Yeah, absolutely." In this exchange the interviewee perhaps cautiously feels out what I, the interviewer, want to hear before speaking in more direct terms about her own opinion.



*"We're Working On It"*

A final, and more consistent, response that often was inserted into discussions of gender was the "we're working on it" motif. Although similar to placing blame, this is more of a deferral technique, possibly accepting the blame but softening its implication so that any gender disparity is merely a temporary (and thus minor) challenge to be overcome. This discursive technique was used most commonly during my fieldwork when I was actually in the offices witnessing how few female engineers there were. The fact that my interviewees felt the need to explain their efforts to "push for more women" or create women's groups could be partially attributed to this particular positioning: there was no denying or softening the raw numbers of males and females in these cases.

During a visit to a mid-sized startup in Silicon Valley, I was shown around the three-story office building by a young woman who had recently been hired into a technical position, although she had not had an engineering background in school. She was eager to turn the conversation to women at her office, and although she acknowledged that there were significantly fewer female engineers than male, she consistently brought the conversation back to the pro-female initiatives being taken at her company.

We then turn to talking about being a woman at Theory. Mindy is on the engineering team and, out of 150 people on the team, is one of 14 women. "That's actually a really good ratio comparatively," Mindy points out. However, there is a huge push for diversity at Theory right now, focusing in large part on women. A recently developed diversity scholarship targets women while they are still in school to promote coding and engineering among young women (and to bring great new employees from the next generation to Theory).

Theory is also very involved with the Women in Tech group, including the Grace Hopper Association (which she says I have to be sure to look up). The company recently hosted a successful “Women in Tech panel.” (Fieldnotes)

Her comparison to other companies normalizes the lack of women that I can clearly witness in the office, and the insistence on conscious efforts at improvement seemed to be a strange foil to this claim. If their office was so normal, why try to push so hard for women’s initiatives? The contradiction implied a more critical view of the lack of women than the former assertion that “that’s actually a really good ratio” implied: the words used in this particular exchange clearly did not precisely mirror the speaker’s meaning. Later in our visit, Mindy tells me that all the women who do manage to make it to higher-level engineering jobs in tech are “kick ass.” This phrase also caught my ear: in order to “make it” you have to be “kick ass,” a quality that implies toughness, almost masculinity.

At another large startup office the next day, I saw so few women that I began to understand Mindy’s claim of a “good ratio.” Although the HR employee who showed me around the office was a woman, I saw a total of two other females in the office over the duration of our one-hour tour. When I asked my tour guide about it, she was similarly defensive of their efforts:

She says there are definitely more men, like all tech companies, and particularly because it is a company that makes video games. Her department, People Operations, and Management are both mostly women, she says, but engineering and programming is more male dominated. They are making a push to hire more female engineers, though, and she says that compared to most other tech startups they have a good representation of women. She doesn’t give me the exact numbers and I don’t push it. (Fieldnotes)

Her comparison with “all tech companies” and insistence that “compared with most other tech startups they have a good representation of women” directly reflect Mindy’s assertions and again normalize gender disparities in tech startups. In this case, my interviewee followed up on this by adding on “particularly because it is a company that makes video games,” implying that she has bought into the cultural discourse that relegates computers, engineering, and gaming to the masculine realm. She quickly brings this around to insist that they are “making a push” to get more females, although if her former assertion were true, there would be no women interested in joining.

In another in-person interview (although this one did not take place on a site visit), a young woman who had worked for two different tech startups asserted as simple fact the lack of women in engineering:

A: There was a decent amount of female employees [in my office]. Every tech company has a problem with female employees in engineering. And they’re all working on that. (Annelise, 11/04/13)

Although she uses simple, direct language to convey the existence of a gender disparity in the Valley, her globalization of the issue, “*every* tech company,” “they’re *all* working on that” softens the bluntness of her assertion.

The discursive pattern, “we’re working on it,” is used in conjunction with many of the other reactionary discourses as well, whether re-placing blame or expressing confusion or anger. While this could be a mere discursive tool to re-direct blame or soften accusation, it is also possible that seeing this as a relatively common pattern in the discourse may mean that, in fact, such an effort *is* becoming

more global in reality. The increase in women's groups in Silicon Valley, particularly for women in tech, has indeed occurred in recent years, but it remains to be seen whether or not companies really are "working on it," or whether this is a phrase used to accomplish a discursive goal in an interview rather than one that mirrors reality.

### ***Talking About Gender Talk***

Within American culture broadly, and particularly in the corporate culture of the work place, there are often implicitly understood expectations of the way males and females communicate: the words they use, the manner in which they frame their discourses, the ideas they espouse, even the clothing they wear. Kendall and Tannen argue that men's and women's language choices in these localized interactions "invoke gendered norms, and, thus, perform gendered identities as well" (Kendall and Tannen, 1997). In their opinion, both genders use particular forms of talk as a *resource* for accomplishing a specific *purpose*: in other words, women and men *actively* choose ways of framing to accomplish specific ends within particular interaction (Kendall and Tannen, 1997). These choices are drawn in part from sociocultural norms for how each is expected to accomplish various workplace actions and interactions. The gendered norms of discourse styles are *institutionalized*, seen not only as "the better way to talk but as the only way" (Lakoff, 1990), and behaviors or discourses that step out of the boundaries created by these rather rigid institutionalized norms are perceived as cultural transgressions. Thus, "if women and men do speak in similar ways, they are likely to be evaluated differently" (Tannen 1994, West 1995). This variation in judgment

enforces “gender polarization,” the ideology that men’s and women’s behaviors are dichotomous and exclusive: “when viewed through this lens, women and men who diverge from gender norms may be perceived as speaking and behaving ‘like the other sex’” (Kendall and Tannen, 1997).

In this way, language and the expectations of language are used to challenge, create, and maintain status distinctions. Critical discourse analysis can reveal how the different ways of speaking with authority enforce legitimacy and authority while denying power of others. Keerfoot’s study of discourse and gender in management roles showed that women in leadership positions often struggled to achieve an ideal of “womanhood,” defined at least in part by their willingness to sacrifice their own time and autonomy. The expectation that women “define meaningful existence as achieved through the care of others” (Keerfoot, 1998) is perhaps one explanation for the stark division in startup roles by men and women, where the dearth of female CEOs and high-level managers has recently come under scrutiny among popular media both in Silicon Valley and on a national level. Such expectations of women’s roles in the workplace also became clear through my fieldwork, where interviewees told me they expected their female managers to take the time to work with them and give them advice, while they were not surprised or offended when male managers or CEOs refused to do so on the grounds of being too busy (fieldnotes). Females in leadership positions who brushed off a request for interaction with, “I’ve got five minutes, what can I do for you?” would be judged differently than would male leaders who gave the same response (fieldnotes). These expectations and discursive constructions create a tension for females in the workplace, a challenge

exacerbated by the separation (conscious or incidental) of females into non-engineering, lower-level positions and out of engineering and leadership roles.

### *Gendered Expectations of Communication*

Tannen (1993) claims that women in the workplace tend to downplay authority to avoid appearing “bossy” in order “to be what they consider a good manager and good person.” Women in the workplace thus are not exhibiting a lack of authority generally, but a deeply engrained tendency to communicate and enact that authority in a different way. My own findings differ from Tannen’s analysis, however, and from a large quantity of academic research on gendered workplace discourse. Rather than suggesting that women in positions of corporate authority give their directives differently in that they are more communicative, collaborative, and polite (as claimed by Tannen, 1994a; West, 1990; Astin and Leland, 1991), my interviews revealed that the conflict over expectations of gendered speaking came because women leaders understood and often broke these expectations. When they did so, many received negative feedback, and most found “other methods” of communication to fall back on. For the most part, lower level female managers reverted to “softer” forms of communication and persuasion, while female CEOs continued their leadership style in spite of accusations of being “harsh,” “tough,” or “bossy.” In stark contrast to these descriptions, I could find no reference to such terms in depictions of male CEOs among my interviewees: only “fun,” “amazing,” “down to earth,” “cool guy.”

One male CEO casually mentioned that he had some women leaders he could put me in touch with if I wanted to speak with them:

D: Yeah, no, there's three of them in particular that have worked with me for years that are just total total studs...If you want to talk to some total stud female startup executives, I'm happy to put you in touch with a few. (Daniel, 11/22/13)

Repeatedly referring to these women as "studs" is a distinctly masculinizing form of discourse, and reinforces the power relationship between men and women in executive startup positions. The only way for these women to have enough power to be worthy of this *male* CEO's recommendation is for them to be "manly." Such casual usage of masculine descriptions suggests a deeply ingrained sensibility of gender and power relations in startup organizations.

In my conversations with a female journalist who specializes in the startup company beat, such masculinization of women who "make it to the top" in tech industries was a topic of discussion she returned to repeatedly throughout our two-hour conversation. I quote from my fieldnotes: "Female CEO's, as many of my other interviewees have pointed out, are often criticized if they don't always acquiesce to requests for their time: women are expected to always be ready to help other people, to be nice and supportive and drop what they are doing to help others. Male CEO's on the other hand, are allowed to say, "I have 15 minutes. What do you need?" If a woman says this, she is criticized for being harsh, rather than just doing her job. If time is money, being expected to give your time to everyone who asks is extremely inefficient for a CEO" (Jenna, 11/23/13).

At the same time as being qualified as “masculine,” however, females in leadership positions are still expected to maintain “traditional” gender roles within their families. Choosing a leadership role over family life is often criticized, as exemplified by this particularly strongly-worded interview with a female startup employee:

L: So yeah. And I don't know. With Marissa Mayer now leading Yahoo and just... I almost, I don't know, joining a company like that and leading a company like that and then immediately... you know she was pregnant when she got hired in, and immediately having her kid and then not taking any time off—I don't know how much you know about that whole story, but she basically just joined Yahoo, was pregnant, and announced that, well it doesn't matter that I'm pregnant, I'm going to have this kid but it's not going to make a difference in how I run the company and I'm not going to take any maternity time. And she didn't. She had her baby and she took like I don't know, a week or two, and then went right back to work! And I don't, I just, that's part of the reason I could not identify with being in that type of position, it takes, that is your LIFE, it takes many more hours than being an individual contributor to contributing at that level. So having a kid and a family, you could certainly do it at some point, but not... you would need to have a different, you would need to at least take some time off if that was a priority in your life. And so that honestly frustrated me a little bit, that she's setting this standard for women that it's, that kids are no big deal... Yeah, it's almost a setback for me to have a leader, a female leader, treat it like that and just say, kids are you can just have babies even when you've just accepted a position and you can still run a company. Well, if your company is your baby, your baby is something else. Like, how many hours do you have to dedicate to that? Like there's just not enough hours in a day to do both, so you're not raising that kid. And you *have* the kid and I just... I don't know I just know the type, the amount of work and hours that people in those positions have to put into it, it's just not supportive of the amount of time that personally I would want to spend if I was going to be having a baby. And that's



another thing, like at some point I hope to, another reason why I don't know how I would be able to make it work.... Anyway... (Lori, 10/14/13)

This young woman explains that her criticism is partly based off her own plans: she hopes to have a family some day and doesn't know how she would be able to "make it work." Though this discourse she is normalizing expectation of women in the family, assuming that she would have to balance kids and work, rather than assuming that the father of the children would be taking care of them in her absence. Her accusation to Marissa Mayer that by taking her position as CEO, "you're not raising the kid," again indicates the belief that raising children is solely a woman's job. Finally, her claim that Mayer's decisions are "setting a standard for women that kids are no big deal" suggests that having a high-level position and having a child are mutually exclusive, and that if you choose the job you are undertaking the child part casually and flippantly. In addition, it is an implicit creation of a distinct social category for *all* women as separate from men: if a standard such as this is set, her discourse implies, all females will experience the ramifications of the decision in the same way.

Compare now, if you will, this accusatory discourse with the casual manner in which a *male* CEO explains how he "balances" his demanding work schedule and his family life:

N: So you mentioned that unlike a lot of the people at the company you're not 25, you do have a family. how do you balance having a family and leading by example in that way?

C: Um, you make sacrifices. At the end of the day I make sacrifices that a lot of other people wouldn't want to do, and that's fine, they don't have to do it. And it's a

personal decision. I don't see my kids for dinner at night. I come home at night and they're asleep, my wife puts them to bed and my wife has dinner with them. On the weekends I spend a lot of time with my kids, I take Saturday off completely and I don't work, and Sundays I take most of Sunday off and then Sunday evening when I'm getting ready for the week I'll work again. But so except for most of Sunday and all of Saturday I don't get to see my kids. And some people think that's terrible, how could you possibly not be home for dinner? And that's fine, they can think that, they shouldn't, they shouldn't start a company if they want to be home at 5 o'clock every day, in my opinion. And now look, there probably are examples of successful companies where everyone leaves at 5, but you know it's hard, because you kind of need people to be really, it's not a 9-5 job in 9 out of 10 startups because there's too much work to do and there's too much, you're trying to do something hard—create a company out of nothing, and make it to be a big company—it's just, it's, you know people are kind of clocking in at 9 and leaving at 5 it's hard to get there. So how do I do it? I just sacrifice some of the family time during the week, and it is what it is. Now some people say their values are such that they want to see their kids every night before they go to sleep, and that's fine and I respect that, just I make a sacrifice around that right now. (Chase, 1/22/14)

If Lori's reaction to Marissa Mayer's decision to accept the position of CEO while pregnant is any indication of social norms, such discourse from a female CEO would likely be considered deplorable. The male CEO's ability to choose work over family without social ramifications, as conveyed by his willingness to speak frankly and unapologetically about this situation, legitimate his position in the social structure of startup organizations. The consequences or results of such structures of discourse for the social minds of recipients perpetuates the power differential between men and women who seek to pursue leadership positions in startup companies: by not fearing social pressure in their decisions between family and

work, men are granted a wider range of power with narrower opportunity for failure. That is, a female attempting to occupy a position of cultural or social power could fail in two respects—personally or professionally—while a man could only be accused of failure in one.

Even at levels lower than CEO, differential expectations of discourse based on gender persist. One recently promoted startup employee spoke about the masculinized discourse surrounding her boss, while suggesting that she, too, had to compete with such gendered discourse expectations:

E: Oh, yeah. I'm sure. You kind of have to buckle down and do it, but the more I've been here the more I'm like I've got to figure this stuff out. Because like, its just, you feel like you need it and who knows? If it was a room full of female engineers would I feel the same? I don't know but it definitely feels like they can kind of be in control, so you're talking to this room of men, and as a woman you kind of have to be very careful and not coming off as bossy or like, complain-y, you know? Like, its all about manipulating the situation to get them to like you and want to work with you but also get your stuff done how you want it done. And you know like [the CEO], they all say, "Ugh, she's so tough." Just like asks a billion questions and she's so demanding. Like that's how they talk about her. Just like, she's the CEO that's what she's supposed to do. [laughing]  
 N: [laughing] Yeah, that's her job.  
 (Evelyn, 9/27/13)

It is notable that she states that the challenge of communication "as a woman," not as her particular management position, or in her particular startup. Such a sweeping categorization suggests that the discourse surrounding gender and expectations of communication is an underlying structure that affects this interviewee's every day experience. In addition, she explains that to get around the gender stereotypes "it's all about *manipulating* the situation to get them to like you

and want to work with you” (emphasis added). Not only is the term “manipulate” highly loaded with connotations of sneakiness and dishonesty, but the idea that female leaders have to get people to *like* them in order to get work done marks a sharp distinction between genders. Even in their discourse, women are expected to maintain a connection between their workplace interactions and their “personality” as an individual, whereas men are most often not measured by these standards. In my interviews with male management-position startup employees, none of them made any attempt to soften their conversation or make me “like them” as a person. The way that Evelyn notes the need to make other people in the office “like” her in order to get her work done shows how normalized this structure of leadership discourse has become in startup culture. Even though she finds the effort that she has to make notable, she does not spend time dwelling on the fact that men and women are expected to exhibit their power through discourse in nearly polar opposite manners: men through straightforwardness and toughness, and women through coercion and community persuasion.

The same female manager explained to me that the tension she observed between male and female discourse came into play only when the level of power conferred by job titles was similar between a man and woman:

E: It’s very interesting. Coming into like being in a leadership position I’ve noticed it a lot more...And when you’re at a meeting table, that’s when I notice it the most. So that struggle, and I think if you’re looking at gender issues in general like that’s where I notice a huge gap. Definitely a lot about power struggles and stuff.

N: Ok.

E: Um, I think that's like, cause like when you're working on your projects and your to-do list, everyone's individual, you know? Man or woman or whatever. As soon as you get into like a meeting room environment, or trying to convince someone to like finagling, like trying to convince someone to take on something, or need a decision made or something it's the fun part but also the tougher stuff. That's when you just, its either non-engineers or engineers. And you'll notice that most engineers at our company are male. We have one female one. So that could be it in the startup environment. So I feel often kind of helpless, like I have an idea that I know is good, know it needs to happen, but now I have to go communicate that to a male engineer. And when you do that you have to do it in a way that first makes sense to the engineer's mind, and second doesn't feel for the man that you're telling them what to do, because they don't like that. And so you kind of, they struggle with that. So its like then, how do I manipulate this situation so they don't feel like I'm telling them what to do but they do it and move on? So I found myself doing that a lot. Or else I come off as kind of bossy. (Evelyn, 9/27/13)

The idea that her promotion to a leadership role has made the speaker feel “helpless” reveals that within startup organizations, structures of power are not automatically conferred based on the role suggested by corporate identity alone. In fact, creating an environment in which a man and woman are power “equals” according to job status (or even when the woman is of a higher status) creates a “power struggle” that forces the *female* to “manipulate the situation” in order to accomplish her goals. The fact that this task of accommodation in discourse falls to the female rather than placing the onus for reconciliation on the man—the one who had trouble with the power dichotomy in the first place—is indicative of a larger structure of social norms beyond the startup workplace, one that assumes women to be the conciliatory sex and men to be temperamental individuals needing to be

“placated.” The speaker’s assertion that she finds herself “doing that a lot” to avoid “coming off as kind of bossy” indicates that although she notices the gender roles within her company, she plays into the existing stereotypes, perpetuating the discursive norms and expectations at her organization rather than breaking with them.

On the other hand, Evelyn does not assert that this normalized structure should be continued. In startup companies in particular, she places the onus for change on women leaders themselves, stating that if there is no established set of rules, there should be a greater opportunity to enact and embody change:

E: And there’s like a problem to be solved... and I’m sure it’s similar in corporate but I think in startup land the rules are even more... you can make them up. You can be a powerful woman and like, push, but you have to be willing to kind of put yourself out there. So I think there’s definitely more opportunity, versus like a corporation that’s been around for a while and have all these rules and social standards that they go by, so I think you do have the opportunity to change it more. But you also have no one modeling for you how to go about it. (Evelyn, 9/27/13)

Although she is clear about the fact that these expectations create “a problem to be solved” she also gives an “out” for women who perpetuate the power imbalance by saying, “but you also have no one modeling for you.” By saying this the speaker at least partly legitimizes the status quo. At the same time, however, she does insist that there is “an opportunity” to change these “rules and social standards. It is the understanding of this analysis that such change could come about through a conscious transformation of discourse in the workplace, both through increased pressure on men to create cohesion through their leadership and discourse styles,

and the empowerment of women to choose to be more blunt or tough if their personal leadership style sees fit. If women continue to play into these expectations of communication they are implicitly legitimating the masculine dominance asserted through discourse.

Perhaps in part because of these normalized discourses of power based on gender, corporate identities within startup companies have become divided along gender lines as well. Often, engineering departments are almost entirely male, while non-technical roles (sales, HR, marketing) are equal or skew towards having more women. Such a division of roles does not balance out equally, however, as engineers hold significantly more power and value in a technical startup company than do non-engineers.<sup>32</sup> Some startup employees argued that this asymmetry was due to the fact that males are “just better” at engineering (Lori, 10/14/13), while others claim that the separation is a convenient way for companies to “even out their ratios” without giving women any real power (Annabelle, 11/04/13).

One woman went so far as to claim that, although she notices the gender disparities within startup organizations, the fact that she does not strive for a leadership position herself inspires means that she does not care about the cultural phenomenon she observes:

L: But I guess that said now I'm starting to think more about female leaders, particularly because there aren't any here. For the most part, and our organization is kind of getting shuffled around, but really we only have a female leader in the Y marketing role. And I also, I know personally now that I don't strive to be anywhere or attain some kind of C level or high level management role or director level role or something major, which is

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<sup>32</sup> See Chapter 3.

what like C level or director level or something like that in a large company, so I don't particularly feel the need to identify with leaders here either, because I'm just not as interested in the business organization aspect, and like, being in that position, but I'm definitely noticing more and more that not only does Y not really have a ton of female leadership, G doesn't either. So... of course, now I'm thinking more about it, I've had lots more conversations about it recently, and have certainly noticed more and more the types of personalities and attitudes of a male-dominated leadership world, and what those people can be like, and don't particularly strive to be like that myself...(Lori, 10/14/13)

In the span of this short moment of conversation, Lori's discourse changes completely from beginning to end. Perhaps to fit with the discourse that she thinks I am requesting, she admits that "I guess that said now I'm starting to think more..." and sees a lack of female leaders. This implies that there is a palpable separation between males and females in her company, but she is quick to add that because she herself does not wish to be a leader, she does not care about the imbalance. Whether or not she sincerely cares about the gender asymmetry she admits to perceiving, Lori's discourse is a process of normalization of her individual experience of a collective cultural issue. If discourse plays a mediating role between subjective understanding and reality, this type of gender talk is an explicit (re)production of power relations in the startup world.

### *Media Expectations and Commodification*

Although recent media pressure on Silicon Valley startups to hire more female employees is considered to be a progressive standpoint to empower women, some women in the Valley feel that such coverage is achieving the exact opposite effect. One young woman opined that increased awareness was necessary, but that



the onslaught of media attention had created an atmosphere for women in the Valley that she equated with “affirmative action:”

A: Yeah, so I think, 2 things. One, for women in startups, I think a lot of them feel commoditized, so it kind of feels like people are looking for them because they’re a woman and not anything else. Cause it’s really transparent when some company starts an initiative that’s aiming for junior girls in college, it’s pretty clear that they’re just trying to even out their ratios.

N: And they fill their HR department usually instead of like engineering.

A: Often, I mean they’re looking for engineers but there’s really 2 concerns for that. There’s one on the side of the company, where a lot of people that already work there but aren’t concerned about that statistic feel like, well are you going to hire people that are less qualified just to even out that just seems terrible where they really need highly qualified, really talented people. And then there’s the concern from the females who are already really good at computer science like, why are you hiring me? Am I really not that qualified? Its affirmative action for women at startups right now. That’s what it is. And it kind of sucks. (Annabelle, 11/4/13)

Rather than empowering women, such hyperawareness of gender has caused some women to feel commoditized: they are considered more “valuable” as a token if they are coders, regardless of their level of talent. The way in which media discourse portrays gender disparities in Silicon Valley, citing numerical statistics rather than discussing quality of coders, has helped establish a structure of talk around females in startup company where CEOs can be seen “just trying to even out their ratios,” a concept that makes a woman into a number rather than a professional. Although the young woman speaking to me was clearly upset about the situation—using words such as “terrible” and “commoditized”—she only expressed that “it kind of

sucks,” softening her attitude at the end of her discussion. This reflects the duality of the situation that several other women expressed to me in their interviews: it does “kind of suck” to know that I might be getting hired solely because of your gender, but at least I benefit from it.

Another young female startup employee pointed out that the way in which the media brings attention to women in Silicon Valley is distinctly different than the way in which they cover news about males in the same positions.

But yeah, I think that probably in like Silicon Valley proper it’s probably a lot more noticeable like in leadership positions just because that’s where the media attention is. So for example Marissa, Marissa Mayer, always gets a lot of different kind of like, maybe media portrayal in Silicon Valley, with some other people. You know it’s like one thing she was known for was her fashion style and stuff. You know, you’re not going to see that with like Mark Zuckerberg because he dresses poorly, but still. It’s like one of those things where being a female leader, that was something that news stories also reported on, which is kind of weird. (Hannah, 10/11/13)

The media attention that Marissa Mayer gathered from media pieces about her fashion sense—most notably with a Marilyn Monroe-esque photo shoot she did for Vogue magazine—is effectively a public discourse about her femininity. On the one hand, such a discourse could be understood as the assertion that females can occupy multiple social roles: CEO, mother, and sensual figure. On the other hand, the fact that Mayer has become known for her “fashion sense” is a distinct marker of difference between her role as a startup CEO and the role of “other” (male) CEOs. By focusing on an entirely different sphere of social life, and one that focuses not on intelligence or personality but on physical appearance, the media perpetuates the

implicit power dichotomy present between males and females, with women as the “fairer sex,” judged by their appearance as much as intellect. The use of appearance as a factor in media portrayal of prominent female CEOs is both part of and evidence of standardized discourse on the position and value of women in society.

In a direct response to such implicit media discourse, Sheryl Sandberg has partnered with Getty Images to compile a new stockpile of images of women in the workplace. These images break stereotypes about how women dress in the workplace—power suits and briefcases, with a baby in one arm—and allow for a more nuanced portrayal of the modern professional woman. In a recent article by the New York Times, Sandberg explained why the new images were so important: “When we see images of women and girls and men, they often fall into the stereotypes that we’re trying to overcome, and you can’t be what you can’t see.” Such images are all the more essential in our modern generation, says Johnathan Klein, chief executive of Getty images. Advancements in technology have led to massive increases in visual media on the internet, television, and social media, including on Smartphones through applications like Snapchat and Pinterst. “Imagery has become the communication medium of this generation, and that really means how people are portrayed visually is going to have more influence on how people are seen and perceived than anything else,” Mr. Klein said in the New York Times interview. A discussion of discourse, particularly around the culture of a hypertechnical region like Silicon Valley, must go deeper than words: after all, a picture can communicate a thousand words and countless cultural implications.

*Normalization of Gendered Discourse*

The preceding analysis of interviews with startup employees suggests that gendered asymmetries in opportunities, expectations, and power in the startup world are conveyed through current discourse. But do people “buy into” the existing discourse, accepting it as a normalized structure of social interaction and expectation. My interviews suggest that they are accepted, and show a process of normalization surrounding gender roles in startup companies evidenced through discursive formation.

In particular, the fact that men and women commonly occupy different roles within startup organizations is conveyed as normal, even rationalizable. One young female startup employee put it this way:

H: Yeah, that’s a good question. So I think the one thing that’s kind of interesting is in tech there’s a lot of kind of gender specific roles, and that engineering is kind of like, male, and that you’re looking at, for example my role, our team was pretty much all girls for like the longest time. So it was like noticeable, but noticeable almost in like a comedic way because there’s one guy on our team and then like five girls at one point, and so we’d be like girl things and just like teasing him because we’re like, oh yeah I’m sure you really care about like where to get our hair cut, what dress we’re gonna get on rent the runway and stuff... Otherwise there were only two other female engineers I think. Again, from when I started back in February until like two months ago, and now as we’ve been growing there’s a lot more. But I think that’s definitely something that I’ve noticed, but nothing that I’ve noticed kind of negatively. Like I don’t feel at all that gender impacts my ability to succeed or anything here. I think that actually interacting with people it’s not something you really notice, necessarily. (Hannah, 10/11/13)

By joking about the situation this interviewee normalizes the situation in her discourse, communicating to me that it is “no big deal.” The implication of her words suggest that gender disparities in her company are not “negative” even if they are noticeable.

Another way of naturalizing gendered roles within startups—particularly the divide between engineers and non-engineers—is an argument of ability:

A: Yeah, I think it's definitely true in Silicon Valley. And again it comes down to the engineering thing, so at places that are engineering heavy it's going to have fewer women. So, New York, again because the business and marketing side is a big deal, I think you start to see more women out here. Also, just it's, like a lot of the business models out here are very partnership driven, so we're, again I'm like grossly generalizing, but in Silicon Valley there are a lot more startups that are making, they're just like making their product, they're just working on their product and then they launch it. Whereas there's many more startups in New York that are more about like partnerships, going out and collaborating with other people or... you know even in the ad world you have to find, you have to pair up advertisers and publishers, there's just kind of a lot more collaboration to it so, I mean I think just like the different vibes end up, the types of roles that are available to people are different. (Annabelle, 12/20/13)

Annabelle takes engineering as a male role as given, making the asymmetry in these roles a natural labor division rather than a distinct cultural phenomenon.

This young woman argues that leadership, too, is more “natural” for men than for women:

L: you know in some of my conversations and then just thinking about it, it doesn't particularly surprise me that it's just more... it's a more natural fit, or almost easier, and it's stereotypical and may be stereotyped, but from the, from my, from what I've observed has often been true is that men who end up in positions like that often have just kind of an overarching confidence and a lack of the need to second guess... and G also even recognized the fact that men the percent of men who put themselves up for promotion is much much much greater than the percent of women who put themselves up for promotion. So... men are just more, a little more aggressive at I don't know, getting themselves to that

phase, whereas women are sort of waiting to be recognized. (Lori, 10/14)

Her initial hesitation to assert that men are better natural leaders is evidenced by her staggered phrases, “it’s just more...it’s a more...or almost easier...and it’s stereotypical... but from the, from my, from what I’ve observed...” before making her claim. However, by the end of this brief discourse, she has switched to being much more emphatic, repeating that men are “much much much” more likely to put themselves up for promotion. Her acceptance of this “statistic” says something both about the social reality she experiences, as well as her legitimization of such an experience as something “natural.”

Finally, some women in startup organizations explicitly played into traditional gender roles by titling themselves “team mom” or putting themselves in charge of perks and food for the company, mirroring traditional female roles in the household.

### *Chapter Summary*

Whether participants in the Silicon Valley startup sphere see gender asymmetry as a challenge to be overcome, a natural fact of life, or a positive affirmation of the role of women as mothers over their role in the corporate sphere, discourse around these issues both reveals and perpetuates the gender roles available to men and women in startups. It is notable as well that the issue of gender is the sole topic in which the culture concept is not discursively invoked: instead, interviewees turned to rational, analytical modes of speech that created a degree of separation between their speech and the emotions and implications of the

gender disparities in Silicon Valley startups. If, indeed, the issue is one that is deserving of attention and change, that transformation must necessarily begin with a re-formation of the way we portray in photos, speak about, and thus conceptualize female roles in Silicon Valley startup culture.

***Conclusion: The Silicon Valley Bubble***

In studying startup organizations in Silicon Valley it is important to remember that these companies and their respective cultures are relatively new additions to the tech scene. In the preceding analysis, I have studied these startup cultures in the frame of the *present*, not to invoke the “ethnographic present” or timelessness of the study, but rather the exact opposite, the *timeliness* of the work. All cultures are situated not only in place (in this case, Silicon Valley) but also in historical time.

Throughout my study, the situation in Silicon Valley continued to evolve and develop even as I did my fieldwork and research. With this concluding chapter, I am making an attempt to avoid *myopia*, a “shortsightedness about the local community, not seeing connections between local community and the region, or the local community and its history” (Keesing 1976, quoted from Thomas class notes). By situating the culture of Silicon Valley startup organizations in the current events of the location, I hope to begin to understand the negotiated relationship between time, place, and the culture of the startup industry.

*Silicon Valley: Is it the “Real World?”*

As my study progressed, I began to realize that many of the companies that people recommended to me were in San Francisco, which lies outside the technical borders of Silicon Valley. Curious about this development, I asked one of my interviewees if she considered herself to live in Silicon Valley:

L: I live in San Francisco, so it’s not down in Mountain View, I worked down there for a year, but I think San Francisco is kind of included in the term Silicon Valley



just because so many tech workers are in the city. And I... I mean, it's pretty phenomenal; it's a pretty hilarious mix of people in the city. Because you can go out to a bar, for example, and the nerdiest looking kids next to you who are just wearing t-shirts and jeans are just speaking in words that I have no idea what they're talking about, they are so smart. You have no idea who's sitting next to you, regardless of what they're wearing or what they look like. And a lot of the conversations you hear just when you're out and about are just brilliant young minds talking about startup things, talking about technology, engineering... you know I was at a fancy restaurant here for brunch one time and two guys were drawing out diagrams of what looked like rocket science to me, it's so stereotypical but that it literally looked like they were drawing rocket ships on their napkins while they were waiting for their food. So I feel like this area is a very intelligent and interesting area to be a part of and to be able to observe. I mean that said, San Francisco still has a wide variety of economic classes and different groups of people living in the city, so I think it is much more diverse probably than if you lived in Palo Alto or Mountain View which are not as diverse in the various economic status of all the people living there, I would imagine. So I get a lot more, I don't know if you've visited San Francisco, but I'm right kind of in the thick of things, so I get a lot more different types of people around in my neighborhood. But still the kinds of places I tend to frequent are like nice restaurants and bars and that's where the other wealthy young startup kids hang out too. So I don't know it's a pretty interesting land I think when I travel I do tend to travel in other countries so I don't really see other parts of the US as much where I would experience other cities that are dissimilar to San Francisco within the US. But I absolutely know that's what most of the country is like is nothing like San Francisco. And I think like, rent here is some of the most expensive, if not the most expensive city in the US now, in competition with New York, it's like \$3,000 a month for a one-bedroom apartment, like there's been such an influx with Facebook and all of these tech companies right in this area, it's had a huge impact on the housing in the city and the price increases that can happen and come with that because a lot of these kids have a shit ton of money and are willing to spend it because they're young and

don't have families yet. (Lori, 10/14/13)

Although Lori equates San Francisco and Silicon Valley as far as labeling and location, she does indicate important differences between the two in regards to diversity. "I get a lot more different types of people in my neighborhood," she mentions, citing the lack of diversity she imagines to be in Mountain View as a comparison. Ironically, however, she goes on to explain that, although she has claimed that San Francisco is more diverse, "most of the country is nothing like San Francisco," and that most people would not be able to afford the massive rises in rent. Her contradictory claims suggest an unwillingness to confront the guilt she feels about being "part of that scene" of young, rich "startup" kids. "That scene" includes nice restaurants and bars, and the ability to afford high rent prices. This terminology also suggests that wealth in San Francisco is assumed to largely be the result of startup organizations, creating a one-sided comparison that implies that other workers (older people, working in non-startups) would thus be non-wealthy. Although Lori brings to light many of the challenges of wealth disparity in San Francisco and Silicon Valley, she does not dwell on them, and even seems to contradict herself by claiming that she sees more diversity in the city.

E: I think, now San Francisco is definitely the place that companies want to be just because of the simple fact that San Francisco is a fun place to live for people in their 20s and early 30s, and even beyond that, but I would be really hard for me to live in the South Bay and Silicon Valley and commute up here daily. I think there's a shift towards companies wanting to be based in San Francisco now.

N: Why's that?

E: Well just because people want to, they don't want to make that commute, just a killer commute and they prefer a more urban lifestyle. I definitely am not ready

to go move back out into the suburbs. I work with some people that do but they're more in a different stage of life, they're either married or have family so... I'll be in San Francisco for the next 7-10 years I bet. (Ethan, 12/08/13)

He goes on to explain the implications of this increase of startup companies in the city:

E: Yeah, for sure. There's so many articles popping up, its best illustrated when you'll see busses driving through San Francisco, essentially shuttling all of these tech companies—Google, Facebook, Apple---employees through some of the worst parts of the city down to work. And it's a very, people use that kind of image of a shuttle just taking workers down the peninsula while the other half, they almost paint it like there's two classes of San Francisco: those that live in San Francisco and shuttle down to work at these huge tech campuses and come back, and those that essentially support the lifestyles of those tech workers in San Francisco.

N: Right.

E: You hear about the crazy rent in San Francisco and it's driving a lot of people out of the city and forcing businesses to shut down. It's a very... the dynamic is interesting to see. (Ethan, 12/08/13)

By stating that the situation is very “interesting,” he situates the discourse in a more intellectual frame, rather than an emotional one. He cites the large number of articles popping up on the topic, suggesting that he pays attention to the conflict on a consistent basis. Words like “crazy rent” “forcing” and “worst” parts of the city indicate that he does, in fact have an opinion on the matter, but is as yet unwilling or unable to vocalize the negative feelings that his lexicon implies.

Later in the interview, however, the same young man confessed that he had trouble justifying the wealth disparities that he witnessed in the Valley and in San

Francisco, and his conflicting discourse reveals his own struggle to make sense of the situation there:

E: Yeah, um, I mean.... I think about this from time to time. Um... yeah like working at a startup, a successful startup at that, is like a lot of fun but I definitely feel like there is a bubble to working at A, I'm very sheltered from a lot of... Like, life could be very different if I wasn't working at A but they, the culture that they provide is great but... sorry I... hm... I'm trying to think the best way to put this. I appreciate the culture but I'm isolated from the real world. San Francisco and all of these startups are not an accurate representation of what life is like for most of America or the world, and I feel like the fact that we are so sheltered is a fundamental problem because we've got so many smart people that can drive so much impact with software and starting companies but the problems we face on a day-to-day basis, it's a little concerning when you see startups trying to do like solve stupid San Francisco problems when there's so many real opportunities to enhance society even 20 miles away from San Francisco. But it's really hard to think like that when you're in your routine of working at a startup where they take care of so many aspects of your life. And that I mean, that might not be specific to San Francisco, working at the venture capital firm in Silicon Valley it's like, I definitely lucked out and the seeing so much, an absurd concentration of wealth, is on one hand you're just like wow, and being in this culture you're somewhat enamored by it, but it can be a little perverse how much money... I can't even comprehend how much money is concentrated in this very narrow corner of the world, but that's the way it is. And I've definitely benefitted from it, but for reasons I can't necessarily put my finger on it makes you gag sometimes. It's a little extreme.  
(Ethan, 12/08/13)

His hesitation about even bringing up the subject is palpable: "Yeah, um, I mean.... I think about this from time to time. Um... yeah like working at a startup, a successful startup at that, is like a lot of fun but I definitely feel like there is a bubble to working at A, I'm very sheltered from a lot of... Like, life could be very different if I wasn't

working at A but they, the culture that they provide is great but... sorry I... hm... I'm trying to think the best way to put this." Such hesitation suggests that this is not a subject that people vocalize often in his social sphere, but the fact that he responds to my open ended question of "Is there anything else I should know" with this particular idea makes it just as clear that he thinks about the subject. When he does finally express himself, the interviewee uses a conflicted set of gentle qualifiers—"sometimes," "a little"—along with strong, almost angry statements—"solve stupid San Francisco problems," "it makes you gag," "It's a little extreme." At the same time, he admits that he has "definitely benefitted from it" and plans to keep living there. In addition, he naturalizes the way society in Silicon Valley works by concluding his statement with "but that's the way it is." This employee's discourse shows a self-contradictory—and perhaps halfhearted—effort to work through his understanding of his own social reality, and his awareness of the register from which he is speaking as a young, well-off startup employee.

Another young woman who had worked in several startups agreed with his assessment of the insularity, or the "bubble" surrounding Silicon Valley and San Francisco:

C: I definitely think that's true, it's really insular in some ways and it is often kind of white middle class males solving problems for other white middle class males and getting funding from old middle class males. And it does work like that to some extent. And I think that's going to change as we get more women and people, just more diversity in general into the region. People are more inclined to think outside of themselves if they lived elsewhere or if they've been disadvantaged. There are obviously exceptions, but I definitely do see far too much of that kind of bubble. Covering healthcare and education you're less likely to see that, which is

heartening. But if you're looking at social networking and mobile apps and so on it's often just kind of solving problems that are not real problems. (Caroline, 12/20/13)

By labeling the problems that startups in Silicon Valley solve as "not real problems" she gives a negative tone to her discourse. Like many of my interviewees who express dissatisfaction with the cultural atmosphere of the Valley, she is careful to say "in some ways," and point out that "there are obviously exceptions," softening phrases that allow her to be more blunt with the rest of her analysis. In addition, she constructs Silicon Valley as a distinctly bounded culture by her phrase "think outside themselves," defining the culture of the Valley as an inward-focused sphere.

Another young startup employee took less issue with the insular products the companies in the valley produced, but had trouble with the wealth disparities that she witnessed.

K: I mean I think there's probably like the true startups who really don't have the money, I mean I know it's there I personally haven't been exposed to it, but in general people are not starving in Silicon Valley, you know? And so I think in Silicon Valley, when you come up with a startup idea, you tend to come up with things that you might use yourself. And that actually is a very good strategy because that means you can design something that's good, because it's good for one person, that's you, and that's how many really good products come out, is people who make something for themselves. But the problem is that the person in Silicon Valley is nothing like the normal person. The products they are designing are kind of for the 1%, they're kind of like solving first world problems.

N: And even like solving problems for other startups, like I've seen a lot of the cloud sharing startups have all had all of their customers are other startups.

K: Yeah, and I bet you a large percentage of those companies are like second time, third time founders who first time around had these problems in their

startup, and they're trying to solve them for other startups. (Kathleen, 12/06/13)

Although she does mention the fact that startups tend to provide services to “people like themselves,” she attempts to justify this reality by pointing out that people are just doing what they have experience with. Many founders, she says, start several companies, so they can only cater to the experience they know. Whether or not this argument is valid is a subject that is both debatable and irrelevant: the fact that she uses this discourse with me, an outsider, to defend the social reality in the Valley, even while criticizing it, reveals a deeper conflict between personal identity and experience and the understanding of a wider relationship to others living in the Valley.

Other startup employees I interviewed brought up not only the Silicon Valley “bubble” as far as what kinds of companies were being founded, but also a sense of entitlement in Silicon Valley. One woman said that she heard a young man in her office complaining that the towels at their in-office gym were not soft enough. Another woman who had worked in startups and had done reporting on the startup industry said that the Valley had a “toxic culture of entitlement.” The bubble is such that people in the Valley are “utterly blind to the massive wealth disparity that still exists in this country.” People in the Valley, she told me, think that sitting on the board of Charity Water is enough to consider that they are doing good for the world, and they continue to live their extravagant lives, Instagramming their insanely fancy meals with #sograteful after them in a way that reveals just how spoiled they really are. “In the Valley, the lack of vision economically goes hand in hand with the lack of vision socially,” she said. Quoting from my fieldnotes after an un-recorded

interview with this woman: “There is a toxic culture of entitlement, bred in part by the perks that these tech startup offices provide. The employees turn into spoiled children, she says: “If you don’t give me massages I’ll just go work somewhere else.” Jenna adds that perks should not be confused with culture: “people need to realize that office perks are not the same as culture.” The hype about this “culture” of Silicon Valley mostly refers to all the perks and the alleged “work-life balance” that doesn’t even exist in reality. She points out that when you work for a tech company, work can follow you everywhere, and you’re never off duty. You are expected to respond to emails instantly, to always be ready to work.<sup>33</sup> Not only that, she says some studies suggest that our brains may not be biologically prepared to keep up with all the new multitasking and constant media and technology we assail them with. Some studies suggest that we are literally killing ourselves with technology, she says” (Jenna, 11/23/13).

Jenna blames this bubble in large part on the fact that there is so much money to be made in the industry. This makes it possible for the quintessential “Silicon Valley douchebags” to exist. Her description of such a person is: “30 years old, made it with his own tech company, drives a Ferrari, has a hot girlfriend, and is a total asshole.” Not everyone in the valley is like this, but some are so bad that people explicitly told her not to talk to them during her interviews. “Avoid them at all costs.” There are very few genuinely nice people in the Valley, she says: many of them choose to leave because the culture can be toxic, and it is much healthier in LA and New York where the culture is not so self absorbed. “Don’t let anyone tell you

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<sup>33</sup> Although it can be argued that the pervasiveness of mobile technology, particularly Smart Phones, has made this a component of work at almost any company, not just startups.



we (LA) are the ones with the huge blinders on,” Jenna says. “Silicon Valley is so much worse” (Jenna, 11/23).

Another female startup employee put it this way:

N: Awesome. And then I guess my last question is just very open ended, what do you feel are some of the most intriguing issues that are facing women or people working in startups in general in Silicon Valley?

O: Yeah, um I think that there is a pretty sizable sense of entitlement in the valley and I think that we kind of live in a vacuum where we feel like we just kind of operate under this default that this is the center of the universe. But there’s a lot of problems in the economy, in the world that are real problems that I don’t think I guess I can only speak for myself and I can speak for like stereotypes and like things that you always see in the news about the Valley having its head up its own ass sort of thing, don’t quote me on that.

N: [laughing]

O: But I think some of that is true. I think it’s really easy to get sucked into this microcosm and that it’s important to be aware of greater views. (Olivia, 10/7/13)

Much like the previous interviews, this young woman shows conflict within her discourse, acknowledging the problem that she sees but then attempting to justify or pass over it. By using passive terminology and saying that the region “is a microcosm” where it is “really easy” to get “sucked in,” she implies that even though there is a problem, it is not her fault for going along with it and not trying to combat the self-centeredness she sees. At the same time, her use of a curse word, “head up it’s own ass” indicates some degree of anger around the reality that she sees. Finally, her aside, “don’t quote me on that,” directly references her curse word, but also shows an underlying hesitation to verbalize this normally taboo discourse. The

conflict underlying her discourse is apparent in the tension of what she says and what she does not say. She sees a divided reality in Silicon Valley that is different for startup employees (including herself) and for “everyone else,” but uses discourse to rationalize and justify this situation and to imply that it’s not really her fault.

The distinctly parallel structures of simultaneous accusation, justification, gratitude and dissatisfaction expressed in these discourses indicate a wider social phenomenon. There is clearly a conflict in people’s subjective reality as startup employees, and their awareness of the broader experience of life in the Valley. Their own conflicting dialogues, and their hesitation to express their dissatisfaction, mirror the experience in the Valley, where people are highly aware but discussing the conflict seems to be a taboo.

### *Language*

The insulation of Silicon Valley startup culture is such it has developed its own language. A differentiation of language is one of the most powerful ways in which a culture can become a distinctly bounded entity. It ties people together in a shared understanding while effectively excluding all who are not privy to its usage, thus creating an “us” and “them” through access to cultural discourse. Whether the lexicon of Silicon Valley startups evolved organically or was explicitly created is a matter up for debate. If it does indeed exist, a distinct language further would further insulate the Valley from the “rest of the world.” One young woman who has worked at several startups in the Valley put it this way:

K: Well one thing that’s interesting is how insulated it is. In the sense that people in Silicon Valley tend to be white, males, between the ages of 20 and 30, who have a

lot of income, they maybe have a lot of savings from their time at a tech company, they can go to brunch on Saturdays and pay a lot of money for nice things. And they just generally have it good, like we do have it good, because there's all these companies that pay very well especially for developers. There's... I don't know if you've read but there's a lot of class resentment, a lot of people who are native to San Francisco do not like all these rich tech people coming in driving up the housing prices. And there's a good reason for that, I think for me personally since I left Silicon Valley for three months, and I've been in LA for the last three months, I've kind of seen how normal people live, like the rest of the world lives. Like I ask them like, oh, can I Venmo you? Which is like a payment system founded in San Francisco, and like, no, no one has heard of Venmo.

N: Really?

K: And like I went to a dance class and the teacher didn't have a song, and I was like here just use my phone I have Spotify, and she was like, what's Spotify? And I'm like, oh yeah. I'm not in San Francisco anymore. These are like normal people I'm talking to they're just not in the bubble. (Kathleen, 12/06/13)

The fact that she initially doesn't even realize that the language she uses in her everyday life will not translate to the outside world is indicative of the degree to which the Valley has insulated itself. It takes leaving Silicon Valley to see how "normal" people live to understand that she has been in "the bubble" in her life in San Francisco.

At a campus recruiting session for a small Silicon Valley tech startup, the recruiters also emphasized that the Valley had its own language. Not only that, they asserted that in order to get a job, you should "be able to use the jargon of the Valley," and even recommended certain books that we could read to get to know the startup lexicon (Fieldnotes). The idea that an applicant to a startup company has to

drop certain words to even be considered shows the power of discourse in creating social identity. By learning the language of the industry, people would signal that they were part of the “in group,” effectively becoming *part of* the culture by being able to communicate with others within it.

In addition to having a language that its in-members speak, there is a newly formed and particular set of words that have been developed to describe the Valley and the startup culture it has come to represent. For example, more than one interviewee referred to the region as a “boystown” in reference to the male-dominated tech startup scene, and words like “broding” (bro-coding) have become popular enough to be used in national media sources. Even phrases that describe concepts like “lean startup model” have become popularized enough to be recognized outside of the Valley.

### *Globalization*

Ironically, the other face of the insulated Silicon Valley startup bubble is the precise opposite. Several of my interviewees mentioned how powerfully globalization has affected the industry, particularly because of the technical nature of many of the Valley’s startups, which allows employees to work from anywhere in the world. This globalization, along with the sense entitlement created by the perks at startup companies, has created what one CEO refers to as a “nomadic workforce.”

D: There was a much greater sense of commitment and loyalty from your parents’ generation than there is from your generation.

N: Interesting.

D: And so what happens is you have... and there’s a lot of articles around on this, and it’s really prevalent in the valley because of the wealth creation in the last decade.

So what happens is you have unrealistic expectations in the younger workforce around how long you have to work and how rare it is to actually get one of those Yammer, Salesforce, Facebook events. So what happens is they become very nomadic. And so the problem is that they can be bought. And what's fascinating about this is what a lot of us look for are the perks, and they completely arose with Google. (Daniel 11/22/13)

D: And it has changed in part because employees are less engaged both because of geographic disparity and then wealth inflation, expectations in tech specifically. And then companies' notions of now there's more of a global workforce to tap into... So the notion of a global talent pool to pull from right now is also changing those dynamics from the company loyalty to use on employee side. (Daniel, 11/22/13)

The fact that he refers to the "greater loyalty" of our parents' generation puts a positive spin on their work and frames the globalization or nomadic nature of younger employees as a negative development. The assumption that younger employees can be "bought" by perks can be seen as a diminishing of the rational, cognitive abilities of younger workers and a commodification of their roles in the startup industry. Even after speaking about the phenomenon in such a negative frame, however, he goes on to explain that, as a CEO, such nomadism and globalization is useful for him in that it creates a much cheaper "global talent pool." These contrasting discourses around globalization, revealed within a few minutes of interview with a single individual, indicate that this is an issue that will continue to become more critical in the startup world in the near future, and is an important avenue for further study.

Although the culture concept is invoked only sparingly in the discussion of Silicon Valley as a whole, startup employees do use the term to naturalize wealth disparities and class structure within the region. The use (or lack thereof) of the culture concept in startup discourse often helps clarify the tension between what people describe in terms of idealized cultural expectations and the stories of everyday life that startup employees relate. Particular aspects of startup societies are justified and naturalized by invoking the “culture” concept, while in other instances (such as gender disparities) the avoidance of the culture concept is used to place the issue in a more analytical (thus less emotional) category.

“Culture” has had a mixed record in academic discussions of various disciplines for decades, yet startup companies in Silicon Valley seem to have adopted the term in their discourse, approaching the status of cliché. The use of such a term can be a means to corporate ends, such as creating identity and solidarity. It can be a way to create, reinforce, or naturalize power and gender differentials. It can be used to describe perks (manifestations of “culture”) and the distinct language employed by startup employees. Although “culture” is used differently in startup discourse than in social science analysis, it has perhaps been unfair to understand this use of culture “Lite” or entirely vacuous. Indeed such a discourse has powerful implications for the real everyday experiences of those within Silicon Valley startup society. In a sense, then, the discursive usage of the term “culture” by startup companies in Silicon Valley is as rich as any academic understanding of the term.

*Some Final Thoughts*

Silicon Valley is a highly diverse region, and the sensibilities and subjectivities of each individual interviewee play heavily into my understanding and analysis. While such a study should not be assumed to document absolute uniformity among startup cultures, it can demonstrate patterns, or “footprints of commonality” while “also documenting the variation within the patterns” (English-Lueck, 2002).

Not only is it essential to avoid myopia and the assumption of a timeless ethnographic present for scholarly reasons, it is also a question of practicality. The speed at which Silicon Valley startups “move” in the economic sense suggests that their cultures will also evolve quickly, both within an organization (based on growth of employees and development of product) and in the cultural narrative of startup sector more generally. History supports this assumption: a study on the same topic undertaken ten years ago would almost certainly reveal entirely different discourses, sentiments, and culture. Contemporary changes in the Silicon Valley startup sphere also are harbingers of further change to come; in particular, the newly popularized “Lean Startup Model” has begun to transform expectations of “culture” (more specifically, perks and work-life balance) from new startup employees. A further factor that will likely be a catalyst for the development of culture is the common scenario of smaller startups getting purchased by larger ones: it will be interesting to follow this trend from a cultural perspective to see if these small startups are able to maintain their explicitly delineated culture as

understood before the merger, or if there is a migration away from specifically outlined culture in the name of purpose over vision.

As high-technology industries become increasingly important on a global scale, there is value in understanding Silicon Valley as a “natural experimental laboratory.” “Silicon Valley has enthusiastically embraced technology and cultural complexity, making it a prime location for the anthropological study of what happens in any technologically saturated community. We can learn from its experiences” (English-Lueck, 2002).

It seems apparent that Silicon Valley as a region is also evolving. Recent media focus on the role that the startup sphere has played in increasing the wealth gap in the region has increased awareness and sparked recent demonstrations on the streets of San Francisco. The region seems to be at a point where political, economic, and cultural tensions are coming to a head, and the startup world, as a critical player in the roots of these conflicts, will certainly be affected.

Finally, from a purely economic perspective, some people—even people interviewed for this study—have suggested that the tech startup industry in Silicon Valley has created an unsustainable bubble. If this bubble bursts in the near future, as many experts have suggested it will, there will be massive implications for companies in the Valley and the culture they espouse.

These factors do not suggest that the evolution of the culture of Silicon Valley startups will make this study obsolete, however. In fact, the constant state of evolution in the Valley makes it all the more important to document the discourse of the culture there. We must be aware of the changes occurring, and gaining at least



some sense of understanding of the current situation will be helpful in comparisons in years to come.

Finally, in respect to methodology and avenues of further study, this study has used critical discourse analysis to unravel the underlying experiences of startup employees in the Valley, the roles and identities that people occupy, and the way that individual subjective realities relate to the wider group experience. Other approaches to these questions would also be helpful in gaining a broader understanding. In particular, extended fieldwork might be helpful to gain first-hand understanding of the lived reality of startup employees. A comparative study in other startup spheres, such as Los Angeles or New York, could also bring enlightening reflection to these questions.

Thus while this study focuses on one region—Silicon Valley—and one industry—startup organizations—it may have broader implications for understanding other increasingly technological regions of the world, as well as organizational culture in other similar industries. In the end, the greatest value of such a study is to provide us with a mirror in which we may reflect on ourselves, our assumptions, and our identities.

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## **Appendix I: Interviews**

*Before beginning interviews, I read the following script to each individual to get permission to record.*

I am a student at Claremont McKenna College conducting a research study about gender and culture in start-up companies in Silicon Valley. For this project, I am interviewing employees and CEO's of mid-sized start-ups in Silicon Valley.

I have a series of open-ended questions for the interview, and I anticipate this taking between 30 to 90 minutes. With your permission, I will be recording the interview and I am currently recording this consent process.

You, as well as all other participants, will be personally identified only to me, and I am the only person who will be able to associate you with your interview. The digital recording of this interview will be stored in a password-protected folder on my password-protected computer. The interview transcription will also be password protected and will not include your name or other identifying information. I will not include any identifying details in the write-up of this research project or in any of my presentations that result from this project.

Your participation in this project entails no direct benefit, cost, or compensation to you, other than the cost of your own time. There is no risk of injury associated with participation in this project. Claremont McKenna College cannot provide any financial compensation or support for injuries or distress occurring as part of research participation.

Your participation in this project is voluntary, and you may discontinue and withdraw your consent at any time, for any reason, and without any penalty. If for any reason you would like to stop, please just let me know. You may also refuse to answer any questions that I ask, and either stop the interview or ask to move on to the next question. You may also ask that I destroy all records of your participation, including deleting email correspondence and deleting audio recording files and written documents.

Do you have any questions regarding the study or your consent to be interviewed?

Do you consent to this interview, based on the information I have just provided?

**9/27/13, 4pm**

*Evelyn, TechRead*

### **Full Transcription**

E: I honestly didn't end up looking at the questions so I skimmed them when you first sent them but I haven't thought much.

N: That's fine! It's really totally informal, I'm just getting a sense of what it's like working in a startup, and in particular-- I'm going to be interviewing men and women—but particularly for women to see what the culture is like in general and I'm also really interested in looking at females getting started in entrepreneurial ventures because there's just a very low proportion of female entrepreneurs who are female. So those are sort of the two things I'm looking at in my thesis. But mostly there's this new field of anthropology called corporate ethnography and it's never really been done for startups and they have such a strong culture so that's all I'm really getting at. Is just to sort of understand what it's like to work at a startup. Is it ok if I record, I sent you that form right?

E: Of course. That's awesome. Who's your thesis reader.

N: well I have one at CMC and it's professor Bilger. You went to CMC right?

E: Yeah, I did.

N: So did you ever have Professor Bilger for Lit?

E: Uhuh, I only had the big round guy I don't know who he is.

N: The big round guy [laughing]

E: He was like round and like, I only had him for Lit 10, he had like rosy red cheeks.

N: That's so cute.

E: What's his name? Kendyl would know. Anyway, ok, cool! And who is your other thesis reader? Are they on a different campus?

N: Yeah, so my anthropology major is at Pomona so it's my anthropology advisor over there. Her name's Professor Mahdavi, she's really cool.

E: Yeah, awesome. That's so cool, yeah, anthropology would be a great thing to major in at Pomona.

N: Yeah, its really neat. It's applicable to everything. What did you major in?

E: I did psychology and religious studies with a human rights sequence.

N: Wow, that's such a CMC major. It has to take like five minutes to say it or its not good enough.

E: Exactly, and I kind of did my thesis in history. I looked at international holocaust curriculums, in Germany, Israel, and South Africa. It was a fun one, I learned a lot because I did all my stays abroad in those different countries and so I actually was able to collect some research there so my thesis wasn't hard to write when I got back.

N: Did you have professor Haley?

E: ok so I know professor Haley just from my interactions with him at CMC and going to some weird dinners that he's hosted but he was never actually one of my

professors. Professor Petropelous was my reader. Anyway yeah, so I'm happy to help you. Hopefully I'll give you some good answers.

N: Ok well I mean just whatever your experience has been is a good answer. And so I'm required to make sure that I ask you if you have any questions regarding the study or your consent to be interviewed and just let you know that your name and other identifying information won't be included so you can feel free to say whatever you want to say.

E: Ok, I think we should be fine. I mean I can't, as far as E is concerned, I'm sure they wouldn't want like internal, if I like talk about like, men or women I'm sure they don't want that published but with this it won't be.

N: And it would be impossible to know if, say you said something dramatic about the inner workings of E it would be impossible to know that it was E that was being talked about, I'm very careful.

E: Sounds great, thank you. And I don't think anything that dramatic would happen but...

N: Ok, so first of all I'm just interested in how you got started working at E, especially with your religious studies and holocaust sequence background.

E: Yeah, so I did TFA after college, I had just enough history credits to be licensed for secondary social studies. So I moved to New York, I worked in the Bronx, I taught 12<sup>th</sup> grade econ and government which is hysterical because history really didn't prep me for that. On paper it looked good that a CMC student was teaching econ and gov but I didn't know much about it. I also taught, for three years, I taught 9<sup>th</sup> grade ancient and modern world history. And my second year I was looking at Google before Google took over all the CMC campuses and stuff, this was like five years ago and I'm like dad I'm going to work at Google, I just like what they're doing. I did a bunch of informational interviews there and stuff. And I just started getting more into technology. And I never found a job that really suited what I wanted at all, it all kind of felt like you were a cog, right? Like you were just in a company that was so big right now that you were just doing the same thing over and over again and it wasn't that leadership that I was so used to... you know at the age of like 25 I had my masters in education and was teaching my own classes and managed other teachers, and so the thought of going back to like an entry level position at some big tech startup didn't really sound great. I also wanted to be at a place where I was valued. The fact that I had managed people and that I understood education, and I just wasn't finding that at Google. So I kept teaching for a third year. And in that year I started adding all kinds of technologies, like I had my kids start blogs, I had them Skype, we Skyped people I had met abroad so they could hear their accents and stuff, so they could learn about them.

N: Wow.

E: So that was just trying to integrate as much as I could. And then I found this company called E, and I found them because there was this one technology magazine called education technology, its like a business to business magazine, and I knew the editor. So I called her and asked her what were the up and coming education technology companies that she had seen in all the columns recently. And she mentioned to me that there's this small company called E, it's like very small they've only been around for two years, but I really like what they're doing, and

they're a great group of people so far that I've talked to you really should reach out to them. So I looked up on their website, I think she might have sent my resume over for me, I looked them up on the website and I thought, you know I better use this product in my classroom first before I apply, so I used it in my class. The kids just loved it, basically it's a social learning platform, it looks like Facebook. They like started class reading and answered each other's questions, it was like super easy to use. Then I submitted my resume, at the time there were about 8 people at the company I think. I got interviewed by the CEO who is also a woman, her name is C, and she interviewed me and it was for a customer support role, it was called Customer Support Manager. And basically I would be their first person on the team to like be dedicated to handling teachers' questions. And she told me that there was a lot of room for growth, which was really important to me. She was like we don't really have, I can't promise you anything but there's room for growth, there's a lot of opportunities here it's a good learning environment, and for me it was like a good transition point. So that's kind of how I got over to E, as their first customer support person, and I was not, I told her about the technology I used in my class but that was about it, you know like I didn't, she didn't test me on my technical expertise. So you want me to tell you the rest of the story?

N: Sure, yeah!

E: So I got here two and a half years ago, and they, at the time I came on they hired me when they were about 8, by the time I came on they were about 20. I had to finish the school year. They hired like ten people before that summer, June. I came on and my boss was this guy who was the project manager for engineering so I technically fell under an engineering department which is just hysterical if you look at my psychology and religious studies background.

N: Yeah [laughing]

E: And, um, I just had been used to working all the time as a teacher and doing TFA and so I got there and I just like, all this time I had been spending developing lesson plans and stuff, I just threw it at learning the product and answering teachers questions. So I probably worked 7 days a week, I worked all hours of the night, I was the only person, I worked with the founder he helped me sometimes, but I just ran this support department and made it so important to get back to teachers within 24 hours of their question.

N: Right.

E: Um, and so it like was a good time in my life where I didn't have like kids or a boyfriend or anything where I like could just work all the time. And I kept doing that and support was becoming, my goal for the support team was to not just make it like this side call center that people think of as support, but make it like the heart of the company, that we're talking to teachers. And so I pushed for um, to have a review at the end of the year and I told them I wanted to run and hire more people to do the support team. And I had to, there was some push back from my current boss because that meant like, I would be running the support team, he wouldn't be my boss anymore. And what happened... I had... I guess this is all good information for your paper, I think. So then I had, there was a woman HR lady and she knew how hard I'd worked and she went to the CEO and she was like, I really think K would be good to like bring on some more people on a team. And so she did that



and I had a meeting, and they figured out how to, I don't know how you'd call it but like take away, it was a weird point in everyone's time. So I basically got kind of promoted to where my boss was you know?

N: Wow, yeah.

E: And I don't think he liked it very much but, um, and I went ahead and started a hiring spree. And in that I had to learn about: how do you train people effectively? How do you hire people effectively? How do you get people who are dedicated, you know to stay up at night and do 24 hour support... can you expect that of others? And so in the last probably year and a half I've grown the team to about 20 people. I've trained about probably 26 people. I've pushed a lot of them out to other teams, and so I've kind of become a feeder team to other teams in the company because they know they come out really well trained.

N: Wow.

E: So that's been my career path at E. So talk about a startup, like that is the kind of startup situation. But it definitely came of two things I think. Like one is pushing for things, like you have to go out of your comfort zone and push. And like a ton of extra hours in work. I think those are the two things that got me here... so now I'm like the director of the support program and like, we present and we really are a big part of the company.

N: That's so cool because it's almost like you have a startup within a startup.

E: It's totally like that.

N: That's really neat.

E: It's super fun. It's super entrepreneurial.

N: Yeah, no kidding. It's really impressive. So I think what you mentioned that really caught my ear is one thing that I have been wondering about startups which is: how do you figure out how much you can expect from people? And how do you find people who are dedicated? Because like you said it is a lot more work than just joining say, an established finance company or something like that where you're just sort of going through the daily grind. You have to find people who are passionate about it. So do you find that you look for that in people? Is there a way that you have, do you have a special training, how do you work around that?

E: Yeah, I think, so definitely I've hired people poorly and I've seen where it definitely falls, but what I look for is people coming from other companies that required a lot of their time so they're kind of used to it. So like investment bankers, I haven't hired any but they're used to working all the time. I think like people who have already tried to start their own companies are really great. You know cause they've like, a lot of the engineers we hire have already tried on their own so they've done everything for like a two or three person startup so all of a sudden they bring them on to like 20 person and they're like, oh this is so much better! You know they don't mind putting in the extra hours. Teachers, same thing, every Sunday night you would do your grading and stuff so like doing work on a Sunday night is not that, you know, a big deal. So I think you kind of have to look for that type. And its definitely a red flag if, and I've done it I've kind of not gone with my gut and hired people who are very 9 to 5, who don't believe in like opportunity. You know? So I'm like, I'll be like hey I think you'd be a really great person to have on this project working with the founder, and they'd be like ok well I can do that but how am I

supposed to do my other work. And I'm like, that's not the point, like those are the people I worry about. Because those people, I'm like, I just gave you an opportunity, you know, you need to figure out how you're gonna get your other work done, you've gotta get in here at 6am, or, because those people get that. That's kind of how we distinguish. So we do some like scenarios in the interviews trying to weed out those... at least for now. And you know as we grow it changes, so we're at 120 right now.

N: Wow, that's such a big change from... so how old is E now?

E: 5 years

N: Ok, wow.

E: So when it was two years old it had three people.

N: That's incredible.

E: Yeah.

N: So how do you think—do you in your particular program for the support staff, do you do anything to create sort of an office culture, or is there an E culture to begin with? Do you have outings or office rituals or food brought in or anything like that?

E: Yeah, they do a lot of that. So I mean, to get the talent that we want and to compete with big people like Google and Facebook, I mean we can't always offer the same salary, although I think they're pretty good, but we can't always offer the salary, but a lot of that you can make up in culture. So our culture has like, there actually have an HR consultant coming in now to check on our culture cause we're getting so big now we're going through growing pains. They bring in, our food is like super, super healthy, always organic and they have been really picky about that and we have like, really good raspberries, all the time. And—

N: I'm sold I would work there.

E: Right, so like I don't buy raspberries cause they're like \$5 a thing at the grocery store. So they do like high quality, when they bring in like catered food—we have another startup that shares our building and theirs always looks like kind of greasy and unhealthy and ours is always like top-of-the-line, gourmet super nice stuff. So that's kind of... they do a lot of food, and then what they have kind of done is that people at the company are in charge of like creating the party and organizing the events. So like our team, there's this IT director on our team she hosts a drag show once a month, like she's invited people to come to these drag shows once a month and like people support her and they all go, so there's—the only thing is---*bye George, good job!*—sorry George distracted me... um... there's events, there's parties... I lost my train of thought. But like yesterday they had the E hackathon, and it was like some girl from business development and a couple engineers and they were like, we need to have this big hackathon party. And so for 24 hours all the engineers—they're all leaving now, they're going home to take a nap, they've been here for 24 hours with their sleeping bags, they've been like coding all night to like invent these really amazing things. And they had like a waffle maker last night at midnight.

N: That's so cute!

E: So they do really fun stuff. On the support team specifically... so everyone's always done that, but you have to fulfill that kind of CMC tagline like, work hard play hard. But sometimes they play a little too hard, and sometimes it's really stressful.

So it's like how do you always balance that? But I remember... some startups are like really fratty, and we're not fratty. So we have people of all ages, they always welcome their kids to come. And like I've hired people of all ages, like moms, grandpas, young people, and I think that actually makes the experience at work a lot more diverse. So this guy emailed me from some startup, and he was like can we do a call? Sure. And I get on the phone, it's a video call and he and this other guy are both wearing like fraternity sweatshirts and they're like hey, here's this awesome job, and we're gonna go through this so quickly... and I'm like, I wouldn't wanna work at your company. Too stereotypical. I think E kind of tries to balance it out by doing like quality stuff but recognizing that we need diversity and need a few weirdoes and a few old people and, you know?

N: Yeah, totally. That's really cool.

E: And on the support team specifically we do, people were going to kill me when I first started but that's probably why you have to be a leader but, we do a support cheer every day. And when we were at 3 people they thought we were crazy, I'd like blast some music for like 45 seconds of like some song of the day, and I'd say like, "Support team who you representing today?" and everyone on the team has to shout out the name of a teacher they're currently talking to.

N: That's awesome!

E: And we all cheer. And at first when it was 3 everyone was like, K what are you doing? But people cheering it, it like, it's good, it reminds everyone what we're working for. Overcoming that was like a tough one when S, the CEO is like in the corner of the room like, what are they doing? And then recently we started this program where we invite engineers to come down, and we call it one-o'clock fun o'clock, and they come down and they talk to teachers. And so now when they come down we cheer for the teachers and we also cheer for them. And it's really fun and everyone knows about it now. It's really fun. We have a good time.

N: I love one-o'clock fun o'clock.

E: It's so funny because people will, I'll be in a meeting and like some of the guys will be like, don't you want to do a three-o'clock fun o'clock? Like everyone makes fun of the name and I don't know what three-o'clock fun o'clock is but they are always doing spoofs on our one-o'clock fun o'clock.

N: That's so fun. So it sounds like you have your traditions, but on a daily basis is your work pretty similar every day or do you find that you're working on totally different projects every day?

E: I'd say me personally, different, and I like that because it has the entrepreneur aspect, more like on strategy. The thing is like I'm motivated by that and I assume most people are, especially the ones that I'm hiring, so the question of how do I recreate that for them in a different way but I still get out of them the work I need. So what we usually do is, 20% of their time in the course of a year is spent on leading a specific project that will make the company better. So that's sort of how I keep the, kind of the entrepreneurial stuff alive on my team specifically. Not all teams work like that.

N: And do they run that project by you?

E: Yeah, we kind of come up with our goals, I kind of create the vision for the quarter, and then I allow them to come and like kind of submit what that project

should be to fit it, and then they kind of outline it on their own, manage it, like let them come up with the outline, I look at it with them, we decide like, yes, this looks good, this is what we want this project to be and then like kind of since we agreed on what the outline should be they just go. You know, because that way I don't feel like I'm micromanaging. And it's been pretty successful so far. I think the hardest—*bye VJ*---the hardest part about like what my job is on a daily basis is I'm a big facilitator, so making sure all the teams are communicating effectively to like get stuff done. So that struggle, and I think if you're looking at gender issues in general like that's where I notice a huge gap. Definitely a lot about power struggles and stuff.

N: Ok.

E: Um, I think that's like, cause like when you're working on your projects and your to-do list, everyone's individual, you know? Man or woman or whatever. As soon as you get into like a meeting room environment, or trying to convince someone to like finagling, like trying to convince someone to take on something, or need a decision made or something it's the fun part but also the tougher stuff. That's when you just, its either non-engineers or engineers. And you'll notice that most engineers at our company are male. We have one female one. So that could be it in the startup environment. So I feel often kind of helpless, like I have an idea that I know is good, know it needs to happen, but now I have to go communicate that to a male engineer. And when you do that you have to do it in a way that first makes sense to the engineer's mind, and second doesn't feel for the man that you're telling them what to do, because they don't like that. And so you kind of, they struggle with that. So its like then, how do I manipulate this situation so they don't feel like I'm telling them what to do but they do it and move on? So I found myself doing that a lot. Or else I come off as kind of bossy.

N: Right. Do you find yourself trying to go to the female engineer more, as opposed to the male engineer?

E: Um, I think there really are none. There's one. There's one, and yes I appeal to her.

N: Out of how many total?

E: One female engineer total. And 2 male engineers. So I guess there's three. Out of 120 total people at the company. Yeah, that's not a lot right? So that's like the hard thing here is like when I worked in a school environment I cant compare it but its hard to tell, is this an engineer thing, or is this a male female thing? Like would I be having the same problem if I had to explain things to a female engineer?

N: Yeah.

E: Yeah. So its an interesting dynamic there. Because that means that when I go to the meetings, what you'll feel often there's a recruiting rep, but lets say we go to a product meeting, where that's really something new, there's someone from marketing there, its always a woman, she'll figure out how to like, message this in a cute way. We have someone from sales, again, a woman. And someone from support, which is me. So three girls. And all the people that actually have control over what's about to happen are men. So the front end developer, the back end developer, the product person. So what I'm trying to do is, there's this girl on our team right now and she like really hopes to do product, so I'll try to push her in. Just

to see her succeed but also I think she'd be a good voice on the team to kind of check themselves. You'll get—our designers we have more females, but they can't make it work, so it's really interesting when it comes down to the people who get to dictate the product and who actually make it work, it ends up being definitely male dominated.

N: Interesting. Even though, did you say that the founder is a male and the CEO is a female?

E: The founder is a male and the CEO is, yeah, a female. Also she is, C was an engineer. So she like went to business school, she's married to a big investor. So she... I think that's it. I was thinking about our call and like, if I could engineer, if I can like learn to program, which I'm like constantly thinking about—and you should definitely research some of the woman programming schools out there, like this could be, I feel like I could get into any company.

N: Oh, totally. It sounds so much more intimidating than it is though. I'm sure you could learn it so fast.

E: Oh, yeah. I'm sure. You kind of have to buckle down and do it, but the more I've been here the more I'm like I've got to figure this stuff out. Because like, its just, you feel like you need it and who knows? If it was a room full of female engineers would I feel the same? I don't know but it definitely feels like they can kind of be in control, so you're talking to this room of men, and as a woman you kind of have to be very careful and not coming off as bossy or like, complain-y, you know? Like, its all about manipulating the situation to get them to like you and want to work with you but also get your stuff done how you want it done. And you know like C, they all say, "Ugh, she's so tough." Just like asks a billion questions and she's so demanding. Like that's how they talk about her. Just like, she's the CEO that's what she's supposed to do. [laughing]

N: [laughing] Yeah, that's her job.

E: So that's kind of my insight there. It's very interesting. Coming into like being in a leadership position I've noticed it a lot more.

N: That's interesting. Its amazing that you notice it more in a leadership position rather than when you're sort of just answering to one person. Cause I guess if you're just answering to one person than you're just dealing with them, regardless of gender.

E: Yeah, I think that's it. And when you're at a meeting table, that's when I notice it the most.

N: Right.

E: And there's like a problem to be solved... and I'm sure it's similar in corporate but I think in startup land the rules are even more... you can make them up. You can be a powerful woman and like, push, but you have to be willing to kind of put yourself out there. So I think there's definitely more opportunity, versus like a corporation that's been around for a while and have all these rules and social standards that they go by, so I think you do have the opportunity to change it more. But you also have no one modeling for you how to go about it.

N: Interesting.

E: Does that help?

N: Yeah, definitely. That really helps a lot. And its cool it sounds like you've figured out how to model it for yourself for sure.

E: Yeah, I'm still, every day I'm like, ok how do I deal with this specific one. Definitely a fun job.

N: That's really cool. Do you think that you'll stay there for a while? Do you see yourself...

E: Yeah I think I'll see it through. I really believe in the mission of what we're doing so I think that makes me want to stay, you know? And like the work environment is so nice in so many ways. Its very flexible time and like, you know, they take care of you there, which makes you want to stay.

N: They take care of you just in sort of letting you pursue your own goals or...

E: Yeah, pursue your own goals, willing to work with your schedule, feed you, you know. I can definitely see it getting harder as we grow. I could leave and come back and no one is like aware of my schedule really, but I'm aware of who works for me, you know? Like so its getting, as managers grow up the teams and stuff and they're responsible for these five people or these ten people they're like a little bit more aware of where they're slacking or not or whatever. But ever since I've been there no one has cared when I take a vacation or if I take a vacation as long as I get my work done.

N: That's really cool. Yeah. I was going to ask about since, now you have a large team rather than running the entire support by yourself, if you find that the work life balance is more work hard play hard and less like, work hard all the time.

E: The nice part is now I have people to work on the weekends for me, so that's really nice the stress is in a different way. Sometimes I wish I could go back to that lifestyle of work. Like just kind of I wasn't responsible for anyone so I just like did it, and now I just... you know I would just come in at like 11:00 some days so I'd wake up early at 7am, I'd do all of my work in the morning, and I'd come in and keep working, leave on Friday at two but then work on Friday night, like it didn't matter as long as I was getting it done. But now that I have a team like they want to know the schedule and if I'm coming in at 11 they want to come in at 11, but I'm like, I don't know how you work yet. So come in at 9 until I figure out when you're most productive, you know?

N: Yeah, that's interesting.

E: Yeah. But its definitely like, the weekends are easier but I feel like I have more at stake, bigger decisions to make, more careers that I'm managing, I think.

N: Yeah. Well wonderful. That's really, really helpful already, thank you so much!

E: I hope it gave you a starting point.

*Offers to try to put me in touch with CEO if I have four or five questions for her, she's on maternity leave but she is a big power in Silicon Valley. I thank her for her time, and she wishes me luck, says keep her posted, and she'd love to read my thesis when I'm done, so work hard! I say I'll definitely send it to her.*

9/29/13, 10:00am

Mary, CF

N: So how long have you been around?

M: Well I started this over four years ago with a mission to basically marry up all the media pipes in this enormous place called work. So I spent the first 2 and a half years to be honest trying to attack one of those media spaces, specifically cable, to launch a dedicated cable channel. And then we launched the website on valentine's day in 2012. In terms of our web presence we're only a year and a half old. And then the TV piece of it is on hold, you know I've met with all the top reps of all the companies you know, Comcast, Time Warner, you name it and got members of congress to write letters on our behalf to the CEOs of these companies saying we need these cable channels yesterday. And no one said no but no one said yes either. You know the world of cable is undergoing massive changes right now and in many ways it was great timing in that the need four years ago is still very much the need today, the number one problem facing our country is jobs. The downside is that consumers want more channels, they don't want fewer channels, and they don't want to have to pay for all the channels they have so cable companies aren't exactly looking for more content, they're looking for what content to get rid of. So in it and as people migrate from TV to the web it may be that we don't need a cable channel anyway, that we can accomplish the same on the web and on the phone, so... so that's on hold at the moment while we build out our web and mobile presence.

N: Wonderful. And how many people are you at CF right now?

M: Well in terms of paid, H is the only paid employee. I don't pay myself because we don't have sufficient revenue yet to do that. And then everyone else who works with us is because its meaning and need for them. They're not comped, they're blogging on our platform because they want to reach a greater audience, they are summer interning because they are looking to create resume material that they can then leapfrog into either a full time job or an even better internship next year, that kind of thing.

N: Right. I'll definitely, if you're willing to have your name spread around, we have this brand new entrepreneurship office and there are always students looking to get involved in startups for summer internships.

M: Oh, yeah, that would be great. And maybe you know from the standpoint of an intern I'm a great deal from the standpoint of, I've managed multiple global businesses for PNG and J&J so you know, I'm not typical in that I know how to run businesses, and I... that's the first thing. The second thing is that the people who intern us, they get to pick their projects. And I encourage them to pick projects that will get them closer to their next goal. For instance our summer intern from last year, he has an amazing resume, you know and after this summer that there isn't anything he won't be able to do or get after working with us. And as you know today internships are everything.

N: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. And I think that's the really important thing about working for a small startup company is that you really do get to do everything, see exactly how it works.

M: Yeah, you know my nephew worked for a company we're all quite familiar with, a fortune 50 company, and I'm not saying it was a bad experience—it wasn't—but he spent as much time at the gym at the advice of his direct report as he did anything else, because big organizations aren't really set up to give meaningful work to interns. They have enough hands. So yeah, I highly recommend to kids that they work for a startup because as they point out there's no end to the amount of work and opportunity to make a difference.

N: Well that's wonderful. I'll definitely mention it.

M: Thank you.

N: And so I'm curious: you said that you've run multiple global businesses. What made you decide that you wanted to start your own, and that in particular you wanted to start C?

M: Well I've always known I wanted to be an entrepreneur, so through the years I have evaluated several business opportunities. One was called [research@now.com](http://research@now.com) which was over 20 years ago, but that was to bring qualitative research, focus groups, online. And there've been others since then. And part of the process of determining if this is what you want to do is to vet it, you know, to do the business plan. And C is frankly the first business plan that I had that went the distance. So as I did the business plan and I vetted it with highly qualified people the boxes kept coming back with check marks. So that was one. The second is it is the biggest problem this country is facing, for which there really is no good solution for people. You know, the landscape has dramatically changed for how you get a job or start a business, and there's really no site like ours that walks you through the cliff notes on what you need to know. If you lose your job tomorrow—well, not you, but say your mom loses her job tomorrow—there's no site out there that very quickly gives you the down low on, these are the 5 things that you need to do right now. That's immensely helpful in this economic environment. And that's only, you know, one small example. So between giving people the what they need to know, the best resources available today to get it done, as well as the inspiration that comes from other people's successes, it was something that would make a difference, it was something that was needed, it was something that would be competitively unique, and ultimately has the potential to make a lot of money. So those were all good reasons.

N: That's fabulous. So what do you think... how did you decide to get started. Did you... did you find someone to partner with right away or were you sort of on your own for a while?

M: Well the first thing I did was I made up a business plan. As I said I then vetted it with some people from the media industry, and I cold called. And one of the people I got in front of was the first ever president of ESPN, and now he runs, it's a different cable network and he's immensely successful. And I just cold called him and he agreed to meet with me. And that kind of happened a lot. You know I met with the same thing with the person who started the Yankees network, and I found people



really responsive. And they all were encouraging, I have to say. You know, they recognized the long shot, but they were encouraging.

N: That's wonderful.

M: ... that person who was the first president of ESPN, he encouraged me to rethink my name. At the time it was called the Employment Channel, and he was right. So I went back to the drawing board on the name and that's when we came up with C. So that was kind of the first step. And then that individual from ESPN said you know look, you've been trying to get into the cable companies without success and you're never going to get in unless you have someone who has those relationships, let me put you in touch with someone who does. And then I paid a fortune, quite frankly, for her to open those doors. And then I assembled a team who I had to pay, people who came out of cable networks to develop the programming for a cable net, and we flew around the country to meet with those people. So it was a very expensive undertaking, I learned a lot, it may ultimately be useful, in fact on Friday I was meeting with someone from MTV and I ended up talking about a lot of those show concepts with him. So it was interesting, I'm 52 years old and the head of MTV asked me if I wanted a job [laughing]. So I guess I'm not that old after all.

N: Not at all! You have your own company, that makes you young all over again.

M: Well you know you kind of have to reinvent yourself a lot of times in this world. A because we're living longer and B, because we just, the money doesn't go as far as it used to. So here I go!

N: That's wonderful. So what do you think that the biggest challenges and the biggest rewards have been?

M: The biggest challenge is the money, and this is true for almost all entrepreneurs: getting funding is the single biggest reason people fold their tents. And I'm no exception: you know, I'm self-funded but at a certain point my husband is going to say, M, enough is enough. And you know he's been incredibly patient and supportive watching the money that we've saved over the past 20 years basically walk out the door with no guarantee that we will ever get it back. So that's the biggest thing. And you know crowd funding has the potential to really help that and change that dynamic, but yeah. The biggest challenge is, you know, it's the money. And the second challenge is managing the rest of your life. I have 2 children who are in school, and I have a husband who until December of last year worked and lived 2 states away Monday through Friday. So I was a single mom Monday through Friday... so yeah, just kind of managing it all. I wrote a blog about whether or not young people are better suited for entrepreneurship, and they in many cases are. Because you know Mark Zuckerberg didn't have to worry about food on the table for his kids, or being at their soccer game, and he didn't have to worry about stupid thing like I have to dye my hair now. You know? Like there are things that... you don't sleep as well as a woman when you are pre- or post-menopausal. Like, I never worried about sleep or whether my hair had to be colored in anticipation of a meeting... or whether you HAVE hair! You know? Your hair falls out as you grow older... there's so many things that just weren't factors when you're, you know, your age. [laughing] it's a different time. So that's the biggest challenge. But I'm so much smarter having done what I did. I don't know how you kids do startups at your age because you don't have the experience of working.

N: Well, I guess you just make mistakes earlier.

M: I guess. You know I mean, I was lucky I went to work for the best training ground for running a business in the world, called P&G, and they spent a year investing in me, as they did all my colleagues who went into brand management, and then I got to work after that. And that training and that experience was so formative for what I'm doing now. I don't think I could be successful, quite frankly, without it. So I'm very lucky. I'm qualified.

N: Absolutely. Do you find it rewarding work? What makes you the most proud in your work?

M: It makes me proud to have people write me. I had a woman who live here in town, I've only known her to see her and wave I've never had a conversation with her, she's my age with kids, and she wrote with a question to help her ex-husband. And I responded, it was on Facebook, and she said "I've been following your site since you launched it, I think it's great, I share it with everyone I know who either has a job and wants to find a new one or lacks a job, and my kids are both in college and I'm like, you better get on C to figure out how you're going to get an internship and a job." That was really nice.

N: So you know you're making a difference.

M: Yeah, I'm making a difference, exactly. Not to say you can't get excited about selling toothpaste, you can. But you know, if you can work this hard and make a difference in the world, even better.

N: Yeah, fabulous. So take me though a day working at C. If you don't have an office, is it a lot of phone calls, is it mostly responding to questions on the internet...

M: Well there is no typical day when you're running a business, whether it's at J&J or here. You know, tomorrow for instance I'm in the city all day, we're shooting two videos. One in midtown with the number one lawyer when it comes to crowd funding, and one in Brooklyn who is a nonprofit that has to do with eliminating the sexualization of girls. And so I will get up at 6, I will be on my computer checking all my analytics, responding to emails, I will get my kids fed and to school, and then I will get on a train, and I will hopefully get back in time to take my daughter to a 5:00 doctors appointment and my son to a 5:20 tutoring appointment, get them home, feed them, and you know, work until I drop about 9:30.

N: You need at least 2 more of you.

M: [laughing] but you know I am very fortunate in that God made me very efficient. So I am, I can just get a lot more done than most people quite frankly, because of those skills. And so Friday I'm back in the city because we have a big meeting with a media company where we'll be talking about selling our job ads, as well as partnership opportunities. In between, Tuesday through Thursday, I will be looking for people for blogs, I will be responding to emails, I will be trying to sell job ads myself directly, I will be vetting guest blogs that have come in, I will be strategically assessing, are we doing the right things, it's just a myriad of things.

N: Wow. Never boring, it sounds like.

M: No, never. That's part of what makes it so wonderful.

N: Yeah. And so the other thing that I'm really curious about is I'm wondering if you've noticed any effects at all of being a woman as you're making these cold calls

and these meetings, if there are challenges, if there are benefits, if you just don't even notice gender at all.

M: You know, if you notice it or anticipate it you just kind of have to put that aside because it's not going to help you. If that's part of the world, you're going in with a chip on your shoulder is only going to harm you in your goals. So I mean, is it out there? Without a doubt. Particularly in the world of raising institutional capital, talking to Angel Investors and Venture Capitalists, without a doubt. But you just have to grin and bear it.

N: Absolutely. I completely agree. I'm interested to know what's different about speaking to Angel Investors and Venture Capitalists, that's what's peaking my interest.

M: They're all men.

N: Yeah, absolutely.

M: It's a boy's club. It's totally a boy's club. It's all about who they know. First of all, you can't get in front of them without someone basically introducing you. You know, you cannot cold call a VC and get anywhere with that. You know, here's a great example, you'll love this. When my younger sister, one of my younger sisters, was growing up, her best friend and I... well she was kind of adopted by my family. That sister went on to work for the UN in Africa for over a decade and I maintained the relationship with this friend who went out to SV. I cannot tell you who she is, but she's a bigwig out there. Not a big wig like Marissa Mayer, but believe me she's a bigwig out there. Anyway, so I see her every, once a year in NY because she comes through to see family of her husband so we get together. And she said to me, 5 years ago or 4 years ago whatever it was, gee I think what you're doing is great, I have a person on our board who we're working with who I think is just a doll, and if you want I'd be happy to introduce you to him, he's a VC. And she did. And that man, it was just as she described, he is a peach of a man, and he took me under his wing, and he looked at my business plan and he said "This is good but I think it's weak on financials, let me coach you on strengthening it, and then once I feel like you're ready I'll put you in front of my top VC picks." Which he did. So that came about as a result of my female relationships but caught wind because a man took me under his wing. You know, that's a beautiful thing.

N: So I'm also curious to know... well I guess this is sort of a silly question because it seems like your work at C is totally night and day different from anything that you've done before, is that safe to say?

M: Well, yes I guess you'd have to say that because I'm making something from nothing. There is no playbook. I haven't walked in with kind of a culture or anything established, everything is zero based if you will.

N: Are you going to try to expand and hire more people eventually? Is that the aim?

M: Oh, yeah absolutely. I mean once our jobs... I mean we are now a media and technology company we launched a patent pending technology to support our job board which has unique extensionality. Once we start really selling a lot of job ads I'm going to have to hire somebody to help support the execution of that. So yes, no question. And then you know we'll be launching apps in January and if those take off as I hope they do that will provide revenue that is sorely needed to free me up to do more partnership strategic things and less executional stuff.

N: Right, that's fabulous. Well great. Well my last question is if you have any advice for young people or for anyone who is interested in going into entrepreneurship.

M: I personally think it's better for you guys to get some experience before starting putting up your own shingles. I think it will just advantage you in terms of the likelihood of success. I mean as you know, half of all startups are gone within 5 years. So that would be my number one advice, and as we already discussed I think choosing to work in a startup before you launch a startup is probably the best fit there. And then you know, find some mentors if you can. Find some people who are willing to adopt you and clue you into, give you the inside scoop and the inside track to the opportunities and the people that you need to get you where you want to go.

N: That's great advice. Thank you. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me.

M: You're welcome.

10/7/13, 9:15pm

*Olivia, SmartStart*

### **Full Transcription**

N: Thank you so much for being able to chat even this late, I really appreciate it.

O: Yeah, god I'm sorry I totally... my personal email, I should have moved this to my work email because for some reason when I'm in hard core work mode, personal email just seems totally optional.

N: Oh, absolutely, no I know exactly what you mean.

O: Yeah, and so I drop the ball all the time on my personal email so thanks for understanding and I'm happy to do the chat.

N: Oh, I do too. Absolutely, well thank you so much. I just wanted to ask quickly before I start: this is an Anthropological project so I have been recording some of my interviews so I wanted to see if that was ok with you and let you know that anything that you said would be strictly confidential. I'm changing all names and identifying information so people wouldn't be able to tell what company I was talking about or anything like that.

O: Yeah, I'm perfectly comfortable with that.

N: Ok, wonderful. So I guess I would love to know your background, how you got to where you are, just your story.

O: Of course. Well I'll start... I'll start with some back story. So I grew up in the Seattle area, originally, played water polo and looking for colleges I wanted to play water polo in college but I also wanted to go to a place where I could do other things, IE play d3 instead of d1, and Claremont was just a perfect fit for that. So decided to go to Claremont, really liked the small school atmosphere, the fact that I still got to be an athlete but got to be a student on top of that. I played all four years and when I was looking for a full time job, it's actually kind of interesting I always thought I wanted to do something in business, and Claremont kind of puts you on this track where you feel like you're behind if you're not interviewing your junior year and you're not getting internships with certain firms. And so I would say that I wasn't as much... I was kind of a product of my environment at Claremont and what I got into immediately after school. And I don't mean that as a bad thing but to give you kind of more concrete example of that, I interned with PWC my junior year cause I was an econ accounting major, and after that I thought truth be told that accounting was kind of a horrible decision. I thought it was like just horribly boring. And I wanted to do something a little bit more challenging. I think it was partly the athlete in me, the competitor wanted to do something that was one of the hardest jobs you can get, really prove myself. And so investment banking was a very natural path from there. So I went through the full interview cycle at Claremont Recruiting, ended up getting a job offer from Cowan and Company in San Francisco. And that stuff is like all on my LinkedIn in case you want to check that stuff out. So I did

banking for a year and some change, about 15 months, and I had gotten into that in 2008 which was really like the height of the recession, like everything started hitting the fan when I was a month into the job there. And so I got a really interesting perspective on basically like the lowest of the lows in the market that probably got hit hardest by it. And even that notwithstanding I don't think banking was the right role for me. One thing I learned about myself there is I could do the analytical stuff and the finance stuff was alright; my biggest strength was interacting with people and relationships. I like to joke, and this is actually not a joke its 100% true, but I tell people in job interviews, that my review after the first year of investment banking I was one of the highest ranked analysts, I was like #2 in the whole class but my individual category rankings were, I spiked the highest in relationships and communication, client stuff. And my lowest marks were in financial modeling and valuations. And so I was like, alright, maybe this isn't the right role for me long term. So I started looking and I actually was I'd say if I was being really honest with myself and self-aware, I was just really eager to get out of banking and I took one of the first job offers I had from a startup. I thought the whole startup world was super sexy and it was the thing to do in the Valley, and that was in 2009. So I took that job and it was not a well diligenced decision by any means. The startup is actually still around, it was more that the role I was doing was, again, wasn't a great fit for me, and the company wasn't working on a product that I personally was super passionate about. And that's so important in a startup.

N: Yeah absolutely.

O: So I didn't really like believe in the company, I decided that I kind of made up my mind pretty quickly that this isn't—I was like, I'm going to put in my time here I made my own bed, but I'm really open to other things and I probably won't be here longer than a year or two.

N: Yeah.

O: So at that point, I'd actually gotten outreach from my current manager, and she reached out to me about becoming a recruiter, which is not something I had ever considered at all. But because I was a little loose in the saddle I was more than willing to take the conversation, and long story short, over the course of the next couple of months built a great relationship with this woman, who has been my manager and my mentor for the last 3 and a half, 4 years. So I made the leap into recruiting... and by the way if I'm giving you way too much info or not enough please feel free to stop me.

N: No, this is wonderful.

O: Ok cool, I interview people all day and sometimes the story is just like, oh my god I've heard enough. So I wont be sensitive to it. But yeah, so I got to Caps, and at Caps I was focused on venture capital and growth equity recruiting for investment professionals, and it was a really natural transition for me from doing investment banking and working at a startup because obviously a lot of the candidates we were pulling from came from banking and consulting or startups and a lot of them are almost peers to me. So it was a business I understood really well and I actually loved—I think on day one I knew I had found the right fit. Sorry my computer... perfect. Ok, so obviously being exposed to the venture and tech community was awesome and I spent a lot of time at networking events and talking to awesome

people who had worked on really cool projects, and I just felt like it sounds like a strange thing to say, but I felt like I really was at the heart of an industry that was so exciting, there was so much happening, and I was just lucky to be in the right industry at the right time, and in a position where I had so much access to people who I had no business talking to whether it is partners at venture firms or people who have led product at Google... it was all very exciting to me. So I after 3 years at Caps had really caught the bug to go in-house at a startup, and there had been a lot of transitions at Caps, my manager had actually left, I by default was then in charge of our group there which was awesome for a 26 year old but was also... I think I'd seen the writing on the wall while it was great that this company entrusted me to run this entire practice, it probably wasn't a good sign that they also didn't want to hire a replacement. So somebody that was super senior to me, had really risen the ranks in the tech community, where I was just kind of starting out. So I left, and actually took 5 months off, which is something that a lot of people find terrifying, especially like type A CMC people, who would never dream of just quitting your job and not having anything planned out, but I found it to be a really rewarding experience actually, and as long as you're doing things for the right reason, and you leave your, I would say, bridges and references intact, it can work really well because you can actually be fully devoted and thoughtful about your next step. And people in my experience were so understanding and appreciative of that. I never got into a situation where people were like, well you've been out of work for 3 months what the hell have you been doing, just chilling? I'd be like well yeah, but.... [laughs] this is what I'm doing, I'm pretty constructive with my time, this is why I choose to make this decision I want to be really laser focused on what I want to do next and that's why I'm talking to you guys. So anyways then I started to hear about SmartStart, which is the startup I'm at now. And when I left Caps I was thinking about what I wanted I was like ok: I want a startup ideally that's under 50 people, just in terms of like growth and how much you can learn and what sort of phases they're going through, so under 50 people, fantastic team, and a product that I believe in. So SmartStart was all of that for me. The product is really phenomenal. It's a really hard-core piece of technology, its in the enterprise phase, it's a B to B product, but the end user is just any business person, so its really consumers who are using this, just in their professional context. So in terms of what was a product I could relate to instead of some really obscure database thing, and the people I just knew from the second I met the team I was like, these are my kind of people. There are a lot of former athletes in whatever sense you choose to define that, whether that be like collegiate athletes, people that had been part of a team, maybe they didn't even play sports but the camaraderie and the teamwork came through loud and clear and that to me was really appealing.

So I joined SmartStart a little over 3 months ago and I'm focused on talent there, I'm the only dedicated in house recruiter, my manager that I referred to a couple of times now from Caps actually joined SmartStart around the same time. So we interviewed together, she's the one who originally pulled me into the process. And she does mostly—she had all people, so HR, recruiting... we have grown from 30 people to 45 people since I've been there.

N: Wow that's fast.

O: *Really* fast. Really really fast. And if I'm being, if I'm being totally accurate, when I signed my offer letter I was the 30<sup>th</sup> signee, but when I joined there had probably been like 4 maybe even 5 people who had started because I had like 3 weeks between when I signed and when I started. And then yeah, we've added at least 10 since I've been on board in 3 months, so really fast growth. So yeah, sorry that was really long-winded but that's the story.

N: No, that's great! That's wonderful and I love having that background because it's really interesting how many different experiences you've had and similar experiences you've had, so that's really interesting. So I guess one of the questions that I was thinking of when you were talking is, I'm wondering, you've got these multiple startup companies you've been in and then you also have this perspective of a startup versus a non startup, and I was wondering—maybe we could do just one of those at a time—what the biggest difference was between your banking experience and your startup experience and I'm sure that they were night and day, but sort of what you think was important and different about them.

O: Yeah, well I think one of the things that is kind of a no-brainer but you underestimate is the amount of leverage you have in a large company or an established company, versus a startup. So yeah. There's really not a lot of resources at your disposal at a startup, you have to be super scrappy. In banking it was like, get this presentation ready and do it the way we do it. And like you know, you send it off to our presentations team in India overnight and they'd send something back and you know there were templates and there was a process set up. In startup land, it's like, just do it no matter how, whatever you have to do to get it done just do it, there's no right or wrong way. You're probably going to do it wrong a couple of times and then eventually figure out what the protocol is. And by the way you're on your own. So I'd say that is a big difference. I'd say that the level of stress and responsibility for me personally was always bigger and greater in my startup roles because you kind of, within a large institution, there's just a lot more like checks and balances in play to make you feel like you're not totally and solely responsible for things. And within startup land you kind of get this like, you start to have this feeling once you're on board that's like, oh my god I'm the only person that's doing this and if I don't do this it's going to have this impact, and we could blow things up in a month if this doesn't get done. So my sense of urgency and my feeling of responsibility and therefore stress, because I'm the kind of person who turns that into stress, has always been much higher within a startup. So while people like always talk about startups being like awesome work environments and what have you, I think it's really not everyone's cup of tea because you have to work way harder, failure can be a lot more real and close to home, and yeah, I mean it's funny, even with at SmartStart we have the most amazing perks like we get all of our meals paid for, they pay our public transportation, we have these amazing group outings all the time, our office is like tripped out, it's crazy. You know at the large company I worked at we had like free pretzels and that's it. And like a Christmas party.

N: Right.

O: So like even with all of these perks and this really casual work environment, I think people have to be really prepared for it just to be hard, and to work really



hard, and to deal with failure. And they have to be self-starters: no one is giving you directions because the directions don't exist.

N: That's really interesting. And it's interesting to me, the cultural aspect you mentioned, all the as you say the perks of working at a startup. I want to know more about the cultural differences. Did you notice that there were any like special rituals or anything that your startup company was trying to create an explicit culture? Because that's one of the things that's been really interesting to me, studying startups vs. well established companies, is that they are starting from ground 0. So oftentimes they are sort of needing to make themselves a culture, and I was wondering if you noticed that at all.

O: Yeah, that's I'm glad you asked that actually because SmartStart has like worked from literally day 1 to establish a culture when it was just our two cofounders in a kitchen in Palo Alto. So culture can make or break a startup. It's what brings great talent, and the talent is what builds a company. If you have great people the product will figure itself out. So how our founders thought about culture, is they reflected on like from our lives to date, what are some of the experiences that we found the most rewarding, the most motivating, and we have the fondest memories of accomplishment. And for both of them it was actually their memories of playing sports growing up. And it wasn't about like the winning and the competition as much as they felt it was about more of the camaraderie, like being on the team bus together on the way to games or like traveling and nights in hotels. And you know just having that really really close bond both on the field off the field. I was a water polo player so in the pool out of the pool... they wanted to recreate that feeling of camaraderie and team work. So they have worked really hard to preserve that within our company especially as it grows. We work as a team; every Friday at 4pm people go pencils down and we recognize the accomplishments of the week so people get up and they show off what they've been working on, we give awards at the end for the person or the team, most of the time it goes to a team, that did the most "defensive" work like the stuff that nobody wants to do that has to get done that maybe we're behind on. And then the people who did the most "offensive" work as in like proactive, pushing us ahead... so that feeling of kind of weekly cycles of teamwork and recognition totally feels like sports to me.

N: Right. That's awesome.

O: And that's one of the things that's really really core to our culture. We also do team events every week, or like every month and it would switch off being things like dinner or things like canoe trips. We also want to make sure that our company is very, very inclusive and family friendly and is one big family. So we make sure that people know that their kids and significant others are always invited to eat with us at meals, they're always invited in the office, we have lots of kid-friendly stuff, which is really rare for a startup because startups typically skew really young. We probably skew a little bit more mature. And by the way the young versus mature thing is way not HR friendly [laughing]

N: No, that's fine.

O: So I don't know how you want to put that. But there's usually like a culture that is significantly tied to the average age of the employees. And if you have a startup where a lot of the people have kids it creates a very different feel than if you have a

startup where there's like a whole bunch of 23 year olds. So we want to make sure that our office feels like a very very family oriented place because people are working really hard, they spend a lot of their lives there, and family is really important. They need to be on board with that and people need to feel like they're not sacrificing that aspect of their life for work.

N: That's really interesting. So I guess you've said a lot of the really positive things... I guess you've sort of answered this question, it seems like the biggest challenges are the responsibility that you have involved.

O: Yeah, I think responsibility and one of the things that I'm really starting to get a grasp on because this is... the startup I was at previously right after banking I really wasn't there for very long, probably like four months total, and I was still pretty junior in my career just like figuring out what the hell was going on. But here, one of the things that I've really started to realize in myself is that I need to learn how to say no. And to micro prioritize things. So I'm a chronic lister, every day I end up with this insane list and things are checked out and you know, like everything is listed, everything is prioritized. But what I was realizing is, ok I have a "priority" list of 25 things to do, and all of those things in an ideal world would be done today but they're not going to be. So how to even micro prioritize beyond that and you have to give yourself, ok these 3 things have to be done today no matter what. And because of that if you feel like its 4pm and you're not on track for that you just need to say no to everything else. So that has been a huge challenge for me, especially when you don't want to let your teammates down and you want to take this sort of thing on but you just physically don't have the time to do everything that you need to do.

N: Right. And how about—this is sort of the side focus of my interest—I'm wondering if you notice being a woman at a startup. If there's any challenges or benefits, or even if you notice at all, especially in comparison with your work at the banking firm.

O: Yeah, I love this question because I think it's so interesting. I was the only girl—woman I should say—in the bullpen in my group at the bank, and there was one other woman in our group actually and she was at the VP level, and there I felt... I felt it. A lot. But I think I also kind of played into it in a gender stereotype, like trying to figure out what's comfortable for you. For me, like there may have been times now where I was like, well this is uncomfortable, but what would have been more uncomfortable would have been to have ostracized myself and to have made it an issue, to have made it a gendered issue.

N: Yeah.

O: But it's just you know, it's all guys, they talk about guy stuff, and for me it was more important for them to feel comfortable talking about that around me, rather than if they felt like they had to watch their backs because they couldn't talk about the same stuff around me.

N: Yeah.

O: I'm also not a very sensitive person on that sort of thing.

N: Right, yea. Me neither.

O: Yeah, my personal philosophy on like gender roles and stuff is that guys and girls are really different. We want to talk about different things. And obviously there's exceptions. But I don't think that declaring that you need to have total equality and

the same treatment for men and women from like what we talk about and who gets invited to what sort of thing, is actually that overarchingly important in the world. Like, perfect example: RI. We probably... we're about  $\frac{1}{4}$  women. We're probably a little light for a startup and particularly our engineering side we're a little light on women, but we're not the worst. I think we could be way better, I'd like to be better. But one of the most interesting things to me is that we have this women's initiative at RI and so we invite like you know the 12 female employees, and like all of the wives of our other employees to do like lean in circles for women. And our CEO, who's a guy, and who's *awesome*, pointed out, like, I want to come to your lean in circles. And we were like, no, you can't, you're not a woman. And our head of HR who's a woman was like, you know I feel like if they were having like a bros circle and they said that we weren't invited we would be pissed about it. But I think that there's horribly unfair benchmarks and it's hard, women feel like we're allowed to have exclusive groups because we're women, and we don't have the same number of opportunities yet men aren't allowed to have exclusively men groups at all just because that's not right and that furthers the divide between men and women in the workforce. So I find that part so fascinating. And I don't think I'm doing a great job of articulating it.

N: No, you definitely are. And I'm totally on the same page as you I really enjoy hearing you talk about it because it resonates with me.

O: So I think there's a lot of like, hypocrisy on that subject in the workforce, but at the same time you cannot deny the data. I don't know if you read Lean In but it has awesome, like Sheryl is so good about citing all these statistics about like how many women are paid less than men in certain industries and power positions and like all that is a fact, that's true, there's an issue there. But I think some of this micromanaging of making sure that men and women are treated exactly the same and have exactly the same opportunities on every single layer of the spectrum is a little bit absurd. Because we are inherently different sexes.

N: Totally.

O: And there's just going to be differences in the way that we work, and the way that we prioritize our lives.

N: Very interesting. And so do you find at your startup company... it's almost like you embrace the culture... the gender difference. It sounds to me like the gender difference is almost more visible in a positive way. And less sort of like you're trying to make it not a thing at all.

O: Yeah. I think absolutely. I think we're really conscientious on having a good balance on our team, and so that applies to everything, gender included. One of the things that we're kind of struggling with right now, not gender related, is that we feel like our team is a pretty bro-ey. We want to be really careful to not just hire a bunch of athletes and have this turn into a locker room: it's important to have balance. And we're right now evaluating candidates and we're like, ok, this person is not like someone that probably would have made sense as a first ten person hire. Because it's important that the first ten people are kind of like, they all speak the same language. But once you get past a critical mass it's really important to have that balance to bring different perspectives to the table. Whether that be personality types, or whether that be gender or work styles, that's all important. We

do definitely embrace like, we have a women's initiative, we love the women's initiative, our CEO loves the women's initiative even though technically he's not invited to it. People are really into it and instead of fighting it I think you're right, it's a fact of life. And so just accept it and try to find as much balance as you can.

N: Awesome. And then I guess my last question is just very open ended, what do you feel are some of the most intriguing issues that are facing women or people working in startups in general in Silicon Valley?

O: Yeah, um I think that there is a pretty sizable sense of entitlement in the valley and I think that we kind of live in a vacuum where we feel like we just kind of operate under this default that this is the center of the universe. But there's a lot of problems in the economy, in the world that are real problems that I don't think I guess I can only speak for myself and I can speak for like stereotypes and like things that you always see in the news about the Valley having its head up its own ass sort of thing, don't quote me on that.

N: [laughing]

O: But I think some of that is true. I think it's really easy to get sucked into this microcosm and that it's important to be aware of greater views. I think for women in particular... what would I say... I'd say that probably the lack of balance in engineering roles between the sexes is a tough problem. I don't really know... its hard for me to articulate but that's something that you definitely feel in the industry. And I think it's... people get really excited about female engineers, and I think that they bring an interesting perspective to the table and the bigger problem is just like, ok what's the root of this issue? Why aren't there more women in this field? I don't know if I know the answer to that, I don't know if I buy into like women are more naturally not as whatever it is, left brained, logically, mathematically inclined. I don't buy that. Yeah. And I, again this is kind of quoting Lean In but this part really resonated with me in the book when Sheryl is talking about most women, at a certain point in their lives and thinking about getting married and settling down, thinking about children, naturally pull back from work because they don't think they can do it all. But that really in some regards is the point where you should be leaning in the most, like don't check out before you're out. And so I think it's important for women to feel like taking however long they're going to to have kids or whatever is just a pause button but not actually a rewind button in their careers. I think a lot of women pull back and are like I don't want to move jobs, I don't want to take a promotion because I'm at a different place in my life and I don't want to work as hard... there's two sides to that coin. Some people might just be like, I'm burned out, I don't wanna work that hard any more, I don't want that promotion. That's cool, I don't care, that's awesome. Whatever you want to do but I think a lot of women just kind of do that by default without actually assessing whether or not they could make it work. Which I think they should, I think people underestimate themselves in that regard.

N: Interesting. I agree. I totally agree. Well thank you so much, Olivia, I really appreciate you taking all the time to talk with me.

O: So glad I could help.

10/7/13, 5:15pm

*Interview with Marie, at Le Pain Quotidian*

I met Marie in person outside Le Pain Quotidian in Claremont. She wore a brow- dark-green plaid blazer, khaki pants, and carried a black leather portfolio. On her angular face she sported power-frame glasses: thick on the sides with no bottom rim. She is thin, fit, and tan, with little to no makeup on her quick, small blue eyes. She has a professional air and an intense gaze, and her blonde hair is cut very short and combed perfectly in place. As she sits down across from me she hands me two articles she had printed for me about entrepreneurship and women in Silicon Valley. As we began to talk I noticed her brisk manner of speaking, and she smiled rarely but when she did it was large. Over the course of our conversation, I noticed that when I asked about culture, she told me about processes, about work instead of about life. I wondered whether this was particular to her, or if it was indicative of the blending of work and life in the Valley.

#### **FULL TRANSCRIPTION:**

N: So I guess I'd like to know more about your background, how you got involved in venture capital and entrepreneurship.

M: Yes, ok, so let's see... my background is early career straight academic. So PHD in biological sciences, did the right training at the right places, got a faculty position at Princeton University, did all the right things, was in the right places. And began talking to pharmaceutical places primarily as a way to get additional research money into my lab. And one thing led to another, and a bunch of the ideas that we had were actually quite good. And one of the people that I talked with left M where he was a senior executive, and called me after he left work and said, why don't you think about advising for us? And that was an easy yes, but then he started to twist my arm about didn't I want to come and join this company? That was harder. But what he was offering in a lot of ways was to explore some science that I probably... almost certainly couldn't have gotten funded by traditional academic methods. And it was just a time when that was true. There was money in the industry to do amazing things that were just not being funded at a government academic level. So let's see where are we going. So I left academia in 1994, spent about 12 years? 95, 96, yeah 12 years in the biotech industry, 3 different companies, 2 in Silicon Valley, one in Toronto. 2 were startups, 1 was a mature company, meaning they had 3000 employees, probably 300 million in revenues at that point. But they were private still. And that was a company that had intentions of going public. So let's see 2 startups, so startup, then this bigger company, then another startup. And amazing experiences. The first company, stayed there about 7 years in that one, and we were trying to find new antibiotic drugs, and so we did a lot of new things and put a

compound into clinical trials, and had an IPO so a public offering, went from when I started we had 5 or 6 people and that grew to probably almost 200 people at one point. And we went public and then things were not so good, so I left there after a while because I couldn't change anything that I thought was important. This much larger company that went from private to public, stayed there about a year and a half but did some interesting things while I was there. Found another startup in Toronto, doing neat work, adventure in Toronto, it was really cool it was right downtown, really neat. And the technology was really interesting. And from that we put another compound into the clinic, but that company as well did good things, it did not good things, and ended up in a Canadian chapter 11 equivalent, which is when you sort of tell the courts that you're going to go bankrupt and everything is going to be a disaster unless you can restructure yourself financially, liabilities you have to have written off at a less than 1 to 1 ratio. So that happened. The investors in that company are going to get rich but none of the people who did a lot of the work to discover the molecule will. And through that company I was there about 6 years, and then it went down to 2 or 3 and the restructuring... anyways so that's the story. And then from that Canadian company I came here to southern California taught at the K institute, taught drug discovery there, and taught entrepreneurship. I started teaching entrepreneurship, decided I wanted to get involved in the entrepreneurial community here, in Southern California, so I got involved in the TCA. So let me just explain that Angel investing is a bit different from venture capital. So Angel Investing is almost always personal money, invested into risky startup companies. Venture capital is usually when a firm puts together a venture fund from individuals. So individuals agree to pool their money together, and whoever they're giving the money, whoever is managing the fund, is the person who is ultimately going to make all the decisions about how that money is going to get invested, but then the investors get the rewards.

N: It's like a reverse mutual fund.

M: No, it's actually like a mutual fund for private companies. I think that's pretty close to accurate. In the mutual fund, individuals give money to the mutual fund, advisors distribute that to companies... so in the mutual fund its public companies. This is a case where people who want to invest in private companies give their money to a venture firm that then makes decisions like an analyst would in a mutual fund. So similarities, angel investors need to be accredited investors, investors in venture funds need to be accredited investors of funds themselves of a certain size. So pension funds typically have a portfolio of companies of different sizes, and it's a risk portfolio, so some small portion of money they put into risky types of things, and not infrequently those pension funds will go into a venture fund. But only a tiny fraction, so if it's a bad decision or a bad client only a small portion gets lost.

N: [interrupted by waiter *can I have a cappuccino? And for you? Just water.*] Do you think that the phenomenon that they're talking about 4.2% of venture capital funding goes to women, is that reflected in angel investing as well or is there any difference?

M: I would say gosh I haven't counted the entrepreneurs... so the biggest studies, I'm not sure there are any studies in angel investing, it might be fun to do. I'm not sure.... I'm not sure what the data... but there have been studies in venture

financing, and the studies usually go, oh some small percentage of venture funds go to women-led companies. And then the biggest question back that nobody I've heard ever has an answer to is, well, what percentage of companies that applied to you are women led? So is it that 4.whatever% of applicants are women and you fund like totally without bias? Or is it that 20% of companies that come to you are led by women and you only fund 4% and so there's some prejudice going around? And I don't know the answer, I don't even have a gut sense of what the answer is.

N: Some of my reading that I did had a suggestion that there were fewer women applying. A lot of the things that I've read have said that one of the reasons is that there are fewer women role models so it's sort of a vicious cycle, so I don't know if you have a sense of that.

M: Well, fewer role models and not infrequently, although there's the Facebook kind of model of the college age guy entrepreneur, but I think the truth is that a lot of venture fund money goes into entrepreneurs with more experience. Certainly in biotech that I'm familiar with no 20-something would give the millions and millions of hours that are necessary to start up a biotech company. So the venture funds are going to companies led by execs with a bunch of experience, and then it gets to round 2 and there aren't any women in the ranks who have that experience so it's a really different place. So I had always bought into that, what everybody says. Never did a study of it, but that's what people say. There aren't women in senior ranks and so they are left. There aren't women as venture capitalists because they aren't CEOs and a lot of venture capitalists start as CEOs that made a bunch of money. So it's like this whole thing that gets down to if only business were to support more women. But my surprise was when I started teaching entrepreneurship here at KGI the women aren't in the classes, that's self-selection. That is totally self-selection. And when I... so that was KGI, that was graduate masters level. Despite the fact that I was teaching, despite the fact that I was a pretty popular teacher, the proportion of women in the student population is usually 40-45%, and the proportion in the entrepreneurship classes varied from year to year because it's a relatively small number of majors, was in the 20 percent's. So there I sort of started saying wait a second... and then there were the couple of years where I was invited to be on a panel at the end of the year at CMC I guess, the Kravis leadership hosts it... Kravis leadership, Kravis family....

N: There's Kravis Leadership and then there's Berger Family and Work.

M: Berger Family and Work. Maybe the two of those, or maybe just the family and work center, organizes sort of end of the year, late April kind of thing, senior women...

*Interrupted by waiter, "Here's your water." "Thank you so much, would you like a water as well?" "Yes I would." "Ok I'll bring you one right out."*

M: They hold this thing primarily for women but anyone can come, but mostly women come, and it's all about work life balance, and putting women role models in front of students to talk about plans and blah blah blah, what it's like after a month and a half from now when you graduate. So I took the opportunity to ask those guys if they were you know starting up something in their dorms, and almost uniformly, no no no no no, too risky, couldn't possibly. And then I asked not knowing too much about the Claremont colleges at that point, well, are any of your guy friends doing

this? Oh, yeah yeah yeah yeah. I was like, what the heck? So you know I don't know what's going on. But I think that would be something really interesting to document and I think you could document it. And it would be a really interesting and maybe very important study, and there are different ways to do a senior thesis and I don't know how much you want to get into this, but I can imagine something where you actually end up as a research paper, where you collect data. You collect not basically the silly anecdotal data that I'm providing you with but you actually go to the schools and you ask for their numbers, right? As long as you said, take off the names, I don't want the grade or number, I don't want anything I want the male female column in any course that has to do with entrepreneurship. And by the way tell me whether the instructor is male or female, right? You go to the Claremont colleges there's probably 3 or 4 courses here in entrepreneurship being taught. But then keep going; see where you can get contacts.

N: Yeah, like even Stanford school of business.

M: Exactly. Go to Stanford, go to Wharton, go to graduate level, go to undergraduate level... there's something called FERPA that you'll need to be aware of, and I can't remember no recollection what FERPA stands for but it's basically student privacy rights. So they will be all nervous about it, can't do that for you, FERPA FERPA FERPA. And just tell them, I'm not interested in anything person, anonymize it all except male female and class year: are they grad students? And just see what you can learn. Because I think it starts in school, I think it starts at the undergraduate level. I think there's a funny perception of what people are saying, oh it's too risky to be an entrepreneur. What does it mean? What do you have to lose?

N: So many things are interesting about this. You're a wonderful terrible influence, because I'm a double major in Economics and Anthropology, and so right now I'm focusing on the culture of it, and now I'm thinking well maybe I'll just write a second thesis next semester where I gather numbers and do an econometric model of it.

M: It's the border of economics and policy.

N: And the cultural side of it, that there's something...

M: If you wanted to do that next semester, you should be getting the contacts now.

N: Totally. And the other thing about what you said about it being risky is I read this really interesting article about how entrepreneurs are actually risk-avoiders in general.

M: Isn't that interesting.

N: Yeah, so it was called the Sure Thing, and in general, people who are entrepreneurs are people who only bet on things that they are sure will work. And so there's the entrepreneurs that everybody knows about who have these crazy ideas and fail, or have the crazy ideas and succeed, and are the outliers and everybody knows about them. But then there's sort of a base median population of entrepreneurship people who see a good opportunity and go into it.

M: And I think it depends where you are. Be really conscious because I think the situation of the student entrepreneur who's basically in school is quite different from what is faced by somebody who has a stable job, and is saying, oh I think I'll quit my job despite the fact that my wife is pregnant, and I'm not going to have a paycheck and my idea might be nuts. Those are two really different things. And so I think it's mostly interesting if you could document in the student population where



what we're talking about is doing a bit of extra stuff while you're a student. And there's lots of extra stuff, this is just one type of extra stuff. And the women were telling me not that they didn't want to when they graduated, they didn't want to be entrepreneurs. They were telling me that as students in their dorm rooms, they thought it was too risky. And that gets back to some self-perception thing, true willingness to risk face, I don't know but I thought it was extremely interesting. So I would say keep looking: there are a lot of things that have been written about risk and entrepreneurs, and differentiate the blogger who thinks he or she has a notion from somebody who actually does a study where they try to gather information. Because I think a lot of people think about it and end up having opinions and then write, and I'm not sure what that tells you other than one person's opinion. Because it strikes me entrepreneurs do take risks: the biggest risk they take is saying I'm going to try to do this. Throw all the sure stuff aside, we're going to try to do this. But from that point on I would say entrepreneurs whether they show it or not are probably scared shitless, and they're trying to minimize their risk, they're not trying to amplify risk, because just in the statement of saying, oh I think I'll start up a company, that's enough risk.

N: Yeah, that's huge.

M: Investors are trying to do the same thing. They know it's risky, anything they can do to minimize risk that's what they want to do.

N: Interesting. Very cool, so I'm going to shift gears a little bit, one thing that you said that really excited me is that you had worked at a startup in Silicon Valley and a startup elsewhere, and that you worked in a startup in Silicon Valley and a non-startup in Silicon Valley. So these are two very important comparisons for me. And I'm wondering if off the top of your head there was anything about your experience at the startup in Silicon Valley that was different at the non-startup in Silicon Valley, the culture, the responsibilities and the freedom, anything like that.

M: Yeah there were a bunch of differences. Remember, the startup characteristics: so the startup had between 5 and 200 employees, the startup had no products other than our brains, so we were basically selling that we were smart and we could do things.

N: What was the actual company?

M: MP. So what we sold, and we got partnerships with pharmaceutical companies, big pharma companies, Kaiser, Johnson&Johnson, and Auchi, which is a big Japanese company, we convinced them that we were really smart and they should give us money to do a bunch of work that they would then have rights to. So in some ways it was like a service model, although our goal was to create a product. Ok, so that was that. What else... so we were private for, I was there for 94 to 2000 I think, 94 to 2000. We went public in 96, so they were private for 2 years and public for 4 years while I was there. In contrast, the Silicon Valley non-startup was I worked at for 18 months, it was private for 6 months while I was there and then went public, it had a presence worldwide, significant worldwide, it had sales numbering 300 million, which were global sales. About 3000 employees, probably 300 of those were at the Silicon Valley site which was the global headquarters, so it was the R&D site. And it had been in business for about 20 years, so it was still a technology company started in Silicon Valley, many of the people who started the company, I

don't know if what I'm about to say is true, many of the people who were on the leadership team today, when I was there, were present in the startup. Now whether a bunch of the key people who actually started the company vanished, that I don't know. I wasn't there long enough to hear all the....

N: The juicy gossip?

M: Yeah all the juicy gossip.

N: So take me through sort of a day.

M: So culture-wise. So let me tell you my position in the two because it differs a little bit. So at the startup I reported to either the CEO or someone who reported to the CEO. I was involved in almost all of our business deals, without question I was the biology spokesperson. In the non-startup that was not true. It was a much bigger organization, I reported to someone who reported to someone who reported to the CEO. I think that's right, the CEO, then there's... there may have been one person in between... and then there was me. So there were either 4 or 5... no 3 or 4 levels between me and the CEO. Whereas there was 0 or 1 in the startup. What else.... So a day in the life in the startup, that's really hard. I'm not going to be able to do that.

N: Was it sort of different every day?

M: It was pretty different every day. I'll tell you in metaphors what the startup felt like. So the startup felt like I started thinking about the concept of momentum in companies, so remember before the startup I had been running my own academic lab. And in that in a lot of ways you're actually a sole business owner. The sole business owner of your brand, the research you're doing, you have to go out and get money, usually government money to run your research, but what you have to do is convince people who are peers that you deserve money and somebody else doesn't. so in comparison between my academic situation, where the buck stopped with me, my chairman could sort of help if he wanted to but it wasn't his job and most of the time he didn't want to, so it was like, there was one person and it fell to me. In contrast to that in the startup there were a lot of things, although I had a lot of influence, I couldn't influence everything. And we did a lot of stupid things, and I knew they were stupid things. And of course because I'm omniscient I was always right.

N: Of course, and just brilliant.

M: [laughs] So you know working with somebody to get things done was pretty different, it was really quite different, and a great learning experience especially because if I wanted to get the things that I thought were really right, sometimes I had to go in a very circuitous, what felt like a pretty circuitous route to get the right answer.

N: Is that because of the relative power equality?

M: Male female?

N: Not male female, just I mean in general in a startup there's less stratification...

M: There's a lot of noise. There's people with opinions, different opinions, decision makers...

N: More decision makers?

M: Certainly more than in academia, right?

N: Yeah, that's true cause there's only you.

M: In academia, the answer is what am I going to decide, not... so ultimately in anything big the CEO made the decision, sometimes even understanding who was supposed to make the decision was not clear. What we did a lot of, and I think we did a pretty good job at M compared to other startups, was create sort of formal structures and bounds about whose responsibility were certain things. And the times when there were conflicts was almost always because two or more people thought something was their responsibility. And because the CEO didn't step in and say cut it out children, or didn't step up and say oh, you're right that's a complex decision, not you and not you and not you, that's me. So there were things like that. In contrast to all that, so academia and then the startup, the 3,000 person company, most of the decisions I was involved with were not at the business level. Unlike at M where a lot of the business decisions I had substantial... so the business was running independently, a lot of the stuff was like should we sell at this price, and I had nothing to contribute to that decision. So it was really the decisions within the 300 person research group that I had the most influence in. and there because there was a 20 year history, and because I was coming in from the outside, there were patterns of making decisions that were not necessarily logical from an organizational chart, so they did a lot of things because they'd just done it that way for 20 years. And when you said, yeah but I'm the head of whatever right now, that's what you hired me in to, they said tough.

N: This is our place.

M: So there was much more of a process of integrating and figuring out where I could influence, where it was just hopeless... a lot, much more than at M it was a lot of decision, I said this already, but decision making that really has nothing to do with the org chart. Decisions where if you looked at the org chart you'd say well, that person, that match should make the decision and it was completely different. So stronger culture, they had a very male culture, I said I was brought in as one of several senior women. But the male culture it was damaging to a lot of junior women. There was a lot of turnover... but that's what happens sometimes, when the pool seems like its going to be 80-20 there's a lot of women that turn over if the guys don't recognize them as much. They're not paying attention, the problem is they're not paying attention to the women anyways, so the fact that there aren't any is just noise. I think that's fair.

N: So that's interesting to me. I had another woman that I talked to who worked in a startup who said she had a hard time because she was one of the few women in the startup and she had to sort of fake her way into, when she was in a position of power so you said you were able to make more decisions, but she sort of had to make it sound like she wasn't the one making the decision. Did you ever run across that?

M: No, only when somebody else was trying to claim it was their responsibility.

N: Which has nothing to do with gender it just has to do with decision making.

M: Let's see... we had a male CEO at the startup, male CEO... it was usually a person who was the Chief Operating Officer in addition to the CEO, and he, we had two of those and each of them were male. But then there was me, I was probably the most senior woman, but we had another woman at a pretty senior level who had... actually two women leading two different departments, so I was sort of VP level

person, and the departments reported to me. But in the hierarchy because we were still pretty flat and pretty small, the department heads being women, they had a lot of voice, and personally they both had a lot of voice just personally as well. So that... I don't know what the total employee ratio would have been but in the senior ranks maybe in the 8 senior people head of department and above, there was probably 3 women. Which is not a bad ratio.

N: Not bad at all.

M: So I don't think I felt much pressure in that, there were a lot of things going on but I don't think there was much diminishing voice because of gender.

N: And that's just as interesting, I've had a couple people say they even feel like they have more voice because they were a woman.

M: And in G, the non-startup there was a lot of sexism, there was a lot. The women who were brought in clearly were marginalized as much as possible, there weren't very many of us.

N: The amount of time that you stayed there versus the other one as well...

M: Exactly, so I left... It was me, Debbie, and oh gosh what's her name I can see her, the three of us, oh Cynthia. Cynthia left before I did, I left, Debbie left in 6 8 months after, because it was, we couldn't have any influence, it was just barricade, barricade barricade.

N: Not worth it. And did that influence your decision to try a startup again, did that make you want to go back?

M: You know, yeah. It just wasn't nearly as much fun. Not having influence is, if you're used to having a lot of influence, not having a lot of influence is pretty frustrating.

N: And beyond the influence, one thing that's interesting to me as an anthropologist is, for example you said that this non-startup company with a 20 year history had this very set way of doing things. So they sort of have these cultures that have evolved over time. And I've noticed in my studies of startups, for example Netflix actually has a hundred page cultural dogma book, that they just wrote out their culture, that they really just physically created it. So I'm wondering, obviously most startups don't do it quite that explicitly but it seems like though office rituals, branded apparel, I don't know, things that make it more of an effort...

M: I would say, I have an example set of 2 plus a non-startup...

N: Well that's one more than most people.

M: M, that's the first startup was led by a guy who, I would call him overly organized, but for whatever reason he really liked his processes. So he looked at this group of people at one point who were just sort of bumping into each other and had the sense to say, this is really inefficient. This is crazy, so let's set down some rules so we're not so inefficient. And he did that quite early. The second startup in Canada was led by a guy who was not only not a process guy; he was sort of an anti-process guy, because he wanted control. He was a bit of a control freak and so anything that gave somebody else power he was either going to try to undo or...

N: They're like control freaks in opposite ways.

M: We had a few processes but we violated our processes probably more than we obeyed them. I don't think we had anything like a rule book, I don't think we had a

rule book at M either but we spent time talking about how we could do things, and setting up sort of organizational infrastructure.

N: What your priorities as an organization were?

M: Even things that, things like timesheets, and that was a big cultural thing. To an academic scientist—a lot of the scientists we hired were pretty immediately from academia, so this COO got us to sign off on timesheets and helped us appreciate why it was important. But I'll tell you from a cultural point of view trying to convince academic scientists that they should fill in a timesheet once a week or once a month... oh my gosh. It's like culture wars. It was explained because we had to track what we were spending time on you know, it became I don't want to know what you were doing that 15 minutes of the day and whether you were spending enough time, I just need to know what fraction of your time are you working on this project versus that project, and that's the only way we can keep track of it. And even stuff like that, oh my gosh it was so young, and we just never got there in the second startup. The CEO was too busy trying to be chief scientist and telling people what to do.

N: Absolutely. That's interesting. Did you have any of the 20% time as they call it now, that you could do sort of what you wanted?

M: No, we talked about it and decided that we were too thin, to officially do that.

N: To thin as in...

M: Meaning we didn't have enough resources. And we did worry about where our innovation was going to come from if we didn't let people play. But we also knew, and I think even the scientists knew, that if we let at least in the kind of work we did, if we let every individual play, nothing would get done. They might feel better, but it was unlikely that anything was going to get done. Because all of our projects require bigger effort, more people, so we sort of had a process for project initiation, and we did startup new projects but we went through a process to figure out each project we should invest in.

N: Interesting. But anyone could bring it.

M: Yes. And we actually had a contest to help promote that anyone could do it.

N: Oh, cool!

M: Yeah, we were giving away; we created an ideas book where every new idea gets a bottle of wine.

N: That's such a good idea, I love that!

M: We had a two or three week period and we said every new idea, I don't care how good or bad, every new idea gets a bottle of wine; you just have to write it up.

N: That's so cool.

M: It was cool, it was really fun.

N: I love that.

M: And there were lots of ideas that came from it. Lots of them.

N: If you give me a bottle of wine I'll give you an idea.

M: It was cool because we probably invested in seven or eight cases of wine.

N: Get it from Trader Joes that's only like 100 bucks.

M: You know we got moderately good wine, you know it was like 6 or 700 bucks, compared to a good idea...

N: Absolutely, and also not only that but it empowers people to be equal stakes in the company.

M: Yep.

N: Interesting, very cool. Do you think there's anything else that I would be amiss to not include, from your experiences?

M: Let's see, cultural kind of stuff... um...

N: I can tell you right now is one of my theories of looking at startup culture in Silicon Valley in particular, I'm trying to use some historical anthropological theories, so I'm thinking about looking at Silicon Valley through the lens of the wild west theories, the new frontier, because it seems to me that startup culture has a lot of this new frontier attitude. And I'm wondering if the masculinity of the new frontier has bled into startup culture in Silicon Valley as a whole. So I don't know if you noticed anything about that or you think it's totally off base or anything...

M: Um... not that's coming to me right now, one thing that I'd say to recognize is you know I was in Biotechnology. Typical biotech startup back then or now we... I think I have this pretty much right, we did a series A before I arrived that allowed those 5 or 6 people to work for about a year and a half before I was brought on board, and that was probably 5 or 6 million dollars. And that was the series A. And then actually right before, right after I arrived the company was seriously running out of money, so I helped to get the series B, which was a big step up, it was 20 million dollars.

N: And what are those series'? I'm sorry I don't know yet...

M: Yeah, so a company, a private company when it goes and gets investors it just names the investments. And they go A, B, C, D, E. And so a typical tech startup right now, oh, I haven't looked at the numbers lately but I think it's operating at a much lower level initially and probably maybe doing a series C before it's talking about 20 million.

N: Definitely. Most of the tech startups that I've looked at, have you been on the website AngelList?

M: Oh, yes.

N: I love AngelList. I go on there for fun. Most of them I was seeing that are tech startups are like 3 million max. Some of them are like 300,000. Because there's lower overhead, they're not like creating a biotech...

M: Right, so because, where was I going with this, just recognize the difference in the amounts of money. Some of the things we were doing in these biotech startups you might find just culturally, especially in the Wild West sense, are really different. So we hired people, senior people who... you know it was a stretch goal for them to become a department head, but they weren't completely green, they all had significant experience before coming into the company.

N: That's interesting.

M: So I think that maybe get rid of a bit of the Wild West. So the investors, we had... another pretty important thing to note the first startup company was funded by the bluest of blue chip venture capitalists. It was all the sandhill road, Silicon Valley mafia in terms of venture capital. And that put quite a bit of pressure on us to succeed, so there was no... fartin around. There was a lot of seriousness about what we were doing, a lot of reputations at stake.

N: Interesting.

M: The G, the non-startup, felt very very wild west. But it felt very Wild West in the sense that nobody was looking, nobody was following the rules, everybody thought they were really cool because they were flaunting anything that looked like a rule. And because of that there was just a lot of chaos. That was, that might have been a company where there was a 20% rule, not in my department but people were complaining about it I'm pretty sure in other departments there was. And even if it wasn't in place, most of the time people were doing whatever they wanted to do just because they wanted to do it. And nobody was saying no. So that actually felt quite wild west. So what else?

N: That gives me everything, thank you so much.

10/11/13, 10:00am

Hannah, Ulta

**Full Transcription:**

N: *reading her the consent, tell her I'll send full form.*

H: Sounds good.

N: Well great. So I just wanted to get a sense of how you got started at Ulta and how you're liking working there, what the experience is like.

H: Yeah, so for me I graduated from CMC in 2011, then right after graduation I went to Grandios. And so I was at Grandios for about a year and a half. And kind of how Grandios sort of works is people are there about like 2 years, then they either go to a startup or grad school kind of thing so there's a lot of turnover with new grads. And so for me I knew that I wanted to do the startup path, that was something I, I used to be really interested in going to law school, but then when I fell into tech it was something that I was like, you know, being in San Francisco there's very much like a startup vibe, like everyone wants to work at startups and so for me it was actually a little bit earlier, about in like October or November of last year. I wasn't like actively looking, but I was just kind of like if I see job opportunities, I'd look into them. And it was interesting cause for me I loved Ulta, and I didn't want to just leave Grandios. Leaving Grandios is kind of like a scary thing, and I knew that I wouldn't want to go to some random startup, I'd only want to go to a startup that I really cared about. And I realized that Ulta was a product that I used every couple days, it was a product that I was recommending to all my friends, and just naturally passionate about. And like being here now I realize I was like the awkward fan girl who was like tweeting at Ulta and all that. So yeah, that's sort of how I knew I wanted to apply to Ulta. And literally I just saw on Twitter they had a job description they were like, we're hiring a community manager, and I clicked on the link and applied, and you know startup is a very fast process. And it was actually the Monday after thanksgiving of last year I got an email about like interviewing, I had a phone screen later that week, and on-site like the week afterwards, and then you know had an offer like 2 weeks before Christmas. That's kind of like how I got into Ulta. Yeah, I mean I love it. It's so amazing. It's something where both culturally and from actual work it's one of the best places to be I feel like. Because like culturally the people are great, it's very much kind of CMC culture, you know like work hard play hard, and like tight knit, and everybody are people you want to work with during the day and like get projects done. But then we're staying at the office late and then we go out together. I mean the past two nights we've all been like partying together basically after work. So that's something I think is really great, it's not just a job, they're your friends, so that makes it even more fun to work there. And you know coming into work is like social so it doesn't feel hard. And like from the work perspective itself, one of the



best things I think is right now we're in scaling stage, and so we're still very start-up, in terms of, if you have an idea, just go for it. Try it. And so it's really nice because we have the ability to really do what we want. And people don't ask questions, they'll give you resources and be like try it out and if it works, let's make this happen. And the cool thing though, is if you experiment with something that seems really good and it works because we're scaling and we're in 45 cities around the world, you can easily push things globally. It's really cool if you do a project... we've done projects in San Francisco that have then gotten rolled out internationally. And so like the impact is really big too.

N: And so what is your role at Ulta right now.

H: I'm a community manager. And a community manager is interesting because it's sort of a new job in tech; I think it started maybe four years ago or something, still kind of a pretty new type of role. And community manager kind of varies at different tech companies, what it means. So like Grandios, community managers basically monitor the help forum, and post like the help forum, and that's pretty much what they did. Their job was like managing this community of like top contributors and helping them using the help forum. At Ulta, we're very different. We don't have a dedicated marketing department, we don't have a dedicated support team, we have... we don't have exactly partnership teams, so pretty much community managers at Ulta do everything related to demand generation. So our operations team is pretty much split between drivers operations, who do everything related to supply, and getting drivers on the road, and we do everything related to riders. So the entire experience. So we do all the customer support, like Mondays everybody pitches in and does customer support. And then the rest of the time we do all the marketing, and we do all like event partnerships, such as like researching what's happening, getting in touch with people and negotiating partnerships, and smaller biz-dev deals for the most part. We also work with engineering, so like product changes: there's one person on our team who's kind of like a copywriter, and she helps write the in app wording and stuff. I've been working a lot on process, and maximizing efficiency on the team, and working on getting things like getting automated by eng, and so we do a lot of variety of things. And sort of going back to why that's great about Ulta is that you have the opportunity to do a lot of different things so it doesn't get boring, but we also have like some specializations as well.

N: Right, that's perfect. And so what's a general day look like? Is every day really different? Or do you have like a pretty set schedule?

H: Yeah, so I think for the most part every day is like pretty different. Like, Mondays just because we've all agreed Mondays we're dedicating to like customer support because we get a lot of inquiries over the weekend, so pretty much Mondays everybody has blocked out to you know help answer customer support questions. Then the rest of the week, it really kind of depends. For example right now I'm working on hiring actually a customer support team, and so my days have been pretty stocked with just like interviewing candidates. And so like that's all I've been doing for the past two weeks is literally reviewing resumes and being on phone screens. But some of my other teammates, like one of my teammates organized this partnership with the detailer, which is like next three days, and so it's like this huge event, so it's like on-site. So the next few days he's going to be at the event talking to

people in person, pitching Ulta to people. We have another person who, that copywriter I was mentioning, she kind of like writes the blog posts too, so her days are kind of like writing blog posts. And so like, I mean it really kind of is project based and varies. So yeah.

N: Cool. And do you have any special office rituals? I know you said the office is really inclusive and fun, but is there anything in particular that you do either in the office or out of the office as far as sort of outings, events, that kind of thing?

H: Yeah, so right now we have basically every month, Ultaverstiy happy hour. And so pretty much what that is is that when we have all the new employees they come to Ultaversity. And so for three days at the beginning of the month. And so that's kind of nice working in Headquarters, because everybody new is coming to San Francisco. So we're already here. So it's like everybody goes out together and meets all the new employees, and so that's like once a month right now, and that's really fun. Our team started something called "neighborhood night" where a lot of us probably amongst our entire team we live in like four different neighborhoods, and so you know the people who live in a certain neighborhood have been hosting you go to their house for a little bit, and then you go to local bars and restaurants in the area. So we do that. And then otherwise kind of like regular events, I don't think there's anything like too solidified, but we do a lot of social kind of outings. Like we did a team trip to the Sonoma Coast one day, and went to the house for like 2 nights. And we do... actually I guess this is kind of ritualistic in a way, we do what we call "Work-cations" so we travel, but because everything we do is from our computers, people are working. So when we went to the Sonoma Coast...

N: That's an awesome idea.

H: Yeah, no, it is amazing. So we were all like you know, we woke up, spent a couple hours working in the morning, and then we went to the beach. We're actually as a company going to Miami at the end of the month and we're going to have the same kind of thing, where there's a lot of planned activities, we're still going to be working and then hanging out in Miami together. And for New Year's Eve actually, one thing that I guess is kind of traditional, I haven't experienced this yet but I know they did it last year and the year before, is people pretty much travel to like a foreign country. And because New Years is like one of our busiest nights as you can imagine, people are working on New Year's. So it's like if you have to work on New Year's let's work together in a fun place, so we can hang out there later. So for example some people in San Francisco went to Bali last year. And so they worked for you know...

N: Cool!

H: Right? They're like working in Bali on New Year's but then you're in Bali.

N: That is such a great idea.

H: But yeah, I think that that's kind of like our rituals.

N: Oh, that's awesome. Well that's brilliant, I want to do that now too. And I'm also wondering what... a lot of startups I've heard... so you said it's very much work hard play hard. But I've heard a lot of people say that it's overwhelming with work because you really work 24 hours a day and I would imagine with Ulta you might have that challenge because as you said, the demand is always there. Have you found—how have you found the work-life balance to be as far as like having time

off?

H: That's a great question, and it's funny that you say that because literally yesterday I was thinking "I'm feeling overwhelmed right now." But it's something where it's a good feeling. It's something where—at least for me—my style is I like being too busy. I like feeling overwhelmed and that there's always something to do. And I was like I'm feeling overwhelmed but I'm kind of happy about that, because I know that there's a project I'm excited about and I want to keep doing all this stuff. And so it's like I think that overwhelmed has negative connotations as a word, but it's not really a bad thing. And I think kind of in startups, like you were saying, is you can always be working. There's always something to do. And I think that's what's kind of so great, like either... so one thing, going back to Grandios, what was interesting about my team is I was very product focused. So I worked on Grandios Maps and Grandios Places and so I was working on Grandios Plus Local. So I was supposed to work on Grandios Plus Local before it launched, and we were supposed to launch, you know, at one point it didn't happen, we kept delaying the launch, so I couldn't actually do my job. Because I was writing like the help center and in-product help tours. I'd do all the work and then the product would change drastically and I'd have to re-do everything. Or I couldn't write about how to use the product because engineering hadn't built it yet. And so it was very hard for me to do like my core role. While here at Ulta we have a set product, we're not dependent on like engineering and launching things so what we're able to do is just, the way it works with marketing and events, there's always an event to partner with. There's always somebody who doesn't know about Ulta. There's always an idea to reach out to somebody new and get them excited. And so that's like one of those things where it's like we have all these ideas... part of the reason I'm feeling quote, "overwhelmed," right now is that I have all these ideas I like want to do that I'm excited about, like all these partnerships. But in all honesty, work-life balance is also amazing. And going from Grandios, where they, it was almost forced work-life balance in a way. Where basically I remember, the other interesting thing about Grandios is that all new grads are paid hourly; you're not salaried, until you kind of are like promoted. And I'm sure there's some legal reasons for it. But so all new grads are paid hourly. And so you get overtime. And I mean if you think about it, your hourly wage is really good at Grandios, and like with overtime... and I was talking to my manager and I was like hey, I'm working on this project, just so you know I'm going to bill extra hours because I'm doing it. And he's like, oh you really shouldn't be billing more than 40 hours a week, you shouldn't be working on evenings, you should enjoy yourself. And I was like, ok. And so it was like weird, because I almost like wasn't motivated to work because I felt like I wasn't going to be compensated for it. Cause like you know they didn't care as much. And so the other hard thing about Grandios though is the commute. So I was living in San Francisco and commuting down to Mountain View every day, which is at least an hour every day. So you're spending two to four hours on the bus a day and now, I mean, being in the city, like my commute's you know, 20 minutes. And so it's something where I'm working far more than I did at Grandios but I have a better work-life balance. Because my enjoyment is also you know hanging out with my team and stuff. And it's also really flexible. Like I didn't come in until 9:45 today.

It's just really nice to be able to do that. So it's like I could stay up late and work last night and then sleep in because I didn't need to catch a specific bus at a certain time and I knew that I could get in by 9:45 while at Grandios I would have had to be on the 8:30 bus to get in at that time. Which is when I woke up. So I think that's kind of one of those things where work-life balance is really great here.

N: So what are some of the other differences between Grandios and Ulta? Do you notice big differences in the culture just between being sort of small and quickly growing startup and a larger... I can't really even call it a startup anymore even though it was once upon a time.

H: Yeah. I think that actually Grandios is also kind of unique in that it's maintained a lot of the fun culture like, I would say that culturally they're probably very similar. There are like dogs running around the office, you know, people sitting on couches with their laptops, everybody is wearing like jeans and tee shirts and stuff. So I think kind of that culture that you hear about is very much the same at Grandios and Ulta. The only kind of thing that's sort of different is Grandios, there's a lot more red tape. Like you have to... I was running the Grandios and Your Business Blog, and before we got a blog post published we had to get it approved by product, marketing, legal, PR, and then we could post it. While culturally here, it's very much a we trust you, use your judgment, just get stuff done.

N: Right. So how do you think Grandios kept its culture when it grew so fast? And do you think Ulta is going to have to do the same since it's, I think it's one of the very fastest growing in the country—startups.

H: Yeah. So I think that the interesting thing... Grandios is kind of like the standard now for this that they just kind of cared about this culture so much that it's just, it's not forced but they knew there were certain factors that they needed to have to enable the culture to kind of happen, and I think that at Ulta we can learn from Grandios, that people are going to be feeling kind of like the same way, that tech companies now know how to make that Grandios Culture happen. And so part of it is just perks. Like you know, free stuff, quite frankly. Like massages, free food, various things like that that make you feel kind of cared about for your company. And I really think a lot of it is just trusting people and encouraging people to have fun. I think the biggest thing about culture is that Grandios, Ulta, all these places; they pay for corporate outings and stuff. And it's something where you are bonding with your team. And I think that's one thing that was really great there, and definitely something people can maintain here.

N: That's a good point. I guess my last thing that I want to get a sense of is if you have any---if you even notice, I guess, that you're a woman at Ulta. So I've been talking to people about how they sort of experience their gender whether that's male or female at their various companies, and just sort of if you notice if there's any benefits or drawbacks, if you even notice at all.

H: Yeah, that's a good question. So I think the one thing that's kind of interesting is in tech there's a lot of kind of gendered specific roles, and that engineering is kind of like, male, and that you're looking at, for example my role, our team was pretty much all girls for like the longest time. So it was like noticeable, but noticeable almost in like a comedic way because there's one guy on our team and then like five girls at one point, and so we'd be like girl things and just like teasing him because

we're like, oh yeah I'm sure you really care about like where to get our hair cut, what dress we're gonna get on rent the runway and stuff. So I think that in those ways it's noticeable, but I think one thing that's kind of cool about Ulta, too is that our head of product and some of our lead product managers high up in engineering, they're women. And it's like they have really great backgrounds, worked at like Grandios, Yahoo before and stuff like that, and so... I guess that's actually noticeable in a way. Like that's definitely something I've realized. I was like this is cool, these women are in positions of leadership in engineering. And that's pretty neat. Otherwise there were only two other female engineers I think. Again, from when I started back in February until like two months ago, and now as we've been growing there's a lot more. But I think that's definitely something that I've noticed, but nothing that I've noticed kind of negatively. Like I don't feel at all that gender impacts my ability to succeed or anything here. I think that actually interacting with people it's not something you really notice, necessarily.

N: Right. And how about in Silicon Valley as a whole. Ulta is in the city, right, not in Mountain View?

H: Yeah, we're in San Francisco.

N: So do you think that that makes a difference as well? Have you noticed that at all? Being sort of out of Silicon Valley and in the city?

H: That's an interesting question. I don't think that the location really makes a difference. I think that like, when we're talking about culture, that's the biggest kind of thing. It doesn't really matter where the company is. And like Grandios has an office in San Francisco and an office in Mountain View, for example. And I think that a lot of it is probably just sort of your team, what you notice and how you feel. Sort of like who you're interacting with on a daily basis. But yeah, I think that probably in like Silicon Valley proper it's probably a lot more noticeable like in leadership positions just because that's where the media attention is. So for example Marissa, Marissa Mayer, always gets a lot of different kind of like, maybe media portrayal in Silicon Valley, with some other people. You know it's like one thing she was known for was her fashion style and stuff. You know, you're not going to see that with like Mark Zuckerberg because he dresses poorly, but still. It's like one of those things where being a female leader, that was something that news stories also reported on, which is kind of weird. But yeah, so I think that probably in Silicon Valley proper, leadership is where the gender distinctions maybe come in more. But I don't think that the location necessarily plays into anything.

N: Ok. Interesting. And do you think there's anything that you would offer that I shouldn't leave without knowing, about work at a startup, or culture of a startup, what you think might be most important?

H: Yeah, so I think that one thing, sort of related to this topic, is a lot of people actually ask me when they're applying for jobs: big company or startup? Like right after graduation, and just kind of a general trajectory. And I think that what I sort of always say is that I always say is that big company, then going to a startup is actually a lot better. And I think that there's a lot of sort of things that are like... I mean we're talking about the culture and things like that. Culture is pretty much going to stay the same, as I was mentioning, but from the actual work, Grandios is Grandios because it did things well. Like it failed, and figured out how to fix things, on various

issues. They know how to have a really successful company. And so there's a lot you can learn at a big company and then apply to a smaller one. And instead of having a ton of small companies go through the same failure and learning and reiterating... and so I think that that's one thing that you know, you have so much more background and knowledge. Even though I was only at Grandios a year and a half there's just so many things I learned there that I've been able to apply here, I think it's really beneficial.

N: That's really interesting, that's a really good point. Well great! Awesome, well thank you so much this has been so helpful Hannah.

H: Good, well if you have any other questions just let me know!

10/14/13, 11:30am

*Lori, Grandos*

### **Full Transcription**

N: So mostly I just really want to know how you got to where you are at G, what your path has been?

L: Ok, so I started at G in august of 2006, so it's been a number of years now. And I basically just got really lucky, honestly, I think I was at CMC as you know and I was studying economics and psychology and most people, most of my peers, and I'm assuming it's probably pretty similar now, actually probably not similar now, but most people back then were going into investment banking, or consulting jobs.

N: That's still now.

L: Really? Even investment banking? Still?

N: Yep.

L: I would have thought maybe that... interesting. Well yeah so those weren't really my passions and I had been fortunate to, I was doing the alumni mentorship program at school and I had an alumni mentor who was the creative director at S&S, a creative advertising agency in LA at the time, and he was my alumni mentor. He had graduated from CMC in like the 60s or something when it was an all men's college, and I was really inspired by him. I had a lot of meetings with him and went to S&S which is just a very vibrant workplace and I think back then had a lot of similar fun cultural elements that startups have now, like their office had—I don't even remember now—but just like plants, fun interactive things you could play with, it was just an alternate office... like lounge chairs, a little beach setup, just amazing. And they're a creative agency so they're like designing their office around stuff like that and I certainly didn't particularly pick a workplace that had those elements in the office but just chatting with him and talking about the creative agency world and the advertising world I was really inspired and started to get really interested in advertising and the creative elements and the communication elements, and kind of saw the psychology and economics as being a good background for getting... and so I don't know, I didn't really know exactly what I wanted to do and I didn't have any kind of marketing or advertising or communications major when I was in school, there was like a five college media-mixed media major but it was more art focused, so I just continued studying economics and psychology and meeting with this creative director. And that was where I was my senior year, like most of my friends already had offers at B and D and all those kinds of things...

N: Sounds familiar [laughing]

L: Yeah, I don't know, and I knew it wasn't for me but I really didn't know what was so I was looking at the job listings in the CMC internal website... I don't remember what it's called the website that had job listings on it for CMC alums and I saw a Grandos listing. And it was something like a product marketing manager, some kind

of title that I didn't really know what it meant, so pretty late in the game compared to most of my friends who had gotten their offers in like September when we started senior year but I didn't hear anything back for a number of months, and I think it wasn't until after our graduation party, even, like into April or something like that, or May, that I got an email from someone at G that was like hey, we saw that you submitted your resume for this product marketing position but we actually would like to interview you for something else called AdWords, or like an AdWords account coordinator, do you want to have a phone screening? And I had the phone screening of course, and they flew me up to SF for the interviews. And the entire time I didn't really know or understand what the job was, I didn't know what online search advertising even meant, it was sort of a new concept still even back then, but certainly new to me and digital advertising was something that hadn't really existed before and I was still grasping what it meant. But I knew it was G and it was very exciting and it was certainly within the industry that I wanted to be in eventually or so I thought so I was like yes absolutely. And I think I just got really lucky, like that summer they hired in the hundreds probably of recent college grads from good schools and they did like a heavy amount of recruiting from like Stanford and Dartmouth and some of the more obvious like ivy league category schools, and I think it might have been just that there was an alumni at the time working at G that they even looked at CMC students at all because the school is so small. So I think I just got lucky, I mean they were hiring a bunch of students at the time, and basically just training kids to be account managers essentially. So it was really interesting. I just find myself really lucky, the interview process wasn't what you hear about which mainly applies to engineers like I just had sort of informational behavioral interviews and they were just checking to make sure I was a smart, normal, well rounded person that matched my resume, and I had done well in school and I think they just knew that kids who do well at very good colleges are going to be hard workers and good for their program. So that's my that's how I got in, and now it's a lot different but its, I just still feel lucky to have had that opportunity, and I just have felt lucky the entire time, I've stuck with it because it's such a great company and I could go a number of ways now, do you have a question so I can direct my rambling?

N: That's awesome. Well I'm curious to know what it is that you like so much about the company, what a day in the life is like, what the culture is like, rituals, things like that?

L: Yeah, um I think I'm just it's kind of like college, there's just a ton of extremely smart people here, and regardless of what you're working on that makes such a huge difference in your life if you're surrounded by smart people at every turn. And of course they're still human so everyone has their quirks and strange characteristics but in SF I interact with the normal average population as well and it's amazing, this network of thousands and thousands of human beings who are so bright is insane to be able to be a part of that. And it still blows my mind, I've been here, I celebrated my 7 year anniversary in August or whatever and in my time at G have traveled to other countries because I really like traveling and like went to the G office in Tokyo and I have this badge and all I need to do is walk in and beep my little badge in Tokyo on the little badge reader and you can go in to this like clean, comfortable place, get free food, be part of this community even though I don't



speak Japanese... I don't know I just feel really lucky to be in this giant network of smart and collaborative and hardworking and inspired people.

N: That's really cool.

L: Yeah, I still feel really lucky. I know that you know it totally depends on your day to day though when it comes down to it and I was in sales when I started and you know, the AdWords account coordinator role when I was starting off was more like we just need smart young people to help advertisers who are starting to spend lots of money on digital and search advertising to sort of manage their accounts and basically take their money and be like, ok we have this money and we can use it in these sorts of ways and my role became a strategist we can call it, they called us optimizers, but that was none of those words really mean much to most people.

N: Optimizer sounds pretty cool though. Sounds really intense.

L: Yeah it was a great title I loved it [laughing] um but I was kind of in the advertising account organizing and strategizing on how they could spend their money that they wanted to spend with us. And so for a long time it was just kind of account management and coming up with ways that they could spend the money. And then it slowly morphed into seeing like the recession started to hit, and advertisers started to pull back their budget, and we started to need to be sales people, and sort of convince advertisers to spend money and do sales pitches and say, get them to spend money when they didn't necessarily want to and G started to come out with different products and bought Y and say well ok, now you need to buy not only search ads but also display ads and then Y ads and go on these client meetings and do this whole song and dance and circus parade of pitching, so it really started to change, and my interest in doing that started to change. So all that to say like, it definitely depends on your day to day and not only the work that you're doing but also your managers and your co-workers that you're working with at any given moment. So you know I've had a lot of friends who started off at that time and then ended up pursuing other opportunities or some people wanted to go back to school. Or some people were just, like I've certainly seen G because it has always grown really rapidly, I found myself in suddenly in a huge sales organization with thousands and thousands of just sales people, and just being in such a large company basically you are just a sheep in a giant flock and they try to move one group of sheep on a field in a different farm and that can completely change your situation, and things can become really shitty really quickly. Or there are certainly managers within the company who maybe you don't work with, or aren't the best of people managers, because they've just become a manager because they've been at G a long time and worked their way up and if you get one of those managers, your life for however long you suffer through it might be really shitty. So I've seen people leave for you know a lot of different reasons.

N: Yeah.

L: So I say I've been really lucky in not only being a part of the company, which I still really like and I love the morals, and I love the network of really smart people, but I've also had a pretty good path as far as navigating managers and having some great direct coworkers and figuring out while I didn't necessarily want to be a sales person, carving out my own path and my own way of contributing and making it clear even while I was still in sales to my manager at the time that it wasn't really

my sweet spot and that I wanted to contribute in a slightly different way than just be like a song and dance suit wearing, high heel wearing sales woman.

N: Totally yeah.

L: And now like I eventually changed roles, and I was really fortunate too I had a manager at the time that I was having those conversations with who was really supportive, and it was a woman, so we can talk about that part too.

N: Yeah, I'm really interested in that.

L: But she was really supportive in me figuring out, ok if it's not sales, what else. And I moved over to a team on Y, so I was able to start a lot of the things that I'd been wanting in my career—outside of the people and my coworkers and the company—but my role itself is now much more rewarding for me.

N: That's wonderful.

L: So I feel lucky for so many reasons but I know that has not happened to a lot of people I know.

N: So is your day now pretty similar every day or do you find that you have sort of a new project every day?

L: Um I think I have sort of longer term projects now, sales was kind of more stuff was getting thrown at me, so every day you didn't really know what was going to happen. And that's part of what I didn't really like about it, because I'm sort of a methodical, and like to be able to know what's going to happen to me the following day, and I don't really like being cold called by my client and getting yelled at for example.

N: Right, that sounds like fun.

L: I had to come up with some logical explanation for why their keywords aren't showing up on the phone while being yelled at, that's not really something I'm great at, so I would say my daily routine is pretty standard although we get a ton of emails every day so new things can crop up and depending on their urgency, I still in my role now is a couple steps away from direct account management, and I'm more of like a support strategist so doing behind the scenes research and reporting and analysis on larger advertiser programs. So all that to say I'm not at the front lines of having to be at the beck and call of the sales people for the advertisers, so my schedule is a little bit more predictable. I don't know if that answers your...

N: No, yeah for sure it really does. That's interesting. And I'm wondering too, because G of all of the companies that once were startups, G is famous for its quote, culture, whatever that means. And I'm wondering what that means to you. I mean you've talked about the community which is a really important thing, but is there anything that you think your office or your managers or the global company in general does to create that kind of culture?

L: I definitely think that they're extremely supportive of having a good work life balance, how that plays out for every individual on various teams always varies. But I... managers are encouraged if not... they're meant to and directed to allow employees if there are urgent family situations just to be understanding and just allow us to take time if we need it for example. And it could be sick days, it could be offering last minute allowing us to take vacations, or working from home, or just being flexible and accommodating of life. Which I think is pretty remarkable that G is still really pushing that work life balance and that flexibility if you do maybe need

to work from home, for like one day in a month or something like that or leave early to go to a doctor's appointment. I think that's pretty phenomenal that G still has this mentality and flexibility and trust of employees. Particularly in comparison to Y which in the last few months when Marissa Mayer came over that their employees are no longer allowed to work from home. And I understand why she's doing it, but at the same time, G would never do that. G would just... it's such a big part of an employee's I don't know, perk here is knowing that the company is sort of on our side and understanding that life is life and work is work, and stressing that we're smart and if we're not cutting it we'll have a conversation with our manager about why and we'll sort it out. So I think that's a big part of it is just the company really supporting from a top-down level that we can sense the work life balance aspect and the flexible and understanding of personal life event aspect. And that's been pretty huge for me too.

N: Right, that's really neat. And ok, so you mentioned that one of your managers was a woman and you also just mentioned Marissa Mayer so it made me start to think about this part, if you even notice that you're a woman at G and if you do, what makes you notice, in what context, if you find there are any benefits, drawbacks, anything like that.

L: Yeah, um I think when I started in my first 4 years when I was in the sales org, there were a lot of female leaders in the sales org particularly at the time, so SS was our VP of online sales at the time. So I had just been introduced and grown up in this world of female leaders, not only S but a number of others. So I didn't really think about it, to be honest. And also the sales org in general I would, I don't know the numbers breakdown and I guarantee G would never release anything like this, but from my personal experience and the coworkers that I had and the team that I was on was like 75% female. So it never really crossed my mind. But I also was still figuring my own priorities out, and as it started to become more of a sales organization and more uncomfortable as a path for me long term, I had no interest in even attempting to identify with the leaders that we had at the time. So had I been interested in the business aspect of sales in a large company like G I might have paid more attention to SS and been like, wow, I'm really inspired by her ability to do xy and z, but I honestly was just like, I'm starting to feel really out of place and I need to figure out something. And I know I don't want to leave G so that's why I stayed for probably 2 years longer than I really wanted to be doing the work, but I thought of it more I'm out of place in this organization and need to figure that out and less of like, I'm a business woman in a company and need to understand that I'm a woman and feel that aspect of things. And so I think now though, that I've moved over and I'm at Y which has so many wonderful things, and Y is kind of a smaller, startup-y feeling company within a company, because its its own brand and it was bought by G and it has maintained its own identity and its own product and its own advertising... of course G is directing and running and owning all of it, but it's still its own brand really. And it has like I'm sitting in the Y office in San Bruno, like there are Y engineers and Y creative designers and Y marketing team is here, and just all of these... it feels like a smaller company within a large company. But I guess that said now I'm starting to think more about female leaders, particularly because there aren't any here. For the most part, and our organization is kind of getting shuffled

around, but really we only have a female leader in the Y marketing role. And I also, I know personally now that I don't strive to be anywhere or attain some kind of C level or high level management role or director level role or something major, which is what like C level or director level or something like that in a large company, so I don't particularly feel the need to identify with leaders here either, because I'm just not as interested in the business organization aspect, and like, being in that position, but I'm definitely noticing more and more that not only does Y not really have a ton of female leadership, G doesn't either. So... of course, now I'm thinking more about it, I've had lots more conversations about it recently, and have certainly noticed more and more the types of personalities and attitudes of a male-dominated leadership world, and what those people can be like, and don't particularly strive to be like that myself. So I don't know, I mean if we want to dig more into that I'm happy to talk more about it, I'm at the office, so I might want to take part of that conversation home if that makes sense.

N: Ok, not a problem at all.

L: If we want to dig more into it then I guess... you know in some of my conversations and then just thinking about it, it doesn't particularly surprise me that its just more... it's a more natural fit, or almost easier, and its stereotypical and may be stereotyped, but from the, from my, from what I've observed has often been true is that men who end up in positions like that often have just kind of an overarching confidence and a lack of the need to second guess... and G also even recognized the fact that men the percent of men who put themselves up for promotion is much much much greater than the percent of women who put themselves up for promotion. So... men are just more, a little more aggressive at I don't know, getting themselves to that phase, whereas women are sort of waiting to be recognized.

N: Right.

L: So I don't necessarily think that it's the company's misstep in not choosing female leaders, I think it's just the nature of sort of how it happens.

N: Yeah, absolutely that makes sense. Interesting.

L: So yeah. And I don't know. With Marissa Mayer now leading Yahoo and just... I almost, I don't know, joining a company like that and leading a company like that and then immediately... you know she was pregnant when she got hired in, and immediately having her kid and then not taking any time off—I don't know how much you know about that whole story, but she basically just joined Yahoo, was pregnant, and announced that, well it doesn't matter that I'm pregnant, I'm going to have this kid but it's not going to make a difference in how I run the company and I'm not going to take any maternity time. And she didn't. She had her baby and she took like I don't know, a week or two, and then went right back to work! And I don't, I just, that's part of the reason I could not identify with being in that type of position, it takes, that is your LIFE, it takes many more hours than being an individual contributor to contributing at that level. So having a kid and a family, you could certainly do it at some point, but not... you would need to have a different, you would need to at least take some time off if that was a priority in your life. And so that honestly frustrated me a little bit, that she's setting this standard for women that it's, that kids are no big deal.

N: That's such an interesting...

L: Yeah, like I don't know, like I—you couldn't possibly be prioritizing your child if you're not even going to take time off to spend with it when it's an infant.

N: Right, right. So it's almost, while she's been touted as this sort of great leap forward, it's not quite...

L: Yeah, it's almost a setback for me to have a leader, a female leader, treat it like that and just say, kids are you can just have babies even when you've just accepted a position and you can still run a company. Well, if your company is your baby, your baby is something else. Like, how many hours do you have to dedicate to that? Like there's just not enough hours in a day to do both, so you're not raising that kid. And you *have* the kid and I just... I don't know I just know the type, the amount of work and hours that people in those positions have to put into it, it's just not supportive of the amount of time that personally I would want to spend if I was going to be having a baby. And that's another thing, like at some point I hope to, another reason why I don't know how I would be able to make it work.... Anyway...

N: Yeah no that's really interesting. I love hearing that perspective. And I know that speaking of work life balance and time and structure, G has their 20% time, and I don't know if they have that for every sector or just for the software engineers.

L: Um, they don't have anything official for the rest of the employees besides engineers, but we are certainly encouraged to work on side projects or other types of projects like, we have sort of a soft 20% sort of idea.

N: Right. Have you worked on a side project?

L: Yeah, I mean I'm kind of working on side projects all the time. I think in my role right now because I am a support person across a team that works on a lot of different projects all at once, I am kind of always skirting around and working on a lot of different projects, so it almost seems like my work is a collection of a lot of side projects. But I think side projects in the sense of like, 20% time that engineers are encouraged to work on generally refer to projects outside of your own team. And I haven't done anything specifically since I've been at the Y role in the last couple of years, mainly because I've been trying to navigate my own role. To give you a bit of background, my position is one of a kind and when I was in sales I was looking for a new opportunity, I found this manager on Y and was just chatting with him and he was like, oh you know we could really use somebody who has strategy and analytical background and he created a position for me.

N: Oh, neat!

L: Yeah, which is another reason why I feel really lucky because that doesn't often happen, but essentially my role is kind of self-directed, so my normally what has been spent time discovering side projects and what I should be working on is now just spent figuring out what *I* should be working on and how I can have the biggest impact on my team. Which is a pretty interesting setup. But I think when I was in sales I had a very much more straightforward book of clients, and I had my very specific, every day I'm going to go in and call these clients, I'm going to work on xy and z, and then outside of that I definitely did work on some like 20% projects you could call them. And I think that's part of like where I am now, because some of the projects that I worked on were Y focused, and so I was like really interested in Y and specifically ad strategy on Y, and so I worked with some, I forget their titles at the time but they were kind of like product specialists for Y to figure out how to

optimize our ad campaigns on Y, even though most of my clients weren't necessarily even doing that. Like I had one client who was running Y ads and that's sort of how I got interested in it, but that was one kind of side project area that I was really focused on. So I guess all in all G is really supportive of employees doing that, and I guess generally only good things come out of it, and they know it because G share skills and experiences and knowledge and you tend to like, you have a focus area and you have some kind of deliverable in mind that will be helpful to other employees to figure out whatever it is you're figuring out. And it was helpful for me in a development sense because I formed these relationships with people at Y and was able to then kind of get my foot in the door and move over here when the time was right.

N: Interesting. So it's really cool to get a perspective from you because you've been in the company for so much longer than most of the people who I've talked to at their companies. Most people have been there for one or two years, and smaller startups. I'm wondering if you've noticed G changing at all since you've been there. It's been 7 years, maybe not much has changed, I don't know how fast things change but I'm curious.

L: Absolutely. I think things do change constantly, I don't know about daily, but certainly like just in the products that G has been offering have changed over the years, and you know it's changed from just a search company and specifically in my world search advertising, to display advertising, to buying Y and having Y advertising to now G plus and integrating kind of a social layer over everything that you do on G property. So you know from a product standpoint, and maps and all the other products, absolutely, things are always changing. And generally most people who are interested in the company know more about what's going on than I do, because I stay on top of the changes that affect my role and what I need to know, which when I do need to know things I need to know them very well, but there's so much G does that I couldn't possibly stay on top of. So yeah, I mean I think there's a lot of change in that sense. As far as, yes absolutely in every sense of the word I've certainly seen a lot of changes over the years, I mean I think in like the sales organization perspective I've chatted about a little bit, it went from being a reactive account management role when advertisers back in the day just was a new thing and were just kind of throwing money at the company to, uh oh, the economy is kind of turning sour and these advertisers don't want to spend money anymore, we need to convince them. Going through sales training, becoming a full-fledged sales force, hiring more experienced sales people... it's much more, its great though, a much more talented and experienced sales force, hiring people that had done sales for a long time in similar kind of industries who can bring their experience over so, I've seen a lot of change there in the sales organization. I mean there are so many levels, like Y, obviously G acquired Y whenever it was, and then Y itself goes through changes very very rapidly because Y is still trying to figure out its brand, its advertising, the way its site looks even... they're changing all the time. So there are a lot of changes in that respect. Yeah, I mean I think as far as the culture goes, the overarching culture and the people within the company we still rely on the same principles on being G, and having good morals and being collaborative, and it's still a giant group of really smart people. And I think I've experienced my own changes

within that just because I've moved, and I was in a big giant sales force, and now I'm in this smaller group that's just Y so it's kind of harder for me to have a broad perspective of any kind of company-wide cultural or employee change in that sense.

N: Right, but as far as your experience it seems like the product is changing faster than the culture of the company.

L: Yes, absolutely.

N: Do you think that's a result of... why do you think that is?

L: I mean I think the company is just growing. G wants to be doing all kinds of awesome stuff, and wants to do it really fast otherwise it's useless basically, so we've hired more people and we have more groups and we are kind of taking away any limits and just saying, let's do... I think it's great that G has money to work on things like driverless cars and G glass and just stuff that you would never have even thought would come out of a search engine. And so I think it's ability, and it certainly I'm sure at the macro level has been harder for people involved in that like HR for example, to maintain that and make sure we're hiring people within the G culture, and to just make sure that the culture does stay the same but I feel like from what I've observed they've done a really great job. And I think that's part of the aggressive screening process, is just... and you know I'm trained to do interviews as well, it's like, one of the interview aspects is G-ness: does it seem like this person is a good fit at G? Which is really interesting that the company prioritizes the culture and the G-ness of a human being regardless of their skill level to make sure that we do maintain that identity.

N: Right, that's really interesting. Well so I feel like I have a picture of your experience of G in my mind. Do you have a sense of an experience of Silicon Valley as a whole? Do you live in the valley?

L: I live in San Francisco, so it's not down in Mountain View, I worked down there for a year, but I think San Francisco is kind of included in the term Silicon Valley just because so many tech workers are in the city. And I... I mean, it's pretty phenomenal; it's a pretty hilarious mix of people in the city. Because you can go out to a bar, for example, and the nerdiest looking kids next to you who are just wearing t-shirts and jeans are just speaking in words that I have no idea what they're talking about, they are so smart. You have no idea who's sitting next to you, regardless of what they're wearing or what they look like. And a lot of the conversations you hear just when you're out and about are just brilliant young minds talking about startup things, talking about technology, engineering... you know I was at a fancy restaurant here for brunch one time and two guys were drawing out diagrams of what looked like rocket science to me, it's so stereotypical but that it literally looked like they were drawing rocket ships on their napkins while they were waiting for their food. So I feel like this area is a very intelligent and interesting area to be a part of and to be able to observe. I mean that said, San Francisco still has a wide variety of economic classes and different groups of people living in the city, so I think it is much more diverse probably than if you lived in Palo Alto or Mountain View which are not as diverse in the various economic status of all the people living there, I would imagine. So I get a lot more, I don't know if you've visited San Francisco, but I'm right kind of in the thick of things, so I get a lot more different types of people around in my neighborhood. But still the kinds of places I tend to frequent are like

nice restaurants and bars and that's where the other wealthy young startupy kids hang out too. So I don't know it's a pretty interesting land I think when I travel I do tend to travel in other countries so I don't really see other parts of the US as much where I would experience other cities that are dissimilar to San Francisco within the US. But I absolutely know that's what most of the country is like is nothing like San Francisco. And I think like, rent here is some of the most expensive, if not the most expensive city in the US now, in competition with New York, it's like \$3,000 a month for a one-bedroom apartment, like there's been such an influx with Facebook and all of these tech companies right in this area, it's had a huge impact on the housing in the city and the price increases that can happen and come with that because a lot of these kids have a shit ton of money and are willing to spend it because they're young and don't have families yet.

N: Right, interesting. Wonderful. So I guess before I go, if there's anything you think it's important that I know about your experience at G, or in Silicon Valley, or about the wider culture as a whole. If there's something... if I teleported there and needed to see one thing about it what would you show me?

L: Um, I don't know I feel like we've talked about a lot. I can't really speak for other people and other startupy environments. I do think G is still really unique, like it sounds like a playland and I'm always very optimistic and positive in how I talk about it... I mean there's still a lot of hard work that happens here, and like, it can be really stressful, and of course there's all that. So my attitude and the way I think about things is totally different than if you talk to my friend who's been here as long as I have and I think her responses would be totally different. So yeah I don't know... and kind of along those lines too I've seen a lot of people within the company who take it for granted, I think now it's been around for so long we have some employees who will complain about the free food that we get, for example.

N: That seems unfair.

L: It's crazy. Some kid... there's a gym here, for free, a free gym in the basement of this office. And I was talking with this one of the instructors down in the gym and she told me that some kid complained because the towels weren't soft enough.

N: Soft enough? [laughing] oh my gosh...

L: Soft enough. So I guess like I'm just bringing this up because I think that you're right, I've been at the company for a long time, I have a different perspective than people who've been at the company for a year or two, but I also think I just still as much as possible try to be really happy with everything and be optimistic and positive about it, because you can always find faults with things. So I just try constantly to remember that yeah, and keep a wider perspective.

N: Sounds like the key to happiness.

L: I hope so, there's always something that can happen. That's another thing like around every corner still however many thousands of people, I don't even know how many people are at the company right now, I still know that my circumstance can change and that I will be powerless, and I might have to end up moving to a new company in 6 months, like I have no idea, I have no power over that. And that's kind of a background fear about working at such a huge company. And I did experience that in, I don't remember, in 2008? 2009 I think, G went through a wave of layoffs during the recession and it was very shocking and kind of tragic because a lot of



these people were my coworkers who were also just brilliant minds and hard workers and when they laid off a giant group of people, they couldn't possibly do it in a super detailed way or have the time to figure out who the very best person to fire is, for example. Or like the worst of a group of great people. So a lot of people were fired and left with a terrible taste in their mouth. And a lot of those people are at Facebook now or at other companies and kind of are like G haters for life, you know? So I can understand how that can happen and my perspective can change, you know it's just the nature of the beast. So there's sort of that... it's not all rainbows and unicorns but we try to make it that as much as we can. But there's just one more thing to say I just kind of I hadn't heard this before but it makes sense that people are like this but I had a conversation with a kid a few months ago who is like a serial startup employee, or so I gleaned from our conversation. He was a young kid and he had had already like four or five different jobs, in like, shorter than a years' worth of time, and he really just wanted to jump around from startup to startup. And he's the type of person who like that's just, I think, it made me realize I think there are some people who just are really attracted to that initial startup of a business and want to be there when they can have *the* most impact. Because he said something that blew my mind, like well I've been at this startup for over a year now and I feel like there's so much process and so many hoops. And I'm just like, oh my god you are in a 20 person company and it went from 3 to 20 and you feel like there's hoops and processes? And so I think that's just another interesting perspective of people in these types of companies, some people just want that. They want to move around and they want a complete non-hierarchical structure and they want the freedom to just jump in and put in their two cents and then just move along or just want to always have zero process and zero hoops... it's kind of like an ant workplace, or traditional work and mentality. Which is very interesting and I think very new in respect to...

N: And that's sort of a Silicon Valley phenomenon you think?

L: Yeah, I mean I certainly think so, like I just... and maybe I don't, I had only talked with that one person and then a couple of other people after that because it struck me as so interesting, and maybe that kind of attitude exists elsewhere and people are going to be serial jumper-arounder types who constantly want to be moving jobs, but I think as applied to the startup model it sounded like he was doing it specifically because he liked the fact that there were no rules, really. So I don't know, I don't know if that's... take it or leave it it's just something that's just in the last 6 or 7 years of being here in the city that was a kind of eye opening conversation and there are probably more people like that I would only assume.

N: Yeah, I think that's fascinating. That's really neat. I think it's also fascinating that CMC hasn't changed much in the past 7 years; I think that's really funny.

L: Yeah that does kind of blow my mind! I would have thought that investment banking sort of would have, I don't know there wouldn't be as many kids going after that now.

N: No there's still a ton...

10/16/13, 3:30pm

*Jake, Grandios*

### **Full Transcription**

N: So how did you come to work at G from McKinsey? Did they seek you out? I'm sorry I missed that step.

J: Oh, yeah, you know the recruiters found me on LinkedIn, and I interviewed and it worked out.

N: You sound like a LinkedIn advertisement.

J: I know don't I?

N: So I guess as far as what I'm curious from you, just if you could take me through a day at G, if you have anything that stands out to you in your work, in the environment, in how people relate to each other, or traditions that you might have.

J: Ok awesome. Ok I guess I'll just start from the top of my day: I usually get here between 7 and 8, and I'm usually one of the first people in in my group, I think people tend to trickle in more like 8 and 9. And then there's free breakfast that gets served at 8, and so I go and I get... I usually get eggs. And then usually the morning is spent, at least until 9, is spent kind of planning my day and getting caught up on emails. G has very high email traffic. And then—oh and by the way, the other thing, hopefully if you are going to write about this and it's going to go anywhere public it would be like not for attribution.

N: Yeah, absolutely. As far as... are you talking confidentiality as far as this conversation?

J: Well, and I guess just like without my name on it.

N: Ok yes, absolutely. I have the whole written up confidentiality, and it's easier when I'm in person I can just show it to you, but I change all the names and the names of the company and I would not say "A company that has created the startup culture," you know, nothing that would let you know that it was G or that you were Jake.

J: Terrific. And I'm not going to be saying anything that's like super controversial, I mean obviously my eating eggs in the morning is not like that fascinating.

N: I won't tell.

J: G sometimes just likes any communications about our culture to go through a vetting team but that seems silly for this so we're going to skip that step.

N: No problem at all, it won't even be about G by the time it gets anywhere.

J: Terrific, great. So yeah, G has super high email traffic, that's really the way people communicate so on any given day I'll probably get 100 emails, and I'll start sifting through them, and then you know 9-6pm is spent I'd say about half in meetings with other Grandiosers over video conference or in person, and then the other half is doing the work, it's making PowerPoint slides or making a model in Excel or drafting a document to iterate with other Grandiosers on some strategic initiative that we're working on.

N: Neat. And so what do you like best about working at G?

J: Yeah, I think that's where I can really start to comment on the culture here. It's so fun working here, for a couple of different reasons. One is, the environment is just really informal, which I love. McKinsey was super formal. I wore... while you're there you dress the way your clients dress, and I served some financial services clients, and they were very formal, suit and tie. And here I wear a tee shirt every day, there's gyms everywhere, there's massage rooms, there's a swimming pool on campus, there's free bikes everywhere that are literally just laying around painted in Google colors that you can use to travel from place to place. And the other part of the culture that I love is that it's so collaborative, like in my role I work with a lot of external teams—external to my group but still at G—and am interacting with a lot of different people. At McKinsey, the relationships were sometimes a little bit formal, because you're a paid consultant and they expect long PowerPoint presentations and for you to have all the answers. At G, it's much more collaborative and iterative. And we're not viewed as external consultants; we're viewed as thought partners. And I love that. The other part of the culture...

N: That's so cool.

J: Yeah, it's really nice. The other part of the culture that I love is all the perks. And I think that's one area where G has really set a bar in SV. So one rule is that food at G, there's no employee who's more than 150 feet away from free food.

N: That's awesome [laughing]. That's an awesome way to put it.

J: And there's just like... on the MV campus, there's 20 cafes each with their own chefs, there's micro kitchens in every building that are stocked with like free drinks and snacks and coffee, and I'd say kind of one way that I've heard it be put, and this isn't actually G's terminology, is that it's a zero gravity approach. You know things that would normally take you away from work or make work more burdensome, like going to get food, or going to the gym, or getting a massage, which normally you'd have to do outside of work, they bring it into your environment so that it's really easy to go do. And they don't let it become like a big distraction for you getting your work done.

N: That's really neat.

J: And you know, as an employee I love it, it makes me happy. From G's perspective, it makes me more productive.

N: Right. Win win.

J: Totally, yeah.

N: So as a consultant do you have the... I heard about the 20% time where you can sort of work on your own project, do you have that too?

J: You know that's primarily for engineers, so I don't. But it's really an important part of the engineering culture. And I think projects like Gmail originally spurred from 20% time. So yeah, it's I think a really important part of Grandios's culture that it's retained.

N: And how about like traditions? Either within the office or if you have any sort of outside traditions that staff members do together.

J: Yeah, you know our group we do a volunteer activity together, we go on a ski trip, we have a really fun holiday party. One of the things we often do together is we eat lunch together all the time just because, you know there's, at least on my team I feel like some days I'll eat at my desk but I really try not to and it's discouraged, which is

kind of nice. So yeah, some big events, some daily just grabbing coffee or going to lunch. And there's also like, there's a bowling alley on campus that we can use... um, it's just like a beautiful, at least in Mountain View, the weather is always beautiful and the grass is so green and it's just fun to walk around.

N: Mhm. And how structured is your work schedule? I don't know maybe this is different for engineers and for you as well but as far as when you come in, when you leave, that kind of thing.

J: It's actually super unstructured for everyone. The goal is for you to get your work done. I come in early because I'm a morning person, but there are people in my group who show up around 10.

N: And just stay really late?

J: Totally. I mean I think we wind up putting the same amount of time into our work day but if I'm like 7-6, they're 10-9.

N: Interesting. I'm sure that makes people more productive as well.

J: Yeah, just cause you can kind of do it when your disposition... when you work best. Like if I work after 6pm I'm like totally useless.

N: Yeah, absolutely. Ok. And so what is the... I mean it sounds like McKinsey and Google are sort of night and day, but what do you think the most important differences between the two of them are? Because it's interesting to have someone who's got experience with such a similar job in two such different companies.

J: Yeah, and you know you're perceptive and 100% right to say that it is like a similar job. The way I kind of like to think of it is that at G, the work that I'm doing now retains all of the things that I loved about McKinsey but gets rid of all the things that I don't... that I didn't. You know the work that I did at McKinsey was so interesting. You're helping these clients solve these super complicated, interesting problems. And I still do that at G. But at McKinsey I didn't like wearing a suit and tie, I didn't like traveling every week, I didn't like that the relationships with our clients seemed so formal and sometimes wooden. And at G, I still get to do that really fun, exciting project work, but all of the things that I found challenging at McKinsey are changed.

N: Interesting.

J: And if I had to say what the biggest one is... I actually would say that the biggest is that at McKinsey, the focus is on the environment in which you work is always the client site. You're there with your client in sometimes a windowless team room from Monday through Thursday every week. And at G our team is, the business and operations team, is 50 people, we all sit together, we all come together and we see each other every day and we hang out and the environment is bright and colorful and fun. And for me I'd say that's the biggest change. Like I'm not in a windowless team room with like 6 guys in suits like surrounding a table that's too small to fit 6 people.

N: Right, so the physical atmosphere.

J: Totally, yeah.

N: Cool, very neat. Well I think that's the majority of what I was going to ask. Do you have anything that you think I should know going into my general research about the culture of SV as a whole or about G or about, anything you think I shouldn't miss?

J: That's a great question. Do you have like an angle yet? Is it like, I don't know, is it like the evolution of culture over time, or the influence of big companies on startups?

N: Yeah, so I'm trying to do... I'm trying to see what pieces comprise the culture, and I've started to read through anthropological theory about the Wild West and cowboy theory, which, believe it or not, there are books about and it's really interesting. And so I'm sort of going at that angle, that this is the new New Frontier, for startups. And so that's, I'm seeing if I can draw some parallels there.

J: Hm interesting... are you trying to like identify kind of the elements of startup culture?

N: Yeah, pretty much.

J: Cool, that's awesome.

N: Yeah, it's been really cool.

J: Do you think you yourself will be interested in pursuing a job in this space once you graduate?

N: Absolutely, yeah. And you know it's funny I didn't even really consider it until I started doing some of this research and now it sounds like somewhere I'd love to wind up. So I'm definitely going to look into it.

J: Cool, well yeah. I know that G has some programs for folks right out of college. One of the programs is Associate Marketing Manager, which you're basically in a marketing rotation. So anyway when that time comes up, shoot me your resume and I'll be happy to send it through our internal recruiting.

N: Thank you so much I really appreciate that.

11/4/13, 5:30pm  
*Adrienne, Payer*

**Full Transcription:**

N: So tell me what you did at Payer?

A: So most of what I wound up doing was actually starting their college ambassador program. So I had 7 satellite interns and a budget of like \$700,000 and I was doing a pilot program on how we could onboard more college students to Payer.

N: Cool. And what did you decide?

A: So, um, this was like my big project, I was also working on the analytics team, the comms team, and the project management team. It's a startup they didn't really know what I was doing. I was the first non-engineer intern so they were especially confused. And so for... it's a little weird with the college ambassador's project, cause my proposal was a lot different than what we ended up doing because they had their own vision of what they wanted to do. And so I created a proposal as well and it ended up just really being molded into something they had kind of predetermined. But the idea was to do a marketing blitz on these 7 places, and my job was to coordinate these 7 people and have them get articles into their college newspapers, so I talked to a lot of college newspaper editors. Their job was to get more local merchants onto Payer so I had to help them find... basically I ran some queries to see which merchants I should have them target, and then there was like a week where we ran a promotion where everyone at these colleges through geo-targeting could get a certain amount of dollars off their Payer purchases.

N: Oh, that's really cool. And so you were the only intern in the non-engineering department?

A: At the time I was their first female intern ever...

N: Woah, in any department?

A: In any department.

N: How old are they?

A: Um, they started in 2008.

N: Ok.

A: So they didn't really have interns until like 2010.

N: Still...

A: And even then it was very few, and then they got a lot of media backlash cause the summer before I started, so the summer of 2012, they had this issue where Jack Dorsey tweeted a picture of all the Payer interns and there were no girls in the photo, and there was like 15 interns. And so all these tech bloggers would write about how Jack D had no female interns. Which is probably why they were keen on hiring me, which I'm ok with.

N: Lucky you, yeah. [laughing]

A: So I was actually the first female intern.

N: How about employees? What was the ratio like there?

A: There was a decent amount of female employees. Every tech company has a problem with female employees in engineering. And they're all working on that. So in engineers, I know.... I know the Spotify statistics but not the Payer ones.

N: What are the Spotify ones? That's interesting too.

A: Um, Spotify in the New York office they have 114 engineers and 11 of them are females.

N: Sounds about standard.

A: Sounds pretty bad. So about 33% of the company in Spotify New York is female, an only about 10% of the engineers... so it's like an overall problem but especially an engineer problem.

N: What about like female leadership?

A: So, at Payer the CFO was a female, I'm forgetting her name... she used to be the CFO of salesforce and then moved to Payer right before I started, she was super super cool. So she was like one of the top 3 leadership positions. The COO since then has left among a large scandal, he had a little sex scandal going on [laughing]. And, she was a female, the engineering leads were all males, most of the other accounting leads were all males, product editors didn't really have a lead, Design lead was a male, design team was largely male. There was a lot of females who felt like they were pretty well represented and fairly equal but it was pretty well dominated by male given the overall population that's design. And then for marketing and communications the lead was also a male. So I think all of the full team leads were males, but there were a lot of people in mid-level management that were female, which is pretty common pattern. At Sammy it was a little different. The CEO COO everyone is in Sweden, so I don't really know but most of them are males, the Global Head of Brand is a female, the Global Head of Brand Strategy is a female, the Global strategy and something lead is a male, tech lead is a male, sales lead is a male... although I thought at Spotify females were much better represented than at Payer.

N: But Spotify is a little bigger too, right?

A: It's a lot bigger.

N: OK. And then as far as the culture and how you felt... it's kind of interesting to have you talk about both of them actually, what's the culture like at Payer? Do you have rituals? Do you have... I know they feed you...

A: Yeah, so pretty much every tech company it's become the norm to feed you. Which is nice. So Payer, there's some good and bad in the culture. So some of the good things were they really valued being open, and in large part they were. So every Friday they had this thing called Town Payer where everyone got together and J would go up and tell you about the company, K who was the COO at the time would go up and he would tell you about everything about the financials of the company, every employee knew all of the financial secrets. The... and then a lot of people would make presentations on product launches, like way before they launched a company everyone would know, or way before they launched a partnership like when they were only just starting to talk to a partnership everyone would know. So that was really cool... the problem was that they also wanted everyone to believe that they were fully open. There were some secrets they had to keep, and they did, but I think they were a little bit in denial about those. And the culture, and this might be just because it was an earlier stage startup in such a high period of growth, the culture was a little strained at times. I think it was growing pains. But partly derives from the fact that S is a finance company at heart, they

work with credit card companies, they work really deeply in finance, and you can sort of tell. A lot of people come from finance too. So everything down to the way people dress, like people dress a lot more formally at S than they would at other companies. It wasn't super weird to see someone walking around in a suit or wearing heels, whereas somewhere else I worked it would be super weird. And then just the process of getting anything to happen went through like 6 levels. And so you kind of felt like everything had to go through so much approval, which is weird given that they did so much diligence on everyone they hired, it seems odd that they had to get everyone to sign off on it. So there's a lot of things I did as an intern that J signed off on which is just a little... it seemed kind of like a waste, and it really slowed down the process for a lot of things. And a lot of people just kind of felt like it was a little too micromanaged, and that they were being watched and people were waiting for them to screw up on things. And that was kind of a problem in the culture there. It was... it's really open and people try everything and are invested in the product, but at the same time it feels like there's friction in things where there shouldn't be friction, and at a startup people don't expect that. Whereas at Sammy it's a Swedish company and Swedes love to have fun and they have their lunch parties and things, and everyone has a great time and nothing you do really gets watched over. And it's really cool cause there's a huge amount of trust in you. It's not quite as open but people don't really mind that. I think generally the overall morale at Spotify was a little happier, but I don't know the financial data, I barely understand... I didn't know where they were profitable until midway through my internship. But at the same time, it's kind of like you can find the information you want, you can do the side projects you want, if there's something you're really interested in doing, you can get that information. And despite the fact that I was there, all the teams are in different places, it's really international, it was easier to work with other teams than it was at Payer where everything's flat and everyone is in the same room. Just because at S you kind of feel like you're bothering people, whereas at Spotify you feel like they want you to come bother them.

N: So you didn't like the flat structure?

A: Oh, I loved the flat structure. But I think it was just something a little more intrinsic about S that made it not as effective. Whereas at Spotify it's like in the Spotify DNA that everyone is happy and works together and even internationally... and it made it a lot easier to work with other people.

N: Do you think there was any difference in what you guys did together? Like, do S people hang out outside of S? Do you do outings? Do you do events? Cause I know you did a lot of that at Spotify and I'm wondering if that makes a big difference.

A: Yeah, so at Spotify there was a more intern structure too, which is why I did a lot of events... at S there was no intern structure whatsoever. But they are friends outside the office at S I think, but they also spend more time at work at S than they do at Spotify for sure. I think they're mostly friends outside of work, it's a little hard to tell cause my team was a little different than other teams especially cause my team boss had only started like two months before me and was a little more shy, on the shy side. So it was harder to tell. Whereas at Sammy they definitely hung out all the time, they partied together, it was just different. But also at Spotify my bosses had been there forever and were the most outgoing people ever.



N: And then what about the culture of SV as a whole, cause you spent a whole semester there. What did you notice, what did other interns tell you, did people love it, did people hate it, was it gendered, anything like that. Boys loved it, girls hated it, other way around.

A: I think everyone really loved it. I think it makes it really difficult on people cause a lot of people I went there with were really set on doing banking or going into consulting or accounting or something, and a lot of them really did change their minds a lot. C for example was going to be a banker, and is going to work at a tech company.

N: Close enough... tech banking.

A: I mean yeah, but the culture is just better. They feed you, you feel like they want you to be happy, you have ownership over something. I know a lot of my friends from home are bankers and it kind of sometimes makes them feel like they're really just a means for their bank to get something done, and they work really long hours, they have no ownership over their projects, whereas at tech that's really not the case: You will have ownership over a project, because at a startup especially, if they hire you it means that they think you are capable of taking ownership of something. And that's a really great part of the culture. I think they also sometimes go to unnecessary means even, to make sure that their employees are happy. So it's great that they give the food to all their employees and there's some awesome things about that, there's all the free food and the snacks that make you want to stay, there's the gym memberships, there's the open culture.

N: ... the massage rooms... why do they do that?

A: Yeah, there's some things that they really don't need to do and I think are kind of a waste of money and really antipodal to the lean startup idea that's become so popular and yet not really applied.

N: I was going to ask about that because that is like, the fad, but no one is really doing it. Do you think it's because people won't work there because they have the alternative to...

A: The thing is, I've only worked at 2 tech companies, and only for a short time each. And I couldn't care less about the perks at the next place I work. I used to care, but like it doesn't really matter. For me it matters how much I believe in the vision, and what type of role they give me, and whether it is something that I actually care about. The amount that you give me free massages or like a yoga room does not matter to me, and I think that if it does matter to people, these startups should be concerned that that's why people are working there. So I actually really oppose the things that they do. I get the fun events. And I think they should have fun events and I think they should make sure that people who work there are happy. But for instance S had a lot more perks than Spotify and I'm starting to realize that that is not what it boils down to when it comes down to culture. There's a lot more important things in there. That said there are some perks that you have to have to be a viable tech company. But some point they've gone way over the top and they should probably shut it down. Like there was no reason that S needed to have chocolate filled pretzels *and* chocolate covered pretzels in the pantry. Like things like that that are really small it's just like, why are you doing this, there's no reason.

N: That's really interesting. I wonder if they will start, if there will be sort of a turnaround on that.

A: I wonder if it has to do with the so called bubble, or...

N: Do you think it's a bubble?

A: I don't know if I think there's a tech bubble, I think there's a little bit of a social bubble.

N: Like a startup bubble?

A: A social startup bubble. So I think Facebook was probably over valued at the time, given just how valuations usually work, I don't think Twitter is overvalued really. I think Twitter is perfectly valued and they worked really hard to make sure about that.

N: It's a very unique company too.

A: And they worked really hard to make sure that their valuation wouldn't be seen as over valued and they would keep everything under wraps. And a little not having that hype show that FB had. But at the same time there are a lot of companies that I don't think will ever be that profitable that are valued at like... like Snapchat is valued at \$4B and I absolutely do not understand why. I'm not really sure how they're going to monetize.

N: Yeah, is that based on users? Like do they do ads? They don't.

A: No, they don't. But a lot of them get valued at things before they do ads. Pinterest is valued really highly, I don't know if they do ads yet, Evernote has a valuation I don't really trust. Its valued at like 3 billion dollars. Even some places I've worked they've been valued ways I don't really trust. But at the same time I think that they just need to calm that down. I don't think the employees are over valued, because I think that they're creating just as much value as someone at a bank and it makes sense what they do, but I think it will come to a happy medium at some point. I just don't understand where they're at right now. It seems really volatile and it's really hard to tell, maybe this is right but there's no evidence for that, there's only the evidence of the bubble that's happened before.

N: That's interesting because it's very much the California goldrush mentality. Everyone just thinks that every little company that gets built is going to make it big and be the next Facebook, or be the next Twitter, or be the next Google, and that seems really unsustainable to me.

A: Yeah and 3 out of 4 startups fail. The other quarter go on to get acquired or IPO. But 3 out of 4 fail, and people know that. That's why people really are wary of joining a startup. I actually, it's really interesting at CMC specifically, because so many people want to be that entrepreneur that starts a startup, but everyone wants to go somewhere midsized or full-sized because people don't want to fall on their face because people are generally risk averse. And no one wants to go join that four person startup where they could do something really cool and go on that fast track. There's a lot of risk that goes into that and most people who start a startup are fully aware that it will likely fail, they just decided that it's worth it.

N: Would you ever join a little tiny one?

A: I would love to join a little tiny one, and I almost want to do it right now, I just don't know if I have the risk profile. I want to do it soon, but I don't know if I will do it now.

N: Might as well have a couple years of job security under your belt.

A: But I'm the kind of person who will spend 15 hours a day on work if I feel like I should, and I don't really need that encouragement when I'm 21 I can't be in that atmosphere.

N: Do you think that there's anything else that I should definitely know for my thesis, either about the culture of SV in general or women in startups?

A: Yeah, so I think, 2 things. One, for women in startups, I think a lot of them feel commoditized, so it kind of feels like people are looking for them because they're a woman and not anything else. Cause it's really transparent when some company starts an initiative that's aiming for junior girls in college, it's pretty clear that they're just trying to even out their ratios.

N: And they fill their HR department usually instead of like engineering.

A: Often, I mean they're looking for engineers but there's really 2 concerns for that. There's one on the side of the company, where a lot of people that already work there but aren't concerned about that statistic feel like, well are you going to hire people that are less qualified just to even out that just seems terrible where they really need highly qualified, really talented people. And then there's the concern from the females who are already really good at computer science like, why are you hiring me? Am I really not that qualified? Its affirmative action for women at startups right now. That's what it is. And it kind of sucks. When I was working at Spotify I was helping come up with the woman initiative for them, and when I talked with my boss I'd make sure that most of the ideas are focusing on high school and late middle school, or maybe early college, because the point shouldn't be to recruit women now it shouldn't be to fill a quota.

N: Amen.

A: I hope that startups start concentrating on that. And on the culture in SV, I think one really important thing to know is that there's this really large problem in SV where if you work at a tech firm there, all you really hear about and spend time with and go to are tech events. And so basically you're living in a world where everyone really wants to start a startup and be an entrepreneur but all they really know about is tech, and tech in SV. So they're really solving these microscopic problems that only techies in SV have, and that's a huge issue. So a lot of them want to solve problems that are only applicable to the people immediately surrounding them because that is the world that they live in and they think those are universal problems but they're not. I think that's actually a huge issue in SV. People just don't have exposure to real things where they can have that little spark where its like, this is what the world actually needs. Or people will look at things and just go oh here's another SV startup, not like here's another startup that could improve my life. Whereas like in NY I didn't feel that way while working at Spotify. These people have exposure to real things and real life because the thing is it's a city which isn't a tech city, it's sort of a finance city but at this point it isn't even a finance city. It's a finance city, it's a fashion city, it's an education city, and it's everything. And I think that actually caters a lot better to people that want to be an entrepreneur because it means that they're thinking in a lot more of a holistic way.

11/18/13, 1:30pm  
*The Motley, Jordan, Sellerz*

**Full Transcription:**

N: Ok, so I guess just tell me a little bit about your experience with RN and how you started working there.

J: Sure. So I was trying to figure out where I wanted to work, and the two possibilities for me were going to be either a really big company with a big brand name, or a really early stage startup because I thought I wanted to go to an extreme. And I guess I just decided somewhere along the line that a small startup would be cool, it would be something that I wouldn't get an experience with that easily. CMC I think, for one, doesn't really encourage going off and finding some cool company, so I wasn't sure if I'd get a chance after college. So basically after that I just thought about what kind of startup I'd want to work for. I think it's hard to figure out the culture before you actually get there, and so a big part of what drew me to certain companies was the product that they offered. Because if it was a cool product, if it was something that I thought I could be engaged with every day, then you know probably the other people that were there would also be similar to me, would be interested in the same thing. So I'm not sure if you know much about the company itself.

N: Fill me in a little. Just what I've seen on the website.

J: So yeah, that website was actually me and the other intern, so in case you saw the website that was up.

N: Congratulations that's awesome!

J: Yeah, so that was cool. Basically the company does retail video analytics, to they take all the video streams from inside a store—it could be a grocery store, it could be a luxury jewelry store, or anything in between—and they run this video through their system, and what it outputs is it tracks customers through the store. You can see where they stop, what they look at, what they buy... and eventually just figure out who your customer is and how they behave, and then plan your store around that. So you can change some aisles, you can run experiments in one branch and then do another experiment in another one, compare the two, see which one did better, increase your sales, decrease your loss, and things like that. So it's cool. So a lot of what I was doing was running those numbers and finding out what stores were doing, and then the other half of what I was doing was marketing, so things with the website, things with Google AdWords, basically classic marketing.

N: Cool. And so... tell me a little bit about the office itself.

J: Sure, like physically?

N: Yeah, how many people work there, that kind of thing.

J: Yeah, so I spent probably what, 2 and a half, 3 months there. When I got there there was 50, when I left there were 60 people, so really fast growing. We got there and we didn't have tables for us because the company was growing too fast, so we had to build a table, like from Ikea parts, on our first day.

N: That's really funny.

J: Which is like super startupy, right? But anyway... it was actually kind of, I think it must have been two offices put together, but it was, the way it was set up was 2 halves, one was a more technical half of the room, and the other was more business and data and marketing and everything else. We could walk to and from the other half and there was no door, but there was like a clear divide it was funny. All the engineers sat on one side and all of us sat on the other side. Nobody had their own office including the CEO, CFO, people who interacted with us every day. But we did have a whole bunch of conference rooms, I think conference rooms are super popular in tech because when you're working in small groups you just want to get away you don't want to distract the engineers, but you just want to jump into a room, write on the walls, and just figure out what you're doing.

N: And with the open floorplan it's the only place you can have a conversation without bothering people.

J: Yeah exactly. So anytime I needed to take a phone call I just jumped into a conference room. There weren't any sales people in the office, and so nobody really had to like take phone calls all the time, but whenever sales people would come in—cause they work remotely—but when they were in the office they would just take up a conference room for a day. That was kind of the physical layout it's really simple, they just moved in this week to a much bigger office because apparently there are like 100 people now.

N: Wow, that's really fast.

J: Yeah, but when I was there it was sort of getting cramped.

N: Do you know about like, the founder's story, when it got started.

J: Yeah, so actually there were these, there was a whole team of them working at Cisco, and they were working on an internal startup at C that was producing this product for gaming companies, so basically casinos. And have you seen that show Las Vegas, at all?

N: No, but I've seen the ads for it.

J: Yeah, so like basically suddenly somewhere along the lines I think people started, in gaming and casinos and hotels, thought that their security systems should be like super high tech. So they should be able to track people's footsteps, identify where culprits were, whatever they needed to do. Just basically people tracking. They started doing this and realized what was being asked of them was kind of beyond the scope of technology and the product that they were going to build wasn't really something that they wanted to build. So the head of that internal startup, Alexi, he's a CMCer as well, he and his team decided to leave. And instead of doing this for casinos, do it for retail institutions. So it was just 2 of them, the CEO and CTO kind of picked up and just like lived in a coffee shop for months. The CTO coded everything and Alexi basically flew around trying to collect money to build it. And they got their first customer before they had a product, they had a meeting like a month later and they didn't have a product, so the CTO is freaking out in a coffee shop trying to build a product that they promised to someone that doesn't exist. Eventually they got it done and I guess it went well, and then I think some more people joined them from C. A lot of people that worked at their company were big company people who were just looking for a small company transition. They'd had enough—they spent a lot of their time talking about how much they disliked C or big companies. The

amount of time they spent in meetings that they just didn't get anything done in, they talked about the infamous full day meetings that they used to have sometimes, and they just wanted to go to a place where that just was not a thing.

N: That's so brutal. What were your working hours like?

J: Mine were actually pretty relaxed. It was 9-6.

N: Did you have some flexibility on when to come in and when to leave?

J: Yeah, no one was keeping track of me, I think everyone just kind of did a 9-6 thing so I was part of that. Some people stayed later, so like the head of the company, Alexi, he was a workaholic so he would often stay pretty late.

N: So the founder is the CEO?

J: Yeah.

N: And you got to interact with him on a daily basis?

J: Yeah, I mean whenever he wasn't traveling he'd be around, he'd take us to coffee, and at first it was very cool like, oh the CEO is taking us to coffee! After that it was just like, hey I'm just going to walk over and ask Alexi a question about some stupid thing I'm doing that he probably doesn't even care about.

N: That's super cool. What about other sort of company events, things like that. Did you guys have lunches and dinners together every day?

J: Yeah, so it's actually very funny. So first of all, coffee was a huge thing, there was this coffee shop down the street and first of all, whenever you go out for coffee nobody would just go on their own, or in twos, you'd go in like 5s or 10s or 15s.

N: [laughing] roll deep.

J: Yeah, like real deep. And sometimes you'd go just like 30 or 40 people, pretty much like the whole company who's at the office would go to coffee together.

N: That's kind of funny because it started in a coffee shop so just naturally you gotta go back.

J: Right, exactly, it makes sense. I don't know what it was but yeah... so coffees were done together, lunches were very often a whole bunch of people, especially on like Thursday or Friday...

N: Would you go out for lunch?

J: Yeah we'd go out for lunch every day pretty much. But on those days literally everyone would join us.

N: That's awesome.

J: Yeah, it was great. I don't think they do that anymore given that it's 100 people, but yeah when I was there it was the whole company, it was very cool. Happy hours every other week or every three weeks there was a company happy hour Thursday night, and that was fun. Alexi is Russian and so he has expectations of people's— and a CMcer—so every happy hour...

N: Oh, a Russian CMcer oh my gosh...

J: Yeah, so but it was great yeah.

N: So what do you think your favorite thing and least favorite thing would be about working for RN?

J: I'm trying to make sure that's not a really personal thing because I think that doesn't really apply to what you're looking for.

N: I mean it can totally be personal. I'm looking for actually just your personal experience, so that's fine.

J: Um, so favorite thing was the people, and the interactions with people, it was extremely informal, I don't think I had a single conversation that wasn't a joke. It was weird. Like they were... people only spoke sarcastically and like, joked to get things done. Sometimes inefficient but like you don't care, it's totally worth it.

N: Happier.

J: Yeah, it's happier. The worst part would be... I don't know I think that at a startup you're trying to provide as much as possible: if the company doesn't need what you have or vice versa then that relationship isn't made. So as much as I enjoyed working there, I think that in my particular case and in the case of the other intern who also didn't go back for a summer or whatever, I think it was the skills that we had or wanted to use for our first job weren't exactly the skills that they wanted.

N: So yours are like more economic and you were doing more marketing.

J: Yeah, I was doing some data stuff which I found interesting but a lot of stuff was sort of marketing based which was very cool because I gained a huge deal of respect for marketers and the importance of their job, but I don't think the company needed marketing as much, they just needed like a good product. And my skills were, the summer before I'd done finance for 2 summers before that, and so I sort of saw that as my skill and didn't think that they could really use that.

N: Do you think that you're going to go back to finance, or are you going to still look for like a financial startup?

J: I considered financial startups, I thought that would be really cool idea.

N: Like Addapar...

J: Yeah something like that. I spoke to Addapar for Silicon Valley and stuff, I am going back to finance, I'm doing banking, but I'm doing it in SV.

N: Where are you working?

J: In Palo Alto. So basically just doing tech M&A, which kind of keeps me in the same area.

N: Yeah, so you can decide either way.

J: And so that's kind of the reason I went back is I want to use all this skill or whatever you want to call it, that we have... also I think if you really think about it the people who are most valuable are the people who are building the product. And you can't have a tech company without marketing or without business operations or accounting, you need those roles, but I didn't feel like I was contributing enough to the actual output.

N: You're not like the heart of it.

J: Yeah, which might be sort of idealistic to think that everyone should be the heart of it, but I wanted to go to a place that I had more contribution.

N: I wonder, that's actually interesting given like the divide of the engineers and the non engineers.

J: Yeah, I think the way that probably ended up happening is they just didn't have non-engineers, and when they started getting them they were like, oh, we'll put you on that side. But yeah, it's sort of indicative of how they think and how they operate.

N: Totally. And so my last question is about gender, and how many women work there? Normally it's very small.

J: No, it wasn't that small. My boss on the data analytics side was a woman, as well as a bunch of engineers.

N: Really? That's awesome.

J: Yeah it was great. It was very international and female friendly office I felt like. The office manager was a woman, my boss, who was the head of analytics, was a woman, and pretty much the person I was working most with was also a woman. I'd say that out of 50, if I had to ballpark it, obviously it's not like a 25 number, but I'd say maybe... maybe 15.

N: That's huge compared with most people I've talked to. That's really interesting.

J: Yeah, and the good part was obviously a lot of the women were in operations, accounting and data analytics, I don't know maybe 3 or 4 women engineers out of the 20 engineers at the company, so it wasn't a bad number.

N: Yeah, and it's how many years old, it's 2...

J: No its older than that, it's maybe 6, 5 or 6 years old.

N: Wow, it's older than I thought. Cool. And were the demographics in general... you said it was pretty international, was it all young?

J: It was all over the place.

N: Really?

J: Yeah it was all over the place it was actually pretty interesting, I don't know if this fits the stereotype...

N: Not at all but that's great.

J: It was I'd say Alexi is probably 40, well he's just under 40 because he was on SV's 40 under 40 list or whatever, but yeah, there's some people there who were probably in their mid-40s, late 40s, and then down to like recent college grads.

N: People with kids and stuff like that too?

J: Yeah, people with kids coming in... there were a bunch of us my age, a bunch of people just getting married, and then a bunch of people with like kids going to soccer practice.

N: What a cool experience. Well thank you! It was really great to talk to you.

J: Hope it was helpful.



11/20/13

11:04 am

Email

[klawe@hmc.edu](mailto:klawe@hmc.edu)

Hi Nora,

It's definitely true that women are seriously under-represented in computer science and computer engineering undergraduate and graduate programs, and these are the disciplines that provide most of the people going into the tech industry. For example from 2007 to 2012, the Taulbee Survey conducted by the Computing Research Association reported the percentage of computer science B.Sc. degrees going to females was between 11 and 14%. Several universities and colleges including Harvey Mudd, MIT, CMU and UBC have shown that it's possible to dramatically increase the number of female students majoring in computer science by a number of approaches, e.g. making introductory (and also more advanced) courses more interesting and less intimidating, taking female students to the annual Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing conference, and providing research opportunities.

However it's also true that women in the tech industry are about twice as likely as men to leave the tech industry in the first ten years. The Anita Borg Institute did a research study a couple of years ago on how mid-career men and women perceived large company tech industry work environment. Men generally thought that rewards and recognition were merit-based. Women thought they were more based on who you knew. More recently there has been a lot of stories about women finding many start ups work environments unfriendly. Clearly there is improvement needed in some work environments as well as in academic programs.

Hope this is helpful,

Maria

Dear Maria,

Thank you so much for this insight! I find what you said about the number of years women choose to remain in the industry particularly interesting: this seems indicative of a wider trend beyond simply the numbers graduating in the field, although whether their departure is due to family expectations, unfriendly working environments, or simply choice is unclear as of yet. Something I will attempt to explore further.

Thank you, again for your time and help.

Sincerely yours,

Nora

11/21/13

Email Interview, Brittany, Coinup

1) Tell me about how you got started at Coinup.

I was working at a PR agency and had a friend at Coinup. He recruited me to interview at Coinup because they needed someone to run their PR team and wanted someone internal ahead of their funding announcement. They had been working with an agency previously. After meeting with multiple managers and getting to know people inside the company over a few months, I made the transition over to Communications Manager, where I run the PR team. For the funding announcement we worked with a PR team and since then I have run announcements alone.

2) What do you like about working at Coinup? Dislike?

I love the culture. Everyone is very young, independent, intelligent - super super smart but fun and quirky.

3) Take me through a day at Coinup.

Unable to comment on my day to day as my work in Communications is sensitive. However, I handle media inquiries, brand/positioning, internal and external comms, internal and external content drafting/finalization, announcement materials (press release, pitch, identifying media to talk to)

5) What is it like being a woman at Coinup? Are there challenges? Benefits?

While I report to a man, he treats me like I expect he treats anyone else on his team. I don't feel like I am at any advantage or disadvantage being a woman. I have to do good work and demonstrate my value just as anyone else does. But I wouldn't say I have to work harder or my life is easier because of my gender.

6) What special office rituals do you have, if any? Outings and events?

Wacky Wednesday - every Wednesday we dress up in a theme as an office. Ex: Country theme, USA theme, All pink, Animals, Movie

We have culture events. We've gone to the California Academy of Sciences.

7) How structured is your work schedule?

Work days are pretty lenient as long as you get your work done. I typically come in around 9:30 and leave around 5:30/6.

8) How satisfied are you with your work-life balance?

Very.

9) Have you noticed Coinup changing or growing over the time that you have been there? If so, how?

We've more than doubled in company size since I arrived. We've also brought on senior level management.

11/22/13, 9am  
*Daniel, Fireside, CEO*

### **Full Transcription**

N: Before we begin I just wanted to make sure it's ok if I record...

D: ... organizations because you have on the technology than you do on say the market side and all of that. You can also look at it from a... the perspective of the mindset of millennial and what their expectations are with wealth creation and the duration of time required to get there. If you know, I'm assuming, if you're a senior you're probably 20, 21, 22, that would make your parents somewhere in their 50s. If you think about your parents' generation your parents and their generation thought about their career across two, three, maybe four different jobs over the course of 30-40 years.

N: Right.

D: There was a much greater sense of commitment and loyalty from your parents' generation than there is from your generation.

N: Interesting.

D: And so what happens is you have... and there's a lot of articles around on this, and it's really prevalent in the valley because of the wealth creation in the last decade. So what happens is you have unrealistic expectations in the younger workforce around how long you have to work and how rare it is to actually get one of those Yammer, SalesForce, Facebook events. So what happens is they become very nomadic. And so the problem is that they can be bought. And what's fascinating about this is what a lot of us look for are the perks, and they completely arose with Google. Google was the first company in the valley that really changed the standard with which everyone else now is forced to compete in terms of the perks that they offer at the office, everything from free lunch, free dinner, you know on site doctors, on-site day care, on site dry cleaners, on site massage therapists, blah blah blah.

N: Right.

D: So, but what's interesting of course is the less you spend on perks the more you can invest in the business, and actually have a better opportunity for that wealth creation outcome. So I think the millennial are very schizophrenic in wanting all the money but wanting all the perks and you know it's really hard to spend a ton of money on perks and also be a really profitable company that tends to have that huge liquidity event and less dilutive fundraising rounds along the way. And so culture has become very very different because of the whole Google phenomenon and the millennial phenomenon, but then there's another side of it to look at which is how communication tools have become much more prevalent, which has really broken down a lot of silos in organizations, and that's driven a very different cultural shift from these top down, command and control, hierarchical, I'm a CEO, you're a low level person shut up sit in the corner and do your work, to very much more open, transparent, meritocracy type of environment. And while millennial might be short sighted in some regards, they bring a much more transparent expectation around communication to the game. A lot of that is because a lot of you grew up in

Facebook, and you grew up with this notion of feeds, and you grew up in the notion that everything in your life is public. I remember when I was at Claremont, I'm 43 so I'm about double your age, but I remember when I went to Claremont my dad sat me down and his, so this was '87 I went there, no one was using the internet at that point, so his comment was look, just as you go out and you have fun and you party, just know that anything you do could show up on the front page of the paper tomorrow, and how would you feel?

N: [laughing] no way.

D: So of course that's just like basic. Yeah but you guys think really differently, right? It's not like it's going to show up in the paper and the paper goes away tomorrow and no one sees it again. You guys do something stupid and it's in the feed forever.

N: Oh absolutely. And it's on Facebook, it's on Twitter, it's on Tumblr, it's on Instagram.

D: Exactly. So what's interesting with all of this of course is you do have a much healthier expectation for open, transparent communication. And that's really changed cultures as well. Cause if you look at what's happening in what's called the ESN space, the Enterprise Social Network space, companies like Yammer and Chatter and Jive and Timber and all of these, they allow for a much different mode of communication than traditional email. If I hired you tomorrow in my company, as a young talented person right out of college, and you got there and you saw some policy that you thought was tachine, you would never ever send me the CEO an email and say hey, this is a really fuckin stupid policy. But oddly enough, what you probably would do is you would probably post in the all-company feed, in the Enterprise Social Network, hey this makes no sense why are we doing this?

N: Hm, it sort of takes you one step out of it.

D: It does, but what's interesting, right, is it forces conversations that would not have happened five or ten years ago.

N: Interesting.

D: And so... I think when you think about culture and how culture has evolved in startups, the gender issue, and I'll talk to that in a minute, I've actually been pushing more gender equality in startups for the last 7 or 8 years and I can talk to you a lot about that, but I think a really big thing to think about with culture is the mindset of the generation that's entering the workforce right now versus the generation that's leaving the workforce and how they think about loyalty to companies.

N: Right.

D: I would then think about it from a communication perspective, and there's this notion of a thing called a communication continuum. And so if you think about your world, your world starts with text as the baseline of your communication continuum. And it then goes to you know, chat and group chat and Instagram and Facebook and continues to go up and then sort of Skype, Google Hangouts, you know that intimate immersive video experience is at the top of it. And you have all of those available today and oddly enough your generation, and a little bit of mine but far more yours, actually has a brain that's wired to consume communication from all of those different mediums at once. If you think about even ten years ago you had email. That was your communication. That was it. That was how you

communicated. You had some very rudimentary and unreliable video technologies, but you know the public internet wasn't robust enough to really drive video in any pervasive or reliable way. And so with all of these different vehicles for communication now it absolutely changes company cultures, and in a very good way because what it does is it flattens them. It makes you the kid out of college, much closer to me the CEO, because you have a lot of different ways to communicate with me. And you can do it in much more public ways, where email is very private. Other than distribution lists which people typically don't use a whole lot anymore, you can communicate to me in a much more frictionless and open way than you could in the past. So that flattens organizations, it really takes a lot out of and fundamentally changes the middle manager role in companies, which really affects culture. Because as a middle manager, my job is to make sure that I'm keeping you, somebody below me away from somebody above me, because if you say anything bad about me I'm at risk. But in the old model, I have the ability through a heavy top down structure to command and control what you do and who you have access to. I don't have that anymore. So the biggest role that we see changing is the middle manager role. And then the other thing I think you can talk about with company culture is more so than ever in the history of enterprise technology is this geographic disparity gap right? One of the downsides of the internet is I don't, again let's go back to Mom and Dad, they probably worked at corporate offices. Far fewer people work at corporate offices, so many people work from home now. So you have this geographic disparity because the internet allows you to communicate in all these different ways. It's cheaper for me to say hey Nora just go work from home in Claremont, rather than me re-locate you and give you a cube in the office and all the costs that are associated with that. The downside of that of course is you feel less engaged. And so if you look at every study it says that 50-70% of all knowledge workers in their organizations feel disengaged. Which then of course drives further turnover, because if you're sitting at home in your pajamas, working all day, and you've never really felt integrated into the company because you work 2,000 miles from headquarters, when you get that call from a search firm saying hey Nora, we hear you're the best thing in town we'd love to hire you away, you have less loyalty. So that of course just sort of exacerbates this issue around the nomadic nature of the workforce today. Instead of course, if I know that, I have to offer now more perks to keep you here, and it sort of raises the bar for everybody in terms of what perks you have to have to keep people and you know what the expectations are as baseline in the Valley.

N: So that's what I was going to ask is if you see a connection between this nomadic workforce... I think of it, especially in Silicon Valley, it's kind of a Wild West because it's this unexplored frontier of new companies, and do you think that that's why people are providing so many perks is to sort of over-compensate for the risk that people are taking? Because most of the time when you join say a consulting firm, there's a risk that you could mess up and lose your job but there's really no risk that your firm is going to go under. And in a startup you always have that frontier challenge, and I wonder if you think that that's the connection?

D: No, you know it's interesting I don't. Because it's actually counter intuitive, right? The best way to mitigate risk in a startup is to spend less money.

N: Yeah, that's true.

D: And so what you have though is there is this totally new expectation about what work-life balance is defined as. And what work should provide you versus what you provide work. And so Google really sort of threw the whole thing for everybody.

N: And why do you think they did it in the first place though?

D: Because they have more money than God.

N: [laughing] they were like, we have to spend it on something.

D: I mean look, Google's very much of an engineering culture.

N: Right.

D: And, you know, as a guy running a company that selfishly, I want my engineers working all the time.

N: Right.

D: But I also want them really happy, if they're on a critical dev cycle, it totally screws me. So at the end of the day, here's sort of the crazy logic that as CEOs we sort of have to think through now, so Nora you're a great developer and you're working on a really important project for me, if I lose you I'm going to have to go recruit a new Nora, which is going to cost me 30,40 thousand bucks, it's going to force my project to slip, and this market is moving so fast if you miss by six months someone can come in and trounce you and take the market. So at the end of the day Nora, I'm happy to spend 10 grand and make sure that you have a beer refrigerator in your desk, make sure we get you massage therapists every afternoon at 2, make sure I buy you a \$2,000 chair that's ergonomically correct, that I handle your dry cleaning for you, I give you a gym and all that because frankly you're also not going to go home, because you're probably a 26 year old guy who doesn't date girls much and just loves to code and you don't have a life anyway, so if I can take all of the things that require you to go home away so you don't have to go home, I probably get 2-3 solid hours of coding out of you tonight, and that's a good thing. So it's this sort of weird mentality that we get the perks really, in the Valley, are mainly for the engineering side of the organization. You make them available to everybody because you sort of have to, but at the end of the day if you're a sales person I could tell you shut up, sit in the corner, make your calls, and if not I'll go find another sales person. But it's not so simple when you have engineers.

N: Right.

D: And so it's really the engineering culture. Google is very much of an engineering culture but also you gotta remember, Google became, they hit 8 billion dollars in revenue in just a matter of a few years. And so you have all of that money and it's just frankly it's not a big deal to spend money on all of these perks. Now it is in a company of my size of course, who just reached 26 million bucks in a series B round, I'd much rather hire more engineers but you just can't get the engineers cause they can go to a Yahoo or Google or somewhere else—and Twitter—and get those types of perks. So I think you want to look at it in terms of the mindset of the workforce that's there today, what created those expectations, when does it really turn, it was really Google that sort of set the new standard for what was expected, and then of course you all have to compete with it.

N: It's a cycle, not necessarily vicious, but it definitely... because the people that they would leave you for are the other companies in the valley so everyone needs to have the best perks.

D: Right, and A players attract A players. So if you get an A player, they're gonna bring all their buddies and then you know... there's this notion that A players bring A players and B players bring C players. It's a really big dropoff. So you know it's critical but I'm, now I can tell you this, I just took over as CEO of this company 90 days ago, and it's...

N: Congratulations!

D: It's a great company and a great technology, but we got a bunch of work to do, and we're behind because the previous CEO frankly wasn't great. So but now, there's a window in the market that I feel we have to hit. So I gotta bring in all these great developers, I have some but I also have to keep them. So I've had to buy a new office, institute free lunch, free dinner, I did actually, you know one of the things you should write about that's sort of interesting is there's this notion of what's called "unlimited vacation policy." So rather than what's typical you have ok you got 2 weeks a year, 3 weeks a year, a few companies, and my last few have done this and we do it here, is we just say, look Nora you're an adult. We know that you work hard. You need a vacation, take a vacation, I don't care. Don't worry about how much you've accrued. What's fascinating is that if I tell you that, you're actually going to take less vacation than if I tell you you get 2 weeks a year.

N: That doesn't surprise me.

D: Which is great. But the other thing that's really helpful for me as the guy running the company is if I give you 2 weeks a year, that's a liability I have to carry on my books, and it gets really big over time. By saying, hey you're not going to accrue vacation, but take whatever you want, I don't have a liability to accrue on the books anymore. Which is a huge advantage for me as a business owner. But that goes to culture, right, because it's a sense of empowerment. Rather than me dictating how much time you can and can't have every year, now I put it in your hands, you're in power to make that decision. So that's a whole other thread you can talk about which is employee empowerment. So I would sort of focus it on communication and the influx of technologies have allowed organizations to be far more open and transparent in their communication and I think the mentality of the workforce that's entering the market now demands in terms of transparency, you guys grew up in feeds and emails. I would also take a look at it from the perspective of employee engagement and company loyalty and how over the last two generations that has dramatically changed. And it has changed in part because employees are less engaged both because of geographic disparity and then wealth inflation, expectations in tech specifically. And then companies' notions of now there's more of a global workforce to tap into. And so you know, look, Nora you're great but as an engineer I can get rid of you and I can go hire somebody in Mumbai for like 50%. So maybe I don't need you. So the notion of a global talent pool to pull from right now is also changing those dynamics from the company loyalty to use on employee side. And now the last one is let's get to gender. So huge issue in tech. there are very very few women on the development side. I don't frankly know what changes that, other than when you're 9 or 10 years old and I'm your dad I'm starting to get you



interested in why math is cool. I don't know what it is, I think it's gotta start earlier. I certainly don't see a bunch of women coming out of college wanting engineering jobs and not getting them.

N: No, yeah.

D: It's just a very male dominated pool of talent right now, and I think it just has to start earlier in school, I think you have to have a teacher that pulls you aside and says, hey you're really smart, and coding is not for just boys, you know? I don't know what it is. But on the non-technology side, sales, marketing, finance, HR, HR has always been gender balanced or maybe even skewing towards women over men. But we've seen it a lot, half of my exec team at my previous company that I sold to Microsoft were women, my exec team here that I'm building right now is more male dominated but will be absolutely balanced within 3 months. I think you're seeing with the Marissa Mayers and the Sheryl S's I think you're seeing role models maybe, I don't know if they're role models, but you are seeing more women in positions of power. Meg Whitman is another one as well. But what I frankly I'm starting to see more of now, which is really exciting, is women entrepreneurs, women starting companies. And I don't know what the answer is there to see more of that, but you are definitely starting to see it. And I could be totally wrong here, my teams have always been very gender balanced, but I don't really see an issue in the Valley of any prejudice towards gender. You know one of the things that's really interesting about tech is there's really no gender or race issues. It's really all about intellectual elitism. People get judged on their intellect, not on their color or gender or anything.

N: You can't really afford to judge people on anything but their intellect if you need the best of the best.

D: So part of that's right, part of that is tech, we were just having this conversation the other day, tech is the one area that there is massive bias is age. The younger the better.

N: Oh, interesting.

D: And so if you're 50 years old, you are done in tech. You are obsolete and there is no value to you. The only exception to that is if you are a CEO of a big company, so you know like Meg Whitman, Larry Allison, Steve Jobs. But Meg aside, Larry Allison started Oracle, so it's his company, no one's going to kick him out. Steve Jobs, no one's going to kick him out of Apple. But for the most part unless you're in HR or finance, those are the two exceptions, CFO, VP of HR, you're obsolete and no longer relevant in tech after 50.

N: Wow.

D: So that is the one area... and just go look. Go look at all of the companies out there. Go look at all of the executives, and you know... so that is one area and I think that that's simply a byproduct of the fact that technology changes so quickly that it's really hard to relate. And we just talked about why. So a 50 year old used email, that's how they think. Whereas what we have to build products for now are people like you that use Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Chitchat, Hangouts, Skype... and so I think it's just really hard to keep up and relate across 20 years of technology changes, or 30 years. So that's where there's a big bias, and I don't think

it's a conscious bias it just is what it is. But when you pull from a global workforce I would say Caucasians are the minority in tech at this point, if anything.

N: Right.

D: But no one really thinks about... I also think that your generation and even mine, we were just raised where—I mean I guess in some parts of the country you still see it—but I mean, race and gender was never something I even thought about.

N: Right, absolutely. Which is an interesting thing because I think that maybe that can sometimes compound the gender disparity in the valley because it is... I have been having some interesting conversations with especially female coders who are saying, I don't want to be hired because I'm a woman, I want to be hired because I'm talented. So there's that sort of catch-22 that there is this gender disparity but you don't want to get rid of it through basically affirmative action. You want to make sure that there's still the highest quality talent, and on both sides: for the women and for the companies. So that's a challenge.

D: Yeah. If you want to talk to some total stud female startup executives, I'm happy to put you in touch with a few.

N: Oh, I would absolutely love that.

D: Ok.

N: Thank you so much.

D: Yeah, no, there's three of them in particular that have worked with me for years that are just total total studs. And so I'll have LeAnn connect you with them, she knows them well... so one of them is Mary Beckett who's my chief customer officer now, one is a lady Viviana Fevia who's CMO for Yammer, a company that just sold to Microsoft, and owns Microsoft's entire social enterprise strategy that's a big team there, and then another one is Samantha Lubland who runs the whole customer success strategy at Yammer and now Microsoft. And she was an executive with me at Salesforce.com as well.

N: You know that's something that I've noticed too is it's very interesting, it's almost like an inverted, it's like a glass floor instead of a glass ceiling. There's very few women in like entry level coding positions but once they are in the industry, like you said there are these total stud women who can just do anything. And they, Marissa Mayer, and the 3 women you just mentioned, and it seems like there's just no end to empowerment once you actually get in, which is the opposite of the workplace feminism studies of the 1950s.

D: Right. Yep. It'll be a fascinating thesis, I'd love to read it when you're finished.

N: Absolutely, thank you so much this has been such an interesting conversation, you have really great insight.

D: Yeah, no worries.

11/23/13

11am, Mi Piace, Pasadena

*Jenna, Various*

The restaurant in which we meet is very upscale and I wish I'd left my backpack behind. The conversation starts slowly, but as soon as we begin to delve into the topic Jenna can hardly stop talking. I interrupt her briefly to ask if I can record and she hesitates. The problem with recording, she says, is that she wants to be able to speak very candidly. She was recently at a brunch for women in technology and entrepreneurship that she had set up in order to interview them about their experiences. As soon as she said that everything at the brunch would be "on the record," however, all the women clammed up. No one wanted to say anything. I agreed and we left the recorder off: every now and then she would say, "Since this is off the record I can tell you..." or alternatively, "Now, this would be quotable..." and I would stop and take notes on my phone. Jenna speaks candidly, and is much more sharply perceptive than I thought at our initial meeting. She speaks evenly, with few smiles but much warmth, and clearly is passionate about the topic and about helping me, leaning forward with her elbows on the table when she speaks. She wears a black silk shirt, a black scarf, dress pants and low brown heels. She is put together, but her hair is loose and her makeup minimal.

Initially when she approached her boss at F about doing a column about women in entrepreneurship, he wanted her to write about women on Wall Street. Since she was located in LA, her idea won out, but it raised an interesting question: Is technology the Wall Street of our time, as far as the gender disparities and challenges go? Will the trajectory of the startup world and technology in general mimic women's experience on Wall Street? Technology is the future, Jenna points out, technology and data are our steel and oil. That is why this topic is so important.

The reason this is such a big deal is that there is so much money in the startup and tech world, and in STEM in general. There are so few women doctors, engineers, and entrepreneurs while at the same time there is a TON of money to be had in these industries. This makes it even more noticeable and creates greater inequity. There are a few very high profile women who have "made it," like Marissa Mayer and Sheryl Sandberg, she says, and people use these women as an example to say that there isn't a gender problem in the Valley anymore. That is just not true, Jenna claims, and particularly for older women the challenge is still very much present. This brings her to another issue she has: Marissa Mayer's "girl next door" look and her Vogue photoshoot in which she posed like Marilyn Monroe. You don't see any of the male founders doing this—I agree and mention the "you don't see any commentary about Mark Zuckerberg's fashion sense" that was brought up in an earlier interview. Jenna points out that women really do have to sell their sex to get ahead, and there are several ways to look at this. Some feminists claim that women should use their sex if that is what it takes: use all the tools in your toolbox to get ahead. Jenna is not sure if she agrees with this philosophy, however: you don't see men selling their sex to get to the C suite or to get venture capital funding.

When she pitches to VC's for her company, she says, the firms are almost exclusively male. What is more shocking to her is that they look exclusively at her

male co-founder during the pitch, and treat her “like a secretary.” When I ask how she responds to this, she says, “Well it’s hard because you want to shout, ‘hello, I’m here too!’ But of course that’s totally inappropriate.” It is amazing to hear a first-hand account from such a confident, powerful woman being ignored in such a blatant manner: sometimes I realize that even I am overly optimistic about the gender equality in the workplace.

More than anything, however, Jenna is a proponent of women helping other women: “When people are looking for a solution to the gender disparity in the valley, some of the onus is on men to solve the problem, but responsibility is also in the hands of women to help out other women.” In Jenna’s own experience, this is often not the case. Even the women who said to her: “Anything you need, let me know, I’m happy to help,” don’t come through on her offer, and many of them don’t even email her back when she reaches out. In contrast, the men who she emails respond to her “like that,” she says, snapping her fingers. They ask what they can do, say they like her idea, give her advice, and meet with her in person to talk about investing or assisting. She goes on to give more examples: when she was an editor at the LA times, her managing editor was a woman and was harsh and unfriendly. She would often ignore Jenna’s requests or have extremely short meetings. Her higher management, however, were males, and they were much more supportive, offering her new projects, promotions, and giving encouragement. In an even more extreme example, a friend of Jenna’s is the CFO at a recently founded startup, where the CEO is also a woman. The CFO recently had a baby and took maternity leave until December. Once on leave, however, the CEO (her friend and co-founder) decided to start looking for a replacement, and the CFO was told that her job would not be there when she returned. Jenna advised the CFO to get a lawyer and sue, but said that that’s not the worst of it: the fact that it was a *woman* who so heartlessly took her job away because she had a baby is what infuriates Jenna (she clutches her chest and shakes her head, scowling). “There’s a special place in hell for women who refuse to help other women,” she says. For example, Marissa Mayer hasn’t done jack for women, she goes on. She is an engineer by trade, and frankly she is only focused on Yahoo and on herself. When I ask why she thinks this happens, she thinks that it may be because there is so much money to be had in the industry that it really brings out the greed and competitiveness in people. Women in high level positions, particularly older women, had to really claw their way to the top, and there are so few of them there that they are insecure about their position—whereas with men, it is very merit based and they are used to sharing the spotlight. In the case of Jenna’s female boss at the LA times, when she asked why she wasn’t getting particularly important project someone told her, “Do you really think your boss wants to share her spotlight with a young upstart editor?” Sometimes when women have made it to the top through arduous struggle, instead of helping the next generation of women they look at them and say [Jenna raises a sassy eyebrow]: “It’s hard. But I made it. Figure it out.”

The fact that there is so much money to be made in the industry makes it possible for the quintessential “Silicon Valley douchebags” to exist. Her description of such a person is: “30 years old, made it with his own tech company, drives a Ferrari, has a hot girlfriend, and is a total asshole.” Not everyone in the valley is like

this, but some are so bad that people explicitly told her not to talk to them during her interviews. “Avoid them at all costs.” There are very few genuinely nice people in the Valley, she says: many of them choose to leave because the culture can be toxic, and it is much healthier in LA and New York where the culture is not so self absorbed. “Don’t let anyone tell you we (LA) are the ones with the huge blinders on,” Jenna says. “Silicon Valley is so much worse.”

Much like several of my other interviews, this turns into a conversation about the Silicon Valley “bubble.” The Valley cannot see beyond itself, she says, it has no sense about the world or about the economy of the United States as a whole. It is utterly blind to the massive wealth disparity that still exists in this country. The erosion of the middle class of America is leading to an erosion of the vision that there should be more equality, says Jenna, and our 99%-1% culture is becoming more prevalent. People in the Valley think that sitting on the board of Charity Water is enough to consider that they are doing good for the world, and they continue to live their extravagant lives, Instagramming their insanely fancy meals with #sograteful after them in a way that reveals just how spoiled they really are. “In the Valley, the lack of vision economically goes hand in hand with the lack of vision socially,” Jenna says. There is a toxic culture of entitlement, bred in part by the perks that these tech startup offices provide. The employees turn into spoiled children, she says: “If you don’t give me massages I’ll just go work somewhere else.” Jenna adds that perks should not be confused with culture: “people need to realize that office perks are not the same as culture.” The hype about this “culture” of Silicon Valley mostly refers to all the perks and the alleged “work-life balance” that doesn’t even exist in reality. She points out that when you work for a tech company, work can follow you everywhere, and you’re never off duty. You are expected to respond to emails instantly, to always be ready to work. Not only that, she says some studies suggest that our brains may not be biologically prepared to keep up with all the new multitasking and constant media and technology we assail them with. Some studies suggest that we are literally killing ourselves with technology, she says.

We return from this very interesting aside to talk about women helping other women again. Jenna qualifies that they should help them because of *merit* not just because they are women. Sometimes women approach her to ask her to write about their startup in her column, but “their ideas frankly suck, and I will not feature their idea if it’s not a good one... that’s not fair to anyone.” Also, she is openly critical of the “pink washing” of female startups. Women-led companies, she points out, are almost always cosmetics, fashion, and jewelry lines. When she brought this up at the women entrepreneurs brunch, one 26 year old woman who had done fairly well in her company came back with, “Well, women these days can do anything.” Jenna raises her eyebrows. “Come back to me when you’re 36 or 46,” she says, “And then try to tell me there’s not a problem.” In addition, the women brought up the counter example of the woman who founded Spanks being a billionaire now. Jenna pointed out that it was so ironic that they brought up the founder of the modern girdle as an example of feminist success. The whole concept of the contraption is that no matter how skinny you are you can look skinnier... is that really a good way for a woman to make her billion dollars?

This brings us to discuss the masculinization of women who make it to the top in tech industries. Female CEO's, as many of my other interviewees have pointed out, are often criticized if they don't always acquiesce to requests for their time: women are expected to always be ready to help other people, to be nice and supportive and drop what they are doing to help others. Male CEO's on the other time, are allowed to say, "I have 15 minutes. What do you need?" If a woman says this, she is criticized for being harsh, rather than just doing her job. If time is money, being expected to give your time to everyone who asks is extremely inefficient for a CEO.

The issue of gender disparity in Silicon Valley is complex, she concludes. "It's not a single bullet solution, you can't shoot once and kill the problem," she says. In parting, she gives me a couple of resources online, a commercial about the toys that young girls play with, and an article about women being expected to give their time to whoever asks. About the commercial, she says, here's the thing, girls *do* gravitate towards dolls much of the time. When she was little no one forced her to wear dresses and play with dolls, she did it because that's what she wanted. She thinks the commercial is a little extreme because of this, but that we do need to encourage young girls to decide on their own earlier what they are interested in, while still acknowledging that there are some gender differences that are real.

12/6/13

*Kathleen, Various Startups*

**Full Transcription:**

K: What program are you using to record?

N: It's called Call Recorder. It's basically like you call a number and it merges the calls, I don't know if you use it in your work at all.

K: Is it an iPhone app?

N: Yes it is.

K: Ok, yeah, that was one that was like ten bucks or something, I looked at it and I wasn't sure whether to buy it or not.

N: What do you use right now?

K: Right now, I don't have to do it very often so I usually just use Skype. I have a program that records Skype calls, but that requires me to call the person.

N: Ok, right, I don't have that one and I've just been using a free iPhone recorder and I would just put my phone next to the Skype call, so I guess that's not the most efficient way to do it.

K: There's a program you can use to record Skype calls, I can't remember what it's called but if you email me I can take a look, but it costs money, I think it was like ten bucks or something.

N: Awesome. Well so if you don't mind telling me what you do on a day-to-day basis, I know that you're very involved in this topic in gender in Silicon Valley as far as I understand, but I don't know much else about what you do.

K: So, what's your thesis?

N: What's that?

K: What's your thesis?

N: My thesis...so it's evolved a bit. But basically I'm trying to get an idea of the culture of Silicon Valley. And I have been looking at gender in the Valley and so that's definitely one of the components of my thesis. But also its more in general about the cultural narratives of the Valley and sort of how there's this narrative of a wonderful work-life balance but people are still working 100 hour work weeks and things like that.

K: Ok, so I can talk about my time at Cleanerz, or I can talk about my time at 100, do you have any like specific questions for me so it's a little less open ended?

N: Yes, I absolutely do. So I guess to start with what would be helpful for me is for you to tell me about your role at each of the companies, and how they were different and how they were similar.

K: Ok, I was a program manager at Microsoft excel, so that wasn't in Silicon Valley but it was in tech, it was in Seattle. Then I was a designer at a startup, Cleanerz, which you know through Louis.

N: I do.

K: And that company when I joined was 6 people and when I left was around 13. And now I am cofounder of my own startup, O.

N: Ok, and what do you do with OH?

K: I do everything except for coding. So I do the design, the marketing, the PR, the fundraising...

N: So do you have a coder who works with you?

K: Yes. He's my cofounder, he's the CTO... it's kind of funny that he calls himself CTO and that I call myself CEO because its not like we're CEO-ing or CTO-ing anyone but ourselves.

N: So it's just the two of you right now?

K: Yes, just the two of us.

N: And how recently did you found it?

K: Uh, three months ago we started working on it and we just launched last month.

N: Oh, wow, congratulations.

K: If you're in front of a computer, you can go to XXXXX.com

N: My internet is being slow so I'll tell you when it loads.

K: Ok, cool, well I'll talk to you about it in the meantime.

N: Yeah, wonderful.

K: And so this was a project that came out of a dance video that I made. I made a video of me learning to dance in a year, took a 2 minute long video of a montage of a year's worth of practice footage.

N: Cool.

K: You can search for that too, you can search for girl learns to dance in a year. And you know when I start out I'm not very good, and then I get better at dancing... anyway the video went viral, it has like several million views...

N: Oh, my gosh.

K: Yeah its really crazy, I got like hundreds of emails from people who said that they now wanted to learn how to dance, they now were going to learn something because they saw this video, it showed them the power of just simple practice. And so that's how we got the idea for OH which was kind of like the dance video.

N: Yeah, I see it now.

K: Yeah so the way OH works, if you've got the website loaded, it's a 100 day challenge, and you basically just choose something that you want to get better at, and you share a ten second video of your project every day. If you see the website you can see people are doing like a pretty wide variety of things.

N: Wow, that's so cool. Oh, this is a neat picture too.

K: So that's me and my cofounder in that photo.

N: What a great idea. And have you done some like have you raised some venture capital, or are you doing it on your own right now?

K: We need to raise venture capital so I... we have been bootstrapping, I've just been living off my savings, my cofounder still has a full time job, he's just working two full time jobs right now. So we need to raise money so we can hire some people.

N: Wow, that's really really cool. So that's actually really interesting, how do you find the day to day different in say your transition from say Microsoft to Cleanerz, to running your own company. I guess how are they different and then why did you choose to make that progression, because it seems like a very clear linear path to me.

K: Each one has been worlds apart different.



N: Yeah.

K: Like ok I'll give you an example. If I were to put together an email to send to everyone at Microsoft, it might take you a couple months of like getting approval, and it probably wouldn't happen, you probably wouldn't get the approval. If you wanted to send out an email to everyone at Cleanerz, it would take probably 24 hours. And if you wanted to send out all the users at OH, which is just me sending an email, it just takes as long as it takes for me to type it up and hit the send button. So that's the levels of beuarocracy, to go from a 100,000 person company, to a 13 person company to a 2 person company. M was not for me. There are certain personality types that probably like a lot of structure, and doesn't like ambiguity, that would probably do well at M, and that I discovered was not me. And so going to Cleanerz was such a breath of fresh air. It was like, wow. I had these ideas and I would be like, hey, I have this idea, do you think we can do it? And then my boss would be like, 'K you can do anything you want.' And I like couldn't even understand that at first. Until like it finally set in and it was like, this is awesome. I can literally have an idea in the morning and then roll it out by the afternoon.

N: That's really cool. But how do you find the working hours as well? Because I imagine they've increased.

K: It's what you want it to be so certainly at Cleanerz when I started I felt a lot of pressure, I would prefer for my name to be changed or something....

N: Oh, yeah, your name and all the names of your companies and all of that, it will all be changed.

K: Ok, cool. So at Cleanerz when I joined I certainly felt a lot of pressure to work a lot of hours, especially when the founders were there from the morning to really late at night, and it always feels bad to leave the office before your boss does. It just doesn't feel good, you know? So I always felt guilty every time I left the office. My first day at E I remember it was like... I used to leave work really early at M, I used to leave work at like 4 or 5pm, and at E my first day at E it was 5pm, and I was like, Ok, yeah I should still be here. 6pm everyone's still there, 7pm everyone's still there, 8pm everyone's still there... up until like 10pm some people start leaving. And I'm like, OK, I guess this is when I peace out now. And it was like, it was a shock at first, but I realized that for me personally they were not going to get the best work out of me if I worked 12 hour days they just weren't. Especially because my work depends on my creativity, so I started taking dance classes, actually, to get a break. And then slowly I scaled down my hours. As I got more comfortable with my job and more confident with what I was doing, I scaled back my hours from probably like 60, 70 hours a week to like 45, 50 hours a week. So 45, 50 hours a week is totally manageable, its not bad.

N: That's really neat that you used the dancing to give yourself a break and now that's become your new, I mean that was the catalyst for your own company.

K: Yeah, I certainly would have never expected dancing to launch like a tech career.

N: Right, oh absolutely. And do you have a background in tech?

K: A background in tech like what I studied in school?

N: Yeah.

K: I studied management information systems in school which is a combination of business and tech.

N: Ok, cool. And then for your work now with OH, how do you find your hours to be? Do you feel more happy to push yourself for longer hours or do you sort of keep it to that 40, 50 hour work week.

K: Yeah I work a lot more now. I work pretty much from when I wake up to when I go to bed, with mini breaks in between I guess. But there's no on or off hours, its just constantly kind of on. And the reason for that is because this is me now, its like before I had a work-life balance because there was work that I was doing for me and for someone else, and then there was life, which was just for me, but now its like everything I do is me, it's for me, I'm not doing it for someone else. And so there's no such thing as turning it off because you can't turn off yourself.

N: Interesting. And I'm interested in the comparison between M and E as well as far as the perks and the rituals and the office culture, if you could talk a little bit about that.

K: Yeah, I mean it's totally different. At M you go into the office, you go into a building with like a thousand other people in the morning, and you go to your own little office cubicle, and you go through emails and you go through everything your boss has told you for the day, and there were all these official projects and you had to record what you were doing. Whereas at E, its like literally I would walk into this like one-bedroom apartment, and its like it's very informal, it moves like 100 times faster. If your boss says, hey, I want to do this, I want to try out this new design where you can share a gift card with friends, you would literally just build it in the next couple hours or days. Whereas at M, the way that same thing would work is that some executive would come up with some idea, and then it would have to get negotiated in several, many many many hours of meetings, it would have to be approved by all these different levels, once it gets approved then someone has to make a plan for it, and a timeline, and set a budget, they have to negotiate the budget which is like how many development resources that comes from, that all needs to be negotiated, and then finally once it starts then it starts in development, like a bunch of people are on it... it's just like, so beurocratic, my goodness.

N: Yeah, yeah. And then also at the three different companies, I love that you have this wonderful comparison between the three, do you notice...

K: It's crazy cause you're having me talk about M, and it seems so foreign to me, now I'm talking about it I'm like, how did I ever survive in that type of...

N: But it wasn't even... I mean that long ago was it?

K: It was... three years ago? Three years ago.

N: Wow.

K: But it's like a world apart. Like when I talk about it it just seems weird to me that I was ever a part of that.

N: That's really cool. Well it means you're going in the right direction, that's a good sign.

K: Yeah, I definitely feel like I've found or created an environment that is much better suited to my personality.

N: And do you think that that has to do with being in Silicon Valley? Are you still in the Valley?

K: I am currently in LA but I'm going to be returning to Silicon Valley in January. I'm just in LA for like three months.

N: Ok but your business is based out of Silicon Valley. Do you have an office?

K: We work from home.

N: Ok, cool. Well that counts.

K: The bedroom is the office, yeah.

N: Yeah, right. That makes it difficult too I imagine, talk about no separation between work and life.

K: Yeah.

N: But I'm wondering about the culture of Silicon Valley as a whole and if you think that it really... does that have to do with why you made this transition between large corporation to smaller startup companies, what made you decide to make the switch in the first place, the catalyst.

K: What made me decide... I think I always had a little bit of an itch for startups, why, because it was just... I just found it interesting. I don't know why. That's a good question. You know the whole time I was at M I was kind of wishing I was in San Francisco, and it took me like 3 years to really make the leap. Cause I had to change careers to do that. But in Silicon Valley its like, startups are just celebrated. Its like if you start a business in like Iowa, and you have a startup and you tell your friends about it, they're gonna be like, oh interesting. Why are you doing that? Whereas if you do the same thing in Silicon Valley people are going to be like, yeah you go girl! Or you can do it! And it's just like, it's celebrated here, it's appreciated here, it's mocked here but it is life here, and if you're going to start it then you will meet so many people who can help you, you'll meet an investor... everything you need is in Silicon Valley. It's the best place to do it.

N: Does that increase the competition as well, though, or do you find that it's mostly positive?

K: Oh, yeah of course it increases the competition, I mean the competition for developers is absolutely insane. Like you hear about all these ridiculous perks, like Google has heated toilet seats and free massages and just like ridiculous stuff like that. And the reason for that is because they have to compete to get developers.

N: Right, interesting. And in... this is my last real question that I have planned out... but in each of the three companies; did you notice your gender in a different way? Did you notice being a woman, do you notice it when you're trying to... well I don't know if you've started fundraising at all, or venture capital pitching. But between that and E and then M.

K: Yeah, that's a really interesting issue. I haven't. I mean of course I notice it, but I think a lot of it has to do with mindset. And like, I haven't started, I have heard it's harder for women to raise money. But also I believe I guess in the power of belief. And so at M it was never an issue because I didn't define myself as a woman. I defined myself as a product manager first, and a woman second. At E, I defined myself as a designer first, and a woman second. When I joined E I was the only woman there, I was the only woman when there were like 10 people in the company, I was the only woman. And at my own company obviously its not so much an issue because its just me and a guy, so its like I don't really think about it, about being a woman in that circumstance. I mean in E and M, I was in the minority, yes I would notice, I'd walk into a room full of like 10 or 20 people and be the only woman there, but if you do not think it's a big deal and you carry yourself that way,

then other people will just know it, and they also will think it's not a big deal. And I think there's a lot of like talk about women in Silicon Valley, and I think if you can hold yourself on the same playing field as everyone else, not just the women but everyone else, and you come across that way, then I think that's honestly the best way to advance women is just to view them and treat them and behave as equal.

N: Awesome. And then just to wrap up, do you think that there's anything that it's really important for me to understand about Silicon Valley as a whole or about startup companies in order to really understand the reality of what it's like to be working at a startup?

K: Well one thing that's interesting is how insulated it is. In the sense that people in Silicon Valley tend to be white, males, between the ages of 20 and 30, who have a lot of income, they maybe have a lot of savings from their time at a tech company, they can go to brunch on Saturdays and pay a lot of money for nice things. And they just generally have it good, like we do have it good, because there's all these companies that pay very well especially for developers. There's... I don't know if you've read but there's a lot of class resentment, a lot of people who are native to San Francisco do not like all these rich tech people coming in driving up the housing prices. And there's a good reason for that, I think for me personally since I left Silicon Valley for three months, and I've been in LA for the last three months, I've kind of seen how normal people live, like the rest of the world lives. Like I ask them like, oh, can I venmo you? Which is like a payment system founded in San Francisco, and like, no, no one has heard of venmo.

N: Really?

K: And like I went to a dance class and the teacher didn't have a song, and I was like here just use my phone I have Spotify, and she was like, what's Spotify? And I'm like, oh yeah. I'm not in San Francisco anymore. These are like normal people I'm talking to they're just not in the bubble. And it's easy to... the thing is when you're... actually hey can I call you back in 5 minutes I'm about to get on a bus and I'll get off in 5 minutes....

N: ... Ok I'm back to. Ok, you were saying... what were we talking about? We were talking about Silicon Valley and how its sort of a bubble.

K: Oh, yeah. Oh right, so I think people sort of lose touch with what people are like who are not in Silicon Valley. And like another example is I went to a dance battle the other day, and there was this girl who was an extremely talented dancer for one of the best, and there was like these \$5 pizzas. And her friend asked her, he was like hey are you hungry? And she was like, "Yeah, but I'm broke." And that was the end of the conversation. And maybe you can appreciate this more, maybe you can relate to this more as a college student, but like in Silicon Valley no one would ever say that. Like no one would ever not eat because they don't have money. I mean I think there's probably like the true startups who really don't have the money, I mean I know it's there I personally haven't been exposed to it, but in general people are not starving in Silicon Valley, you know? And so I think in Silicon Valley, when you come up with a startup idea, you tend to come up with things that you might use yourself. And that actually is a very good strategy because that means you can design something that's good, because it's good for one person, that's you, and that's how many really good products come out, is people who make something for themselves.

But the problem is that the person in Silicon Valley is nothing like the normal person. The products they are designing are kind of for the 1%, they're kind of like solving first world problems.

N: And even like solving problems for other startups, like I've seen a lot of the cloud sharing startups have all had all of their customers are other startups.

K: Yeah, and I bet you a large percentage of those companies are like second time, third time founders who first time around had these problems in their startup, and they're trying to solve them for other startups.

N: Right, interesting. That's really interesting especially because there's also, I was actually reading about Silicon Valley as a whole, and apparently there's a very very small middle class. And there is a good sized lower class but you don't see it at all, a lot of families living under 10,000, which is pretty remarkable considering.

K: Yeah, I guess we've seen, maybe you've talked to Louis about this, about like Cleanerz cleaning, and I don't know what you talked to him about.

N: Yeah, actually Erica mentioned that to me to, was that it was a little bit strange to be at Cleanerz because you have access to seeing both sides of the region.

K: You see like ultra-rich people, you literally like some of our companies were millionaires, that was not uncommon. And so our workers were people who didn't have money to pay for their lunch.

N: So how do you deal with that as someone who is sort of stuck in the middle of those, at E, how did you come to terms with that?

K: I guess I left.

N: Do you think that's a big reason why?

K: Um, you know I left for other reasons, I left because I wasn't passionate about what they were doing, and I think it was good for me to see both sides. I think it was really good for me to see the cleaners in the situation in which they were because that kept us rooted in reality and had a foot outside the bubble. It's easy in Silicon Valley to be completely within the bubble but being exposed to these workers every day you keep perspective, which is important.

N: Absolutely. Interesting. And it's cool because now your startup is for everybody.

K: Yeah, you know I'd always looked at startups who solved seemingly meaningless problems, like another photo sharing app, or another blah blah blah. And I'd always kind of like deny them in my head. And when I started OH, I was like I really don't want this to be another startup solving a first world problem for rich people. And I was a little hesitant about it, because it is a self-actualization app. Like if you were to put it on a list of priorities, it's not about food or shelter, like the bottom, it's the top, it's self-actualization, it's like self-improvement. But, but I think this is something that anyone with a camera and an internet connection can use, which a lot of poor people have. And I've seen people who, there are quite a few of our users who do not have much money, there is one user on OH who every day she posts a video of herself going to the gym, she's like 300 pounds and she's been struggling with her weight and she also has been struggling with depression. And OH has been incredibly helpful for her to combat her depression because she has an outlet for her to talk about this stuff, in a different place than like Facebook. Because on Facebook you're supposed to be perfect, and supposed to like show the best version of yourself right? But OH is all about showing your mistakes and your struggles, and

showing your victories, but showing all of it, not just one side. And so it's a pretty safe place for you to post your foibles and stuff, everyone's very supportive. So OH has really really helped her with her goals of weight loss and with combating her depression, and I would hope to see more people like that getting helped by the site. And it's cool because when I started it it was just like, ooh 100 day challenge, it was all about skills in my head, like personally I just love learning skills. Like unicycling or juggling or card tricks or playing music---that's what I designed it for myself as, and so to see people using it for other things, like fighting depression, like recording their kids learning how to watch, like videoing their pets, that huge variety of ways that people can use this thing that was meant for one thing but can really do well for other things, it's very satisfying and I do think that OH is a product that is not for the 1%, it is for anyone who has an internet connection and a camera who wants to improve themselves.

N: And it can be as lighthearted and as serious as you want, I want to use it now... I'm trying to think what I'd use it for. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me.

12/8/13

*Ethan, AtlasStay*

**Full Transcription:**

N: Well great, so anyway like I mentioned...

E: I was just wondering so I can have the extra context, so you're doing interviews and then...

N: Yeah.

E: So these interviews will kind of drive topics for the rest of your thesis?

N: Right, so it's even more than that, this is a really huge help for me because it's an anthropology thesis. And so basically what I'm doing is an ethnographic study of people who work in startups in Silicon Valley, or in San Francisco, in that area.

E: Gotcha.

N: So what I've been doing is I've done a couple site visits but I've only been to I guess 8 different startup companies and then I've been doing interviews. That's why I'm keeping it open ended, is I really just want to hear about what its like for you to work in a startup in the area.

E: Alright cool.

N: Yeah, so that's the background on why I'm doing interviews. But Ana Kakar mentioned to me that you worked at A, and she said don't do your thesis without talking to him, so I'm so glad that I got to talk to you. Yeah, so as far as questions I sent you a couple to start off with, but I guess I'd like to start with how you came to work at A and what your story has been.

E: Sure, yeah. So I guess... I told this story many times and I guess it starts when I was studying abroad in my junior year. I went to Denmark, had a great time, up until that point thought that I was going to do the 3-2 Engineering program, and then I decided against that but I still liked making things. For a brief period I thought I was going to go into like film production, and then I realized that that wasn't necessarily the industry I wanted to be in, and after I went abroad I discovered A just through traveling and I got, for some reason, really drawn to this whole tech startup community. A was something that I heard about and I fell in love with it, and then I started reading tech news as much as I could just to absorb this whole world, I was enamored with it. And I'm originally from the east Bay so this is all essentially in my backyard. So I knew after I used A and travelled a little bit that I wanted to work at A or at a similar startup. And so I came back and that following summer before senior year I found an internship at a very small peer-to-peer rental startup, essentially it was the A for everything, that was the problem, it was a little too broad, not specific to one, but that was my first startup that I worked with, it was really interesting to see how they operated, how they worked in the marketplace. It was fairly successful for how ambitious they were, but it ended up not panning out. But it was still A, collaborative consumption was kind of a buzzword being thrown around, that whole industry was really interesting to me. And I got involved with like San Francisco carpooling network that's this kind of grassroots network of ride sharing into San Francisco, and then I was inspired by that to turn it into some kind of business pitch for the KLI startup competition.

N: Oh, cool.

E: Yeah, so I came back senior year, pitched that, they liked it and so I went through the rounds and then in the spring realized that was too ambitious I needed to focus it a little more so I focused it on like a college rideshare system. And then with that pitch me and, I partnered up with a buddy from high school, so we like got the prize and then a week later, my buddy said he was going to go pursue a different project, and I was kind of out of luck, like I didn't have my partner anymore, and they said you need to find someone within a week to replace him, and I just said, I can't replace this guy in a week, that's a recipe for disaster. So I turned that down and didn't really have a plan for what a job would be, I wasn't necessarily all that concerned because I knew that I wanted to end up in San Francisco working for some kind of startup, so I kind of made it up as I went. So I applied for a position at A, it was just an internship on their sales team, officially getting properties onboarded onto the website, and I made this whole website, because I started doing that on the side just making money, so I made this website about like why I was the best applicant for this specific job, it was more just a creative, fun exercise, because I was done with thesis. And I went through the whole interview process and ended up not getting it, which was at the time I was like so down because A was the one place I wanted to work. Interviewed two other places with the same process, because that worked for me, I would create websites and be like, I only applied for companies I was really really interested in, and that was a good strategy because it was very unique so I'd always get interviews. And then I interviewed, I found a job at, online which is very random because they don't usually post it online for this specific company, but a venture capital firm called Sequoia Capital that actually invested in A, so they were very much on my radar. And that process of creating a website actually totally got me the job. So I interned there for like 3 months and then after that my projects were winding down and I saw that same job at A pop up again and told them that essentially, I want this job, I'm going to apply for it, and this time around maybe just the right recruiter saw the website and it was like the 3<sup>rd</sup> time I applied and I was coming from one of their backers... and essentially like there was no interview process I just kind of had the job.

N: Oh, cool!

E: Yeah, so that was cool, and then so that's the long winded way of how I ended up at A, and while at A I knew that I didn't want to be, my role was going on the website throughout the internet to find properties and get them all on A, it was a very manual, tedious thing, I wasn't necessarily inspired by, I was just happy to be at A. so a few weeks later I saw that they needed someone to analyze data that the team was relying on, so I became the default data analyst. And then that's what got me a fulltime job. And I did that for six months and then I guess the first day I joined I told people I wanted to move to the product team, which is product managers that work with engineers and designers so I think I kind of was on people's radar so they picked me up and I joined the product team as a coordinator role, about six months ago, and here I am today. Its actually, it couldn't have worked out better, I couldn't have planned it like this, for the jobs that I got once I was at A, they didn't post it externally it was like all internal recruiting so I got lucky. I always credit just



making that website, like I think about would I have gotten in the door at A, maybe not. So I'm a big proponent of doing crazy creative things to get people's attention.

N: Yeah I think that's such a cool idea, that's awesome. And so in your current role, what's your day-to-day like? What kind of work are you doing?

E: So I, broadly its help the product team communicate internally, and so that takes the form of like, making sure big product team meetings are organized well and the content is there, and I do essentially like the internal product newsletter, so just like sending out emails, to say what's changing for the product. And then I work on a more day to day basis helping the product managers just make sure things are running smoothly. So it's a very, its like facilitating the leadership of the product organization through like a bunch of random different ways that things are communicated. It's a very abstract role, basically my boss is like, your job is to fix problems, and that facilitated that.

N: Right, so pretty much filling in wherever you need to. So does that mean that every day is pretty different?

E: I mean there is some rouine, so like the week in terms of big meetings happen on a regular scheduled basis so that kind of drives my week, but that's like 50% of it, and then the rest of it like at the start of the week I wont necessarily know what my time will be filled with but it will get filled.

N: Funny how that happens. And then as your time gets filled how do you feel about your work-life balance? Do you pretty much have a standard 9-5 work day or is it much more?

E: Um, yeah I think it's hard to say, I'm like working right now kind of, the last couple of hours putting together these product newsletters. So I don't feel like it's out of balance, but I feel like, I don't know where the work-life line is drawn so to speak. So I do I probably work between like 50 and 60 hours a week, which is like, my roommate is from CMC and he works in banking and he works so much more than me, so comparatively I'd say I've got great balance. What makes it, or perhaps what's unique to a place like A is that when I'm there it doesn't always feel like I'm working, so I don't get burnt out if I'm there for 12 hours, I wouldn't rather be anywhere else, for the most part. So yeah, it's I think I have good work-life balance but when I try to explain to other people or like my parents that I'm answering emails like way late into the night and then like doing other crazy shit they like wonder, but I wouldn't have it any other way. So for the most part, if you ask me on a random Wednesady after something stressful happens I'll probably say like just like anyone else, like fuck this job, but for the most part I cant really complain.

N: So what makes you say that you wouldn't rather be anywhere else than at work? You said work doesn't really feel like work when you're there sometimes, is that an office culture thing?

E: Exactly, I think it's this whole very abstract idea of like what is a culture of the workplace. I'm like surrounded by people that are very smart, it's like a stimulating place to be, and it helps that it's a very young office, which it just naturally like I can relate to a lot of people in ways that if I was to work at a, I'll say more traditional, air quotes, office with perhaps a different age demographic, I think it would be harder for me to be friends with someone who's at a very different stage of life than me, but

I'm working with people that are in their mid-20s, early-30s, for the most part, I could have gone to school with them it feels like.

N: And do you guys have office rituals or any other perks that are particularly important to you?

E: Yes, yeah. So cult is a strong word but I've heard people say at times it feels cultish or churchy. So that's an interesting thing, I don't know there, I don't know if this is inherent or only true to A but I think at a lot of companies people are naturally drawn to either the brand or the culture so they try to maintain a very strong identity in that sense. So we have, yes we do have weekly like Friday meetings where we've got like a ritual for introducing people, it's nothing weird its just... we introduce...

N: You put on your hoods and you light some candles?

E: Yeah [laughing]. It's just, yeah, its fun, people get on stage, they say fun facts about themselves, they try to make it entertaining, and actually I cant speak to what is it like at a different company because A is the company I've worked at the longest and it's like not an internship. But I don't think other companies do that, like you're not going to get the entire company of like 300 people to go sit upstairs in like the cafeteria and say almost the same thing on a week-to-week basis and introduce new people. But you like want to like welcome these new people to the group because I remember when I was being introduced and it was a great experience. So I think like that and there's a whole bunch of other fun things that they build into the weekly routine. Its both things that are important for like the business, they bring in speakers, actually this week we had Marissa Mayer come in, which is like one of the best talks we've had come in, but like...

N: Oh, wow that's so cool!

E: Yeah, so things like that they program into the week and it like stimulates conversation and like challenges you, like it's always great content, challenges you to think about how we can make A better. What else. The most fundamental daily routine is the, there's a full kitchen upstairs and a staff of people that feed us three meals a day, almost seven days a week if there's randomly people in on the weekend. And that's I think just the idea that you show up to work and you eat with these people that, it feels very family like.

N: That's really neat. Lets see... and what about like your... how did the company get started? How old is it?

E: Yeah, it was started in 2008, and it was in San Francisco, the three founders... actually it started out with two, they were friends from college, they went to Rhode Island School of Design, um, they moved to San Francisco and moved in together and the story goes that the rent was increased and one of them didn't have a job so they couldn't make rent. And they wanted to start a company so they saw that there was no hotel rooms available for this major design conference that was coming to San Francisco, so they blew up a couple air mattresses and threw them on the floor and then advertised their two bedroom apartment as the air bed and breakfast. And they had a few people stay, A is shortened from air bed and breakfast. And that was the first stay that they did. They recruited an old roommate from MIT who was the 3<sup>rd</sup> founder and he's the technical side of it, so they built this very basic website, but then realized that they made way more than they needed to just in that weekend of

renting out their space so they figured, alright there's something to this, let's try to build this out, this could be what like the business is build on. And there's so many other details in terms of how they started but essentially the big highlight is that they joined a startup accelerator program called Y-combinator, which I guess was only a few years old at that point, but it essentially takes you in for three months, gives you \$20,000 to essentially not have to work and find a product market fit, make sure that your idea has some legs to it, and then at the end of it, will give you an opportunity to pitch to other larger investors.

N: Cool.

E: So they did a lot of other things right but I think the Y-combinator story is integral to them making it as a successful startup, and then I mean, there was a lot of growth, sorry not a lot of growth for a few years and then I think around early 2010, they started to like explode, and since then they're on a tear. So that's the very broad how the company started and where we're at today, so...

N: Very, very cool. And then I guess I have one more broader question about, so you've been back and forth in Silicon Valley, San Francisco area a lot, and working in different startups, and I'm trying to get a sense of the overarching culture of Silicon Valley. Do you think that it has sort of its own culture as a place, I know that's an odd question. But what do you think it is important for me to understand about Silicon Valley?

E: So Silicon Valley, excluding San Francisco, I mean I've like worked down there at Sequoia so I have a very narrow insight into what it's like down there... just like culture, I cant even speak to, but just like the presence of, for the longest time like, all the venture funds were down in Silicon Valley, it was like, so that's where companies wanted to be in my opinion for a while, because that's where the VCs were, that's where all of the large tech firms were, down in Palo Alto and Mountain View. And I think the presence of Stanford, a lot of smart people in the area, these are all very broad ideas about what it would be like to live down there. For me I would feel a little out of the action I think, now San Francisco is definitely the place that companies want to be just because of the simple fact that San Francisco is a fun place to live for people in their 20s and early 30s, and even beyond that, but I would be really hard for me to live in the South Bay and Silicon Valley and commute up here daily. I think there's a shift towards companies wanting to be based in San Francisco now.

N: Why's that?

E: Well just because people want to, they don't want to make that commute, just a killer ocmmute and they prefer a more urban lifestyle. I definitely am not ready to go move back out into the suburbs. I work with some people that do but they're more in a different stage of life, they're either married or have family so... I'll be in San Francisco for the next 7-10 years I bet.

N: Cool. So this is actually the hardest question, I always save it for last because everyone really seems to love what they do, but what do you think the hardest part or your least favorite part of working at a startup generally or A, or you can take it to any of the places that you've worked even the venture capital firm.

E: Yeah, um, I mean.... I think about this from time to time. Um... yeah like working at a startup, a successful startup at that, is like a lot of fun but I definitely feel like

there is a bubble to working at A, I'm very sheltered from a lot of... Like, life could be very different if I wasn't working at A but they, the culture that they provide is great but... sorry I... hm... I'm trying to think the best way to put this. I appreciate the culture but I'm isolated from the real world. San Francisco and all of these startups are not an accurate representation of what life is like for most of America or the world, and I feel like the fact that we are so sheltered is a fundamental problem because we've got so many smart people that can drive so much impact with software and starting companies but the problems we face on a day-to-day basis, it's a little concerning when you see startups trying to do like solve stupid San Francisco problems when there's so many real opportunities to enhance society even 20 miles away from San Francisco. But it's really hard to think like that when you're in your routine of working at a startup where they take care of so many aspects of your life. And that I mean, that might not be specific to San Francisco, working at the venture capital firm in Silicon Valley it's like, I definitely lucked out and the seeing so much, an absurd concentration of wealth, is on one hand you're just like wow, and being in this culture you're somewhat enamored by it, but it can be a little perverse how much money... I can't even comprehend how much money is concentrated in this very narrow corner of the world, but that's the way it is. And I've definitely benefitted from it, but for reasons I can't necessarily put my finger on it makes you gag sometimes. It's a little extreme.

N: That's interesting, you're not the first person who's mentioned that to me. So it's interesting that seems to be something that people are uncomfortable with, this bubble formation around Silicon Valley and San Francisco.

E: Yeah, for sure. There's so many articles popping up, it's best illustrated when you'll see busses driving through San Francisco, essentially shuttling all of these tech companies—Google, Facebook, Apple---employees through some of the worst parts of the city down to work. And it's a very, people use that kind of image of a shuttle just taking workers down the peninsula while the other half, they almost paint it like there's two classes of San Francisco: those that live in San Francisco and shuttle down to work at these huge tech campuses and come back, and those that essentially support the lifestyles of those tech workers in San Francisco.

N: Right.

E: You hear about the crazy rent in San Francisco and it's driving a lot of people out of the city and forcing businesses to shut down. It's a very... the dynamic is interesting to see.

N: Yeah, that's really interesting. Well I think that's all of my questions, unless you think that I've missed anything enormously important. This has already been such a helpful conversation, really interesting.

E: Yeah, I'll definitely... it's something I think about a lot. I know that I really enjoy this world of tech startups, so if anything stands out to me I'll shoot you a message.

N: Thank you so much that's really nice of you.

E: But actually if you're interested, and I'm not sure how useful it'll be right now, but there's a documentary called something ventured on Netflix, and if you're looking for the more historical background on how did Silicon Valley start and where we are today...

N: I am, it's called something ventured?

E: Something Ventured, yeah. It essentially describes the initiation of Silicon Valley and companies creating silicon microchips and how that first company spawned the next generation of companies, and that attracted venture capital to the area, which became like an institution like very unique to Silicon Valley, and then kind of like the ripple effect of all of that to major companies you see today. I watch it from time to time its really entertaining.

N: That's awesome, well I think I'm going to watch it today!

E: Yeah.

N: Thank you so much for the recommendation.

E: And if there's anything else, other questions, I'm actually super interested in what you find, it's a really interesting topic so I'm glad...

N: I'll keep you in the loop, I really appreciate your help.

E: Yeah, of course.

12/9/13, 5:15pm

*The Motley, Annelise, Geo-Trace*

**Full Transcription:**

N: So before I start asking you questions I just wanted to check and make sure if it's ok if I record the conversation, and I'll change your name and any identifying details, and the details of the company that you work at.

A: Yeah, yeah of course.

N: Ok awesome, thank you. So if you don't mind just telling me a little more... it's Geo-Trace, am I saying it right?

A: Yes, you're saying it right.

N: Ok, so a little more about the history of the company, the role of the company and your role within that company as well.

A: Sure so G has had, there's been some shifts in the past few years. So the idea came about in 2005, 2006 by a couple of Israelis. It's an Israeli company founded in Mountain View. So the crux of it is in Silicon Valley, both founders have just moved back to Israel. And it started off with data storage, so storing company data online, or in the cloud rather which was sort of a new idea, but as the company grew they noticed that there was more of a need for not only storing data but collecting data. So what they do is they collect user data from social networks. So one thing they do is social logins, so for example say you want to go to I don't know Kate Spade or RueLaLa and you want to be able to sign in without having to enter all your information, you can sign in socially through Facebook, or LinkedIn or Twitter or whatever. That's called social login and that's what Geo-Trace, that's part of what G does. So that's a little bit about it, I'm happy to go into more detail, also if you go online I'm sure there's like a 2 sentence elevator pitch that I don't have.

N: Right.

A: Yeah, so it's a really company. There's, let's see, their headquarters are in Mountain View, they just opened an office in Phoenix, we have one in London, and most of the engineers are in Tel Aviv, so that's the other office.

N: Wow. And so what do you do for them?

A: So I'm on the business development side so that's sort of a wide, broad term. Specifically at G I start the sales cycle. So what that means is researching companies that could potentially be a fit for our technology, we primarily work with e-commerce, travel sites, and media publishing, so not every site is a fit. So what I do is I start that research, identify people at the C-level, so CEOs CMOs, at those companies to contact, figure out how to contact them, which is half the battle, and then I contact them, sell them on the idea, and then pass them off to my senior colleague who then ends up making the sale if a sale happens.

N: Great. And do you think that your day-to-day work on a daily basis or do you find yourself doing something very different every day?

A: I wish that was the case, no it's pretty consistent. At first it was really exciting because I had never done anything like this before, but yeah day-to-day is pretty consistent. On Mondays I'm pretty call-heavy just because I'll have had at the end of

last week I had a lot of places I wanted to reach out to, tomorrow will be pretty email heavy, but on a day-to-day basis, or week-to-week it's all the same.

N: And tell me a little about the culture of G, in your office. How many people are working in your office in Mountain View?

A: So just about, I want to say 180.

N: Ok, that's a lot!

A: Yeah, it's a big sales floor, so if you can imagine just a big open area, no cubicles, there are a couple of side conference rooms. And HR has their own office, finance has their own office for obvious reasons. But yeah we're basically in a really big room. The culture, so there are I would say mostly men, I don't know what the breakdown would be, definitely at the C-level it's all men. The VP of HR is a woman but she's very new to the company she just came on last month. So mostly men, I like to say it's a little bit of a frat scene, there are a lot of... I guess that in sales they look for people who are, at least at this company you have to be a team player, because not only are you making sales for yourself but you're working within a team. So they look for really smart people who are team players. So that ends up being many male athletes. Because... not specifically males, but people who have played on a team before. So there's a lot of the Ivy League, male athletes. Which creates an interesting environment, it's definitely a little competitive, and it's definitely a little bro-ey, or very bro-ey. And yeah, it's just, I mean its fun, there are rewards for everything we do, we have these little auctions at the end of the month so we can use all the points we have accumulated throughout our work to get iPads and headsets...

N: Oh, cool, so you get points for doing things?

A: Yeah, so if I let's say made the most calls one day, or sent the most compelling email according to our executive, we get points for things like that. Yeah, so not everyone wins something but there's a chance to win cool things at the end of the month. So yeah, it's definitely a fun environment, I'd say it's a little bit of a pressure cooker for people who have managers who are intense, we're all, everyone in my position so we're the entry level people, we're all on a team of about 6, and then we each have a manager. And there are some managers that aren't very stressful and then there are some who like to light a fire under our ass at the beginning of the week, so that's what team I'm on and people just get really into it. And so yeah, it's definitely I'd call it a pressure cooker and a little fratty or bro-ey.

N: And do you find that the fratty or bro-eyness, does it influence your ability to do your work, do you think?

A: Um, not my work, it's just sometimes I hear ridiculous conversations in my ear. I wouldn't call it the most professional environment; it's kind of bro-ey and unprofessional.

N: That makes sense; I'm getting a picture of it.

A: Nothing bad happens, it's just like no one, people look nice but no one's really dressed up, girls don't really wear heels, guys just like to talk about their fraternities and their sports teams... if that makes sense.

N: Yeah, I'm getting the picture [laughing]. And then, do you, a lot of the startups that I've talked to have very specifically delineated values, do you guys have anything like that, do you have a culture code that's written out?

A: Yeah, so everyone, they want everyone to be a team player. Obviously we do our work independently, well not obviously but we do our work independently so for example I have to set 7 meetings a week with CEOs and CMOs from 7 different companies. But for example I set 9, so what I could have done was kept 7 but saved 2 for this week, but because I'm on a team and my team was down by 2, I had to convert those 2, I had to actually present 9 and not 7 instead of saving them. Being a team player is super important to the company. I think being super outgoing and just willing to spend time with people outside of work is important for the company. We have a happy hour every Thursday where people just get really wasted...

N: Sounds like CMC.

A: Yeah a little bit [laughing]... and like it's at a bar, close by, and there isn't pressure not to go, but people are encouraged to participate, or to at least attend sometimes. And there's a huge drinking culture at the company, which hopefully...

N: That's the frathouse scene that you were talking about.

A: Yeah, so what happens is on someone's birthday they get iced by members of their team, and of course you don't have to drink it but you're heavily encouraged. And then the other thing is on Friday at 4:30 when most people are done with their work for the week, a beer cart comes around so two of the newest members of the team push this cart that has all different types of beer and people just kind of hang out that their desks and...

N: Oh, that's so funny.

A: Yeah, so I think people who don't drink might be uncomfortable. I don't know if you're going to say G's name in your...

N: Oh, no I won't.

A: Ok, yeah cause it could be a huge HR violation, HR has never said anything...

N: Not to worry I'm changing everything.

A: Awesome, no one has felt peer pressured and if they have I don't think they told HR, so yeah, I think it's just sort of a fun thing to bring everyone together and to make the environment a little more relaxed.

N: Right. And how do you find your work-life balance? That's sort of the catch phrase in Silicon Valley, do you find that you are doing a lot of work on the weekends or at home, or are you pretty much at work when you're at work.

A: No, I'm pretty lucky. I have a lot of friends in consulting not in Silicon Valley, mostly New York, who do not have a work-life balance, they are at the office until about 2 or 3am, and their job is their life, their life is their job. I'm really lucky in that I get to work at 7:45 and I leave at 5. Of course I'll do some reading at night if there's a company I'm... so for example I'm going after this one company, the CMO of Kate Spade who purchased our technology is now the CMO of this new company, so I was just reading about her switch to try to target her more effectively. So I'll do things like that, but it's nothing that, I would never be called into the office to stay late.

N: Right. And are you expected to answer emails on the weekend or are you pretty much off duty when you're at home?

A: I'm pretty much off duty because nothing I'm doing is super pressing. I'm not an engineer who's dealing with clients, I'm really just, what I'm doing that's client facing is setting up meetings for my account executive. So someone will email me



and say, oh I actually can't meet next week, can you meet next Friday? And then I can respond but it's just super easy to do on my phone, it's nothing that requires brainpower.

N: Gotchya. And as far as Silicon Valley as a whole, do you find that there's a very specific culture there?

A: Um, I would say so. You know it's funny, I went to two different happy hours that were designed for the Claremont Colleges, so there was one in Silicon Valley, it was in Mountain View where I work, and then I went to one the following week that was in San Francisco and the vibes were just so different.

N: Really?

A: Yeah, the one in Mountain View was mostly Harvey Mudd and Pomona engineers, from Google, and LinkedIn, and all these other companies, and then the one in San Francisco was people who are more financy, and not to say that people who work in Silicon Valley don't live in San Francisco, because it happened right after work that people working in Silicon Valley went to the one in Silicon Valley, it was just a very different vibe. It could have just been random, I know people that work in tech companies in San Francisco, it was just a very, it was more of the nerdy, intellectual vibe in Mountain View, and then more of the finance, bro-ey vibe in San Francisco.

N: That's really interesting. And then what do you think, this is a very broad question, but what do you think the most interesting challenges are going to be in the near future for either women working in Silicon Valley or just anyone working in the startup industry?

A: Yeah, you know that's a tough question, I think I'd have to think about that... at least at my company, it's easy to move up, looking at the percentage of women at the company there are a lot in my position, at the entry level position, at the manager position. All of the managers for my position are female, except one.

N: Oh interesting.

A: So that's interesting. And then there are a lot of account executives, so the ones who make the sales, I would say there are at least 30% women, but then you get to the executives and there are no women. So then you look at Sheryl Sandberg, there are a lot of women, but just not the majority. So I don't know. I guess I've been thinking in terms of my company and moving up, but I'm not super well versed on culture and life out here just because I'm so new to the area. But yeah most of the companies I interviewed at I met a lot of women, mostly because there are a lot of women in recruiting and HR, and that's who I, those are the people I spoke with. But yeah, I can't really give a full answer to that, maybe in a few months when I get to know more about the area.

N: No that's wonderful. That's really helpful even what you said, it really helps.

A: Ok, good.

N: And then I guess my final wrap up that I like to end with is, what about your experience at a startup or at Silicon Valley I should not write my paper without knowing, if anything.

A: Let's see. Um, yeah let me think. So what I really like, and my company I guess is considered a startup because we haven't IPOed, but specifically what I love is that I sit two seats away from the CEO and that's just totally not the case at other companies. I mean I don't know, it's the case for many startups in the Silicon Valley,

from what I know. I interviewed for lots of similar companies in New York, and the entry level people were on the first floor, and the CEOs were on the top floor with a great view.

N: Interesting, so it's not a startup thing, it's a Silicon Valley thing.

A: It might be, I just and it could have just been the places I interviewed in Silicon Valley but just the spaces were really open and really easy to... you know I hear everything that goes on at the company which is great, you know I'm learning so much. I can listen in on the CEOs, they're probably not that important of calls because I can hear them, but I'm getting this great feedback from these really bright people who are sitting right next to me, and everyone is so willing to share their insight and to... you know the VP of sales sits right behind me and he said, you know what, next time I would say X Y and Z rather than whatever, blah blah blah.

N: That's really cool.

A: Yeah, and I don't know, it's just its being in a sales room, I don't know if you can really picture it, but it's a salesroom floor, it's a huge open area and I just don't see that as much at, outside of Silicon Valley. And it could be because Silicon Valley has startups and that's just startup culture.

N: Right, interesting. So if that's the best part for you, what do you think the hardest part is?

A: Um, of being a female at a startup? Or just being in Silicon Valley?

N: Anything about your experience. If you could change one thing.

A: Um, you know something that was difficult at first, in my position they bring in a number of people every two or three months, and when I came in there were 11 people, I was the only person, I was one of two females and the only person not from an ivy league school.

N: Wow.

A: And I felt like I had to prove myself, a) because I was a woman and I would say things, we had 3 weeks of training about business development and just it was like business 101. And people would say, oh you went to a women's liberal arts college. Like I was the token woman, and that was really difficult, and I felt like I had to prove myself. So my first three weeks I just went all out, and did really well, and I'm still doing really well but I like went insane those first few weeks just to prove myself. I don't know why I felt like I had to prove myself because I got a great education from Scripps but everyone was like, Scripps what? You know when you're... I guess there were some non-ivy league students but they went to Stanford so that's same difference.

N: Close enough.

A: Yeah, so I think that is the case, you know my boyfriend works for LinkedIn, he went to Pomona and he was one of the very few non-ivy league students. Of course Pomona is a great school as well, but he was just surprised, he was one of the only non-ivy league students, I think the other non-ivy league students went to Amherst.

N: Still sort of counts as Ivy League.

A: Yeah, and you know Pomona is pretty much up there as well.

N: I would say so too.

A: I guess it's sort of like a silly thing that I'm lucky that this is the thing that I found most challenging, but yeah, it was, I was four years in Claremont, everyone else went

to Claremont, everyone else is very similar to me, especially at Scripps, everyone was a woman. So being here I was like the token woman, and the girl who went to a college no one knew of, so that was just a little difficult.

N: That's really interesting. Is your boyfriend in the GSOU program at LinkedIn?

A: Yes.

N: I probably met him, I was interviewing there last week, a week ago today.

A: Really? Do you remember who you met there?

N: I... what is his name?

A: His name is Mike Mawyer.

N: I don't think I met him actually. I met like probably 7 of the people on the team so it wasn't a lot.

A: Oh, was this on campus or was this at LinkedIn?

N: This was at the San Francisco LinkedIn, it wasn't at the Mountain View one.

A: Oh, so his first rotation is in recruiting, and he goes back and forth between Mountain View and Sunnyvale, so he's only in San Francisco like 2 days every month so...

N: So I must have missed him. That's so funny though.

A: Yeah, on Saturday they had this huge holiday party, they rented out this entire museum, so I met a lot of them and I just, we were talking about our jobs and it just seems like everyone is so over qualified for these entry level positions, just hearing what he's doing at least, he's doing the bare minimum of recruiting, just looking for good engineers on LinkedIn that's basically all he does.

N: LinkedIn trolling.

A: That's exactly what he does.

N: That's so cool though it seems like a neat program.

A: Yeah, people are just so bright in that program, and they have so much fun and they are learning a lot, they have lectures all the time and speakers and, so even though this first rotation the recruiting isn't extremely difficult, he's getting so much from it.

N: That's awesome. Oh, well great, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me this has been really wonderful.

A: Yeah, of course. Please let me know, I don't know how much of a help I've been but if there's anything...

N: Oh, you've been an amazing help! This is really great.

A: Ok, well if there's anything else if you have any last random questions feel free to email, or call, or text or anything. I know how thesis goes so I'm always happy to help.

N: Wonderful, thank you so much I really appreciate it.

12/20/13, 1:30pm  
*Annabelle, Ginger, Grandios*

*At times, the call cut in and out: areas that were cut out or inaudible are designated by \*\*\*.*

FULL TRANSCRIPTION:

A: Yeah, hi there.

N: So I actually went onto your linkedin profile just so I could have a little bit of background and you have an incredibly impressive resume. And I guess as far as your work goes at Ginger and at Grandios I'm interested in what your day to day work is like and how you found your work-life balance.

A: Sorry, you're interested in what the day to day work is like and what?

N: And how you find your work-life balance to be.

A: Got it, ok. Is that the question?

N: Yes.

A: Oh, that's a big question then. What is the day to day work like... well I'm going to probably say what every single other person that you've interviewed has said which is, "well, there's no typical day." Because nobody wants to pretend like they have a typical day. I guess I'll start with Ginger. Ginger was my own company, I was on the founding team, so being an entrepreneur is a little bit different than working in an office, like a traditional office, in the sense that you never really have to be working, but you always have to be working. You know what I mean? It's like a very weird, it's a weird dichotomy there. So I actually would sleep in a little bit, I probably didn't get started with my work day unless I had to for a meeting or something until probably like 10. But then I tended to work late and I worked a lot of weekends as well, so kind of whenever anything came up, or whenever I had any downtime instead of thinking, "Oh, I wonder movie I could watch?" it was, "Oh, let me fire up my laptop and see what needs to get done." And I think probably more so than in like a traditional office job at a big company, because it wasn't totally clear what my role was, it wasn't like, oh here's my role, and here's like the 5 things I have to get done this week, it was like an infinite role, you know what I mean? The work could expand to fill the time allotment so you know if I had extra time it was like well lets think a little bit more about what new partnerships we could do or how we can change the product or, you know, whatever it is.

N: Right.

A: So, my day to day, I did a lot of, everything that fell on the business side. So we had a team of engineers that was like building the product, and for some period of time during the lifetime of Ginger we had a couple of sales people as well. But for the most part I was really doing most of the business side stuff, so a lot of that was business development, so what that means is kind of going out and finding partnerships and people who wanted to use the product. So to simplify it, it was an ad product, right, so on one side you have advertisers that are buying campaigns, and then on the other side you have publishers who are using the ads on their websites and the additional properties, and they're using it to make money. So we

get money from the advertisers and then we split it with the publishers. So most of my job was going out and finding the publishers who were going to use the product. I flew to Los Angeles a lot because a lot of our clients were in the entertainment and music industry so... and then I had meetings in New York also. And I usually went to other people's offices instead of having them come to mine because mine was pretty small and in a lot of cases you're going to go pitch to somebody, so if you're going to pitch them don't give them an errand and make them come to your office, come to them. And then I don't know if that's helpful... I mean other stuff I spent a lot of time on email and that was my main thing. I also made a lot of specs and PowerPoints so kind of like all of the materials that we use to talk about the product, and when you go in to pitch to somebody what you present when you pitch them. And then I did a lot of the analytics when we were running campaigns like how they were performing, making sure everything was working fine, reporting to publishers on how it was going and how much money they were making, and that sort of stuff. And then feeding that information to an account manager that reported to me who worked it out with the advertisers a little bit more, and... yeah that was like a lot of Excel spreadsheets.

N: Ok, great. So it sounds like pretty much everything on the business and marketing side. And then at Grandios, how is your work, is it different there?

A: Yeah, so it's a very very different role in a lot of ways. I'll caveat this by saying that the CL is like a big-time anomaly within the larger organization, so it's not structured or run like any other part of the company. We're on the 16<sup>th</sup> floor of the New York office, and most people that work in that building don't even know that there's a 16<sup>th</sup> floor because the elevators don't go up that high.

N: That's cool.

A: so you have to go through like an unmarked door, through like a narrow stairwell to get to our like semi-secret office. And some of that is by design, so our job is to go out there and be thinking differently from the rest of the company. Everyone else is very busy doing the work that needs to get done and that makes it a great company, but we're blessed within the business to have the resources to have a smallish group of creative who are just focused on thinking of what's the next big thing, you know? So if you think about the whole business as like a spaceship, we're like the end tip that's out in the front kind of looking and seeking where should we go next? What's the future of this industry or that industry? Or this product or that product? And doing a lot of product development and future visioning.

N: That's a cool analogy, I like that.

A: we're also like the little thrusters kind of near the back on the other side, as the company is moving in a direction kind of adjusting it and scooting it. So we kind of play those roles. But within the lab there's three kinds of employees: there's true creatives, so filmmakers, animators, designers, copywriters. And then there's a bunch of producers who help to kind of get projects done. And then there's a small group of people who have my role which is like team lead or marketing manager. We're not like super title focused but there's kind of just a handful of us, and if you think about every project we do in the lab as its own startup, we are kind of like the CEO of that startup, so... we're the head of the team for the project, the one that figures out what it is, why we're doing it, who we need to work with to make that

happen. And then works obviously very closely with all the producers and the creatives to make sure we're making something really rad.

N: And I know Grandios has a very strong culture and reputation, did you have expectations of Grandios before you started working there and, if so, how did they match up to what you've experienced?

A: Yeah, hugely. I mean I've read a number of books about the company and also just I follow tech, I used to write a tech column for \*\*\* so like, I know a lot about the business. So yeah, my expectations going into it was like this is going to be a fun place to work, it's going to be a place where they take care of their people, this is going to be a place where a real emphasis is placed on making awesome stuff, and I think I got very lucky that in a company where that is already that way, I am in a group that is really really really that way. So, again, like I'd say my day starts a little later than it did when I worked back in California, like 9:30 or 10. \*\*\*... is like working with people to make things, so I can't really work from home that much, because like I was a little bit unaccounted for by the rest of the team when I was at Ginger I was like off doing meetings and I would work from home a lot because I was a solo person. And now I lead teams that are working on projects, so I like really need to be with that team. But they give me free food all the time, and it's super delicious.

N: [laughing] awesome.

A: We have really nice offices, beautiful views, and I work with smart people that I really genuinely love being around, so it's a very fun atmosphere so I'm happy to be there as late as I need to be. I think I usually probably leave around 7 or so. But if I need to leave a little bit earlier and be home by like 5:30 I can do that, sometimes I eat dinner there, particularly if everyone at my apartment is out of town and I'm going to go home to an empty apartment I'll stay at the office and hang out with my coworkers a little bit.

N: Yeah. I actually lived right down the street from the Grandios building I'm like imagining it while you're talking about it, I'm like getting nostalgic.

A: Where did you live?

N: I lived on... well it wasn't quite right down the street, I lived on 30<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, but I went down there all the time because I had a friend that worked at Spotify which was down there.

A: Oh, yeah perfect, I think they actually just moved out of the building.

N: Yeah, they did they just moved to a brand new office near Union Square I think.

A: I've heard a lot of good things about it.

N: It's a really nice area. So, sorry to get sidetracked. I'm also really curious as to whether you find that the New York startup scene is culturally significantly different from the San Francisco, Silicon Valley startup scene.

A: Yeah, I mean I think there's a couple ways that it is, so one is that every startup scene draws from the industries that were existing before it, so if you think about something like New York, our startups are overwhelmingly focused on things like ad tech, fashion tech, it's like retail tech, finance tech... the biggest one being ad tech, branding, you know the reason they choose to start up in New York is you have a lot more access to branding agencies and like the kinds of big media publishers that want to be using those kinds of services. So it's a lot more... I would say like the

business side, so people like me, like the business development marketing-y people tend to have bigger roles out here in Silicon Valley. So in a Silicon Valley company that's really through like hard technology, so there's I think a much... engineers just kind of have a different role out there. And you'll see founders are engineers that built something, whereas there's more founders in New York who are business people who go and hire...\*\*\*[breaking up]

N: Sorry you're cutting in and out a little bit... can you hear me.

A:...can you hear me?

N: Yes, every once in a while I can. Sorry I missed the last sentence though.

A: Oh. I think because of that it's like a pretty social scene, there's like a lot of meetups and parties. I mean Silicon Valley is scene-y also but it feels even scene-ier out here. And I think there's a little more... um, I don't know if I want to say that actually. But yeah, I would say that it's just a little more social.

N: Ok. And I actually was also studying the gender aspect of it because there's a lot about women in tech in Silicon Valley or lack thereof. Do you notice that in New York as well? Or do you think that's even true in Silicon Valley from your experience?

A: Yeah, I think it's definitely true in Silicon Valley. And again it comes down to the engineering thing, so at places that are engineering heavy it's going to have fewer women. So, New York, again because the business and marketing side is a big deal, I think you start to see more women out here. Also, just it's, like a lot of the business models out here are very partnership driven, so we're, again I'm like grossly generalizing, but in Silicon Valley there are a lot more startups that are making, they're just like making their product, they're just working on their product and then they launch it. Whereas there's many more startups in New York that are more about like partnerships, going out and collaborating with other people or... you know even in the ad world you have to find, you have to pair up advertisers and publishers, there's just kind of a lot more collaboration to it so, I mean I think just like the different vibes end up, the types of roles that are available to people are different.

N: Yeah, definitely that's interesting. Well that's mostly what I was planning on asking you. I'm interested just in sort of a wrap up if, since you did your own column on entrepreneurship and startups in Silicon Valley if there's anything that you think is really important for me to know as I'm approaching this huge topic of culture of startups in Silicon Valley.

A: ooh, interesting...

N: Specifically, if it helps at all, I'm specifically looking at the cultural narratives and whether those actually play out in reality.

A: yeah, no I think that's super interesting. Because you can certainly be the type of company where there's like companies that really value fun, and then there's companies that put up a sign on the wall that says, "We value fun!" Right, you know what I mean? It's like a different thing.

N: Totally.

A: And I frankly haven't been at Grandios long enough to know any of the secret sauce there, but I am really impressed with how well they have been able to preserve that kind of googly culture through however long it's been, 15 years I

think. 15 years this year, actually. I think a lot of that comes down to some of the little details about the way they care for their employees, particularly the environments they put us in. I mean like its fun offices. One of our kitchens is a Lego kitchen and there's big Lego blocks you can sit on.

N: That's so cool.

A: And the walls are painted like little Lego men, but it's like dry erase paint, so you can like draw little faces on them. Even just walking by that stuff every day is like a subtle reminder that you're working in a place that values you as a person and wants you to have a pleasant experience working in this space, but it's obviously you get fed, there's a lot available to us as far as perks and feeling like the company is taking care of us. So those things help. But it really comes down to the work ultimately. I feel that every day in my work, and I don't know if people who work outside the lab would say the same thing, maybe they would maybe they won't, but I just don't know because I'm in the lab. But every day I feel like I'm reminded like, we are trying to do super rad stuff that is fun, it delights people, it makes people smile, and that's cool I really enjoy that.

N: That's awesome. Well thank you so much, that helps a lot and I really appreciate you calling me even from the airport, that's really nice of you.

A: Yeah, I'm sorry I had to call you this way instead of giving you like a proper, quiet phone call.

N: No, this was fabulous.

A: I mean I obviously have like a million other things I could say on all of these topics, I think specifically I realize I could answer your question about startups, like it's very expensive to do a lot of the things I just talked about.

N: Interesting, yeah.

A: We catered in lunch every day at our San Francisco office at Ginger and obviously that's an expensive thing but it's a really nice thing, and it got our engineers to like get together every day at lunch and sit around the table and hang out and tell jokes and I think it's worth the investment on those types of things.

N: That's interesting. I've been curious about that because there's been the whole lean startup recently that's been so popular, but perks are really contrary to that so they're very at odds with each other.

A: Yeah, and I think it's the difference between your founding team and when you're like building out the bigger team. When it's, I mean like Larry and Surge didn't like lavish themselves with fancy meals all the time, they like shared one desk in the corner of a Stanford office for a few years. So I think it's a little different when you're still your founding crew trying to figure out what you're doing, but I think once you start doing it and hiring people that's when you really need to like make those investments.

N: Right. Oh, and I just thought of something else that I've been trying to define. How would you personally, since you have experience with startups, how would you define a startup? Because I think it's really valuable to talk to Grandios but I know it doesn't really count as a startup anymore.

A: Definitely not. Well you know it's funny, I think we culturally have really conflated the term startup with tech company, in a way that like they are indistinguishable from each other, and I think that's probably not a great thing,



because starting anything has a lot of the same challenges and requires a lot of the same skills. You know interestingly I work very closely with a DJ duo and they're two women who quit their day jobs to do this full time, and they've worked really hard to create a brand and an audience of customers who come to see their shows and buy their music, you know you have to build all the same things that you would if you were building like a tech company. And they go through all the same struggles and exciting moments and you know, they're DJs. Which we would think of as totally different than a tech startup, while about starting an enterprise of any sort has a lot of those same calling cards. So I would say a lot of those companies that are really in its early stages of starting, and then once you're up and running there needs to be some kind of point at which you are just a company.

N: Right, and just a company with the leftover shared values of startups. Because like Grandios really sounds like it kept...

A: Totally, and I don't really know where that point is, I don't know if it's a certain number of employees or a certain round of financing, I don't know how much you know about the financing process, I didn't know anything about it when I was in your position. So I think just generally as a startup you need money to get stuff done before you have customers and money coming in the door for a lot of companies, so they say to go out and get a little bit of money in a seed round, and then a little more money in a series A round, and maybe a little more money in a series B round, and by the time you're like series C, series D, series E, you're not a startup anymore in my opinion. Because at that point you probably have employees that are into the three or four figures, definitely have like revenue that's pretty serious, I can't think of any company that raised a series C without revenue \*\*\*, cause maybe there's like some really great example, like I don't know when Twitter started to have revenue and I don't know how many rounds they raised so maybe never mind on that, but I think I don't think it's something where there's like a strict formula on that, but I think it's like a combination of like, how many employees you have, how much money you've raised, how advanced your product is before you're like just a company that's figured out what you're doing. So I guess sort of be aware... are you familiar with the concept of a pivot? Like we're going to pivot and do something different in our company?

N: No.

A: So a lot of startups will do this, especially early stage, they're like "Oh, here's this cool idea, we're going to make this widget, it's going to be rad." And you like go and you start making it and you realize that like everyone hates it and it's like not right, or the product doesn't fit or whatever. And then you're like, "Well, not going to do that anymore, let's do *this!*" And like when you're in the super early stages, that's normal, that's not like a really bad thing. Investors kind of understand, especially if it's in the same sort of space just slightly different. But a lot of the big companies if you go and read the stories of Instagram, they did this big time, I think it was called "Bourbon" before and they did something kind of different, and then pivoted into Instagram. But I think at some point a pivot is no longer allowed, because people invested into you and it just looks like you're giving up or you don't know what you're doing or you're not in control or you're not focused enough on what you're doing. So like right now if, I'm trying to think of a good example, but if Twitter right

now came out and said, "Hey guys, actually I think we're going to make cars instead of do this whole like social network thing." No. That's not, no. So they can't really do that anymore, I would say they're not a startup. I think once you've IPOed definitely you're not a startup anymore.

N: That's interesting that's a cool way to look at it.

A: Yeah.

N: Well great, thank you so much I know I tried to let you go earlier and then I asked you more questions so I really will let you go.

A: I can talk about this stuff forever so feel free to hit me up.

N: Thanks so much, and safe travels.

Hi James,

Funny coincidence: I attended a Spiral information session on campus today and met Andrew, who has nothing but praises to sing of you. He said that you would make the first cut on his "Fantasy Start Up Team," which seems to be quite an honor. He also told me that you came into Spiral knowing less coding than the standard Software Engineer, and that you very quickly were able to pick it up and develop some of your own projects. I would love to know more about this progression: what inspired you to apply to Spiral, what inspires you to seek out these new challenges, and how (if at all) Spiral inspires or supports this ambition.

I have also included more generic questions about your Spiral experience. Please feel free to ignore, answer, and change at will! I am trying to get a sense of the Spiral culture and your experience there, and am grateful for any information you choose to share.

Tell me about a standard day at Spiral.

Ah, hard to say... we usually have like two-week long units of work, and then at the end of 2 weeks we get back together and reprioritize everything. Usually some combination of:

- building new features
- deploying code from our laptops to production
- code reviewing other engineers code
- interviews
- fires (we get a pager saying something isn't working, and have to mitigate it)
- reviewing bug reports from customers
- meetings

How structured is your work schedule?

not at all, I can show up whenever I want, work from home, wear jeans/tshirt to work etc. i mean not showing up for meetings or interviews is bad form.

What are some traditions or rituals you have at Spiral (if any)?

Wednesday night we have dinner and new employees demo apps that they've made to everyone, in exchange they get a Kindle and a track jacket.

I don't know... some guys on our team liked the Simpsons, so there are easter eggs a few places in our API, for example if customers look at the source code, it says the API is powered by the AT-5000 - [http://simpsons.wikia.com/wiki/AT-5000\\_Auto-dialer](http://simpsons.wikia.com/wiki/AT-5000_Auto-dialer).

What do you like about working at Spiral? Dislike?

Everyone is pretty smart. In general high performers are given more responsibility/prestige in the org and low performers are given less important tasks or, if they can't get it together they are shown the door.

Lately I've been doing much more management-y things like deployments and meetings and code review which is not fun. On my individual team I wish the contributors/product manager were stronger.

Thank you so much for your help, James!

Hope this helps... not sure if you are looking for a job, or trying to work this into your thesis, or what.

1/15/14

*J, S*

N: Happy 2014!

J: Same to you! Now you're friends with Marco, right?

N: Yes, I am, I go to school with him.

J: He was, we loved having Marco here this past summer.

N: Oh, he loved it, he speaks so highly of you guys.

J: Oh, well he was a great addition, and between you and me he was the favorite of our interns so...

N: That's so great.

J: He was a really welcome addition, it was great experience. Hopefully he had a good time.

N: He did, and he absolutely loved it.

J: If all interns were as great as he was we would want them here all the time.

N: Oh, that's awesome. Well I can see what would make you say that he's a great guy and I'm so glad that he was able to connect us too.

J: Yeah, definitely.

N: And I know it's a really busy time of year so I'll keep it short but I've just been, basically I'm doing my senior thesis research on startup culture in Silicon Valley, San Francisco. And I'm an anthropology major, and I originally came into it just sort of wanting to study startup culture how anthropologists study cultures, you know, around the world. And I'm still sort of focusing on that and figuring out the commonalities and differences between startups.

J: What an interesting thing to focus on, I love the topic.

N: Yeah, it's been really cool, and it's been amazing I got really lucky with my timing cause it seems like you can't get away from it in the news now, it's really interesting.

J: Yeah definitely, it's a very timely topic.

N: Yeah, it is, and I didn't know that would happen but I'm glad I chose it. So you guys are located in San Francisco right?

J: Yes, so we're located in San Francisco, and I don't know how familiar you are with San Francisco but we are in SOMA, which is South of Market. So we're right up against the financial district, and Soma's really the heart of sort of the startup world in San Francisco, in the city.

N: Do you think that the startup world is moving a little bit out of Silicon Valley and into San Francisco now, or has that always sort of been the case?

J: You know that's a good question. I started at S about a year ago, and I just moved into the city and this is my first experience with a startup. But from what I've heard there are a lot of startups that are relocating to San Francisco. I know that T is opening an office here, or they have already, I know that Y just opened an office, a block away from us, so I know a lot of companies are relocating here, or they're opening sort of remote offices in SF for the people that work in SF. I also know that it greatly affected the price increase in the last two years of rental property.

N: Yeah, and that's been leading to the protests as well, that are in the news...

J: Exactly. So I mean just from those stories and things like that, it does seem like there are more companies moving to SF, but yeah I mean like I said this is my first

experience with a startup. I don't have a ton of past history about how many startups were in San Francisco but... yeah it does seem that way.

N: Right. This is great actually because one of the things that I'm really interested in is when you first came to a startup—I'm glad it's your first one and it was fairly recent—I'm interested to know if you had expectations of what working at a startup was going to be like, and what those expectations were, and then whether or not they were met, maybe they were exceeded or different or not met at all.

J: Yeah, you know to speak very frankly just between the two of us, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I really took it at face value when I boss said the 9 to 6 workday, I really didn't realize that really that was sort of the minimum that was expected.

N: So what is your workday?

J: I definitely stay later, probably until about 7, and that's just a normal workday. I'd say that there have definitely been probably since I've been here... I've been here 11 months and in that time there's been nights when I've been here until midnight, working on something that needs to get done or... you know it's sort of like, for me, if I'm going on vacation for a couple days or for a long weekend, it's not like I really have anyone to cover for me so I've been here a couple nights really late and it's been before I'm about to go for a three day weekend, you know, nothing big but it was sort of like even though I get to take a vacation day, I almost work a double shift the day before because there's no one to sort of pull your weight when you take time off, it's sort of like it's just you especially in a small office environment. So yeah, so I didn't realize sort of how much you do have to go above and beyond. But it also goes, it's sort of a balance between the things you love about being at a startup, you know the casual work environment, the more fun laid-back vibe, but there's other things like there's no one to pull your share of the work when you're gone, or you know something needs to get done, oftentimes you'll be asked or get an email to do things after work hours, because that's how it works, everyone is pitching in and doing all they can, hopefully for what will be a successful venture.

N: Right. And did you expect any perks from the job, like free food, anything like that?

J: Yeah, you know when I interviewed, I knew a little about the startup culture, they like to feed their employees, keep them happy... one thing that is kind of fun is I do all of our HR, I do all of our office management, and then I'm the executive assistant to our CEO.

N: Wow. A woman of many hats.

J: Yeah, so the job of keeping our employees satisfied as far as a stocked kitchen and extra perks is actually my job.

N: Cool!

J: It is kind of nice, I get to, you know, surprise the group with, on Friday, two weeks ago I brought in milkshakes for everyone, or get quiches delivered in the morning. but it is kind of fun because I actually get to be the one that provides or chooses what those perks are going to be.

N: That's awesome, and you get to pick your favorite brand of cookies, too, to stock the kitchen with.

J: Exactly, exactly, I think the milkshake idea was like, "You know what? It's 3 o'clock on a Friday I could really go for a chocolate milkshake. I bet everyone could go for a chocolate milkshake." So I definitely, my boss has given me the leeway to do any type of special thing that I think of, so that's been a lot of fun. And in a lot of ways, I'm 34 years old and out of our 25 employees I think I'm the 5<sup>th</sup> oldest. So a lot of our group are in their 20s, so in a lot of ways I've kind of taken on a team mom role. So for me that really is a role that fits me well and that I enjoy. And that part has probably been my favorite part, being able to sort of help people out, or being able to plan the monthly outing or monthly, we do like a monthly social thing and so planning those has been a lot of fun. Or surprising the team with, like one day we got, this is, Marco wasn't here but when we first moved into our new office, our first day we had masseuses come in, and so that was a surprise for the whole office.

N: You had who come in?

J: Masseuses.

N: Oh, that's awesome.

J: Like massage therapists, so everyone got a 30-minute chair massage. You know, doing things like that are sort of something that's expected in the startup world, but it's fun to be able to surprise your team of 25 people with like, oh guess what everyone gets a 30 minute massage today, or something like that.

N: Oh, that's so cool.

J: And those things are definitely things that make you not as resentful if you do have to stay late or put in that extra time.

N: Right, right. Interesting. It's cool to hear it from your perspective you're the first person that I've talked to who's actually the perk provider. That's neat.

J: Oh yeah? Yeah it's a fun role. Because even though it's not my money, you know, for me the most gratifying thing about my job is most of the things I do are sort of behind the scenes, you know working with the CEO on a project or PowerPoint slides for presentations that then I don't even really see, whether it's for speaking at a conference or something like that, or dealing with all of our accounting to get all of our bills and such to our accountants. So a lot of it is sort of thankless work, but I get a ton of positive feedback when we do things for the office. So, and I think because of it that's the part of my job I enjoy the most.

N: And I was interested too that you mentioned that you're one of the oldest people at the company, is it prohibitive for older people at a startup? Is it difficult to be part of a startup once you pass say, 45 or 50? Because I haven't talked to anyone who's older than 50.

J: I don't think that it's prohibitive, but I do think that a lot of startups are looking for a vibe that comes with someone who's more youthful. They're looking for an energy and a vibe... the other thing is people that are younger tend to be able to throw themselves into the job more than someone who, say, is married and has a few kids, who has more of a home life that they need to get back to and need to leave the office at 6 o'clock or 5:30. So I think it's definitely a younger person's world, I mean I don't think... I'm actually single and I don't have a husband or kids, so I think that's why it works for me in where I am in my life right now. I could see, you know, those things changing and then working at a startup not being a good fit, because it is sort of this all encompassing, like, we eat breakfast here, we eat lunch here, like four out

of five nights of the week we order dinner and about half the office stays and eats dinner together. So it almost becomes like this family, you know? And I think sort of the vibe, even though I'm only about 8 years older than the majority of our people here, it's definitely like, you know, it's a different generation. And so I think most of them connect because they are in their 20s, and I definitely feel like I'm sort of this team mom role, and I can't imagine someone who's even ten years older than me would probably feel even more... sort of out of it. I mean it's as simple as like references, things people are talking about in the lunch room or... I don't know, it'll be interesting. Like our CEO is 39, and there's only one other person that's older than him. So it is interesting because my entire life I've always worked at jobs where I've been one of the youngest, you know?

N: Right.

J: Or one of the younger, considered part of the younger group. Yeah to just switch companies and all of a sudden flip-flop around to be one of the older people, it's interesting. I mean it's also cool too because I definitely feel, in some ways I feel like my opinions are more respected, or I feel like there's definitely... because I'm a little bit older that sort of like I'll make a decision and it's like, "Oh, ok, she must know what she's talking about." You know? I don't know it has, it's interesting. It's very interesting. It's an interesting experience.

N: Cool. And then one more thing that I've been hearing from a lot of people—it wasn't originally something that I was looking for—but a lot of people have been mentioning that Silicon Valley kind of feels, and SF together, the startup world kind of feels a little bit like a bubble. And that they wind up making products for other startups, and I can see how that could be a positive thing or how that could be a negative thing. And I was wondering if you've sensed that at all and if you find it helpful or destructive or what you might think.

J: You know it's interesting that you say that because a lot of the services we use are provided by other startups.

N: Right.

J: Like from our catering company, our catering company acts as an aggregate who manages all these different restaurants and then provides different meals from different restaurants every day. That's a startup that's located here in San Francisco. Our grocery, like where I order our good, grocery store order each week, we don't use strictly.com we use another startup who then goes to Safeway and whole foods and Trader Joes. I know that some of the service providers we use for our website are startups within San Francisco. So it is, I found that very interesting, that it's sort of like a lot of these startups are really catering to other startups or helping other startups. They almost are you know, very interdependent on each other. And it will be interesting. You know in 2008 the bubble burst, and it definitely feels like another bubble. So it will be interesting to see what happens. Because a lot of these service providers, if you know, we are a company that is well funded but we're not monetizing yet and I think a lot of companies are in that situation. And if those companies then go under and don't ever monetize or start to generate revenue then those other companies that were receiving revenue by whether it's by catering or delivering goods or hosting their websites, then those companies are going to be losing customers. So it will be interesting, it'll be



interesting to see what happens over the next few years. A little scary, but it's definitely an interesting place to be part of.

N: That's very cool. Well that was all the questions that I had in mind. Do you think that there's anything pressing that I should know about the culture of San Francisco in general?

J: Um, gosh that's a good question. You know I feel like, so I started at the company in March, and then I was staying with family in Marin county and then I moved here in May, so I feel like in some ways I'm still getting to know the culture of San Francisco and the startup culture. But it's definitely an interesting, exciting space to be a part of. Like I said I've never worked for a company whose main focus isn't generating revenue. To just be at a company where the main focus is the product, it's a different way of thinking about things. Its interesting I think it's great that you're doing... is it a dissertation or your thesis?

N: It's a thesis.

J: I think it's great that you're doing it on startup culture because I think it really is something unique to San Francisco and the bay area and there's a lot of different ins and outs about it.

N: Absolutely, and it has been really interesting I even, I spoke with a couple people in New York, thinking that maybe this culture that we've been talking about, the flat structure, the perks, the working hours where the narrative says that it's great while its much longer in reality. And that doesn't really happen in New York, so it really is a San Francisco, Silicon Valley thing.

J: Oh really? Like the crazy long hours and...

N: Yeah, no it's totally different in New York.

J: Him, that's interesting. Yeah I think that was the biggest surprise for me is that you know, I'll sometimes be here until 8 or 9 and when I leave, like half the company is still here.

N: You feel like you're leaving early.

J: Yeah, right, it's just insane.

N: Wow.

J: But it's also cool, I mean it's nice to feel like everyone's pulling their weight and everyone's just as dedicated and just as invested in making it work.

N: Well thank you so much for your time.

J: Of course. And if you have any other questions please don't hesitate to reach out.

1/15/14

Rob, P

R: Today's just kind of flown by I totally forgot about this.

N: No not to worry, and I'll very quick cause I know it's a really busy time of year.

R: Every day is busy so...

N: I was going to say, every time of year is a busy time of year, but now especially getting back in... did you get some holiday time off?

R: Yeah, our, um, I was off the last... I basically had like a school vacation essentially, my last, I was off since the Friday before Christmas and then I came back on the sixth.

N: Oh that's a huge amount of time that's wonderful.

R: Yeah it was like a school holiday almost.

N: That's great. So what do you do for Pinterest?

R: I do business analytics.

N: Ok, and were you working somewhere else before?

R: Yeah, I was at OKL prior, that's how Evan and I know each other.

N: Ok I was going to ask, that's great. And then OKL, was that your first job out of school?

R: No, I worked a few, like two other places. Like I was an econ major out of college so I went into finance, and it wasn't my thing. And then I asked family and friends and stuff what I should do, and I was like I knew I didn't like the structure and everything so I figured getting into the startup world might be best because I'd have a lot of agility to do a lot of different things. And I worked for a small global startup and it was awesome, I really enjoyed it, so I did really well there, and then an opportunity arose at OKL and then from OKL just continuing... what's great about startups is you network a lot, because it's such a small world, you know? And I don't know one thing led to another and now I'm at Pinterest.

N: That's very cool. And it's cool to have the perspective of you coming from finance to a startup world and that's something that I've been asking people, if when you started in a startup, did you have expectations of what it was going to be like and how did those expectations either get met or how are they different?

R: I expected a more laid-back atmosphere, more than anything, which was fulfilled. Like going from wearing a dress shirt and slacks every day to you know, jeans and a tee shirt is pretty awesome. And I mean, funny to say that's one of the top reasons, but it definitely was. And then it's like... I don't know just the mentality, it's like everyone is stiff, like in that finance world but it's like not as bad, it's very much looser and laid back. It's more like sales task and continuing to move forward.

N: And how about the work life balance? Has that improved for you or is it about the same?

R: Um, it's definitely.... It's different. Because like you're an owner in a sense, you have an equity in the company, you have this sense of ownership and you want it to do well, so it actually incentivizes you to work harder sometimes, and more frequently and you're more involved in the product. As opposed to some place where the company does good or bad like, yeah that's great, but you don't really feel a sense of ownership. And so like in a world where you do own, like the direct

success, there's a high correlation in the success of pinterest and my personal success.

N: That's interesting.

R: So like, while sometimes I may be working more frequently I'll be more plugged in working in a place like this, it doesn't bother me because I know what the outcome will be.

N: Right. So do you work about the same hours?

R: Um, I get in about... I mean it's very flexible here, I get in at like 9 o'clock and I leave 5, 6 o'clock. Sometimes I stay later sometimes I leave earlier. It just depends, if there's stuff I need to do it's not going to prevent me from living my life. Today for example I'm going to a basketball game with my dad and so I'm leaving at 5, but I might go on later tonight just to catch up.

N: Right, cool. And another thing that I'm really interested in that a lot of people have mentioned is the sort of bubble that Silicon Valley creates, and they have described it as, there are a lot of startups that are founded to serve other startups, and I know pinterest isn't like that, but I'm wondering if you feel that at all in the atmosphere of Silicon Valley, if it's very inward facing—and when I say Silicon Valley I include San Francisco—or if you don't think that's the case.

R: So you're asking me do I think there's a bubble?

N: Yes.

R: Yeah, I think there is but I mean I think it's a little bit better this time around in the sense that these are actual businesses with actual value propositions to businesses and customers that in my mind differentiate it from previous bubbles. I think a lot of these things are here to stay, I don't see Facebook or Twitter or for that matter Pinterest going anywhere.

N: I certainly agree with that. And that brings me to sort of my wrap up question, when do you think a company ceases to be a startup. Because I know sort of everyone considers themselves to be a startup now in Silicon Valley, I've even heard people referring to Google as a startup, so how would you define it?

R: I would define it as... um... hm... I would define it as anything less than minimal viable team members. Like you know, I consider, I have definitions, like a true startup is probably anything less than 50, you know? And then you're kind of like this small-stage startup where you're like 50-100, and then anything higher than that it's like mid-stage, late-stage, until profitability and then I consider you a corporation at that point.

N: Ok, so you think when a company goes public, does that make it a corporation?

R: Oh, absolutely because now it's outside of your hands of ownership and there's other people that... you know like, and so the values and... what makes startups great is that you know you can instill values within a company, but when you have off-site shareholders those can sometimes theoretically impact it. But there's companies like Google and whatnot that have stayed true to their values, but that's not necessarily the case for every company.

N: Right, that's interesting, what I'm... it sounds like it's sort of this play between what makes a company a startup and whether they can keep those values once they have other decision makers involved. That's interesting. Well that was all of the questions that I really wanted to run by you, do you have anything you wanted to

add about what it's like to work at a startup, or anything you think I should know about the culture of San Francisco in general.

R: I don't know I guess for me it's... I don't know... uh, I don't really have much to add, but I'm curious about your thesis, what are you writing it on?

N: So I'm an Anthropology major and I'm Anthropology and Economics double, so I wanted to do something that sort of brought the marriage of them together but it seemed super disparate. So what I'm doing is I'm studying startup companies the way that a lot of anthropologists will study, say, tribes, or something like that. And I've visited a lot of startups and have been interviewing people to get their perspectives on the culture and what life is like and I've been building this cultural narrative of a startup company, the components like work-life balance, a flat power structure, the perks, things that people expect from startups, and whether or not those are played out in reality.

R: Got it, ok that's awesome, I'd love to read it when you're finished.

N: Absolutely I'll definitely send it your way when I'm done.

1/22/2014  
C, CEO S

N: You still there?

C: Yep.

N: Ok wonderful. So I just wanted to know about, a little bit about sort of your day to day experience, I know that obviously your experience will be very different from Jenny's just because of your position, but your day to day experience at Spreecast, and if you've worked anywhere else before and how it differs?

C: Yeah so one thing I would say even before I answer that is, since you gave me a little bit of background on what you're doing I would tell you that startups, startup culture varies widely from startup to startup, not all startups are the same culture. There's a lot of very different sort of cultures, and culture is super important in a startup, you know, and it affects morale, and it affects you know what, how successful the startup is going to be. But I think it varies greatly. So for my typical day, I usually get in around 9, I'm usually at the office until, it depends on the day, but anywhere from 7 at the low end up until 10 o'clock or 11. And you know I am in meetings a lot of the day, a lot of my meetings are one-on-one meetings with people who report to me at my company, a lot of my meetings are with investors, a lot of my meetings are with partners that we're trying to do, build relationships with. And then some of my meetings are kind of team meetings for internal meetings but instead of one-on-one it would be with a team of people, like the product team or the business development team or things like that. And then I also, yeah, so I think there's a reasonable number of phone calls that I have throughout the day and a reasonable number of demos, where I'm giving kind of demos of our product again, mostly to business partners or investors or people like that. I also do a lot of recruiting throughout the day, so I'm often talking to potential recruits who we're trying to recruit, many of whom are engineers, software engineers who we're trying to recruit into our company to work at our company. Or meeting with recruits. And so those are probably some of the key things that I spend my time on. I'll also you know work on other areas like legal questions with our lawyers or corporate legal questions, like stock options and giving stock options to people, or raising capital or the background involved in that. Or I also spend a reasonable amount of time on kind of accounting type questions like, how much revenue do we have, what's our costs, how much money are we spending each week, how much cash do we have in the bank, how much cash do we need and do we need to go raise more money from new investors, and those kind of questions from looking at a financial statement. So I think those are kind of the things that I spend my time on every day.

N: Ok. And I'm interested, I think it's really important what you said about every startup being unique and every startup culture being unique depending on the company. And I was wondering how you promote the culture of Spreecast, and do you have sort of a, do you have any cultural documents or anything like that or is it more just a sense of culture?

C: Yeah we haven't documented, we haven't really documented any kind of cultural elements like our values or sort of, we do have like a mission statement on our "About Us" on our website, so if you go to our website About Us you'll see like a

mission statement. And I try to... you know at some point we probably will publish written documented values and things like that, I think that could be helpful. But what we've done historically is sort of lead by example, and try to show people just through example the types of things that are important to me, and the types of values that I believe are important. And you know I would say I personally value certain things: I value hard work, I value some risk taking and people being comfortable trying things out even if they fail and having sort of an experimental element to what we do. I value people who, I value people's nature and innate characteristics much more than I value their experience. So I want to work with people who are smart, and creative, and cheerful much more than I want to work with someone who has a certain resume and a certain set of experiences on their resume. I'm much more interested in people kind of who they are inherently as a person than what their experience set is. So those are the kind of things... so for example, leading by example, I myself, even though I have 3 kids and I'm married and I'm not 25 years old anymore, I try to show people that I work really hard as an example of what I value. I tend to be, again, as I said usually in the office at least 55, 60 hours a week and then working from home quite a bit as well. And it's not just about hours in the office, obviously. I try not to make it so it's not all about face time, it's much more about people's product and what they get done. But I just believe that even if you can... to me, even if you can get a lot done in a short period of time, even if you're so good that you can do the same amount of work in 20 hours that other people are doing in 60, that doesn't mean you should only work 20 hours. That means you're blessed, you are really talented, but you should still work really hard to get that much *more* leverage out of your time, not to just work the minimum number of hours to get the work done. So I think when you're in a startup you're cash strapped, generally you're not making revenue early on, and so yeah.

N: So you mentioned that unlike a lot of the people at the company you're not 25, you do have a family. how do you balance having a family and leading by example in that way?

C: Um, you make sacrifices. At the end of the day I make sacrifices that a lot of other people wouldn't want to do, and that's fine, they don't have to do it. And it's a personal decision. I don't see my kids for dinner at night. I come home at night and they're asleep, my wife puts them to bed and my wife has dinner with them. On the weekends I spend a lot of time with my kids, I take Saturday off completely and I don't work, and Sundays I take most of Sunday off and then Sunday evening when I'm getting ready for the week I'll work again. But so except for most of Sunday and all of Saturday I don't get to see my kids. And some people think that's terrible, how could you possibly not be home for dinner? And that's fine, they can think that, they shouldn't, they shouldn't start a company if they want to be home at 5 o'clock every day, in my opinion. And now look, there probably are examples of successful companies where everyone leaves at 5, but you know it's hard, because you kind of need people to be really, it's not a 9-5 job in 9 out of 10 startups because there's too much work to do and there's too much, you're trying to do something hard—create a company out of nothing, and make it to be a big company—it's just, it's, you know people are kind of clocking in at 9 and leaving at 5 it's hard to get there. So how do I do it? I just sacrifice some of the family time during the week, and it is what it is.

Now some people say their values are such that they want to see their kids every night before they go to sleep, and that's fine and I respect that, just I make a sacrifice around that right now.

N: And do you think that's one of the reasons that there are so many young people in startup companies, just because it takes so much time out of your life?

C: Yes. Yes. I think that's exactly why, I think that it's not coincidental that a lot of founders of startups like Mark Zuckerberg or the guy from Snapchat or Twitter, probably 9 out of 10 of successful internet companies and mobile companies in the last 10 years are started by guys that are in their pre-family years. And you know my first company that I started was StubHub, and I started it when I was 25 and I was single, and it was really successful and that's not just a coincidence. It's the perfect time to start a company because you can work 80 to 100 hours a week and you don't have a wife and you don't have kids and you don't have anything holding you back. So work-life balance doesn't matter as much because you don't really have external commitments.

N: Right, interesting. And then I want to keep it brief but another thing that I've been really interested in is sort of what you mentioned just now, that a lot of the startup companies in Silicon Valley right now are centered around tech and many of them actually are tech companies that serve other tech startups, that fill a niche that people have seen that needs to be filled when they were working at another startup. And I've heard a lot of people sort of referring to Silicon Valley as being very inward facing, sort of almost like you have a bubble around it, not so much a bubble in the economic sense but more in the cultural sense. And I'm wondering if you feel that way about Silicon Valley or if you think that it's just a natural progression or if you've seen that at all.

C: Um, I mean look, I think, I think there is a couple things about the tech scene in the bay area that make it sort of different from a lot of other areas. One is even when unemployment was high in the US three years ago and the economy was in a recession or whatever, coming out of the great recession, it's still hard to find engineers in the bay area. So we are a little bit secluded from other industries in that there's been a lot of growth at that time, and it's been very challenging to hire the most talented people because there's more demand than there is supply of those people. Another thing, I think the most successful companies here are not just serving other startups and are serving a bigger world than that, they are serving, you know companies in various industries that go way beyond the startup world, so I'm not sure that that's right. I'm sure there are some startups that serve just other startups but many of the best ones are doing more than that. You know... I think there's different, you know you look at LA and so much of that is driven by Hollywood, I think it's a very different kind of culture than the tech scene in the bay area, which I think is different from the financial scene in New York. And so yeah I think some of these geographies, these cities do have real differences in the types of people they attract and the types of protocols that fits, and yeah, you know more and more New York is becoming a startup scene as well, LA still feels very Hollywood to me, yeah, I mean I think there are some real differences and I think there's different types of people that work in these industries.

N: Interesting. I think that's all the questions that I really wanted to ask you, do you think that there's anything that I should not miss in my understanding of startups in Silicon Valley, or in the culture of Silicon Valley in general?

C: Um... I don't know, one of the things that we didn't talk about at all and that I think is really important in terms of moral at companies and also culture depends on the success of the company. So you know, the most powerful thing, I think that you can have to drive a positive culture and a positive morale is a product and a company that's having some success in the market, that is growing, where customers like the service or the product and it's having success. So that company of is greatly, is hugely important in the culture, and in turn, the flipside is also true, that the culture does help success. If everybody's really positive and everybody's working really hard, that could really help the company have success. But it's not sufficient—it's necessary for success but it's not sufficient in that you also need to have a good market, you need to have a good plan, it needs to have some other things in addition to having a good culture. So they do impact one another, culture affects success and success affects culture, and so that's really important too, to the overall mix of what culture is and the morale and things like that.

N: That's a really interesting point, something nobody else has brought up so thank you so much. And thank you so much for taking all the time to talk to me, I really appreciate it.

C: Yeah, sure no problem. Good luck with your report.



1/23/14

J, S

J: I think with that being said, part of startup culture is wearing a lot of different hats, and so I definitely experienced that myself. And I sort of try to, you know part of my role is defining our culture a little bit, or at least trying to provide some direction for our culture. So yeah, I probably have a different experience from other folks because I'm sort of part of at least trying to shape culture. But I find that culture means different people, and you may have found that in your research as well. But the way that I define culture for myself is sort of like, the unspoken rules of a company, you know, the things that nobody actually tells you but that you sort of pick up on standing in the hallway or when you're in the kitchen interacting with other folks. You know the way that folks interact with each other and those sort of unspoken things is sort of how I think of and define culture. And also the way that people feel when people are in our space and in our environment.

N: Right, so when you say that your role is to sort of provide or enhance culture, how do you do that without having an explicit... without speaking it. You know, how do you encourage those interactions in the hallway?

J: So you know I think, I can give you the example of what I think we'd like to see here, and so for me that means trying to engage with as many people as I can on a daily basis in a super positive way. And providing an upbeat atmosphere and trying to be helpful to folks, and trying to set the tone in the office is the way that I do it, without actually saying, "Hey, I'm trying to set a positive tone." There's something that, there's 30 of us here so you know it's easy, I don't want to say easy, but it's more likely to catch on in a smaller office than it is in an office of 250 people where just because one person is upbeat doesn't mean that it's going to catch on with everybody. So yeah, it seems to be that if one or two people sort of set the tone for the day and start it off in a positive way, then it sort of catches on. And I've been here over a year and a half now, and it seems like we've been pretty successful in keeping things fresh and upbeat.

N: Do you think that the perks and the team outings and team dinners that a lot of startups tend to do, is that part of the culture creation as well?

J: Yeah, sure. So we don't do a lot of team dinners, to be honest we, I think there's a little bit of a shift currently with work-life balance in startups, in that we're competing with some really big players like apple and Google and twitter and square and some other companies that are offering a work-life balance to folks, specifically to engineers who are incredibly difficult to recruit. So your sleeping bag under the desk situation is I think fading and more so now than maybe 5 years ago, people are experiencing a better work-life balance. But we do do team outings, we do the trampoline park, and we've done croquet, and I certainly think that that definitely contributes to a culture that's sort of a very laid back environment. We have a fully stocked kitchen where like people just sort of roam in and out of all day and get their own snacks, and we do catered lunches on Fridays which is nice because then it's an opportunity for everyone to sit down and be together if they want, and we have a foosball table we have tournaments that center around that, there's a lot of sort of fun competition circling around that that makes for a little bit

of a competitive environment which is always fun. Specifically for the folks we have at stitcher it seems like competition always sort of you know, it's always a good way to sort of cultivate interaction.

N: That's neat. And I'm interested that you said you think things are changing. That's another focus that I'm really interested in. what do you think the future of the startup world looks like? Is it moving more toward the lean startup model or what might it look like.

J: Yeah, that's a really good question. I think it... I mean when we think of startups we think of like the tech industry, and so I mean from that perspective I think... when you say lean startup do you mean less people or less money to spend?

N: Yeah, less money to spend.

J: I think I mean, it's interesting because if you're talking about a tech startup you have to have engineers, and you can't hire engineers in this climate without paying them a lot of money because there's going to be other companies who can be paying them a lot. So I think lean startup is going to be taking on a new twist to where you know, I don't know that it's going to be possible to be that lean. I mean you can be lean with other positions, with your marketing folks, and you can bring on interns and things like that, but to attract and retain the best engineering talent you have to pay people. And you also have to provide them with competitive benefits and you know, yeah and I think when folks outside of this industry think about startups sometimes they think they're just a bunch of like early 20s guys in an office, and while that is a good portion of our environment also, there's also folks who have families and have kids and benefits and getting home at 6 o'clock are important to them. So I think it's about finding good talent and the folks who you want who are going to contribute, and then making sure that you're offering things that are going to keep them around.

N: Interesting. And then for you personally, what do you think is the best part and the hardest part about working at a startup?

J: I think the best part is the people that we work with, cause we've got talent from MIT and from Duke and sort of just super intelligent folks who are super innovative and always sort of pushing you to think outside of the box, and to educate yourself and to think bigger and better things. And so that's what I would say is really the best part of working at a startup. And I imagine that most startups sort of have that sort of situation where it's a bunch of smart people trying to make something really awesome. In terms of the hardest thing, I would say... I mean, when you take on a job in a startup, you kind of understand that there are ups and downs with it, and so you sort of just have to roll with the punches and let growing pains be what they are.

N: Right, that's interesting.

J: You just have to be... you have to be open to pivot. To change your action as the business dictates.

N: Interesting. Well that's about all I had in mind to ask and I'm wondering just very open endedly if there's anything I should not write my thesis without knowing, since you are I believe my last interview. Either about Silicon Valley in general or about the startup world.

J: Hm, let me think about that for a second.

N: OK.

J: ... I think that the thing that's probably most important to understand about a startup is that the, your stereotypical, what people imagine startups to be is rarely an accurate depiction of what they actually are. Like I think people have this perception of what a startup is, and I totally had that perception before I started working here as well, but that perception is rarely accurate.

N: What do you think that perception is?

J: I think the perception is you know, people, there's like you know, 15 college kids in a room and there's a CEO yelling and a lot of beer being consumed and, but it couldn't be further from what most startups are trying to accomplish. It's less about the work environment and more about the product than most people probably understand who don't work in a startup. I think people work... I think most folks are at a startup intentionally, they didn't just land there. And the reason that they're at the startups that they're at is because they're passionate about what they're working on and the product that they're working on and so a lot of attention goes to that and less kind of goes to the Silicon Valley mumbo jumbo.

N: I know exactly what you mean by that.

J: We're not sitting here thinking to ourselves, we're working in a startup, we're working in Silicon Valley and this is so cool. It's more about like, how can we make our product better, how can we get it in front of more people, and what do these people really want, and how do we make money off of it and those are the questions that are really important to us.

N: That's a really good insight thank you so much. And thanks so much for talking to me that was really helpful.

J: Absolutely happy to help. And if you have any follow up questions let me know, I'm happy to reconnect!

## Appendix 2: Fieldnotes

### Fieldnotes 9/18/13

11 am

#### Phone call

In order to find contacts in Silicon Valley, I had been corresponding with Steve Seigel, director of Claremont McKenna's Silicon Valley Program. He offered to call and speak with me more about the alumni contacts he had in his database, and we spoke for almost an hour. Steve was friendly and casual, and a CMC "lifer:" after graduating from CMC and earning an MBA from the Drucker School, he returned to work in CMC's development office. Between his graduation and his MBA, Steve had a short stint working as a consultant in pharmaceutical and medical devices for three years. Finally, a year and a half ago, Steve was put in charge of running the brand new Silicon Valley Program, a study-abroad akin to CMC's DC program, where students take classes in Silicon Valley and pursue an internship in whatever field they wish (normally this is tech and start-ups). Steve says that he has found the work very rewarding, and thinks the students have been enjoying the program, as well. I assure him I've heard only positive feedback as well.

During our conversation, Steve perused the Alumni Database, as well as just thinking off the top of his head, and came up with over 15 people for me to contact. He made sure to tell me who each person was and why they might be interested in talking to me, and assured me that I could use his name when getting in touch with them.

Our conversation also branched into a discussion of the unique corporate culture in Silicon Valley as Steve has experienced it:

"In '87, corporate cultures were hierarchical and everything was funneled to the top. They give a lot of responsibility to the employees to choose what to do," he said.

"It takes a lot to know what your company wants and how you expect your employees to act," he added, and this is why he thinks that Silicon Valley companies are so explicit about their culture. Many, he says, have extensive documents outlining their culture, which strikes me as very interesting. Culture, in an anthropological sense, is often considered to be extremely organic and malleable. How, then, does it work to have such an explicit culture to be created out of nothing? Is that even possible? How does this fit in our understanding of "culture"?

Steve went on to explain that he thinks this is wise business. The people in Silicon Valley, he says, are coming from a place where they want to keep corporate culture as thin as possible. This way, they can empower people to do what they are hiring them to do. For example, there are 30,000 Google employees, and each receives a "20% time" where they get to spend 20% of their time on a project entirely of their own choosing. So how do you get all 30,000 people to spend their 20% time on things that are really productive? How do you inspire people to do that and also not take the company in a direction you (as a CEO or leader) don't want it to go? "Either they have tons of faith or a really great educational program

for their employees. Or they reiterate goals often in the way average person cant see, or all the above,” Steve posits.

His language struck me as interesting. Calling for “faith” and an “educational program” makes it clear how much of an institution the company is, and how similar it is to other cultures anthropologically.

Steve also points out that it is interesting to look at the specific linguistics and word choice in the culture statements. Brand new companies need powerful statements, but they should then be able to evolve as their company changes. He gave the example of one company that had “the F-bomb” in their culture statement that was created 10 years ago. Most of the employees who were young at its founding now have young children, and they face the challenge of having this kind of language around them.

However, Steve points out, being explicit about culture is very important for a start-up. “When they do start young if they really think about the culture from the beginning, it becomes easier for people to uphold it. That’s the beautiful part of a startup: you can get right from beginning if you’re really thoughtful about it.”

He also suggested that I look at companies that didn’t manage to “get it right” and gave me contact information for professors on campus with whom I could further discuss corporate culture and find sources. Steve hung up with an invitation to reach out to him any time, and followed up with an email with additional resources a few hours later. I am so grateful for his help, and so re-energized on my topic! It is, I must confess, a scary topic to be undertaking because it is such a new field in Anthropology and one which I believe has not been explored in the Pomona Anthropology department before. That being said, its newness and unique nature is precisely what makes it so exciting, and I am thrilled to be on the cutting edge of a new field. I hope I can live up to the challenge, and maybe even make a real difference through my research.

**Fieldnotes 9/22/13**

*Kairos Regional Luncheon*

I have joined an international Entrepreneurship society called the Kairos Society, and went to our first regional luncheon today. There were not that many women there: I counted four, myself included, out of around 20-25 attendees. Striking disparity. Everyone is dressed to impress, and the girls are all wearing dresses. The setting is beautiful: a southern California bungalow with beautiful gardens and vines growing on the roof, a back yard with a ping pong table, a veranda with table and chairs. The house, the owner tells me, is totally off the grid: classic entrepreneur home. There is a definite aura of power, even among these young people, and I get the sense of being “gauged” by the others in terms of my current and potential future power.

**Fieldnotes 9/24/13**

*Claremont Yoga*

It appears that I am not the only one to suspect a gender issue in Silicon Valley. After my yoga class today, I was mentioning to one of my students that I was going up to Silicon Valley to work on my thesis. Jasa is tall and slender with large, defined muscles and jagged tattoos. She wears no makeup, and her angular face is beautiful in a slightly harsh, almost manly way. After hearing about my thesis and my life dream of becoming an entrepreneur she said, "You might want to be an entrepreneur, just don't go to Silicon Valley."

"Why not?" I ask.

"It's just such a boy's town," she replies. Jasa worked there out of school as an industrial designer, and said she worked with a lot of "tech boys," and describes the atmosphere as "cut throat." When she was there, it was the 1980's and "you really had to work harder as a woman. There were barriers."

When I asked her about the culture, she reiterated how fiercely unforgiving it was. "It's a really cutthroat culture, you have to be ready to run people over. It's cut throat." She paused to think about it. "There's a real power struggle about it," she continued. "It's very masculine in a way." I interpret this to mean that the culture itself has masculine qualities and ask her to elaborate. She explains that the few women who are able to succeed are harsh as well. The women who she knew who succeeded were "almost butch. Not in their sexuality, just... rough. Masculine." I was interested, because she looks to me like this kind of person. Maybe she knew it, because she continued, "I wasn't like that. I was always really shy when I was younger. Painfully shy." Her eyes have a far away look of remembrance. It's not really advancing "our condition" as women, the culture in Silicon Valley, she says. "Women have a lot of power, we just give a lot of it away. By being shy or relinquishing our power to others."

I ask if she thinks it's a prohibitive culture for women or if lots of women just don't want to work there because of that masculine culture. She says she doesn't know, maybe a little of both? Maybe, she says, it's that women are inherently predisposed to be the people who hold the group together, who encourage collaboration, support each other. Which is the opposite of what happens in the cut throat competition of Silicon Valley.

She finally realizes she is going to be late getting home and bids me the best of luck on my work. I leave full of thoughtfulness: if one woman can have so much insight and passion on this subject, I wonder what I am about to discover?

### **Fieldnotes 10/7/13**

*Interview at Le Pain Quotidien, 5:15pm*

Last week, MS came to CMC to run a "generating entrepreneurial ideas" workshop. I loved the work she did, and after the workshop I approached her to ask if I could speak with her about my thesis. As soon as she heard my topic she lit up

and practically grabbed my hands, saying she would *love* to speak with me about my topic, and gave me her card. A few emails and one week later, I sat outside *Le Pain Quotidien* in the Claremont Village, waiting to meet with her.

Molly comes a little late, wearing a brown and dark green plaid blazer, kakhi pants, and carrying a black leather portfolio. Her blonde hair is cut very short and has been dried and gelled perfectly into place. Although she is not a tall woman, she is thin, fit and tan, and her angular jaw and straight backed posture gives her an aura of power. Behind “power frame” glasses (no rim on the bottom, wide steely bands on the sides), Molly’s eyes are quick, small, and sharply blue. Her high cheek bones and intense features are accentuated by her tan, but she wears no makeup.

Handing me two articles she has printed for me, Molly sits down and apologizes for being late: she was feeding her dog. She talks in the same brisk, quick way that she moves her eyes, in a tone that suggests to me that she is not accustomed to compromise. Throughout our conversation she smiles rarely, but when she does it is a large one. Interestingly, when I ask her about culture, she steers the conversation immediately to “process” instead, about work rather than about life. I wonder if this is a reflection of her own character, or of the inevitable intersection of work and life in Silicon Valley, the one that I have read so many articles about?

At the end of our conversation, Molly mentions that she thinks that an invaluable thesis to write for Economics would be finding the statistics of students studying entrepreneurship in various schools, and look at if there is a gender disparity there. If there is, that means that the gender issue is deep-rooted and begins early due to preference. If not, then perhaps there is something prohibitive about the industry itself that prevents young women from entering entrepreneurship and startups after graduation. If I decide to write a thesis in the Spring as well, this will be what I write about!

### **Feildnotes 10/7/13**

*8:45 pm, phone call with Professor Conger*

Professor Jay Conger (CMC) is generous enough to offer to “meet” with me over the phone, as his schedule is too busy to fit me in during the days this week. I tell him about my thesis, and ask for his advice and contacts. I mention Molly’s idea for crunching numbers about school statistics as well, just to see what he says.

As far as my current thesis, Conger says, he thinks that the reason there are fewer women is because many start ups today revolve around engineering,



computer science, and technology. He thinks that it has more to do with the career path than it does with masculinity issues associated with the valley. The occupations that women have historically been drawn to, and the kinds of entrepreneurial situations in existence, are what drive women away, he says. There is a “boy’s nerd culture” to which very few women are attracted: boys doing programming and videogaming all the time, and women are not so into that. Lots of video gaming has to do with killing: “my boy loves video games, my girl has no interest in them. The gender differences start very young.”

What might be more interesting, Conger suggests, is to explore glass ceiling issues; is there such a strong boys culture that women have a difficult time when they are hired at breaking into the inner circle (“founder circle”) in the company? Are women in Silicon Valley today replicating what women did 20 years ago in the corporate company world? 20 years ago, women breaking into finance and corporate companies had to be *more* masculine than the boys, “they would eat males for breakfast,” he says: you have to be really tough to make it there as a woman. He’s talking about the advertising and financing industries 20 years ago, he clarifies, and now it’s an issue in this industry. Is the woman trying to break in to Silicon Valley culture being masculine now? No, he suggests, she’s not being hyper masculine now, she’s actually being consensus-oriented. Women in Silicon Valley are using a different approach to break in than the old style.

So the question to seek the answer to, he says, is how are women coping with the glass ceiling in Silicon Valley as opposed to 20 years ago? When I ask for any advice for my upcoming field research, he suggests trying to sit in on meetings. Try to shadow one or two women for a while, and get a sense of what their daily routine is like. Definitely interview the men, too, he suggests. Interview people who *had* worked at large corporations previously and came to startups. A good open ended question to ask is: what do you feel are some of the most intriguing issues facing women in Silicon Valley?

“I really think you’ll find career paths as the dominating factor,” he hypothesizes.

### **Fieldnotes 10/9/13**

*Zappos headquarters, Las Vegas*

On our first full day in Las Vegas, they take us to the Zappos headquarters, a ten-story concrete building with strangely curved sides and windows all the way up to the top. The area around the building is as barren as the surrounding downtown Las Vegas landscape, and there is nothing to suggest that this building houses a company that recently made \$22 million in revenues in a single day. The courtyard in the middle of the circular Zappos building is concrete with only two uncomfortable looking benches, and the ground is strewn with various chalk signatures and drawings from previous visitors.

We get checked in at the main lobby, where they look at our Id's and hand us a swipe card/visitor's pass that allows us through the gates to the main floor. Off to one side of the check-in desk is the self proclaimed world's largest nametag ball, and the guides hand us our sticky nametags that we will add to it after our tour: It, too, has a nametag hanging around its neck: "Lucille Ball." On the other side of the reception desk is a huge lego wall that spells out: "Zappos: Join the Family." Visitors can insert their own lego into the missing gaps to help fill out the wall-sized plastic mural. This is the first of many, many times that we will hear the phrase "Zappos Family" used to describe this quirky place.

Our guide is a large man with a long, scraggly graying beard that frizzes down to the middle of his chest, square glasses, and a bald head. He explains to us that his nickname is the "cultural outlaw," because he used to be in this very building as an inmate when it was still a state prison. He wears an oversized gray tee shirt, flip flops, and jeans. Everyone else, men and women, are dressed in a similarly casual manner: I see some sweat pants, a few hoodies, a lot of jeans and tees. Their manner of speaking and addressing us is equally causal: everyone is friendly, welcoming, and trying to make us laugh at all times with a strange sort of nerdy, quirky humor that seems to be pervasive in the building.

Inside, Zappos's main floor is surprisingly messy, with an odd assortment of decorations sprawled across each desk. Every floor has an "open plan:" there are no cubicles and no offices. Each desk is separated by a low divider, adding to the sense of chaos in the rooms as the decorations from one desk spill onto the next in a kind of jungle of odd trinkets: Halloween decorations, giant stuffed teddy bears, posters of Darth Vader, stickers, bead necklaces, balloons, streamers, cardboard cutouts. Even "monkey row" (thus named because this is where the "head monkeys," or the CEO, President, and Vice President sit) has no walls, and anyone can come by any time to chat or ask a question. "They have an open door policy all the time because they don't actually have doors," our tour guide explains.

He also explains the nickname phenomenon that I've already begun to notice. Everyone there has a nickname: he points out a few as we pass—"That's Liz, or Lizard. There's Jerry the Mayor. We call him the Mayor cause he's the oldest person here." The effort at a flat power structure is obvious, and the extremely casual nature of the office is almost overwhelming for me. It doesn't feel like a work environment in which you could get things done: but apparently, for these people, it certainly is.

There are a few other interesting features of the building that we pass on our tour: there is a separate room for mothers who are breast feeding, and a "royalty room" where employees can set up goal sessions with a professional goals coach. The goals themselves can be personal or professional: in the past, people have worked with the coach to lose weight, quit smoking, or advance their careers. Dani mentions that her office in Hungary had offered a goals coach as well, and she had loved it. The royalty room is over done in classic Zappos fashion: there is a massive throne, a VIP red carpet at the entrance, and a plush padded crown waiting to be donned by the next employee.

We then walk down to the "Z Café," where every day there are four free drinks offered: one of today's is called a "Zappachino." The drinks and food that are

not free are still heavily discounted, but I cannot help comparing the offerings with the lavish spread at Spotify and Google. I wonder about the priorities within an office and a company, particularly because I believe that they have similar pay and size structures. Outside the café, there is an upstairs patio with a view of the city and lovely seating areas. Below us, our guide points out, is the bistro, where the employees go to eat. Here, there are also free options (basic salads and sandwiches) or discounted fancier options that run around \$4 for a hot plate or custom salad.

Our tour guide tells us about other office features: there are 17 break rooms where employees can get a snack or coffee or whatever they need. We enter the customer service phone room, and our guide informs us that everyone, including the highest-paid employees, take a shift on the phones. Their customer service is fun and creative; there are no set email structures with which to reply, and employees do not receive commission for any of the work they do. Two other strange job descriptions that he mentions are the consultants (who consult other companies using Zappos's model), and the "fungineers," who are in charge of morale, engagement, and events.

We pass through the "hall of fame" where there are framed tee shirts on the wall from each time the company breaks a new record in daily sales. The first time they broke \$1 million dollars in a single day, our guide tells us, was August 2004. He was in the office when it happened, and says that the CEO came in with two handles of Jack Daniels and told everyone to stop working and start taking shots. They all went out to happy hour and to a big Zapos dinner, and everyone in the office got the free commemorative shirt. Since then, every time the record is broken, they repeat this tradition. Now, the record is \$22 million in a single day, and the record keeps getting broken faster and faster. According to the delivery people at UPS, one out of every 60 boxes shipped is a Zappos box.

Along another wall in the same hallway are framed copies of the "Zappos Culture Book," in which every employee writes a sentence or two about what the Zappos culture means to them. The company gives this book out to potential employees, to friends, and to use for branding. Our guide tells us that they ship out about 50 of them every day now, and consult to other companies about the importance of having a strong culture. The book is, in true Zappos fashion, large, hard bound, brightly colored, and fun, with just as many pictures as words.

As we walk to our next meeting with Tony (Zappos's CEO) I reflect that I've seen at least as many women as men here, if not more! There are over 1,000 employees in the Vegas office now, and another few hundred in an office in Kansas City (the shipping hub). Another Kairos Fellow asks Tony how they maintain culture with the two locations, and he says that they actually send people from Vegas to Kentucky to shadow them and hang out, essentially to check up on them. Now that Zappos has been bought by Amazon, they don't have to worry about their warehouses as much and they can focus more on their main Vegas office, he says. Even Tony, their CEO who is worth hundreds of millions of dollars, is a small, soft-spoken Asian man wearing jeans and a gray hoodie sweatshirt. You would never know that he is a powerful man.

At the talk, I spoke with a Venture Capital woman who said back in the day when she worked people asked if she was ok climbing stairs, and she had to wear

heels and a skirt. Now, she says, things are much more equitable and she hardly notices her gender. I also speak with a girl named Shipli who has recently graduated college and is now doing Venture for America, a two-year program for budding entrepreneurs. She says that in her VFA program, there were only four girls and fifteen boys, a hugely unequal ratio. The year before was no better. She is trying to make it a big initiative this year to drive the gender ratio toward equality, however, and says she wants to talk with me more about it in the future. I certainly plan to do so, and hope to send her my thesis, as VFA focuses on areas that do not currently have much entrepreneurship and are developing a brand new entrepreneurial culture. If Silicon Valley seems to have any gender inequalities or culturally unfavorable factors, these new regions of growth may be able to avoid them as they develop. I certainly hope so!

### **Fieldnotes 10/11/13**

*Pasadena*

*Conversation with LK writing about the LA Start Up Scene*

Lori is a small woman with large brown eyes that make her round, tan face look sweet and friendly, although she rarely smiles. Her voice and mannerisms are slightly childish, and she forgets her coat and portfolio when we leave. She is, however, put together, in a freshly pressed skirt and coat and her long brown hair in neat waves. She wears light makeup and heels, and walks slowly as we speak. Although she only had a few minutes before her next meeting, Lori was able to speak with me briefly about my thesis. She has started a column in Forbes about the LA start up scene, and she finds that the LA culture is much more equal as far as gender goes. In LA and New York, she hypothesizes as we walk, the population is so diverse that they would not put up with the kind of all white (and Asian) male start

up culture of Silicon Valley. In New York, she says, if you tried to tell a woman she couldn't do something, she would laugh in your face.

Lori has never been to Silicon Valley, but she says that she has spoken with people about the "broding" (bro coding) culture that exists up there. It was described to her as the "drive fancy cars and fuck bitches" culture. She thinks it is possible that this stems from the fact that the men in Silicon Valley were nerds all through their life, and suddenly they have money, power, and women. Faced with such a sudden turn around, she says, perhaps they think they are "cooler" than they actually are. We have to part soon after, but she is returning to campus within the next month and we plan to have a dinner together and talk about the subject more thoroughly. I am so excited to meet with her again and have a longer discussion.

### **Fieldnotes 10/14/13**

7pm

*Information Session, CMC*

The two young men presenting are recent CMC graduates, each wearing T tee-shirts, T jackets, and jeans. Immediately, I noticed the vibe that the information session gave off: it was casual, yet self-important. The catered food was fancy cheeses, dates, figs, and potstickers. On a back table were rolled up T tee-shirts, T sunglasses, and T iPad holders, all free for the taking.

The presentation was also clearly carefully put together and began with a demonstration of T's API by using a computer program to collectively call all the phones in the room. At the same time, the young man presenting spoke in a casual way, with an easy air about him. They spoke about the growth of T, from a tiny startup to a company employing 200 people with revenues of \$104 Million, and 200,000 developers using the platform. They still consider themselves a "startup," however, and emphasize breaking ground and solving problems.

One of the aspects of T that they emphasized (not surprisingly, as this was a recruiting trip) was the culture. Every Wednesday night, T employees have dinner

together and present any T apps they have been working on. If there is a particularly good one, they can get knighted by the CEO, who is always there and accessible throughout the office as well. “You can’t work in the office without bumping into him on a pretty regular basis,” one of the young men said. On Friday, there is a similar tradition called a “sprint demo” in which everyone gets together and shares what they have been working on.

In their pitch for us to apply to T, one of the young men said, the pay is good, but the perks are better. The company gives its employees money towards gym memberships, books, 2.5 lunches per week, one dinner per week, and more free food and snacks every day than you can possibly consume. The work life balance at T is emphasized: they realize that people who live interesting lives will bring that back to the company and do better, more interesting and inspired work.

The company also has an inside joke about a “How to draw an Owl” meme. The first step of the instructions is, “Draw two circles.” The next, with an elaborately designed pencil sketch of a great horned owl, is captioned “Draw the rest of the fucking owl.” It is supposed to signify how one goes about doing something extremely difficult: particularly in a startup, there are no set paths to follow, because no one has done exactly what you are doing before. I found the curse word in the meme interesting: I have heard that language at startups can be very brash, partly coming from the fact that many startups have an extremely young employee population. It will be interesting to compare the cultures of startups with family-aged people and those with an exclusively young population.

The presentation then went on to discuss technology in San Francisco in general: “So In Right Now,” the slide said. The draw of working in tech, the presenter said, is that you have the chance to do something no one has done before, to make an impact on the world. It struck me that these are very *American* qualities. In addition, they emphasize the work-life balance that startups and tech companies are famous for: I wonder if they really are so great, or if our capitalist system has just gotten so bad in all other sectors that “normal” appears amazing? It would be interesting (but probably past the scope of my current research) to compare American startup culture with that of another country more known for work-life balance in every sector, such as Norway or Sweden.

They also discussed the benefits of working in a small organization: there is more freedom, you can define your own job, you can look out for yourself more and define and accomplish your own goals. Again, this is very “Wild West” and American. On the other hand, large companies can give you more training and mentorship, a well-defined career path, and a clearly delineated process to follow. There are benefits and drawbacks to both, but the former is much more of a frontier spirit.

In order to get a job in Silicon Valley, they tell us, you should have strong, well reasoned opinions about how the company can improve. You should know and understand current technology trends, and be able to use the jargon of the Valley (cloud, minimal viable product). It is interesting that this region has its own culturally driven language, totally separate from normal speech. They recommend knowing industry news, and really following the company, knowing its goals, values, and culture. It is less about the skills you bring, more about your fit as a person and

your ideas. This is very interesting and quite different from other types of companies when they are hiring. Finally, they recommend reading “The Lean Startup,” a book that is a kind of how-to for startups, to get to know the jargon of the industry.

I am able to speak with one of the presenters afterwards, and mention that I have been corresponding with Kevin. He gives me the name of another woman I can interview who is doing a study of T’s culture for her job at the moment. I am so excited to get in touch with her, as her work sounds very much like what I am trying to do in my thesis research.

### **Fieldnotes 10/16/13**

12:00pm

*S Information Session, CMC*

*Alicia Montesa—Campus Recruiting*

*James Kelly—Finance lead, 6-7 years at Startups*

All three campus recruiters were dressed in gray S tee-shirts and jeans, looking casual but put together. Much like the T information session, the casual outfits were contrasted by the highly formal Powerpoint presentation that started with a S recruiting video. After showing the video, the main campus recruiter started talking about S, and their mission to preserve the “startup” culture in the office despite recent growth. The mission of S, she said, always has been and must remain helping people and small businesses throughout the world. The team matching at S is based on skills you want to *develop*, not necessarily those you already have. In addition, she emphasized that every employee—even new hires and interns—are given equal opinion on everything and are assigned a mentor to help them learn the skills they need.

The company itself was founded by two (young male) cofounders in December 2009. They regard their company as a metaphor similar to the Golden Gate Bridge—connecting the buyer and seller in a beautiful, elegant way. They decided to found the company because, at the time, there were 180 million

Americans with credit cards but only 75% of small businesses accepted credit (of 27 million small businesses in the United States).

The culture at S is also extremely important, according to the recruiters. To describe the company outings they used the phrase "off-sites." One off-site they mentioned was called "S Games," which was like a mini Olympics held on Treasure Island in San Francisco. The environment at the office is equally congenial. For the interns, they hold an iron chef competition and bring inspirational speakers to the office. There are 600 employees at the office now, but they still consider it a startup. They say it is a unique and open environment. There are stand up desks, raised cubicles called "Cabanas," and an internal coffee shop with its own baristas as well as a cafeteria where they beta test all their new products. They just moved into a brand new San Francisco location with three floors, each of which is a full city block, including an onsite restaurant in the building.

In the video and later Powerpoint slides, they were sure to show photos of the office, and highlighted the fact that employees "three S meals a day" as well as money for gyms and other perks. Other perks they mentioned were the transparent culture in which any employee can stop by and chat with the CEO (this seems to be a theme among startups). They have a meeting once a week called "Time S" where the CEO meets with in the office from 5-6pm and anyone can bring any ideas, thoughts, or concerns to him. The company also offers loan refinancing, gym reimbursement, and a quarterly "hack week," a weeklong hackathon at which anyone from any part of the organization can make something, even if it is not technical. Last year, one of the recent hires says, a finance employee participated in hack week and created a new process to streamline the finance sector of S.

Many of the information from S reflects similar start up culture themes from past organizations that I have heard about in my research thusfar, and perhaps to an even greater extent. I hope to be able to interview a S employee further in the future to get a better sense of what the day to day life is like there, and if there are any gender disparities.



**Fieldnotes 10/18/13**

8:00 pm

*Sam Grossman, AdMe*

Sam calls me at 8pm, sounding out of breath. "I'm sorry," he pants, "I just got done at the gym. Now I'm just waiting for the shuttle to come pick me up and take me home." He laughs. "I'm still at work, and I've eaten an amazing dinner, gone to the gym, and am going to get chauffeured home. All for free. I ate breakfast and lunch here too." He is working out of the company's Mountain View campus right now, he tells me, one of three offices the company has in the Silicon Valley region. The Mountain View office is the biggest, and, according to Sam, has the best food. "They bring in gourmet food, chefs, it's amazing," he says. About the gym, he says, "They bring in Equinox trainers every day, you can do yoga or cross fit or anything you want. Most people will stay here and work out, or do it during their lunch break."

Finally we get back on track and start talking more about the company and his position, rather than just about the perks, which are numerous, he makes clear. His program is called the GSOU, and it is designed to hire new college grads. It allows for a rotation between a variety of different departments within the company, helping new graduates build skill sets and abilities. At the end of the program, students end up in a sales position, although they are free to move to another position if they see fit and are allowed to by their supervisors. The students start off in recruiting, "learning the world of recruiting inside and out." A lot of the products that AdMe sells are recruiting based, and the biggest revenue is from their recruiter product. Then there is a customer experience rotation, in which you learn

about customers, customer support, and website interaction. Sam says with a hint of irony that “It’s really just glorified customer service.” Next, there is an elective, which is a “non-customer-facing role” in sales, analytics, or operations.

I ask him what he wants to do with the program coming out: “I’m hoping to go into client facing roles, generating and qualifying leads. I also have the option of a non client facing role too.” There are around 20 people in each “class” of the program, and 2 classes. When I ask what the real point of GSOU is, Sam says, “To hire non-tech people right out of college, teach them business, teach them the company culture.” It strikes me that the first and most important aspect is company culture. When he recruits, he says, he looks at cultural fit *first*, and does not mind much what else he sees.

I ask him what his favorite part of the work is, and at first he says culture. Then he says, “No, that’s not it. It’s the people. That’s different. Everyone there is fantastic, there are no assholes, no egos, no bullshit. Everyone is so smart and collaborative.” He continues, “I also have a phenomenal boss. He is incredible, crazy smart. Everyone knows him, and working for him is an awesome opportunity.” He speaks with reverence about this boss, Gordon, who is “a tiny man with an Irish accent that will melt your heart. He looks a little like Johnny Depp. He could be doing anything, really, he is so incredible, but this program is his passion.” “He could have done “bigger” things but he wanted to train next generation of leaders at AdMe. He really wants you to succeed.” Later, Sam describes him as “someone you would follow into battle every day.”

The fact that the organization is so flat is another one of his favorite things about AdMe. There’s no bullshit, you can get in touch with anyone at any level if you have a purpose in the meeting or if you just want to chat with someone about their career path. “I went to happy hour last week with the global leader of sales development for the company, and he asked me to send him an update about a suggestion I had for the program.” They’re interested in who you are as a person, not just as an employee.

Several times in our conversation I have to ask him to define terms. “InMail,” for example, is their company email, and departments such as [in]cubator, [in]fluencer, and others come up with frequency.

“What is your day to day work like?” I ask him. “Is it pretty much the same every day, or always something different?”

“My day to day right now in my rotation involves sourcing people on AdMe, reading a lot of profiles, InMailing people I like and asking, ‘Can we set up a chat? Are you interested in working here?’”

“It’s great to be here,” he continues, “Because we’re in a period of ‘hyper growth.’” AdMe has around 3,000 employees, he tells me, up from only about 1,600 two years ago. In 2010, the sales development team was 10 people, and the company hired 100 more by 2011. Even though AdMe is adding around 2 users per second globally, “compared with Google and Facebook, which are huge, we have a lot more room to grow. Here, we’re much more flexible, quicker, more adaptable. There is an opportunity to make a huge impact. Hyper growth mode presents challenges but also opportunities.” The industry they are trying to corner is a 9

billion dollar recruiting industry, a number so huge it doesn't make sense in any tangible way.

I ask him to go into the culture more, and he pulls up their "culture document" to double check, a two-page typed document that outlines their cultural values and their vision. He tells me the GSOU got chewed out for not knowing the four core values by heart a few months back, Gordon was so mad he stormed out of the room to cool down.

The cultural values are: Transformation, Integrity ("we push this, we have all this data and could do lots of stuff to make money with it but we don't."), Collaboration, Humor, and Results ("we're very results oriented, that's a big one."). There are 6 more "values" that he lists, but is unclear as to how these are different from the first. These are: members come first, relationships matter—internally and externally, be open honest and constructive ("No bullshit"), demand excellence of yourself and others, take intelligent risks, and act like an earner. The company vision is to "create economic opportunity for every professional in the world." They currently have offices in 26 countries around the world and plan to continue expanding. There are challenges to expansion, however: for example, the company was utterly unsuccessful in Japan because culturally, the professionals there cannot brag about themselves. All in all, they are about 1/3 of the way as far as capturing the total market of global professionals. "We're a company with a startup mentality and the resources and outreach of a huge company. We move quickly and change things all the time. If you have a part of the company devoted to risk taking you have to be comfortable with a certain amount of failure. We can have this totally experimental new team and see what happens. We have the stability for that." Our conversation ends with his passionate plug for the company, the people, and the opportunity once again. I can feel him glowing through the phone, and I can't help but feel love for the company as well, his dedication is so strong. I look forward to seeing it in person.

**Fieldnotes 10/21/13***Tour of B, San Francisco**MD*

It takes me about an hour and a half on the MUNI and Caltrain to get down to Los Altos to visit B's office. It is out in the heart of Silicon Valley, and I pass the famous stations: Redwood, Palo Alto, Menlo Park. The first thing I notice upon entering the office of B is the yellow twisty tube slide that pops out into their main lobby. It obviously comes from upstairs on the upper floors, and I laugh thinking about how often I'd like to leave work via slide. I am checked in to the tidy office by a friendly receptionist, who directs me to check in on the iPads set up on the desk for this purpose. M comes down to meet me, bubbly with excitement, and gives me a big hug. Everyone I see, including Mary, is wearing jeans, comfortable shoes, and either tee-shirts or cardigans. I am given a laminated nametag to wear around the office, and we take off on our tour. As we head for the stairs, M is stopped by a young Asian man who is worrying about how a visitor he is supposed to host has not showed up. M sends out a few emails to help him, all from her iPhone, and they banter briefly about how I am writing my senior thesis about her. All of the interactions I witness are full of sarcasm, fake meanness, and ironic humor. Everyone seems to be very relaxed with each other, and happy to help each other out when the need arises.

We walk up the stairs to the second floor of offices: the walls of the stairwell are decorated with the logos of all the companies that B now serves. I immediately notice the bright, welcoming light, large windows, and open floor plan: much like Zappos, the "cubicles" barely have walls separating each desk. Again, like Zappos, the floor is a chaos of decorations on peoples' desks. I see so many stuffed animals, I wonder if I stumbled into a toyshop rather than the engineering department of a

fast-growing international startup. Several people have plants on their desk, and the carpeting and ceiling tiles are colored as well, adding to the brightness of the room. Around one corner there is a full kitchen stocked with tons of free, healthy snacks (I am soon to see many more of these in the rest of the office... one common thread among startups certainly seems to be an abundance of free food everywhere!) Each of the conference rooms that Mshows me is themed with a theme from B's past: there is one that is the SF Giants room (from a particular company outing), one decorated like the dive bar in which the genesis of B was born. This is interesting to me because it reveals not only a sense of fun in decoration (particularly in "serious" board meeting rooms) but also shows a dedication to the company's *story* and history.

In addition, I see painted silhouettes, stickers, and even a huge cardboard cutout of the founders and CEO's. (This seems like hero worship to me!) When I ask about it, M immediately tells me their life stories: the founders of B were four best friends who had been together since middle school, and all dropped out of school within a year of each other to found the company. They were only 20 years old at the time, she tells me with reverence. When I ask if she has met them, she laughs and says, of course, we'd passed one in the hallway earlier. They're only 27 now, so they are really relaxed and everyone in the office knows them. The CEO, she tells me, is a crazy character: look him up on Youtube, she says, he has these crazy videos. Every Friday the company has an "all hands" lunch which this character in question emcees. He wears crazy sneakers and jumps around, constantly playing with his "thick Jew fro." At these meetings, he repeats the B mission, reviews the goals from the quarter, and then goes into a deep dive on the work that one of the teams is doing that week. This is an important tradition at B, and Msays everyone looks forward to Friday lunch. In addition, there is the "Innovative Leadership Series," which brings in amazing leaders in the technology and startup world to speak at lunch several times a week, athenaeum style. Mloves this because it is always a break for her mind, a chance to ponder and learn something new and random. One memorable lunch hosted the CTO of Pixar, who had nothing whatsoever to do with B, other than the fact that his company utilizes B in their work.

I ask Mif this is her favorite part of working at B, and she replies that the people are what make it such a great place to be. Everyone is fun and ridiculously nice: the recruiting staff is dedicated to bringing in insanely nice people, she says. They are also intense risk takers who get things done quickly and fail fast. The idea is to go hard at a new idea and then if you fail, move on just as quickly. Don't dawdle along on an idea for months before realizing it's not going to work and that you wasted all your time. This leads to B's main philosophies, which are framed in artsy representations all over the walls of the cafeteria where we are sitting. One of them reads, "10X it!" Mexplains, "We want you to 10X everything you do here," as in, go at it hard and always be striving to get better. Another framed core value is "Make mom proud." "Bring your Wacky self to work every day" is another framed value, which I love. "Blow our customers' minds." "We hire the best: trust each other." And, my personal favorite, "Believe your epic ideas are possible." Along this theme, the mascot of the company is a unicorn, and I see stuffed unicorns and unicorn pictures all over the office. In addition, there are bright colors everywhere, and one

floor has electric pink walls on one side and electric orange on the other. The B logo is everywhere, offsetting the crazy chaos of color and decorations with its steel simplicity.

We return to the ground floor, where, in addition to the slide and reception, there is a room of desk spaces for people operations (HR) as well as marketing. On the other side of the ground floor is the cafeteria. I ask Mabout other office rituals, and she tells me that B employees love to party. Halloween is a huge deal and there are 7 different parties, including happy hours, kids parties, and more. I love that they are inclusive to the people who have families: this is quite unique and reminds me a little of Edmodo. They have a huge Christmas party, too, she says, and celebrations for various reasons throughout the year. As the company is going public, however, Mthinks that some of these may cut back as they will have to reduce “frivolous spending.”

They also have several important acronyms: GSD time, which can be seen on several calendars around the office, is “Get Shit Done.” Many people block out GSD time to focus on nothing but one particular project that they are working on at the time. They also have GTDX for new proposed projects: Goals, Tactics (to reach those goals), Deliverables (what will come of the project), and X (how will this project 10x your team or the company as a whole).

As we talk, I notice that there is an intense ping pong game being played behind us. People are laughing, taking a break from work. Mtells me that it’s cool to be young at B because they respect newness, and they value intelligence over experience.

Malso tells me that scaling up has been a challenge for the company, as they are in a period of extremely rapid growth. The company itself is only 7 or 8 years old, but recent growth has been explosive. When she joined a year ago, the company had 75 employees, and last week, they had already surpassed the 1,000 employee mark! The company is clearly growing super fast, and the revenue is growing faster than the people growth. This means that the company needs to be more selective in its hiring process, Msays, and it is creating some internal tensions among the “old guard” of B. Some of the people who have been with B since the beginning are not experienced enough to lead the company to the next step in its development. This has led to some tensions, as people are being hired *over* some of the longest standing employees of the office. The head of marketing, for example, did an amazing job getting the company to where it is today, but now the job and company has outgrown her. The new head of marketing is a CMC alum who is a “total rock star,” and had a huge and impressive career before B. Many of the other teams are also outgrowing their old team leaders as well. Mary’s current boss in the engineering department is a “rockstar in the valley,” having founded 6 startups with 4 successful exits (meaning they were either acquired or sold). His last startup was called “Writerly,” and it became GoogleDocs after being bought by Google. He then went on to lead Google Apps, but hated working at Google and was charmed by the cofounders of B, as well as its culture, and wanted to help with the challenge of scaling that they were experiencing. But, in the spirit of B, she says that scaling is difficult so they are going to 10x it and go for it!

B is three floors in this Los Altos office, has a sales office in San Francisco, and has opened several offices around the world now, including in London and Japan. Hearing this, I ask how they deal with communicating across offices and within offices. Mnods, saying this is a good question. “We’re still figuring that out,” she says. They make a point of having executive presence at all of the offices: with 16 associate vice presidents, 2 vice presidents, 4 cofounders, a CEO, CFO, and COO, this is a viable proposition. As Mpoints out, there isn’t a huge C-suite, because they want to keep people reporting directly to the COO as much as possible. There are 2 VPs in the new London office: when a new office opens, she says, they need someone from the headquarters to go and impart B culture. The UK team is now 75 people, she says, and the VPs there are on the daily two hour conference calls that serve as the executive daily scrum (each team has their own). Engineering stays entirely in the Los Altos location, however (the HQ), and the offices abroad are responsible solely for marketing and sales. They are careful to hire people from the area when a new office is opened, and often send people from their current office who either know the culture or the language (or both) of the new location in question. Again, she mentions that they send people to carry over the B culture, and every quarter the execs from each global office come back to HQ for a big meeting. In addition, there is a large advisory tech board that comes once a quarter, and Mis able to sit in on those meetings. She says they are really fun, intense, and a “shit ton” of work. Every employee is faced with frequent performance reviews with their managers, and it is highly uncommon to work for B remotely (although this is common in other startups).

We then turn to talking about being a woman at B. Mis on the engineering team and, out of 150 people on the team, is one of 14 women. “That’s actually a really good ratio comparatively,” Mpoints out. However, there is a huge push for diversity at B right now, focusing in large part on women. A recently developed diversity scholarship targets women while they are still in school to promote coding and engineering among young women (and to bring great new employees from the next generation to B). B is also very involved with the Women in Tech group, including the Grace Hopper Association (which she says I have to be sure to look up). The company recently hosted a successful “Women in Tech panel.”

Mpointed out that since women in tech are the minorities in their classes throughout school (particularly for those who start young), they are often “total bad asses” by the time they get to a company to work. Because of their experiences, they tend to want to pay it forward and help develop other young female engineers. Technical operations has only 3 women on a 52 person team. “When I started there was only one woman on the team,” Msays. “It’s super dominated by men.” She attributes this to the fact that it is a very tactile job, and it necessitates seeing things in black and white. Women, she hypothesizes, often see the bigger picture, and have trouble with the extremes of tech ops. In meetings, there is definitely a female minority, and there are only three women on a team of ten for management meetings.

As Mpoints out, however, the engineering *leadership* is 3 women out of 10 total, which is a much better ratio than the team as a whole. The executive staff of the company as a whole is over a third women at B, and the company is touted in the

media for having strong demonstration of female leadership. At Yahoo, Mpoints out, there are more “Daves” than women on the engineering team. B’s women’s group, she reiterates, is very active. Tomorrow, for example, they will be holding a career development panel that will benefit the whole company, although it will be catered towards women specifically taking their career into their own hands which, she says, women are stereotypically less inclined to do.

I see someone walk by in a suit and tie and automatically think, *he doesn’t work here.*

We continue our discussion as Mescorts me outside to the shuttle that will take me back to the Caltrain. Women, she says, just need to start coding earlier so that it feels less intimidating. Harvey Mudd’s president is working hard to dispel this intimidation factor, she says. She points out that not only does engineering require a diversity of opinions, women are also notoriously better at managing and multitasking and should be really good in tech startups. I point out that having a startup is like raising a child, and she agrees whole-heartedly. Mreiterates that women who make it this high in tech are nearly universally kick ass, which suggests to me the “glass floor” hypothesis. We bid farewell and I ride the luxurious B shuttle to my Caltrain stop to head back to the city.

### **Fieldnotes 10/22/13**

*Pinterest, looking creepily through the window*

As I walk from Scripted, I remember someone telling me that Pinterest has their office in this part of town as well, and am excited to see a sign hanging outside a pretty brick building reading “Pinstitute of Arts and Sciences.” Naturally, I walk slowly and very creepily peer in all the windows, hoping I don’t get arrested. This is my version of a Pinterest site visit, I think. Through the large windows in one room, can see a full kitchen with an espresso maker and refrigerator. Two young (mid-twenties) people are sitting at one of the four Ikea-style white tables talking.

Through the all-glass front doors, I can see the reception desk, where two young men sit in Pinterst tee shirts. There is a sign propped up on an easle that reads “Welcome to Pinterest” in cutesy script. The target-like Pinterest logo is everywhere. There is someone waiting on one of the three gray couches, decorated with pillows that boast the Pinterest logo as well, and a commercial fridge branded with “Pinterest” that has Hint Waters in it (there seems to always be some kind of free food or drink). I see stairs leading up slightly into a closed, black door. Although I do not go in, I can see that this office has many similarities with the others I’ve seen, and I’m glad I took the time to be creepy.



**Fieldnotes 10/22/13**

1pm

*S, J*

I initially have trouble finding the entrance to S, as its sign is over a Vietnamese Pho restaurant. I ask one of the women inside how to get up to S, and she looks at me blankly. Fortunately, one of the customers eating there overhears and tells me it's not the next door, but the one after that. I thank him and find the door without further trouble. A tall Indian man wearing a gray jacket, jeans and sneakers is standing by the door talking to a woman, and swipes me in with his pass. I recognize him as Sunil, a CMC alum who came back to judge the ISA a few years ago, and he looks like he recognizes but cannot place me (later, when we are introduced, he lights up and asks if I've done the ISA and we make the connection).

I walk into the hallway lined with bicycles, and up the narrow stairwell that opens into a surprisingly spacious office. The wall in front of me is painted with the "S" logo and there are large, floor to ceiling windows that let in plenty of light. Decoration is simple and tidy, with framed art on the walls, hardwood floors, and tall black and steel tables with two stools each. There is a waiting area with a long gray couch, and a tiny kitchen that boasts only a sink and refrigerator. I see a spread of lunch set out, green beans, potatoes, chicken, and can immediately recognize it as ZeroCatering again. The tables are not conducive to collaborative eating, though, I think to myself.

To the right are the "cubicles," again, with very low walls. Some desks are not even cubicles and J's is a stand up desk that is in the middle of the desk bank. All 17 of the employees are right here in this area, and many of them are chatting over the low barriers between their desks. I see a variety of clothing here, a couple men wearing suits and ties, most wearing tee shirts and jeans, but nice shoes. A couple of people wear beanies. I see very few women... perhaps only two, although I could not say definitively.

I wander in slightly aimlessly, not sure which one of the young men I am looking at is J. "I'm here for J?" I announce, and someone yells his name. J is at his standup desk wearing a v-neck green tee under a red flannel button-down, jeans, and nice shoes. He is a large-boned young man who looks around 27-30, and a carefully trimmed scruff on his large round face. He shakes my hand and welcomes me, then immediately yells over to Sunil to ask if they are ready for the meeting. "Want to see this stuff done?" he asks me, and I follow him into the meeting room, being introduced to people as I go. The meeting room, too, has tall windows that are now covered with white double curtains that are just sheer enough to still let in light, but dark enough to make the projector visible on the side wall. The conference table is actually a collection of cheap-feeling white plastic tables pushed together, and each has been branded with a spraypaint stencil of S's logo.

The meeting is Sunil, J, a carefully manicured older man in a gray suit and red tie who speaks in a British accent, a young man wearing a gray "The Onion" tee and hipster glasses, and a young man in a checkered button down, who J introduces me to as one of the founders. Sunil has gathered the comments from their feedback forms, and has organized them into an Excel sheet by "buckets," which he presents to our table. As they talk, it strikes me that I am the only woman at the table, and I'm not even contributing anything. Would I be willing to speak up, I wonder to myself, were I working in that environment? I initially answer yes, but I am a very forward and outspoken person. It is a fascinating exercise in role play. Sunil runs the meeting, as he is in charge of presenting the data, and J is the other biggest contributor, as he, the Director of Product (soon to be Product Design), is the one that much of the data was collected for. Others chime in as well, with potential solutions, but at the end of the meeting it is J and Sunil who do the re-cap. I also laugh as the group talks about the projector: it's still kind of crooked but at least the curtains block the light a little better now. The idea of making due with the non-essentials seems to be important here.

After the meeting, J and I go out to the main room by the kitchen and sit at one of the tall tables. He tells me that the founders of the company originally started it as "Script," a company that grew to 80,000 writers in only three years and was targeted at screen plays for Hollywood. However, when they began the implementation and crowdsourcing phase in Hollywood, they found that the Writer's Guild and the general publishing population in Hollywood had issues with the idea and were not interested. Sitting at South By Southwest a few weeks later, the founder found himself telling this story to a man from Levi, who said that they needed access to writers to create content for a new advertising campaign. Encouraged, the founder decided to try again and within weeks "someone in Pakistan" had a prototype ready and S was born. They raised \$1 million from cross-linked capital, and hired an accounts woman and J as a programmer. That made them a team of 4 just 2 years ago, and they have moved offices twice since then, having moved into the office that I visited only a few months ago.

I ask J about their culture and he describes them as "anti-startup." He says they "avoid fluffiness" and aim for "no bullshit." I ask him to elaborate on this and he says that he thinks that the issue he is talking about comes from the Venture Capital phenomenon. Venture Capital is largely unsuccessful, he points out, but

every once in a while you just might hit it big. “It’s very California, very Hollywood, gold rush,” he says. As a result, many companies exist because they have grand ideas, but they have no revenue streams or concrete plans to get there, he says. This yields a culture that is not tied to reality. The result is ball pits in offices, he says, “I don’t get why that is necessary. We are very anti-that.” Sunil, too, is very outspoken about this no-bullshit culture, J says. “We are building a real business that helps people and ultimately we hope it changes the way people think about work.” Eventually they want people to not have to come into an office for work, but to be empowered to work from anywhere. This will allow people to do what they love for a living, like writing. When they went up for a second round of funding, J said, this anti-startup culture got them in trouble: “We had a lot of trouble because we are a real business. We had revenue numbers so people could see them instead of us painting this picture of an amazing future that they could just imagine.” He says, “We had trouble because we’re no Instagram.”

The executive investor in the company also means business, J adds. “He’s not here to pat people on the back and tell us we’re going to be huge.” There is a massive proliferation of Angel Investors in the valley, he says, because there are so many IPOs in tech startups, and people get lucky once, invest, and then have a huge say on the board of the company, regardless of whether or not they are qualified to give advice in any way. “Then you just have a lot of noise,” he says. “You need to find a level headed investor.”

I ask him about growing pains, since they have burgeoned from 4 to 17 in two years. He says there is a lot of head butting, but it is always productive head butting and they all still like each other. I ask if they are having to hire new people over the “old guard,” thinking of Box, and he says yes, this has been a challenge for them as well.

When I ask about work-life balance, J says he thinks that S is one of the best startups when it comes to this factor. He personally has trouble turning off, and is basically always on, so he has been known to work nights and weekends sometimes. But, as a company, there is a healthy work-life balance. He isn’t forced to, he is just basically clearing out the shit work that his employees would otherwise have to do: he wants to help keep them working under 40 hours and keep them happy. Most people get in around 10 and leave by 6 or 7, depending on the department they work for.

I ask about the age demographics in the office, and he says there are a lot of “1988-ers,” 25 year olds. Recently they have been bringing in more senior people, and have been getting pressure from their board to bring in older people as well. Diversity, he says, is really important in a company. Ageism is a real problem in this world, particularly in startup companies. Many startups want people who can really throw themselves into the work all day every day, and those tend not to be people with families.

When I ask him to specify their core values, he nods and says that’s actually an issue they have been working through. They have not done a great job communicating their mission, vision, or core values, according to employee surveys. They want to hear the identity of the company laid out in a more formalized way. Pooja even said this in her exit review: “This was fun but what are you?” He says it

is a priority for them to try to make that clearer in the near future. His take on their mission is to improve the quality of writing on the Internet. They really care more about executing and building real things, though, then delineating their culture. “The Valley sways toward vision over focus,” he says: startups are good about the big picture but have trouble with the details and execution.

I know that he has a meeting after me, so I tell him I won’t keep him any longer, and depart with a farewell to all the employees in the office, who all wave back good-heartedly.

### **Fieldnotes 10/22/13**

4:30pm

Z, S

Z is over-the-top even from the outside: the outside of the seven-story, round-fronted brick building is draped with a massive flag of their logo, a white dog against a loud red background. I go to their main entrance, marked by a large sign that is a mock “Play Z” button pointing down towards the doors. The security guard outside tells me that those doors are locked at this time and that I should go around and use the other entrance. I can see through the glass doors the famous “light tunnel” that Z is famous for in its entrance: a long tunnel of psychadelic lights that emulate video games that everyone entering the office from this side must pass through. I go around to the other entrance at his instruction, though, and enter a much more tame entryway... well it’s all relative. The stairs leading up to the round atrium (structured much like Zappos) are decorated with a massive picture of Farmville 2, and from where I am sitting on the comfortable gray armchairs I can see all manner of absurdity: someone lies in a leaf-shaped green hammock on an overhang above me, and I can see the elevators that look like space-pods. The check-in process is rigorous: the first real check in process I’ve had (other than Box) and much more formal. He must see my ID, and needs to email the person who is supposed to show me around so that she can come get me. I wait for about five minutes before S shows up, a young woman with short, carefully trimmed dark hair, a fresh-faced complexion, round eyes, and careful makeup. She is wearing leggings, hightop nike sneakers, and a long gray shirt that somehow makes the whole outfit look high-fashion. Most people I see are wearing the same dark blue zip-up hoodies with the Z logo on the front and back, jeans, and sneakers.

As we walk up the stairs, my senses are assaulted with color, sound and a ridiculous level of frivolity: it is like walking into Willy Wonka’s factory. Which is odd because no one is smiling. There are about ten different video gaming booths of the kind you would see at a bar or game room, the rocketship elevators, five pingpong tables, pool tables, foosball, minigolf, and more. Everything is decorated: the tables are decorated like gaming tables or with loud colors, people sit on

couches working on laptop computers. There are tall racks with studs in them that line the middle that S explains to me are for people to hang art on, although they are empty right now. To the right are glass-walled office spaces in which I can see groups of people working: S explains to me that Z rents out that half of the office to other small companies, emphasizing small education technology startups (particularly if they have to do with games). Edmodo was housed here once upon a time, and now there are several other companies there to carry on the legacy. Z consults with these companies to help them with marketing, growth, and product management, all for free as part of their Z.work program. It is a kind of do-good part of the organization: S tells me that they also promote non-profit work, and have a week each year where their employees go out and do service work: there are specific non-profits around the city which Z has longstanding partnerships with. She explains that studies show that employees who have the opportunity to volunteer feel more grateful, and more satisfied with their work.

We continue on, and she tells me she will take me downstairs first. As we walk, I notice the bright lighting in the atrium, and see tall potted palms and other greenery around the office. We step into a huge room that S tells me is their cafeteria: they're having a meeting in there now, but I can see a live plant wall, a full coffee bar, long tables with cafeteria style seating and a huge screen that everyone is watching the presentation on. She tells me that Z has in-house chefs who cook 3 meals a day. Breakfast is more of a continental fare, but lunch and dinner are cooked fresh and there are options for hot plated meals, salads, soups, a wide variety of freshed cooked goodies. Every afternoon from 3-4pm, they bring in a different kind of fresh farmer's market fruit, and people can go to the cafeteria to get them where they are chopped up and washed by the chefs. The various fruits of the day are posted just outside of the cafeteria on one of two chalkboard walls. The other wall is the ZMovie schedule, announcing what films will be playing on the large screen that I see during dinner. Tomorrow is "The Princess Bride." Good choice. I ask if people go to that together to socialize, and she says not really, they'll just watch it while they eat dinner and then leave.

We get in the elevators (whose doors are decorated in psychedelically colored swirls, and whose floors are decorated to look like roulette) and go downstairs to the basement. The elevators open onto a full bar with mahogany topping, three beer taps, fine wines and glasses lined up, and the classic low purple bar lights. S tells me they have happy hour down here on Friday, and sometimes host parties down there from time to time as well: there is always a monthly bash with some sort of theme. This month, it was Oktoberfest. She shows me an auditorium that looks like a movie theater, where speakers will come on a monthly basis to talk. They have had a diversity of speakers, from the founder of Ebay to the heads of non-profits. The room is linked up so that anyone around the world who is part of Z staff can tune in and watch. She tells me that Z has about 2,000 employees worldwide, and 1,800 in this office. Considering that the company started with one game (Farmville) and four people only 5 years ago, this is staggering growth. She does not speak of the CEO or the founder story with the same reverence as I have heard at other companies, however: she says she only knows some of the story, and has never met the founder or the new CEO. I ask her about the structure of the

company and she says it is much more hierarchical and corporate: there are 4 degrees of separation between her and the CEO where she works in the HR department. They are a meritocracy and will reward hard work with bonuses, unlike Netflix. When I ask, she says they don't have any specifically outlined values or goals, and that the company is changing all the time. Their main value, she says, is to make games their users love to play.

We round the corner and walk into the gym: a massive establishment with locker rooms, a spin studio, a yoga studio, a weight room and cardio room, a line of rowing machines in front of a wall painted to look like a beach, and a half basketball court (seriously). There are quite a few people working out, mainly men. I ask her as we get back into the elevator if that is just because we're in the gym or if that is indicative of the gender ratios in the company as a whole. She says there are definitely more men, like all tech companies, and particularly because it is a company that makes video games. Her department, People Operations, and Management are both mostly women, she says, but engineering and programming is more male dominated. They are making a push to hire more female engineers, though, and she says that compared to most other tech startups they have a good representation of women. She doesn't give me the exact numbers and I don't push it.

We go up to the 6<sup>th</sup> floor, which has a vertigo-inducing view down to the mélange of toys on the ground floor. S leads me to a kitchen and sitting area, decorated with the pastel pinks and oranges of candyland. There is an old fashioned candy dispenser, and barrels (literally, wooden barrels) of candy. There are also huge refrigerators full of drinks, a full touchscreen soda machine, and snacks galore. If you're too lazy to go downstairs to the free coffee bar there's also a coffee machine with all the settings imaginable. Did I mention that *everything* is free? I laugh as she keeps pointing out perks and suggest that people would be willing to work here for free for all these things. She agrees and says, there's really nothing you need or want that's not there. You don't really need to ever leave. I ask her about work-life balance, and she says that on the HR team hers is quite good. She gets in around ten and leaves around 6 or 7 every day. On the engineering teams, particularly when a new game is close to launch, they can work much more intense hours, but she says for the most part she feels like there is a good balance.

S asks if I want anything, suggesting her favorite candies. I ask for water, and she gives me a cup, saying they've been trying to get away from bottled water to be more eco-friendly. Due to the proliferation of frivolous extravagance I have seen over the past twenty minutes, I find this ironic. But I am grateful for the glass of water.

We go back downstairs and walk back towards the entrance. I am in sensory overload. S tells me a few other details: people are welcome to bring their dogs to work, and there is eclectic art everywhere, including framed "DrawSomething" pictures. I ask S if she knew she wanted to work in tech and she said, no, but she knew she wanted to do HR after graduating from University of Maryland in 2011 and her uncle works at Z. She says she's not sure if she is going to stay much longer though: the company is not doing well, and particularly after going public its shares are suffering. The new CEO was also hired after the IPO (only a few months ago),

and he is changing the structure to be more corporate, she says. A lot of changes have happened as a result of his new position, and I get the sense that she does not approve of some of them. As I leave, she is very friendly and says to make sure to say hi to Chad, and to email her if I think of any questions at all. I thank her and leave the crazy wonderland, stepping onto the street and back into reality.

### **Fieldnotes 10/22/13**

11:15am

*Cleanerz, Jessica*

I have a little trouble finding Cleanerz, as my map leads me to a back street that has corrugated metal buildings that look more like construction sites than offices. Finally, I see “Cleanerz” written on a gray door, and Jessica comes out to greet me. Contrary to appearances, she tells me, there are actually three startups in this building, themselves included. The other two are just around the corner.

Inside, Cleanerz is small but tidy and well kept. The “reception” desk is through a doorway to the right, and consists of one young Hispanic man sitting at a low, cheap looking table with a laptop. This is also the supply room, and there are cleaning supplies stacked up to the ceilings along every wall. The space is otherwise bare, with white walls and no decorations. I meet the young man, who has been with the company since the beginning, and then am taken into the main room. There is a small, gray, two person couch and matching arm chair that face a large television hooked up to about 5 video game controllers. There is a tiny glass-walled “meeting room” with a small table and 5 black plastic chairs. Through the next doorway is the dining room and full kitchen. Jessica shows me the homey kitchen with dishwasher, real silverware and dishes, and full fridge. There is also a long wooden table with chairs on either side where I presume the team eats lunch together. Jessica tells me that they have lunch catered by a company called ZeroCater (a startup itself) which delivers from a different local restaurant every day. Employees can then rate the food, and the dishes become more and more tailored to their tastes. Today, she says, they’re bringing Japanese food, and I’m invited to stay and eat with them. Cleanerz provides dinner for its employees as well, in the form of paying for them all to go out to a restaurant in the area together. Jessica tells me that this really helps them bond as a team, and that they often go out for happy hour together too. In addition, in the past one of the programmers offered development classes in Ruby on Rails every Thursday night, and most people would stay for these.

We proceed upstairs to the main workspace. All 15 of Cleanerz’s employees work up here in this open space, with large-screened matching computers. There is a treadmill desk to the left, and many people have yoga balls under their desks to sit on if they choose. The space is largely undecorated and looks tidy. The light is

pleasant, and the lack of any sort of divide makes it a very inclusive feeling space. One half of the room is dedicated to operations, and the other half is programming, but they work together very closely, Jessica says.

Jessica tells me that her “work uniform” is Lulu workout clothes: just in case she wants to hop on the treadmill, and also because it’s just more comfortable. Most people are dressed equally casually, with the exception of one girl who is slightly more dressed up. “She’ll learn,” Jessica tells me laughing. She has just been hired a little over a week ago, and had to look nice at all times for her old job.

I ask Jessica about her role, and she says she has recently been promoted to customer support manager after they hired three new customer support employees. Her role is comparable to Katie’s at Box, but she says she has so much more responsibility and has learned so many more skills. Originally, she was one of only two on the customer support team, and found herself working insane hours. The company started off as an errands service, and only shifted to cleaning a few months ago, so Jessica was there for the genesis. It’s always exciting, she says: she has no idea what her goals will be a month from now, because the company could completely change again. They have to be willing to always be trying things, adjusting, seeing what works and what doesn’t. In addition, being a small company means that each employee really gets input into what happens there. If there is a process that you think should be changed, or you have a new idea, you can really help steer the company in the way you want, she tells me. For example, last month they were frustrated by how long the bad rating ranking was taking, and by the end of the week they were able to have a brand new system in place. “There’s no play book, no manual, no process,” she says. Unlike at Box, where they teach their operations people their “method” to use in every scenario, at Cleanerz you have to make it up as you go. The company is only a year old, so you are really making totally new processes right there, often through guess and check. “Try a lot of things and then revert if they don’t work,” she says. The company moves so fast that a process that was a staple can be gone or totally different next week. However, there is a balance as a small company: they do not have the resources to “move fast and break things,” as their expenditures are limited and a mistake that was *too* big could spell disaster for the company.

Jessica says it is fascinating to work in her role at this company because she sees both sides: the workers, who sometimes cannot make it to work because they have no home for their kids, or because they don’t have money for gas; and the “tech world” they serve—wealthy, busy people who just want an easy and carefree cleaning experience. Jessica focuses on making sure the workers are happy, because without them they wouldn’t have a business.

I ask about the on-boarding process for new hires, and she says that one important component is whether they get along with everyone else at the office. Before making an offer, they always take the prospective new employee out to dinner with the whole office to make sure they are a good fit. The demographics of the office are astoundingly homogenous: everyone there is under 30 years old, and it is predominantly male with only 3 girls on a team of 15 people (and all from CMC!). For a while, Jessica says, she was the only girl there. The fact that everyone there was around her age made this less of a big deal, she said, because she really



felt like they were all friends. But there were times when she felt that she couldn't speak up as much as she would with a group of girls, she adds. This was almost never an issue, because the company is so small and everyone is very close to each other: "Anything I do say will be heard and acted on," Jessica adds. Everyone in the company has a part, and this is an important value in their culture.

I ask her to tell me a little more about Cleanerz's culture, and she says that it is very much work hard play hard, like CMC. Next weekend, they are all going to play "sloshball" in the park and then doing a pig roast. They do party buses all the time, and did a sailing event with the company when they launched a new city. There are also theme parties and Thursday night game nights and drinks. When a new hire comes on, they have an event called "taste test" where the new hire names a category and someone goes and gets a huge variety of them: in the past people have chosen pickles, salami, and whiskey. Jessica says it's important to keep it fun because people are often in the office on the weekends, and need to be willing to stay until 10pm if needed. There are not that many people, so the people who know how to do something have to be willing to show up and do it. That's the work hard component, she says, particularly when they try so many new things that can backfire and then need fixing. The play hard also includes great perks such as the aforementioned events, free house cleanings, and lunch and dinner every day. Jessica says despite the fact that everyone is so young it's a pretty diverse group as far as nationalities, and the fact that they're all around the same age makes it even more fun.

We go downstairs for our catered Japanese food, which is delicious. I leave with great respect for this small company.

**Fieldnotes 11/4/13**

5:30pm

*Interview with A, Motley Coffeeshop*

The Motley is starting to get crowded, but we're lucky enough to find a semi-private table in one corner where we can talk without having to shout over the general evening buzz. A comes from Poppa and is wearing a black sweater and yoga pants, looking relaxed and awake, and happy to be taking a break from work. Before I turn on the recorder, I start by asking her for advice on who else I might be able to talk to in the startup world from her experience studying in Silicon Valley for a semester. She gives me a long list of people that I can contact, and I write them down for future reference.

Somehow, we get on the topic of Google. "Don't even get me started about Google," she says. "There's a lot I don't like about them." She says that a lot of CMC people go there after school and quit after a few weeks (I remember this being reflected in several of my interviews as well). When I ask why, she says it is because Google has a huge hiring-firing problem. Last year, she says, they fired around 1,000 people but hired around 7,000... but they're not growing fast enough to merit that kind of expansion. They really don't *need* all 20,000 of their employees, she says, and it leaves them with a "bloated bottom." Entry level employees find themselves doing extremely mundane tasks: in charge of sorting customer complaints, or writing a single line of a help section. They are terrible jobs that are actually meaningless, but many people stay for the culture, for the perks. In this case, I think, culture may be a negative thing. She points out that you can get that culture elsewhere but it's easier to get a job at Google because they do hire so many people. Each person makes less of a difference, and so they are willing to take people who are a little less than perfect. This, in turn, makes the culture a little weaker, she says.

We also talk about how the culture of coding and Silicon Valley must have changed, because in the 1970's females were about 30% of computer science graduates, while now it is closer to 11%. What happened in the Valley (or elsewhere) that made women want to stop pushing for these jobs? We are both very curious about this phenomenon, and she says she will be in touch if she discovers anything.

We also discuss how the disparity creates a dual problem: the companies don't have a large group of female engineers to choose from, and the women don't know if they are being chosen because they are qualified or just because of their gender.

**Fieldnotes 11/08/13**

11am

*C, A, Motley Coffeeshop*

C is running late, which is fortunate because by the time he shows up there is finally enough room at the table for the two of us to sit side by side. Because we have only a short time to talk, we start speaking as soon as he sits down, although I feel bad about keeping him from the yogurt and pastry he brings along with him. I'm particularly interested in A because it is a financial software startup, and I wonder whether the finance culture or the startup culture shows through.

First, though, I ask him to tell me a little about the company and how it got started. As with most startups, the story is really the "hero story" of the founder of the company, and this one was a "serial entrepreneur" worth billions in Silicon Valley. He had a private wealth manager, and one day he asked to see what the manager was doing with his money. He was appalled to note that all of the financial records were in a set of excel sheets, disorganized, and decided to do something about it. A now makes financial software for this very purpose (private money managers, mainly).

I ask C what his job was there, and he says that is the biggest difference between his experience working in investment banking and for A. In investment banking, he was given very basic tasks and made to do them repeatedly based on an extremely strict set of predetermined rules and expectations. At A, they didn't even know what he would be doing at first, and when he decided on a project they just didn't really check up on him until he provided the product (thousands of training slides to teach new customers how to use the software) two weeks later. He loved this kind of autonomy and ability to make a real, tangible product that clearly impacted the company.

I ask what people wear, and he says there's really no dress code. Most people wear jeans and a button down, but often people come in tee-shirts too. The layout of the office is much more "startup" too, with a wide open floor plan, bright lighting, plants, and the framed "core values" on the wall (he shows me pictures). There are also glass walled conference rooms with couches and comfortable chairs, each named after a different kind of currency. The company has a full kitchen, free drinks and snacks, and provides breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day. They also allow people to bring their dogs in, although C thinks this can be a bit of a distraction.

When I ask about gender, he mentions that one woman who used to work for them left and wrote an article about how she didn't feel valued there. He says it's something they're really trying to work on, but they don't want it to be affirmative action. They have extremely high standards, he says, and the reason she didn't feel appreciated was that she frankly was not as good of an engineer. A hires only one of

about every 1,000 engineers they interview, and they want to keep the quality level this high. Unfortunately, out of a company of 90 people, only 3 are currently women: an astoundingly low percentage. He says that this is something they are actively trying to ameliorate, however.

At the end of our conversation, he provides me with the following links:

<http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=herzberg+theory+of+motivation&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>

<http://www.amazon.com/How-Will-Measure-Your-Life/dp/0062102419>

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvos4nORf\\_Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvos4nORf_Y)

<http://www.glassdoor.com/Overview/Working-at-A-EI-IE423990.11,18.htm>

<http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=stephanie+volftsun+A&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8#q=knotch+stephanie+volftsun&rls=en>

