IxDA Sydney Podcast

S02 E04 - Nina Ajnira Karisik

Audio Transcript

Jessica Pang: Hello and welcome to the IxDA Sydney Podcast, a show where we can't guarantee answers, just better questions. I'm Jessica Pang and in this episode, Sam and Vinita are chatting with Nina, a strong advocate for women in tech and sustainable fashion.

Nina is a software engineer and a sustainable fashion enthusiast with a background in digital marketing, branding and journalism. She looks at code holistically, being equally interested in back-end and front-end development, and how code can make a difference in people's live.

When not diligently sitting in front of the computer, she can often be found perusing various OP-shops for clothing bargains, mentoring women that want to learn to code and giving tech talks.

Let's get started!

Vinita Israni: Hi Nina. It's lovely to have you here today joining us all the way from Perth. How are you going this morning?

Nina Ajnira Karisik: Thank you so much for having me. I am so excited. just woke up, but I'm, really excited. .

Vinita Israni: That's okay. It's we we're a couple hours behind, but I think I'm still waking up as well, so we.

Go on this journey together. So yeah, I just wanted to start with a little bit of background about yourself. Could you share with us what you do and what you're passionate about?

Nina Ajnira Karisik: Yes, of course. So I'm a software engineer, I transferred from a non-tech career into a tech career.

I've worked random jobs. I did a little bit of journalism, a little bit of branding. Then I moved from Bosnia to Australia and then done fundraising for a while. I did some call-center jobs, a digital producer and finally an engineer.

Vinita Israni: That's amazing. What's been the thread throughout your [00:01:00] career? What kept you going and exploring all these different things?

Nina Ajnira Karisik: I think it has been creativity. Communication with people, like connecting with people and just building different things, like starting something from just an idea and then see how it blossoms.

And that has been a thread through whichever path I took. I had that mission and it was really interesting to see how it actually goes from, Just communicating with people and sharing ideas and then building those ideas and having the tools to build those ideas.

Vinita Israni: And it sounds like there is the, the thread you said of building something from, the ground up. It sounds like you also have a passion for sustainability with fashion. Can you talk a little bit about.

Nina Ajnira Karisik: I always, always loved expressing through fashion. And I found it to be such a fun and interesting tool to use, to [00:02:00] communicate with people. And then When I was a teenager, I got really, really into fashion and started blogging about it and was in that frenzy of fast fashion. And then later I learned about fast fashion and the issues that fast fashion brings.

I've started learning about it and reporting on it as well. And today I have a website that actually deals with those issues and it's. Really fun to learn about and sometimes very challenging to open myself and learn about the issues that fast fashion industry has and how it treats its workers and the planet, and even customers.

But also looking into the ways that we could possibly solve it, but that we could still enjoy fashion, but at the same time be very mindful of how it actually can be very consequential for the. ,

Vinita Israni: could you

give us an example of some of the [00:03:00] ways that we could possibly understand or learn a little bit more about fast fashion and some of the initiatives that you're working on?

Nina Ajnira Karisik: Yes, so I have a website, fashionist that endangered.com, and I report daily on the use of in the industry. I think the best way to learn about it is to, when you wanna buy something, You should look into how it was made. And the easiest way to find out how it was made is to go on their about page. And if there is just fluffy language that says We care about fashion, we care about you, we empower you, they're probably just giving fluff language that makes no sense. And they're probably just using suppliers and excusing themselves from the process.

Vinita Israni: That's great. I think I'm definitely on that journey towards learning about fast fashion and starting to sew as well, just to kind of understand all of [00:04:00] the effort and time that it takes to be able to create pieces of clothing. , which is awesome. So kind of along those lines, when you're, when you're learning and you're on that journey, I've found mentoring to be really important.

Kind of what has your mentorship

journey been so far? Okay. So for me, mentoring means it really changed my world. So before I started coding, I just was sort of curious about. . And then I got into this programming course that lasted for six months. And I've learned from people in the industry about coding and I saw them solve the problems and that helped me understand how important it is to see people solve problems, and do the things that you want to do and then see that it is possible to do that.

So for me, it like changed my world. It made me go from coding is interesting to. [00:05:00] I love this and I wanna do more of this. And I am so inspired by these people. So now I also mentor other people and I mentor in different ways. I go on she codes workshops, which are like one day coding free coding workshops.

And I mentor women that want to learn to code and transition from a non-coding background into a coding industry and tech industry. And it has been very, very eye-opening. So. Because I came from Bosnia and I was of thinking that living in a developing country in a fertil country, in a warton country I will pro I my life is probably very much different from women that live in Australia and they probably never felt Backlash from, go from starting for, for learning to code or, or wanting to study computer science or being extremely positive and excited about the world.

[00:06:00] And then when I went to learn to code and was surrounded by these women, I've learned that so many of them are going through the same issues and have the same shackles that I've had and. That really inspired me to to just sort of break that unconscious bias that we all have and help other people to to sort of just empower them so they can actually also have like, also help them and give them the tools so they can also build the lives that they wanna.

Yeah. And I know that you're really passionate about women in tech as well. Can you talk a little bit about some of the lessons you've learned and some of the themes that you've seen in how you've been involved in the

Nina Ajnira Karisik: community? One thing I've learned is. you can always ask questions. There was this big thing when I started the course when I went to take the course that a lot of us [00:07:00] were afraid of Googling things. We were thinking that if we are Googling things that we are probably not for this industry, that we're probably stealing code and that we shouldn't be here. It was amazing for me to see how we went from, I don't wanna Google things, so I'm more than happy to Google things than to ask questions freely and solve the problems. Cuz coding is all about collaboration. It's all about sharing the knowledge we have.

And now when I go in and I mentor people that, have a very similar background and I see them go. , I am definitely not for this. This is so challenging to, oh, I can do this. I can do, actually, I have this really cool idea and I'm gonna try it and see what happens.

So that's one thing that I've learned. Then I've learned that, you don't need to have four years of experience. You don't need to go and study computer science in order to Work in tech industry, I've learned that there are different alternative paths that you can [00:08:00] take. If you wanna go into tech industry and get a job there, you can start as a digital producer.

So somebody who takes care of the website, you can, you can be a tester for a while or. and one of the most important things I've learned is that all of our experiences are extremely valid. Like just because now I'm an engineer doesn't mean I don't use the knowledge. I've learned fundraising and in a call center while talking to people actually that knowledge was extremely important and journalism as well.

And like all of that is a well of knowledge that can be. to em, empower the products you work on now, or maybe if you have ideas that you wanna see blossom, then you can use all of their knowledge and push it into a product. So really like one of the biggest lessons I've learned from mentoring is that developing and programming is so much more than just code and learning the databases and the different languages and using different IDs.

It's actually all [00:09:00] about solving problem. And using the knowledge you already have into making the world you wanna see.

Sam Hancock: Brilliant. I think that's the same that goes for us as designers as well. I think there's a very Similar crossover there. The one area that you touched on earlier that I find fascinating is that there's a little bit of a third grade slump.

What happens when kids stop asking questions when they become self-conscious? So as adults, we definitely have that alongside biases. So can you talk a bit? What you found about unconscious bias within the tech industry, especially from a woman perspective?

Nina Ajnira Karisik: Yes. Okay. I'm gonna start with the beginning for me from because I was actually faced with it fairly early in life before I started studying computer science or even. Going into the science of it, I, we got [00:10:00] a computer and it was so exciting and I was using paint and I was like, I'm in the future. This is so exciting. And then My whole education system was very much about growth, memorization, and about being perfect and not asking dumb questions, and just getting that straight A and then when I got into, when we got a computer science class, I was really happy because I thought this is gonna be, this is my window into.

A modern world. And then I was faced with a harsh reality of unconscious bias with, with a teacher who who was unfortunately extremely sexist it was a woman, but she was of the belief that girls aren't really good for computer science. And that computer science in general, in general is very hard.

We had, I remember her opening our class on binary numbers and saying, this is extremely hard. I don't think you guys will understand [00:11:00] this. And I still remember that when she said that I, that's the only thing I remember. And for every, it took me to go from, . Oh, binary numbers are not hard.

It's just that she believed that. And the worst thing is that I believed her, but it's not like she was trying to explain to us the logic gate or anything. Just simple numbers. When I finally try to deprogram myself and teach myself that binary numbers can be understood.

I still have to catch myself and be like, Hey, actually, you know, this, it's fine. And that is something that I had to deprogram and understand about myself. And then when I. Decided sharing my story with other women, I've learned that they all have very similar stories.

I have had a friend who said that she really wanted to study physics and a professor told her that she will never thrive in that industry. Or another one said that parents told her [00:12:00] that computer science is only for men. And those kind of beliefs live with us and we have to fight them and. if we have an incentive to fight them.

Sometimes you live with it and you're , well, I'm not, I guess I'm more into languages like I, or I'm a creative type when actually programming is extremely creative. So, and then going into the industry and learning about how we all sort of have to get over that fact and go from uttering our. and into the like in being okay that we know things and, that we can solve problems and it is okay to ask questions and everybody was in our position at some point and we all had to learn things and that we all had different styles of learning things. It made me feel less lonely and it made me feel like we actually yes, there are some there's this in, in the, in the tech industry, you, you'll see sometimes people who will probably believe that you can do less. It [00:13:00] can be challenging, but I really do believe that. , as long as you believe in yourself, anything can happen. No matter how cheesy that sounds. .

Sam Hancock: Yeah. Right. I understand that as a white male. I'm maybe am part of, the problem, especially when it comes to stem.

So I spent some time earlier this year reading up on a book called Invisible Women. . I don't know if you've heard of that. But it's incredible in terms of some of the unconscious bias that goes on within your day to day that you don't even, you don't even realize is happening.

I just would love to know, like how did you start on that journey to acknowledging some of these things and how did you action that into your of day-to-day

Nina Ajnira Karisik: role. . So there was this study that really helped me understand how much that unconscious bias lives within me as well.

That said that basically went on and took a little study group of kids and it actually showed if you [00:14:00] tell a child that their whole gender is bad at a subject, they will divorce at that subject. And then they will go on and do really bad at other subjects and especially if those other subjects have similar concepts such as logic.

That opened my mind., I realized that so many people have treated me very differently because of the way I look, I'm also very petite. So they probably sometimes talk down at me as well, like literally and metaphorically. And then I love fashion. So there is this other thing that's also connected to dad, which is like, oh, you look cute.

You're, you're probably very shallow. So Dad also, affected. The world treats me and then how I treat the world as well. So, cause it is action and reaction. So then to go from acknowledging that there is a problem and then [00:15:00] going , okay, so how I'm gonna handle this? It was quite difficult.

And it probably started when I did my six month coding. Program. And when I started learning to code that's when I, and I saw a huge issue of me not moving forward because I'm afraid I'll sound stupid if I ask a question. And I was stuck in this position of, I can't ask questions like it, the, the imposter syndrome is really strong.

And, okay, if I ask a question, then I will be embarrassed. And my teacher's voice saying Girls are not into, not for science, really started making a huge impact. So how I tackled it was I took a checklist and getting a huge problem, and then putting it into smaller and smaller chunks.

I have a problem such as a task and I'm afraid to ask a question, I will give. an hour of trying to [00:16:00] tackle the question. And then if I can't tackle the question, I'll give myself another hour to ask a question. Then I, then I may be able to Google it. And then if that doesn't work, I'll follow the checklist and then I'll remove myself from it.

And and then I'll like see the, first of all, sometimes I just can't solve a problem on my own because I don't know what I don't know. And that's okay. But. Suddenly the checklist is telling me to do these things, I just follow it and see what happens. And that's how I started training my brain. And it's done miracles.

I mean, it really helped me deal with my personal issues. And I always say programming is so much more than just a job. It's actually a lifestyle that you can apply everywhere and every problem, almost every problem has a solution.

Vinita Israni: I really appreciate you sharing your perspective, Nina, cuz I think we all tackle problems quite differently. I think it. Took me a couple years in my career before I realized that the problem that I was given may not actually be the right problem that I was solving.

Right. And even having the [00:17:00] headspace and the mindset to understand that, take a step back and question the actual problem statement before you just. Start, you know, jumping into solutioning is, is really important. And I think as designers in particular it was funny that you said, you know, programming is actually a a lifestyle because you can apply it to everything.

I feel that way about design, cuz I think there's things to understand and start to break down to then. , you know, incrementally iterate towards a better solution as well. So no, I think that's awesome. You touched a little bit on imposter syndrome earlier, and I know you talked a bit about how you actually work through it, but in terms of supporting others in the industry and women in tech in relation to imposter syndrome, what have you seen as kind of the biggest threads and what are the things that you think that we need to still work on.

Nina Ajnira Karisik: One of the most important things that have helped me and that I've seen help others as well is sharing your stories. If you are in any kind of [00:18:00] seniority position, when you share your stories you actually help somebody who is just starting out and who thinks that they need to know everything in order to achieve their goal and they need to do it.

And so if you share your stories and if you also share the fact that you also sometimes feel like maybe you don't belong that will help immensely. So that's what I do when I go and mentor, I share that often. It's extremely hard but it's also extremely rewarding.

And then empower people, tell them, how you see them. Because sometimes people really see only the bad things about them. When you show how you look at them, they'll, gain a new perspective and can be extremely. .

Vinita Israni: Yeah, I love that. One of the icebreaker exercises we've used is to name someone else's superpower because sometimes they can't see their own.

And it's [00:19:00] changed a lot of dynamics on our team, I think because you know, a, a person might not realize like all the things that they're actually contributing to the team until they're called out on it in a good way. So, and that's great. .

Nina Ajnira Karisik: I think it's cuz you constantly are trying to improve yourself and sometimes you forget that you've done such an amazing job already.

So it's really helpful to have people cheering on.

Vinita Israni: I know you've touched on it a little bit before and you've hopped around in a lot of different industries, but I wanted to delve just a little bit deeper about your personal story and how you've gotten into programming. So could you share that with. .

Nina Ajnira Karisik: Yes. So as I said programming is so much more than a job for me. It actually helped me develop myself financially and psychologically and ideologically. But mostly I went from somebody who. Thanks that programming is boring and uncreative and filled with databases and I'll probably just stare at a black screen all [00:20:00] day to, oh my God, I can go from a thought, an idea, and see it happen and flourish in the real world.

I can have something tangible. And it was so eye-opening. So for me I went and did a six month coding course. I also did one one hour a day of coding. And that helped me Get into the tech industry.

In my previous company I worked. And then I got into convent and became a digital producer, which helped me so much. And through this path of me going and learning about that, I've learned a lot. And I got so fascinated by the idea that a hundred years we had a huge camera.

And if you wanted to make a film, you would have to be in the right place, at the right time. You would have to know the right people and hope for the best, and then maybe your movie will be, But these are all F's and only a few people were able to do that.[00:21:00]

Now fast forward, we actually have these little phones, these little machines, and we can actually film things and put it on the internet and share our actual real stories. Such as like the things that are happening in our world, in our community, but then also creative, fun stuff and sometimes silly stuff.

Sometimes stuff that maybe shouldn't be on the internet, but we still put it and we still we're, we're able to communicate and that's amazing. And so what YouTube did for Phil and, and now Instagram and TikTok coding does for ideas. It's an actual tool that can help a lot of people. Build huge businesses or build some amazingly creative organizations that can actually impact the world for the better.

So that was so empowering to learn. It was so empowering to learn about binary numbers. It was so empowering to learn, how computers work, and that it's actually extremely connected with the real

world. I went from [00:22:00] somebody who thinks that even though she loves creativity and is very bubbly, and I still.

I can't have an idea. I can't have a, that's not for me, that's for somebody else. I went from that to, oh my God, I have all these tools and there are so many things that I can do. There are so many things that people can do. So that was hugely empowering and it, it gave me an independence. I never dare dream of.

. I guess that's my programming story. That's how it actually helped me view the world in a bit of a better light. I'm, I mean, I still think that the world is extremely bleak and extremely horrible, but at least we have this thing that we can use to communicate and help each other.

Sam Hancock: So, other than the fashion project that you're currently building out, how are you using programming for good?

Well, ,

Nina Ajnira Karisik: other than the fact that I am building a small[00:23:00] business that is aiming to help empower workers and help solve an issue with fast fashion. I'm also doing it in other ways such as like teaching other people to, to code and helping them find their own tools so they can.

Build the world they wanna build. I'm also sharing my stories as much as possible with anybody who would like to hear them in hopes those resolve, that unconscious bias that they might have and take a chance on themselves. Then I've done a really cute project where I try to match People with senior pets and so they can adopt them.

Because, there's this huge issue of senior pets, unfortunately being unadoptable. So I was able to like, okay, so maybe we could solve that issue. And then I Got together with some girls from Chicos program and we built that mobile app. And hopefully we'll push it live very soon and we will be able to help out little animals that don't have a home yet.

Sam Hancock: [00:24:00] Awesome kids, staff and all for the helping out older pets. One area that I would like to touch on is the advancement of technologies such as the open ai platform that you're seeing at the moment.

There's some incredible tools which are out there for content creation digital art. What, what does the future potentially look like from a building and software development perspective?

Nina Ajnira Karisik: So it's actually really exciting. The way I see AI in general is just an amazing tool that we can use to do things faster and better. Because you know how I said, oh, we can ask questions, and coding is all about collaborating. We right now, are on the precipice of getting all of that collaboration into one, and then we can see what happens and then we can amend it a little bit and then see again what happens.

Not only that, it will save time, it'll help us creatively and, sort of also touches on that [00:25:00] exploration feeling that we lost because we used to be very tribal and we would travel and we would see more of the world and we would be really excited about exploring the world. And now we have another opportunity to explore this whole new universe of maybe our brains like, but together as a collective that is so exciting. So I use often stable diffusion for fun. Then I use Quill Bot and Grammarly for news reports to, see as much as news as possible and then see how it could be said better, because I do come from a different language. So it's really fun to see all the, all these things that help me communicate better. And then, yeah, again, stable diffusion, extremely exciting. AI tools to design clothing, which can be really good. I think it, it's very exciting, but I am also a little bit skeptical and I do know that a lot of fast fashion companies will use it to turn out designs even faster which is upsetting. But I do hope that we will become, [00:26:00] More conscious when it comes to consuming fashion and clothing and we will eventually banish fast fashion.

Sam Hancock: So, to clarify, stable diffusion is a, text to image model? Yes. Right. So are there any at the moment, which of. Code and build, build code.

Nina Ajnira Karisik: Yeah, there is get co-pilot that I sometimes use, but it's actually not that good. But it's, it's, it's okay. But it's more fun to see how like you can use it to see how your code can be written better.

Which is very helpful. It, it won't solve all your problems but it can guide you a little bit. And I think it'll be better, hopefully as we, as we use it more, because right now it's still in these beginnings which are very trusting and yeah, it's not that good right now, but I'm hope, I'm hopeful.

I, I don't, I'm not actually afraid of it. I don't think it will. will take my job. But what will it'll do [00:27:00] is probably take away the menial parts of the job and help me build ideas faster and, build a smarter code instead of making it only clear to me. So that's what I'm hoping the coding.

AI will

Sam Hancock: do. So it, it essentially kind of negates the need for like peer programming?

Nina Ajnira Karisik: Maybe in the future? Not yet, but I don't think so. I think it's still a tool we'll be using. But I do think that peer programming is invaluable. I mean, having somebody to bounce ideas off and sharing your stories, I think that that is that will always have a bigger impact than AI would, but it can help you.

It's just like , you have these textbooks and they help you understand code differently or in, in concepts. And, and they explain concepts in detail, but you still need somebody to bounce your ideas off and share what you understood from that concept. So it's a [00:28:00] great tool, but I think we still need our humans.

We,

Vinita Israni: as designers, I think, talk about that a lot with all of the automation that's coming around. Cause I think there's designers that feel like, at least with, you know, certain tools like Canva that make the visual design side of things a lot easier, that that might actually put designers out of a job.

Although I. . I personally don't fully agree with that. Just because I think there is something to be said about the human touch and all of the thinking that goes into that. So can you talk to us a little bit about just your work with designers and. As you know, there's always a strained relationship possibly between developers and designers, but I think there's actually a lot of opportunity there as well to collaborate in a completely

Nina Ajnira Karisik: different.

yes. Sorry. I've studied visual arts and communication design. I've studied that because I was more comfortable with being a designer than saying to people that I'm a programmer because growing up [00:29:00] in that community of even though industries, all you can go into, any industry you wanna go, and there, there are no lows about it, but you still sort of have, you're still encouraged to do things.

that are not very logical. If you're a girl , even though like designing is still extremely logical. That's why I was drawn to it. And when I was younger, the first thing I did with coding I worked with c s s and I would take designs and refresh my website all the time.

And I could see those, I could see the page come to. with the design. So to me, design is extremely important. I am extremely inter minded with it. When I start, when I have an idea and I wanna bring it to life, I first make a wire frame because I cannot start building functionality before I know how it looks.

So I am actually extremely dependent on design. And I think there is a huge bridge. The backend and front end programming and then the [00:30:00] user experience. So to me it is extremely important and what I'm doing, I'm also always talking to designers and then also with developers cuz I do sometimes see myself as somebody who is bridging that gap a little bit.

And I've seen other developers. , bridging the gap as well and communicating more. And I think, well, at least where I'm standing, I do think that this all is designed and program, it's mashing into one and it can't exist on its own. And it's becoming extremely evident that if it's not, if something is not user friendly, , if it works perfectly, it's not gonna be used. So you just wasted your time.

It's a healthy co-dependence.

Yeah. I love that.

Vinita Israni: I think that's super important and it's great that, especially I think working in, in the startup space, design can be used in such a [00:31:00] great way to clarify what the objectives are to clarify. What it is that we're actually making rather than being the, you know, tack on at the end of the aesthetics as well.

So it's great that you've blended both of those in as part of your process and in your process. So I just wanted to ask, what processes or steps can designers start implementing to become more cognizant of the developer's workflow? Cuz I know you've done. The other way around. But from a design perspective, how do you see us working better with the developer's workflow?

What is, what are

Nina Ajnira Karisik: things that we could do? Yes. I think one important thing to do is, well, I think it kind of goes back to user experience, cuz at the end of the day, if it's if it's functional, then I'm, I'm pretty sure every developer is more than happy to develop it if it serves a. If it's, if it actually blends in with the rest of the [00:32:00] functionality.

With the rest of the software, then developers will be more than keen to implement it and it'll be much, it's not, it's not about being keen implementing, it's more about how useful and how much it makes sense. It's sort of like when you go with branding and you're like, oh, does this fit in with the rest of the brand?

It's the same thing. It's just does this fit in with the functionality? Does this make sense? Is this going to take a huge amount of time as well? So we have to be thinking about how something is being processed. So if designers are interested in Del into any topic regarding development is probably how things are processed.

How fast this is gonna load on the page. That's probably extremely useful and it'll not only be really good for developers, but it's actually gonna be extremely good user experience as well. So you are gonna have that like smooth feeling of when you go and on a website around product, you know, oh, this is really cool, this is smooth.

And it's smooth because it, it's actually easily processed. . [00:33:00] And so I

Vinita Israni: wanted to wrap up our session today with one last question, which is what are some resources that you would recommend for us to take a look at from your perspective, whether that's things around fast fashion, whether that's things around development anything that you've really come across that you would as Sam would say, hang your hat on.

Nina Ajnira Karisik: Yes. In general thing that we should all play a little bit more with stable diffusion and see how that works and see how we can play with AI and challenge our creativity and challenge our independence. When it comes to fast fashion, if you wanna know, I love good onya.

It's a really good rating page on finding out what brand is actually walking the walk . And then I love The She Codes website as well. It has a lot of resources. This is She Codes Australia has a lot of resources of women sharing their [00:34:00] stories and how they went into the coding industry from a non-coding background. With what women in Tech in Western Australia is really useful to go and search on and see different talents. and, and see what they're doing in the tech industry. And I think they have a lot of designers as well, which is very useful. If you wanna check out my website, it's called fashionista in danger.com.

It shares a lot of news that deal with human rights issues and also how to express yourself at fashion and how important that is.

Jessica Pang: And that concludes our latest episode of the IxDA Sydney Podcast. You can find the audio transcript for this episode as well as any resources mentioned at ixdasydney.org.

Nina Ajnira Karisik: Hey, I'm Nina and you've been listening to the IxDA Sydney Podcast.