BSC Recordings _ Nici Kelly_Final

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SPEAKERS

Nici Kelly, Jaqui T, Dr. Thomas, Dr. Fowles

Dr. Thomas 00:16

Today's guest is Nici Kelly. Nici has 20 years of experience in full stack software engineering in industries like cybersecurity, health tech, online dating, social media, higher ed, and she's worked for the government. She's done it all. She is the former lead user interface engineer at Amobee, which is the world's leading independent advertising platform located in Silicon Valley, California. Right now, she's focusing on coding evangelism and the company she founded called Gurl Code Academy. And girl is spelled g -u- r- l, because you will want to look that up. Nici believes that teaching Black women to code and helping them leverage that skill set to enter the field of technology is a crucial component to closing the wealth gap in the Black community. You can connect with Nici and learn more about her story on what it's like to be a Black woman in tech on social media. Her YouTube, Instagram and Twitter handles are all Black Gurl Tech. And again, girl is spelled g- u- r- l. We are excited to have you here. Welcome Nici.

Nici Kelly 01:32

Thank you, thank you for having me. I'm excited to get into some, you know, technical topics today.

Dr. Fowles 01:38

Now, I'm excited to get into technical topics, but I'm more excited for people to meet you.

I'm really excited to have you on the show. Because I feel that you are the architect of our generation, right you have, yeah, the keys to literally a code that can create something from nothing. And a lot of people will say that they love technology. They're on social media all the time. I'm a, I'm a content creator. And I really enjoy doing things with with my laptop with my phone, but but you are the person that creates those things that people enjoy. And so I'm really excited for people to to pick your mind and to and to really understand for you what's important now. And also what's coming next. Right?

N Nici Kelly 02:36
Let's do it.

D Dr. Fowles 02:39
Awesome. So today's article that we're going to talk about is a part of our Intellectual Capital Segment. Intellectual Capital Segment, of course, is a discussion where we talk about a research a journey, a current event, or we take a look at an article to to dig a little deeper. So today's article is from CEO world, and it's about the digital skills tech companies are looking for. You're launching a tech company. You're in a tech company. So I think this is right up your alley. So the article really talks about four, four different things that it says that tech companies are looking for. One is a creativity. Two is persuasion, three collaboration and four emotional intelligence. So I'm gonna stop there, because the article is is is short. But like I said, we have somebody that knows what what they're looking for, as they build their own own tech company. So I would start off just by asking you, do you agree with the four buckets that this article listed? And what are you looking for, as you connect with people and build companies?

N Nici Kelly 03:58
I absolutely agree with what the article has kind of laid out. A lot of times people are under the misimpression that in order to work in tech, all you need is technical skills. All you need to do is you know, learn how to code, you know, and you can go and get a job just like that. Not quite. So alongside your technical skills, they're going to be looking for basically what you just listed as soft skills, behavioral skills. A lot of times those skills are evaluated in interviews when folks go to you know, secure a job in tech through kind of behavioral interview questions. They want to know you know, what your, your your team skills are, that will fall in the collaboration bucket, how well you work with a team, how proactive you are, if you're self starter. When it comes to emotional intelligence, they really want to see that you're not a person that Kinda likes to keep yourself in a bubble in a silo. You have good communication skills. You're not just like a walking robot or a

computer, that you're going to be able to communicate cross functionally on teams, you're able to manage up and manage out. So, yeah, especially with the creativity, a part of a lot of technical jobs is about being creative and solving problems, complex computer problems, we're building systems a lot of times, and it calls for a lot of creativity, when it comes to coming up with a wide range of solutions in order to achieve the company goals.

Dr. Fowles 05:41

I think that's, that's interesting, right? Because if I, if I think about the, the TV characters, I know, the movie characters, I know, when you say, Hey, you know, I'm an engineer, I work in computers, it's really, it's always someone that's like, alone in their apartment, like eating chips, it's the exact opposite of what you need. Right? When I when I think when I when I think of an engineer, I don't think of that person that has those soft skills.

Nici Kelly 06:14

You know, it's funny, you say that, because both of those people are represented, I'm not going to say you're not going to find, you know, that stereotypical archetype of what an engineer is. He's usually white, usually male, you know, they portrayed as a guy that lives in his grandmother's basement and has a wall full of screens, and he's socially inept. You will definitely find those people there on teams. But those are the people who typically stay software engineers, they don't move up, they don't move out. They enjoy staying, you know, at the software engineering level, from age 20 to age 50, their content. But if you're looking to move upwards and have like a lot of upward mobility in your career, have to have to have to develop those soft skills in order to go into management, maybe a directorship or be a technical lead, because beyond technical skills, those positions, it's not about your technical skills, it's about your soft skills, and how you deal with people. So you, like I said, you'll find both kind of characters in the office environment.

Dr. Thomas 07:33

I completely agree. But especially if you're managing or if you are, if you're managing people, or if you're managing a project, right, like you need those soft skills, but I almost like don't like the word soft skills, like it makes them seem unimportant. Like, oh, I'm really great in my hard and technical skills. And then people will be exactly like you said, they are like, they'll, they'll sit in, you know, their parents' basement or apartment and just, you know, type away at the computer all day and look at the screen all day and never work on, you know, the way that they think the way that they collaborate with other people, they'll never work on the way that they, you know, come off, right? When they say certain

things when they disagree with someone, I would rather hire someone and try to teach them the hard technical skills. And again, I'm in education. So that may not be something that you're able to do Nici right, because you can't just be like, you're a great person with these soft skills, I'm gonna just bring you on, I'll teach you everything else you need to know, right? But I feel like if you know, you are looking at candidates, for me, in education, I'm kind of ready to make sure that you have the basics of the hard skills, I need the person with the best soft skills. Um, because I just I need you to be emotionally stable. I need you to be a team player. Yes. And I need you to be able to follow directions.

Nici Kelly   08:58

Right, right. Right. And that's understandable. I think in in the tech world. The issue may be more that both of those people have value at certain stages of the lifecycle of a company and a product. So for example, you're probably going to get a company who's maybe just a startup, there's not too much upward mobility really going on. You may be a software engineer where the person directly above you is the CTO. So they like there's really nowhere to go. So they're really not, you know, really checking so much for those soft skills, because they're in there in a build, build Build Mode, so they don't really care. You know, what's your emotional intelligence is looking like, at that point, they're not caring about what corporate company culture is looking like because Okay, there's just five of us. You know what I'm saying I just need to hire this person who I know can get heads down in weeds build quick, fast get out, I'm not worried about the other stuff. But then later on in the company's history when Okay, now we have 1000 employees, 2000 employees, there are six people between us and you know, the CTO. So now you have upward mobility. Now you're working with a lot more people, teams are cross functional. Team sizes are anywhere from five, seven, you know, nine people, it matters, you know, more then so I really think it depends on where exactly the company is on its its growth and scale roadmap.

Dr. Fowles   10:36

I think, I think there's interesting to think about what, like, these buckets will look like moving forward. Something like how do we build soft skills in quarantine? Like, how do we portray these skills when when we're behind screens all the time, but I think that that's something that could come across often, especially like you're talking about where, you know, lots of tech spaces have been remote for a really long time.

Nici Kelly   11:06

Right, and I've actually worked remote, quite a bit in my career. So one thing that I find

working remote is that it benefits one type of personality versus the other. So the person that does best in you know, in person engagement, very talkative, very charming, has a lot of personality, you know, you thrive you do well there, but then there are those people who do better with written word. So, you know, we're using tools like Slack and Microsoft Teams, etc. Those people may thrive better, you know, working remote, you know, just being able to type their thoughts out and you know, you know what they're working with all day. But that still doesn't preclude you know, the jerkiness or any some kind of personality flaw or defect from coming out, it will show itself, it may take a little bit longer, but it will definitely show itself. For example, I just recently had an experience at my last employer where I was managing a team of seven men. And as a Black woman, that's kind of unheard of in tech. And all the men that I was managing were white males. And there was one that always challenged me. So whenever I typed an idea, or you know, wanted to have my say, with the team, or kind of give the team direction on what we were going to do, he would always be the first one typing back at me furiously, and you can tell his tone, you can tell you know that he was being pushing back just for the sake of pushing back. And some, even as their technical lead. For him my ideas was just never good enough. And we had never engaged or spoke in person. It was all through, you know, typed words.

D Dr. Fowles 13:01

I imagine inserting the Kermit emoji.

N Nici Kelly 13:05

Mm hmm. Definitely. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

D Dr. Thomas 13:08

Yes. His hands flopping up and down.

N Nici Kelly 13:10

Yes. Because it the pushback would come quick today. Like, dang, I just like I just said that two minutes ago. Like, you could have let it marinate.

Jaqui T 13:21

Right.

Dr. Thomas 13:21

So Nici? What does it look like in the tech industry when someone is lacking soft skills? And what does it look like when they're lacking hard skills?

Nici Kelly 13:32

Okay, so lacking soft skills, I can give you a good example of myself. I did five years working in Cisco in the cybersecurity industry. And I want to say about midpoint of my career, I kind of shut myself off, I was a bit shut down. siloed. My coworkers kind of felt like they didn't know me. I wasn't a very expressive I didn't share about my life. I just came in, did my work, go home, it was kind of that, you know, sometimes in the Black community, we are kind of taught that you go to work, to do your work and go home, you don't go to work to make friends. Now in the technology industry that can get you in trouble, especially if you're looking to be promoted and to move forward. My negative experience came about one day when my boss called me in the office and he said, You know, we're reorganizing the teams, and all the project managers have said, they don't want to work with you. And I'm like, What are you talking about? I'm your top UI engineer. I do my work. Like, I'm damn good. Like, you need to give me something else. Some other kind of data to let me know what I did for you to you know, be saying this to me. And he really didn't quite have the data. But when it came down to it after I did some investigation of my own after asking him Okay, who said this about me? So I talked to these women. And it was, oddly enough, it was women in the office who-

Dr. Thomas 15:04

Wow.

Nici Kelly 15:05

Right women that I did not work with closely. They weren't on directly on my team. But they were just kind of mad because I wasn't around the office ke keeing with them. Like, they felt like they didn't know me like it's one, it's one of those things where if you're not being social around the office and tech, you'll get dinged. You have to do the social part, and build relationships, if that means you're going out on Monday or Tuesday, Wednesday, you know, after work, to have, you know, a beer with your colleagues, or just going being around the office talking, you know, with the other women in the office who may be non technical, you may be the technical one, they may be non technical, but they're the influencer. They're the influencers, to the upper leadership, that make decisions, when it comes time to do things like reorg, whatever. And if they don't know you

on a social level, it could preclude you from being promoted, being put on the right team, or given more challenging work. So that's what not having the soft skills looks like. It can hold you back a lot. If people just don't know you socially. Not having the hard skills looks more like I would say, maybe being given a project and you not having the right tools to get the project done, or the tasks done. But in that sense, you have a little bit more runway, because you will, you know, in some cases be given the opportunity to go learn whatever it is you need to learn real quick, say I, you know, have a project and I need to use Bootstrap or Angular or React, okay, they'll say, you know, you may have two or three days to go on your own, or company time, you know, go read the documentation, go play with it, go learn it. So, you know, in a week's time, we can start this this project

D **Dr. Thomas** 17:21
Okay

N **Nici Kelly** 17:21
so there's more leeway there, when it comes to the hard skills, they'll give you an opportunity to learn. Often companies have learning and development departments where you can go log into a company, account of Udemy, or their own learning and development platform to where you can level up your skills to prepare you for future work.

D **Dr. Thomas** 17:45
And I guess it's just like anywhere else, like employers are expecting to work with you and expecting like, you not to be the perfect candidate. And they can they can teach you a little bit if you if you come with a little bit.

N **Nici Kelly** 17:58
Yeah, they're they're very much when it comes to hiring, you know, if you're not 100%, on all the hard skills, you know, they may do an 80 20 rule, you know, kind of like relationships, like, okay, we know the 20% that he or she doesn't know, we can work with that we can get them up to speed, you know, etc. But you're more likely to get fired for your soft skills being off than your hard skills. And if you do get fired for your hard skills being off, it takes a lot. It's like, you literally created a bug or something like that, that's so egregious. You know that-- Like you, you coded something really, really wrong.

Dr. Thomas 18:47

That makes me feel like there are you know, they're probably Black women, Black men, Black people who are like, I want to go into the tech industry, but I'm not going to apply for these jobs until I can do this thing perfect, right? And it sounds like if you have some good knowledge of it, and you got some good work skills, soft skills, you should apply for the job.

Nici Kelly 19:09

So let me give people the cheat code, because I use this all the time. Look, if you're looking at a specific position, look at the job requirements for the hard skills, whatever it is, learn enough to be dangerous. Enough to get through the interview and you can worry about the rest later. It hasn't it hasn't failed me yet, honestly, because there's so much information out there on the web, down to what the interview questions are going to be-- that you can pretty much find that, you know, it's not about so much learning the technology sometimes it's about learning the interview, especially when it comes to getting jobs in what we call FAANG companies. So that's Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, Google is when you're going for the job. It's not about showing them that you could do the job. It's about showing it learning the interview, and how to get through the interview. Because a lot of times, they're not interviewing for the job or interviewing for complex coding skills. Like they're giving you all these brain teaser questions that you have to answer. So, yeah.

Dr. Thomas 20:25

Right

Dr. Fowles 20:25

Y'all just got the cheat code.

Dr. Thomas 20:27

And I feel like some of these technical skills that are talked about in the article are needed across industries. Do you ever see people leave your like, kind of tech industry field and then go other places to help out?

Nici Kelly 20:45

I would say yes, so there's a statistic currently, especially when it comes to women, that women in this field only stay for about 10 years. And then either due to like family planning, maybe lack of upward mobility, we exit. So I've seen you know, other women, you know, go on to do, you know, a whole wide range of different things after being you know, in industry for 10-15 years, I myself, I kind of went far past, you know, that statistic, I made it 20 years moving up and out of corporate America, but I'm still staying in my vertical of technology. So, a lot of times, that's an option. Also, people are just tired of working for someone else. And they have their own ideas, you know, for software, technology innovation that they want to pursue. And you know, they've decided, you know, what, now's the time.

D **Dr. Fowles**   21:54

So we're gonna take a quick break. And after the break, we're going to get into your educational journey, we're going to talk about your passion for helping Black women get into the tech world, and a little bit more about that. So after this quick break, we'll get into all of that.

D **Dr. Thomas**   22:16

Have you ever felt the need to let people know who you are and who you are not in a professional setting? Well, now you can with a critical race theorist or a culturally relevant pedagogist tee. Get your swag and stay motivated at staymotivatedandrisetogether.com/shop. All right, we are back. So we're gonna get into our community capital segment where we talk about a Black professionals' journey, and professional lessons that they've learned as they have progressed, and today we are going to hear about your journey Nici. So the first question I have is, can you describe your educational path? How you chose you institutions, majors, degree plans, all of that? Why did you go into tech?

N **Nici Kelly**   23:07

So that's a good story. So I like to tell the story a lot. I'm sure everyone has heard of Ciara and Russell Wilson, and you know, the future. So I'd like to compare the start the start of my story to as an analogy to that. My mom- She went off to college and my dad, he was local, and he was kind of the bad boy. And I arrived, but five years later, you know, she married the Russell Wilson. She went got her the smart, nerdy guy, you know, and he ended up being a programmer analyst for Reader's Digest. So I was heavily influenced by my stepfather and his, you know, daily work. We had computers all around the home. And I'd say by the time I was my early teens, you know, I was into video games, I wasn't quite

your, you know, your average kid that was gonna go outside and play. You know, I'm on the Super Nintendo, you know, you know, the Atari, GameCube, Dreamcast, all of those things. And you know, my parents really just recognized that, okay, she's not quite like the other kids. So we're nurture this. And they put me in- by the time I was 15 years old. They put me in a program at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York, called the science technology enrichment program. And they were family friends, she wrote she ran the program and what that was on the weekends, and then for, I think, was like maybe two to four weeks over the summer. I was on Marist College's campus. They were exposing us to STEM topics, letting us use a computer lab. And I gravitated to the computer lab. So it got to the point where even outside of the program, my mother would let me walk down the hill to Maris campus, I had a college badge from being in the program, I would just spend hours down there in the computer lab. So just that exposure, and by the time I was ready to go off to college, I had taken you know, classes like AutoCAD in high school, I also had an entrepreneurial spirit. So I was in programs like Future Business Leaders of America and high school, etc. And I just decided to major in computer science, especially after my grandmother bought me a computer for my 17th birthday. And at that time, you had to install your own media kit. So I kind of took the computer apart, you know, put it back together again, all that good stuff, got familiar with the operating system, in like I said, but then I went off to college as a computer science major, had it in my head, like, Oh, I'm gonna go work for Lockheed Martin, you know, that kind of stuff. But I ended up coming home on a break one day and my dad had a HTML CSS JavaScript book sitting on his desk, I picked it up and I began to read it. And that was the beginning of my interest in web development, because I read that book in two days, and then turned around and went and build websites for the school's gospel choir, my sorority chapter website, and other NPHC organization websites, Black Student Union, and which led me to be getting the job in the Career Services Department at the University, doing web development. So that's how I got my start. And you know, while I was doing my studies, I also always freelanced and kind of had my own business and my entrepreneurial side of doing websites for other people. And that's how I helped put myself through school. So by the time I graduated, I had a portfolio of work that I had done. And I didn't have to rely on here my grades, and here's my coursework. No, I have a professional body of work immediately coming out of school, to where and I'm going to be honest, my grades weren't the best. I barely graduated by the skin of my teeth. But coming out, my you know, the first employer I went for, was Cupid.com, which was one of the first online dating sites to exist. The CTO, he didn't care what my educational, you know, background look like, because I was able to hand him a portfolio of sites that I had done, and I could prove that I could do the work despite what my GPA said.

D Dr. Fowles   27:55

So I'm gonna jump in right here, I'm gonna talk directly to all my Black student unions, all my students orgs. This is why we tell you that your organization is needs to be on point. Because while you're running around campus, doing all of your your events and all that. This is somebody's bodies of work. This is this is your body of work that you can use to accelerate your career. And, and I've heard this story over and over again, the people that are doing well, in the future, they get their starts right on campus, right.

N   Nici Kelly   28:30

That's those are opportunities I created for myself, every time I embedded myself in a campus organization. That's how I provided value.

D   Dr. Thomas   28:38

Let's talk about what you're doing. Now. Tell us about coding evangelism. And I'm gonna get this exactly right girl Code Academy with the girl spelt with G- U- R- L.

N   Nici Kelly   28:49

Right. So I like to call myself a coding evangelist, because I'm just an, you know, like to evangelize for Black people, especially Black women to learn how to code and just begin that journey of upgrading their technical skills skills for the future. So we all know that the the time is coming where automation is going to kill a lot of jobs. And unfortunately, that automation is going to be done in the sectors where Black and Brown folks over index. In, you know, low income jobs that can quickly be automated. So, I like to focus on you know, people who are interested in transitioning their careers, I might not have said this 10 to 15 years ago, you do not need to go to university and get a full out Computer Science degree in order to get into this industry. There's other pathways. Now you can go through a coding bootcamp. You can be self taught, I've worked with all sorts of colleagues where You know, I sit down, day one on a job, what's your background? Oh, I majored in business. I majored in art, you know, yet, they still found their way into a programming or coding position. And sometimes, you know, you may be sitting next to the guy that only has a high school diploma, but because he was coding since he was 15, you know, he's sitting next to you, he's your peer, he's making just as much money as you are. So I like to tell people all the time, like, it's very possible to get into this industry, but you still have to have the aptitude, don't get me wrong, you have to have the patience, you have to like the job, I would not suggest getting into this industry, for someone who's just in it for the money, you're going to be miserable. Yes, it's a high paying, you know, kind of high powered job. But if you don't have the patience for it, if you don't have the aptitude for it, you're going to be miserable. It's long hours, you know, it's it's mind numbing at times,

sometimes just sitting staring at your screen for three days until the solution for whatever the problem is they're trying to solve, you know, comes to you. That could be three days, that could be a week, it could be two weeks, before, you know you're able to solve the problem. So I just say that to say, I really want to see more Black women in tech, especially, because it's a pathway to more wealth. If we, you know, talk about the wealth gap in this country, in order to close that, you have to have income. And you know, no one is building wealth off of 30-40k a year salaries, which is about the median income of the Black family household right now. So if we can increase, you know, they'll salaries to over six figures that will give people the opportunity to save more, maybe build more wealth, etc. and technical jobs will allow for that.

D **Dr. Fowles**   32:00

Let me let me jump in here and ask you this, because we started off this episode, describing some of these soft skills, some of these hard skills, you know, broadly, right? Now, I really want to, we're talking directly to Black people right now, what will be the four buckets that you will give a Black person to make sure that they do these things if they're stepping into the space? Are they the same? Are they slightly different based on on your own experience

N **Nici Kelly**   32:37

Um, I would say, it's still a good parallel, you have to get the hard skills, that's number one, and learn but you still have to, you know, work on those soft skills to make yourself an attractive hire. It's not enough to just say, Oh, I can code you still have to, you know, work on your emotional intelligence, your, your persuasive ability, your creativity. For example, if you're going through a boot camp, they're going to teach you how to code, they may not necessarily teach you how to do the job. So you still kind of have to go outside of that to get additional skill sets, like going to get a mentor, I always recommend that people that are in boot camps, go get a mentor, number one, number two, start working on your personal brand. That's very important, especially in 2020. With social media, these recruiters and these hiring managers will Google you in a heartbeat. And if you know, they see stuff that doesn't align with their company values, what they're going to say is no matter how good your hard skills are, you're not a culture fit. So I know how to play that game. I've learned it early. And a lot of times, getting and keeping jobs in tech is about knowing how to play the game, the social game, but code switching game. It's all very much relevant on top of the hard skills,

D **Dr. Fowles**   34:12

we wear the mask,

N Nici Kelly 34:13

I personally don't, I don't take the approach of getting mad and offended that I have to go code switch, you know that I have to wear the mask, like the long-- look, think about your long term play what is really your goal working in the industry. And I think people have to think about that early and often. And play to that don't be afraid to be the unicorn. Don't be afraid to be the only Black person in on the team in the in the organization or in the company. You know, use that opportunity as your moment to stand out to shine to show out

D Dr. Fowles 34:53

I wanted to ask you two things kind of in closing and to wrap us up a little bit. The first is, tell us a little about, tell us a little bit about what's next. I know that you're spending some late nights doing some amazing things. So give you the opportunity to share what you're doing. Right? And then also follow that up with what do you want to leave people with, right in terms of like a tangible lesson that we can kind of chew on for a bit after this episode is done

N Nici Kelly 35:29

Awesome. So what am I doing now? So as you introduced me, former lead UI engineer at amobee, I left amobee in May, because I wanted to do my own startup, I've been up all kinds of hours at night, my bedtimes, I'm looking more like 6am these days. Yes, I'm totally flipped, like, I'm getting my my first wind at like eight, nine o'clock, and up to six, seven o'clock in the morning, and I'm sleeping through the day. So I'm just excited about it. I'm excited about the product. I'm excited about my team, I just brought on two co founders have my chief insurance policy officer. And then I also have a head data scientist is going to be working on my artificial intelligence, data science work, for risk analysis, etc, for the insurance policy. So I'm really excited about it.

D Dr. Fowles 36:32

What's the final thought that we want to leave people with today? You talked a little bit about hard skills, talked about soft skills. But I guess I'll ask this what why why do you think tech is so important moving forward? And what do you want people to do within the space?

Nici Kelly 36:53

I think tech is important, because tech will give you the opportunity to do things on your own terms. It's such a broad field, you can get into tech with technical skills you can get in tech with non technical skills. There's plenty of jobs that are not technical project management, product ownership, user experience design, you know, so many jobs that folks can get and you could really be proactive, kind of take the bulls by the horn, and carve out your own lane. Your own path. Your own destiny is really like a manifest destiny type of situation. And you can use it to level up not only you know, income wise, wealth wise, education wise, lots of opportunities. Again, for you know, having these companies pay for your master's degree. It's a doctoral degree, like, they got budgets, like big budgets for continuing education for their employees as as part of the benefit package, so you can really just carve your own story.

Dr. Thomas 38:13

Thank you so much for your time. We are so excited about what we learned. And we're excited for what our listeners are gonna get on today's episode. And with that, we are out.

Dr. Fowles 38:28

We hope you enjoy today's show. Remember, the way we build social capital is to build self and build others. We're sure you got some notes on your tablet, computer or even using a pen and paper. Leave us a review, continue the conversation on social media @BlackSocialCap, and share the show with someone you know. Until the next episode, stay motivated and rise together.

Dr. Thomas 38:53

This is Black Social Capital.