EPISODE 1268

[INTRODUCTION]

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"**FT:** Oh, you should have led with that, the money."

"**AK:** Right, the money. This is a lucrative field. It's a growing field. It's generally secure because of the reliance now on technological solutions. And so I think that we sometimes hesitate to say that. But I think it is such a compelling piece of the story because we should be paid. We absolutely should be paid. And we're still battling a salary difference between men."

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FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm your host, Farnoosh Torabi. Special guest today, Alana Karen. She was a very early stage employee at the Google, employee 300 something. She's an award-winning tech leader, author and speaker whose work impacts many of our everyday lives, from Google Search, to Ads, Fiber, to Google Grants and beyond. Alana has been leading the charge to develop, scale, build and drive team and product development that has seen a rippling industry impact. She has spoken at conferences and summits on technology, leadership, DEI, talent and innovation. And her book, *Adventures of Women in Tech: How We Got Here and Why We Stay*, is the focus of our conversation today. In it, Alana aggregates hundreds of stories on so many topics pertaining to women in this hot field, which isn't always inviting to women. You just heard her talk about one of the reasons, maybe one of the secret reasons women enter the field of tech. It pays well. And there are many jobs in this field. Technology is no longer a niche industry. It is all-encompassing. And as many of us are considering our next chapters, our next career moves, maybe technology is where it's at for us.

Here's Alana Karen.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Alana Karen, welcome to So Money. It's great to have you here. Thanks for joining.

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AK: Thank you for having me.

[00:02:54]

FT: We are going to talk about all of your adventures in tech. You've also written a book capturing the adventures of fellow females in technology. The book is called The Adventures of Women in Tech**:** How We Got Here and Why We Stay." You yourself, Alana, come to this with decades of experience working in technology, specifically starting at Google. I think you were one of the first employees there. Employee what? Everyone knows, right? What's your employee number?

[00:03:25]

AK: Oh, everyone does know, don't they? 319.

[00:03:28]

FT: 319. My goodness! At some point along your career you decided you wanted to start using your voice in a more public-facing way. You began speaking. You wrote this book. What inspired you at first to take on this new role of championing other women in a big way?

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AK: Yeah. I mean, I think it was a gradual journey to some degree. Like when I look back and I talk about this a little bit in the book, I was slowly realizing why there was even an issue for women or other minoritized populations, because tech had this very progressive, at the time, idea of meritocracy. And so it really was based on seemingly the work that you put in and then recognizing that work. So it took me a while actually to see, "Oh, wait a second. There's still some stuff here." And we are having different experiences. And we don't all necessarily feel like we belong.

And I think a lot of – Very similar to a lot of women I spoke with, my early years was me just trying to refine myself. Me thinking it was me. And it was to some degree. Like we all have to improve. But I was thinking it was me why they weren't listening to me in the room. When it turns out, there are a lot of societal reasons why maybe women have to figure out how to have their voices heard more even if their skills are top-notch.

So very much a journey, and I'd started it for myself, and then I'd started it for my team, and I'd started it for other women in my group and other people I was mentoring. And then around 2017, 2018, I was starting to think about, "Oh, could I help the world?" And not in a very like – I always like to blame Google Hubris for things. But in a sort of really like, "Oh, am I limiting who I'm helping by not sharing this more broadly?" And so that's when I started – Yeah, I started to write articles on LinkedIn. And that was basically the journey for me.

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FT: But even before you started at Google, before the "journey" began, you were drawn to this field where many other women, young women at the time, your contemporaries, may not have been for the reasons that continue to be a reason why I think women don't enter tech. They see it as a male dominant field. They don't feel safe. We hear these stories. We read your book. And hopefully by the end of your book you're encouraged and you're inspired to take a role in the world of tech. But what for you drew you to the space knowing

perhaps already that there were going to be challenges that were not anything that you could really control?

[00:06:30]

AK: It's funny, because I think back and I was like, "Oh, I was so innocent. I was so naïve. I had no idea."

[00:06:37]

FT: The naiveté, okay.

[00:06:38]

AK: Yeah. I mean, I do think ignorance is bliss. So I was introduced to computers at an early age by my dad. I often credit him for that. But recently, I was talking to my dad and he's like, "No. You were the one who kept going down, and using it, and doing hours of stuff, and coming up with projects to do." It was very self-driven. So I think there was a lot of natural affinity interest. And I found early on that it was a great way to express my creativity. I wasn't down there coding necessarily. I was writing poetry. I was doing artwork on the little art apps, right?

And so I think that that was part of what really clicked for me was this like new way and a really easy way to express my creativity. And when I got into college, I was studying history, really, for the most part. But I was learning web design in my free time. Just self – This was 20 years ago, y'all. So this was self-taught. There were no books. There were no classes. Maybe there was like an HTML for dummies book. But there just wasn't a ton of resources out there like there are today. And so just figuring it out on my own, a little bit of JavaScript, how to tweak it, that sort of thing.

I think because I wasn't in the engineering courses and I wasn't seeing that I was maybe only one of as women. Maybe because it was so self-driven, I had no idea really that I was going down this sort of path of passion, self-interest that maybe down the road would have

some things. And, really, I knew, because I wasn't taking any formal classes, that I had a lot

to learn. So I think that going in and having people treat me like I didn't know anything

seemed totally legit to me. Like I wasn't like, "Oh, they're doing it because of gender." I like

legit didn't know things. So I think that that was –

Yeah, I think, nowadays, maybe part of the con is that you can build up all these fears and

knowledge in advance. When in reality, there's a ton of places that will be great to work. But

you have to kind of get through that initial stage first to find them.

[00:09:05]

FT: Well, certainly, back then too, much of a learning curve for everybody. I mean,

technology was still in its infancy in terms of what we're used to today. And you were at the

beginning of that. What was your actual role at Google? I know you held many positions.

But tell us a little about like the responsibilities that you had.

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AK: By the time I got to Google, it was 2001. I'd done a couple jobs before. One being like

an actual webmaster of a site, doing a redesign, running a website. Another at a startup

having moved more into account management and then training. And by the time I joined

Google, I knew that I wasn't going in the more technical direction. That I really did like

working with people, having a lot of time off the computer. And so I joined in a customer

service role. It was a combination of intentionality, and that's what was available. Like I was

looking for a job during the bust of the dot-com. And so I really was looking for a good

company. I wasn't necessarily that picky about the role. But I was being really intentional

about the fact that I wasn't going to learn coding and go deeper there. That I was looking

for more of the operation side or the support side in a way. And so my initial responsibilities

were answering customer email and reviewing and approving ads manually. So just like

looking at the ad and saying like, "Was it good? Was it not?" sort of thing.

But pretty soon after I joined, we were growing really quickly, and I got into obviously

helping the team grow, but also very specifically policy. What ads we accept and what we

don't accept. And that turned into my initial 10-year career where I was first building out my role and then a team for creating, implementing and maintaining policies for ads and other products globally. So really interesting space, and I really couldn't have predicted like there's no way to say I want to grow up and be an ads policy, right? Like that was very much a cutting-edge job coming out of the reality of what happens when you open up your platform to everyone and anyone and the new business is happening on the Internet?

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FT: Your book came out in December of last year, the *Adventures of Women in Tech: How We Got Here and Why We Stay*. If this was called the adventures of men in tech, a very different book obviously. So tell me about what are some of these adventures. Tell us about how this is very much a book for women versus men.

[00:12:01]

AK: I've had men tell me that they find a ton relevant. And I think the reason, having spoken with a lot of them, is that a lot of what I'm about to say is common. But what I will say was really unique, I think, to the women's journeys and other minoritized populations, for sure. So other intersections, or even men from certain minoritized populations, is there is this journey of feeling like you belong and feeling like you're in the right place and that you can be what you see other people doing without always examples of another woman, another Latina woman, another black woman doing what you're achieving.

And so a lot of people were going through this journey separately, maybe sometimes with support. Finding out that they needed support, not realizing they needed it at first. Finding their voice, feeling like they could ask for what they wanted. Feel like they had to speak up and market their talents. And, really, over time, developing this resilience and this belief that they're awesome. But all over five years, 10 years, 15 years, that seemed to be the really common adventure that like they didn't come in feeling that. They didn't come in feeling the support for that. They didn't always have. Sometimes they did sometimes they didn't. But they didn't always have a mentor or a sponsor pushing them. In the end, the

story of the book I think ends up being like how can we all help each other get there faster? And we are missing out on the talents of these women not helping that journey sooner.

But on the other hand, if you read the book, a lot of what they did and a lot of the things that they had to discover, men have to discover too. But I think on majority, that feeling of not belonging, has a lot to do with what what's around you. And are they talking like you? Do they think like you? Do they accept your ideas when you speak up? And all of that type of stuff. And we know that that's impacting minoritized populations like women more than men.

[00:14:38]

FT: It's certainly true not just at in technology, but in a lot of male dominant fields. Certainly there are women in those fields. But if you look at who are the decision makers? Who is sitting at the board? Who is in the C-suite? It is mostly men. And to your point, some of those women at that company could have been there for 15 years and never make it to that point. Why you wonder? Whereas maybe the men would have had a faster trajectory. But you do call out on a lot of problems throughout the years women in tech have, and they told you, and it's in the book documented. Being told to dial back their viewpoints during meetings, judged for how they look, haircuts, getting called out, demands from bosses to pick up laundry or face punitive consequences. What was your early on experiences as an employee in tech, as a female in tech? Did these stories resonate with you specifically, personally? And how did you navigate those? Can I call them – They're horrors.

[00:15:40]

AK: The gantry one I should say was actually from a different industry. I think it was from like, I don't know, politics or something. But I actually haven't necessarily not heard it especially if you're in an administrative role. So it's not in the book is that one. But like I think that it does resonate and would resonate with some people.

I think that I, in some ways, had a lucky journey because those initial years at Google, for instance, I was working in a very woman strong team partially because it wasn't – It was a

business side team. And what you'll often find in technology companies is the technical side, the engineering teams, the product teams, etc., still have less women. But if you go over to the business side of the company, whether it's the finance team, the sales side, the HR team or whatever, they are more equivalent, sometimes even inverted.

And so I think because of that, some of it resonated. Some of it didn't, because I do think I was able to form my identity, find my voice in a team with more women. On the other hand, I still had experiences along the way where I was like really mansplained a deck by a man. But sometimes what was interesting, and women talk about this in the book, is like they don't always know if it's a woman-man thing. And I look back, and a lot of those experiences, I don't know. That person had gone to business school and I hadn't. He was older and I was younger. And so what was what was playing into that? Maybe multiple societal things. And I think that's part of what we're navigating right now is sort of like knowing that we were coded by society to think certain things. Women should be caretakers, for example. And then having that play out in the office, right? Like why are you expected to get the coffee if people visit? And having to realize over time like, "Oh, okay, that's how we were coded and maybe that's old stupid coding. And we need to like get rid of it. And we need something else." So I definitely have experiences.

But I think what's so difficult for minoritized populations is to know what it is. It's not always this one thing. And figure out like what should you do? Like I spent a lot of my early career just being like, "Oh, okay. Well, maybe it's me. Maybe my deck is bad. But I was lucky in that situation that I went to two other senior women. They just happened to be, at the time, the two senior people I would go to were women. And they said, "Oh, just ignore him." But what if I would have twisted myself up in knots, maybe done decks differently for the rest of my life if I hadn't had those people there? So I think that there's just so much to your question. But basically, yes. And, again, I'll come back to support and examples for women in what made the difference for me.

[00:19:13]

FT: I was going to ask about mentorship later in the conversation, but I'm going to jump right to it because I think this is a natural transition to that topic, because of this story that

you just shared, which is that you didn't know how to feel in that moment when a male colleague criticized your deck. Whether it was you, whether it was would he even said that if you weren't a female. And it took two more experienced women to say to you don't listen to him. How do we find these mentors? It sounds like you just stumbled upon them. But deliberately go about finding the right kind of mentors who won't just be mentors, but also they'll sponsor us. When we're not in the room, they'll speak up for us, will advocate for us. And I would say that your mentors don't have to be only women. Women don't need just women mentors. I think the best mentors I've had have been both men and women. So tell us about like the anatomy of an ideal mentor/advocate for you in the workplace and how to go about creating that relationship.

[00:20:19]

AK: Yeah, absolutely. And you're covering so many great points. Thank you. I didn't even have to emphasize some of the things because you've said them. For me, mentorship was something that I didn't even realize I should ask for. And so I really am preaching that it isn't something that you wait to be crowned. You don't wait just to have a conversation with someone and it magically clicks.

I think that what we do need to do is really be aware of the things that we're trying to build in ourselves or the issues that we're having and look around ourselves, whether it's at work, or at conferences, or on LinkedIn even, and say to ourselves like who's demonstrating this? Who would be great to talk to and get advice? And instead of making it this marriage relationship for yourself where you have to find the perfect one, think about it more like speed dating. What questions do you have for someone? And can you boil it down to a simple email to them where you say, "I love what you do. I love how you do it. I have three questions. Do you have 30 minutes? And really just start building that library of advice and experience for yourself.

Now there are definitely sometimes mentorship programs that work. I say why not give them a shot? They can be hit or miss, because you may not get matched with someone that ends up having that advice, that experience, that relevancy for you. But maybe you try again, right? I think sometimes these things, we kind of try it once and we're like it didn't

work. But just like finding a good therapist, sometimes it takes a little shopping around. And really think of it as more like a board for yourself. You're not trying to find the one person that magically fits at all for you, but you're thinking about a group of five to ten people who you can go to with questions when you have them. That person is great at communicating a message. That person is great when you're having a technical battle in a meeting, right? These people can provide different things for you and you don't need to necessarily meet them once a month. It could be an as needed thing. And I think that's really opened up mentorship for me, because I think I just couldn't impose. I could not impose a marriage on someone. And I couldn't figure out who that magical person would be, but thinking about it in this much broader way helps.

Now, to your other point about who will advocate for me. Who will be a sponsor for me? Who will bring up my name and rooms where I'm not? Who will bring me into those rooms who will introduce me to new people? That is interesting, because that's very much at that person who's bringing you up, who's deciding that, that sponsor's desire. And so I do think doing this, where you're forming yourself more of a set of people, opens you up more to having one of those people do that for you, versus waiting for someone to magically observe you and think they should do it for you. So I think that's how we put ourselves in the driver's seat of the mentorship sponsorship thing.

And I will just add really quickly. I don't think that's the only kind of support you need, right? I think thinking about your friends, family, co-workers who are just great support when you had a bad meeting. That's also – I mean, that's very valuable. I'm thinking about that as well. I can tell, it made a lot of difference for women who built that for themselves.

[00:24:15]

FT: And I just want to share, because I think it's so special. And I'm sure you know. But your mentee, Kathleen, from Google Human Resources emailed me, I don't know if you know this, and said, "You need to speak with Alana. She has been my mentor. I find her content and live charisma to be relatable, empowering, demystifying about women's experience in tech." You should know your book helped her as she says, these are her words, "Own that

even I am a woman in tech, though I don't have engineer in my title." So I thought that was really special and a great example of a mentee supporting the mentor.

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AK: I mean, I blush. I blush.

[00:25:00]

FT: She made it happen. She made this episode happen.

[00:25:02]

AK: Internally, I squirm. It's so lovely. But I will say – And if you're a person in the position to start thinking about mentoring, which might be earlier than you think, you get a lot out of the relationship. I have loved working with Kathleen, who I know listens to your podcast, every episode. So she'll hear this and blush on her own. And I interviewed her for the book, because I think her experience has been so interesting and valuable. She's been in people operations, HR, in a technical company. And seeing her figure out her own journey within that – I just think it's really interesting. You see a lot of yourself sometimes even in people who are different from you in a totally different job. I've never been in people ops HR, right? And so I think that I always get just as much as I give, for sure, absolutely.

[00:26:01]

FT: Yeah. Kathleen, thank you so much for bringing us together. Alana, your book, the subtitle, *How We Got Here and Why We Stay*, I want to focus on the why we stay part for a minute, because right now many women are not staying in the workforce, whether that's in tech or other fields because of the perils of the pandemic, stretching them far too thin and having to make really hard choices. Do I take care of my family or go back to work because those two lives cannot co-exist?

So this is an important time, I think, to be talking about the benefits or why we stay, as you write, at least in technology. What keeps women in tech? Or why do you think tech is the kind of career or industry that fosters an inviting place for women, especially women who have other responsibilities outside of work, taking care of people? How does tech provide more flexibility for them? And what do you want women to know about tech so that maybe they're more encouraged to apply?

[00:27:02]

AK: When I interviewed women and asked them what they liked working about in tech, it was almost like I'd given them a script behind the scenes. It was so consistent amongst women. There were four main things, basically. There was the ability to change the world. To have an impact on the world at a scale that they wouldn't otherwise be able to do, and there's numerous stories of that in the book. They also loved the career opportunity for themselves, right? Here was usually fast-growing companies, lots of opportunity to try out different things, not necessarily just go up the career ladder. But also have different experiences. And just keep learning. Keep learning and growing. And then the third thing was feeling like they'd found their people. Feeling like it was an environment where the culture appealed to them and people seemed open and welcoming to lots of different types.

And then lastly, the money, which I think is totally okay to say, but we sometimes shrink back from saying it.

[00:28:17]

FT: Oh, you should have led with that, the money.

[00:28:19]

AK: Right, the money. This is a lucrative field. It's a growing field. It's generally secure because of the reliance now on technological solutions. And so I think that we sometimes don't – We hesitate to say that. But I think it is such a compelling piece of the story because we should be paid. We absolutely should be paid. And we're still battling a salary difference

between men, 80 some percent for every dollar that man earns. So yeah, we should be in there, just like the men's – Just the men folk are, right? And I know we're saying men-women, which is very binary. But obviously this is true for all genders, absolutely true for all genders.

So when you think about those four things and you fast forward 10 years into someone's career, 15 years into someone's career, 20 years into some someone's career. And now they've gone through maybe an arc or two and maybe now they have competing life demands outside and they're trying to decide whether to stay. I feel like it's really helpful to look at what happened to those first four ingredients, because I think people often will blame motherhood or blame a hostile work environment. And I think that that's true. But if you look at the other four, if you start to talk to them about the other four, you'll see that over the years the story got weaker for them.

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FT: I 100% agree, yeah.

[00:30:02]

AK: Which meant we had an opportunity that we missed or we lost to make sure are they still in impactful roles? Are they still growing? What happened with their environment around them and what happened with their salary, and all of that type of stuff? And so I think that is absolutely. Like there's a code there that you can follow for checking on your people. And they still may have to leave for some reason. But you can retain a lot of your women, absolutely.

[00:30:31]

FT: My gosh! It reminds me of – Sometimes, before the pandemic, when we used to get together. And I'd be at you know play dates with meeting other parents. And I might start talking to my mom and we ask – It's always a little bit of a tricky question, like where do you work or what do you do, because you don't know? Like maybe that mom doesn't work. And

so in any case, this mom talked about how she left her career to raise her kids. And she said, "I just did the math and it just didn't – It was like, gosh, what I was paying for childcare was like on par with what I was making at the end of the day. What's the point?" And so I just nod. And then she says, to your point, "I didn't really like my job anyway." And I go, "Aha! There it is." What if you were obsessed with your job? You loved it so much? You felt there was such a future for you? Maybe you weren't making a lot but you knew you could if you put in the work, you put in the effort, you asked for the money?

I think sometimes we need to lead more with saying the job was crap. We also need to call out the employers that are not making it possible for us to have both or feel better about staying in the workplace. And so I really perked up when I heard you say that, because I knew that, okay, maybe it wasn't just that one time at that play date with me when I had this epiphany. But maybe it's actually a bigger problem.

[00:32:04]

AK: I just saw one of those – You see kind of like a quote from someone's tweet or something getting reshared, reshared. And it's basically something like, "Society called us superheroes so they could just assume –" Like they basically – We'll do it all, right? And they don't have to fix any of the problems underneath.

[00:32:22]

FT: Yeah. But they didn't give you the magic cape. Like, come on. They gave me no equipment. They just gave me the title.

[00:32:29]

AK: They just gave me the title, and now they think that that's okay, right? Like we're all going to be heroes and it's going to work out. And that's not structurally sound nor sustainable. So yeah, flipping the narrative is very important even if you feel like society accepts the narrative of you staying home more readily, right? But it's important. It's

important to call those things out. Anyway, I have to run. I am late for my own team meeting.

[00:32:56]

FT: Yes. Alana, thank you so much for joining us. The book is called the *Adventures of Women in Tech*, out everywhere. It was a pleasure. Thank you.

[00:33:05]

AK: Thank you.

[OUTRO]

[00:33:08]

FT: Thanks so much to Alana for joining us. Check out alanakaren.com, alanakaren.com to learn more about her book and follow her work. See you back here on Friday for Ask Farnoosh. And I hope your day is so money.

[END]