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Breaking Bold: This Female Founder Taps An Underutilized Startup Resource—Women!

Photo credit: Vanessa Plakias, SLO LIFE Magazine

Kristen Hazard is a lawyer and environmentalist, turned hard-core coder. She self-taught herself Ruby on Rails, Postgresql, MySQL, JavaScript, CSS and HTML, in order to launch Suntoucher Software, a successful environmental compliance consulting firm.

When Fortune 150 PG&E needed an environmental compliance reporting app, it turned to Suntoucher. The app proved so valuable that PG&E expanded its use to a multitude of construction projects. Over the next five years, Kristen's solution was used to submit over 50,000 reports and upload over 300,000 photos from more than 600 users from 30 companies.

As PG&E's aggressive usage proved the app's scalability and extensibility, Kristen recognized that a global opportunity existed. At the time, field biologists were still utilizing old-school data gathering techniques and then storing their data via inaccessible PDFs. What began as a tool to better serve one of her consulting clients turned into a cutting-edge software solution for the entire $30 billion environmental compliance industry. With this realization, Kristen promptly shut down her consultancy and launched Wildnote, as a Benefit Corporation.

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Another inspiring aspect of Kristen's company is that all the senior executives are women. In fact, women comprised 65% of all Wildnote's employees. I spoke with Anita Henry, who heads up Wildnote's marketing efforts and asked her how the team came together. According to Anita, "The core team assembled itself. Kristen is like a magnet for talented, tech-minded women who enjoy a challenge, love learning and have incredible grit and fortitude. I think she embodies the kind of leader and employer that women traditionally find hard to come by – and in the tech world, are real unicorns."

Doing Well By Doing Good—Serving All Your Stakeholders Always Pays Off

"After earning degrees in Mechanical Engineering and Law, I became fascinated by the challenges of Silicon Valley startups and programming. I began to invest my time bridging the gap between what people wanted and the code that created it." Kristen Hazard, Founder & CEO, Wildnote

John Greathouse: Hey Kristen - thanks for taking the time to connect. I know you're crazy busy, so let's jump in with Wildnote's origin story. *(Note: Kristen's remarks have been lightly edited for brevity and readability.)*

Kristen Hazard: Thanks John. It's been a long and winding road to Wildnote. I'm not your typical young, just out of college entrepreneur. I turned 50 this year so you can guess at all the twists and turns.

I studied Mechanical Engineering in undergrad and then went on to law school on a save-the-world kind of impulse. After law school, as I was awaiting my bar results… I was desperate for work. The Bay Area was so expensive, even back then. I got hired at a startup. And to my great joy and surprise I was a natural at programming. I really enjoyed it. Way more than law. I went all in.

A few years later I moved to my hometown of San Luis Obispo, CA and eventually founded a software consulting firm. At the same time, in true hustler fashion, I became a principal at an environmental consulting firm.

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Greathouse: I won't hold your law degree against you, but I'm glad you left the dark side... You have a great value prop, as you're making regulations more efficient and more effective, by surfacing data that was previously buried in static documents. I assume everyone, irrespective of their view of regulations in general, are supportive of Wildnote's mission.

Hazard: You bring up an interesting point. Surfacing buried data is one of the great things about Wildnote. We open up data by making it extremely accessible and easily retrievable, *and* also makes it consistent, which is a huge value-add for analyzing data. We know our platform makes the process of tracking environmental compliance between 40-80% more efficient. I think everyone can get behind that.

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I would venture to ask, "Who can afford not to?" We really see our platform as a way to help the regulated, the regulators and the community; all parties can meet their respective goals to protect the environment.

Greathouse: Your early employees were motivated to join (Wildnote) because of the company's environmental mission, but you've matured from (being a) nascent startup to a venture in growth mode. To continue growing, you have to hire folks who are looking more for a job and less for an "adventure." How have you adjusted to this transition and what do you do to keep everyone on your team motivated?

Hazard: Wildnote has been through a few ups and downs. Being mission driven has attracted some pretty spectacular talent – and I can tell you it's the mission driven employees that stick around and make it work no matter what. For some employees, the mission seems to bring a little extra juice to their work because they feel they are contributing to something larger than themselves.

In our current growth mode, our funding allows us the stability to hire people looking for a more traditional "job" environment. All of our employees thrive on challenge and stretching themselves which is an absolute necessity for a startup.

Greathouse: I understand you initially intended to bootstrap Wildnote. However, you recently raised a Seed round with Entrada Ventures. What caused you to take on a VC investment? *(Note: I'm an Advisory Partner at Entrada.)*

Hazard: As an independently minded, single founder that had already successfully built another lifestyle business, I thought I was going to bootstrap Wildnote into a second lifestyle business. Even though it is pretty obvious that paper-based data management is inefficient and ineffective, it turns out that environmental consultants are just late adopters of technology.

So, we were able to bootstrap Wildnote to an alpha test state but, when a market is young like this, it requires extensive resources to educate the public and innovate the product for adoption. So just like the industry has to grow into the possibilities, I had to grow into the possibilities too and open up to getting investment capital to make this thing happen.

A big part of that growth happened during our three-month accelerator with Heritage Group, powered by Techstars. What a great program: we learned so much, filled some gaps in our business plan, and graduated with the bonus of securing our Seed Round funding with Entrada Ventures and Heritage Group Ventures.

Greathouse: Yea, missionary selling is tough. What did you find most challenging about the fundraising process - anything you'd do differently next time?

Hazard: Next time? You're kidding, right? <laughing> Once I realized that this was not going to be the set-it-up-and-let-it-run-itself lifestyle enterprise I first envisioned, it was either quit, or grow. I realized that bringing technology to a pen and paper industry would require a huge amount of effort. With that came the need to learn *a lot*!

But I just wouldn't quit. Fortunately, some incredible mentors and advisors also began to show up about that time. By then, I have to admit, I had gotten in way over my head financially with my self-

funding of the business. But as Wildnote joined the SLO HotHouse, and then Techstar's programs, I started to see Wildnote as a much bigger opportunity in terms of market size and potential as well as in terms of contributing something good to the world. I had to learn to tell that story with vision and metrics that investors could get behind, because at that point, it wasn't going to happen without them.

Greathouse: Wildnote is effectively creating a new category. This can be a blessing and a curse - in what ways have you overcome the inertia inherent in missionary selling?

> *"Our biggest success so far has come from early adopters. Customers who are comfortable with technology and can see the massive benefits a digital solution can provide."*

Hazard: Great question. Our biggest success so far has come from early adopters. Customers who are comfortable with technology and can see the massive benefits a digital solution can provide. Once the early adopters get the program in place we tend to have quite a few converts because the less adventurous can follow their example. Sometimes you've gotta see it to believe it. At that point it's a simple math problem; is savings in time and money plus increased accuracy greater than the effort to change?

Greathouse: You established Wildnote as a Benefit Corp and you're in the process of converting it to a B Corp. How difficult has it been to ensure that your efforts benefit all of your stakeholders?

Hazard: It's not difficult at all and, in fact, B Corp guidelines have helped me understand what it really means to benefit all stakeholders, which is a benefit and B Corp principle… a business that supports society and makes money too. That's the vision. It just makes sense to me that all stakeholders, all engaged parties, should benefit from any relationship, whether it be business or personal. The B Corp certification will probably be the hardest part because we have to prove that we are conducting ourselves as a B Corp.

Greathouse: Love it. Doing well by doing good.

All of Wildnote's senior executives are women. Was this by design? What advantages have you derived from heading up an all-female executive team?

Hazard: Yes. Our leadership team is all women at the moment. Of our fourteen employees, nine are women. In a technology company! And I do not think it is a coincidence that we often find ourselves meeting with women that are leading their environmental consulting firms as well. One advantage is that we all work at our highest potential because we are free from ingrained hierarchies. With an all-woman leadership team, we feel free to work to our highest potential and work together in a naturally cooperative manner.

Greathouse: I'm sure it has changed over time, but what is the current profile of the ideal Wildnote customer?

Hazard: Our ideal customer is managing a large-scale environmental compliance project - lots of data, lots of reporting, and lots of scrutiny on the results. It could be a restoration project (such as restoring wetlands) or an infrastructure improvement project (like building a desalination plant or high speed rail). Both types of projects require a lot of data to be collected, usually with big field teams deployed; they have a lot of eyes on the project including the general public, and they require consistent reporting to regulatory agencies and other stakeholders.

These types of projects are also where our vision of creating a digital standard that works all the way through, from the field data collection to the various regulatory agencies, which has the potential to transform the process in profoundly beneficial ways. The ability to access and share data can help break through costly bottlenecks and delays and also reduce duplication of efforts across agencies. Our dream is to elevate the free flow of information between all parties working toward a more pristine environment and sustainable world.

You can follow John on Twitter: @johngreathouse.

Image credit: Vanessa Plakias, SLO LIFE Magazine