

**EPISODE 1387**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[00:00:00] KP:** Internships can be an incredibly valuable resource to new professionals and are often the first professional work experience for many participants. Yet, it's often the case that internship programs are suboptimal. Employers don't always provide a clear path to success for the intern. Interns in turn don't always have a resource to reach out to for help or even know that it's okay to do that. Nikita Gupta is the co-founder and CTO at Symba, a company that provides an all in one platform for managing talent development programs. We talk about what makes a good internship, how Symba helps facilitate that, and her journey as an entrepreneur.

[INTERVIEW]

**[00:00:41] KP:** Nikita, welcome to Software Engineering Daily.

**[00:00:44] NG:** Hi, Kyle, thanks so much for having me. Honored to be here and excited to have a great conversation.

**[00:00:49] KP:** Well, congratulations as well on the recent launch.

**[00:00:52] NG:** Thank you.

**[00:00:53] KP:** Why don't we get into what Symba is for listeners who don't already know.

**[00:00:58] NG:** Of course, so Symba, not for the Lion King, is for symbiotic relationships. And it stems from my personal story, which was when I was a software engineer, I was able to, and had a great opportunity to intern for a lot of large companies as well as small companies when I was in college, and even in high school. But the problem was that there weren't many people that look like me and that was a narrative that I wanted to change.

In addition, my co-founder, Ahva, who is Symba's CEO as well, she was one of the first remote interns for the Department of State about a decade ago. And if you can imagine the government

having a remote internship program is a big deal. It was a small program, a small cohort, but now has grown to over thousands of students large and it's exciting to see that expansion. So, both of us knowing how important internships were us to help us determine what we wanted out of our career and we wanted to be able to allow companies to be able to scale their programs, and offer these for students all over the world. And what Symba is doing is we are turning over the traditional 12-week summer internship where a student has to come into the office, sit down over TED, and now helping companies build these cohort-based learning experiences and design the best ones, so that way they can hire a talent all year round, and just continue improving their diversity in their organizations and nurturing future leaders.

**[00:02:27] KP:** Moving to an all year-round model seems to open a lot of opportunities, but also conflicts with the notion that an intern might be in school and that's what makes the summer free. In reality, what is it like? What are people doing outside of internships? Or maybe they're not? What's the typical model?

**[00:02:44] NG:** So, a company can have actually an internship program any time of the year, it really just depends on are you giving those students impactful work that is driving the company forward and making that student feel like they're making a contribution. So, first of all, internship programs can be part time, which will allow the student table to get some experience even while they're on campus. And then even continue that experience full time in the summer and then part time again back in the fall. And that is how companies are able to engage with a lot of talent all year round, because they're able to continue having these students work for more than just those 10 to 12 weeks.

Secondly, these cohort-based programs are not just internships that are for college students. What we're seeing even on Symba is high school students are going through these mentorship and professional development programs. Moms who are trying to get back into the industry are also getting these many internship experiences and even veterans too, so call it mentorship program, call it apprenticeship program, a rotational program or an internship program, it really just comes down to this cohort-based learning experience that companies can offer to talent all around.

**[00:03:51] KP:** What types of companies are you looking to work with?

**[00:03:54] NG:** So, Symba is actually supporting industries or companies across all different industries. We are industry agnostic. We work with companies in the pharmaceutical space and technology space, but it is for companies who are investing and ready to nurture this talent. Excuse My French, but we don't work with companies who just hire these students to get shit done. We work with companies who are excited to grow that talent. So, industry agnostic, but definitely programs that are focused more on technology. We support students who are doing software engineering, internships, marketing, internships, business, finance, and so much more. But basically, the type of work that can be done on a computer and not so much hands on, as you can imagine construction or something in the medical field.

**[00:04:38] KP:** Is there any process you have for vetting or checking with companies to ensure that they have this ideal path laid out?

**[00:04:45] NG:** So, that is all part of our sales process. And the companies who fit in our profile are companies that have at least 20 students in their cohort. We even support organizations that have upwards of 5,000 or even 100,000 for some cases as well, especially these types of organizations that are growing over the next couple of years. But throughout the sales process, we work really closely with the program coordinators and the HR teams to understand how they're investing and nurturing this talent. And then what the excitement that they have to create these best experiences and use Symba to do that.

Before we even started building the product, my co-founder and I sat down with over 250 HR leaders, and created mock ups of our platform and got them to really give us great feedback on what was working and what wasn't. We've realized that companies need to invest and track these different metrics, have a good onboarding program, keep their students engaged, and Symba is helping them do that in the best way.

**[00:05:45] KP:** When I think of an internship, I think of kind of a, not a primary contributor, but like a singular thing. My friends that got internships in college, they were just them going to a company, maybe there was a project, or maybe they were doing some remedial kinds of stuff. You're describing as a cohort; can you expand on how that's different from just the traditional idea I have in my head?

**[00:06:07] NG:** Of course. So, by cohort, I mean, a company that has hired a handful of students. For those startups or one-off internships where it was just you as the only intern, we wouldn't really consider that a cohort. But part of Symba is that we are helping companies engage and retain their talent. And that comes with when they're able to connect their students with other fellow students who are also going through that same experience. We have supported small startups that have had one or two interns at a time. They have been able to derive value out of Symba. But the larger companies who have more students who are really also trying to invest in creating a community together, where they're learning off of each other, sharing skills, collaborating projects, those are the types of companies that have these cohorts where a handful of participants are at a time, and that's how we grow with them.

**[00:06:58] KP:** So, Symba is a platform. Could you describe the user experience when interacting with it?

**[00:07:05] NG:** Symba is a web-based application, and it is the platform that's helping companies design and curate the best experience. We support three different types of your user interfaces. So, we are an enterprise SAS platform, we'll sell our platform and license it out to a company. Let's just say for example, that has this 100-student internship program. And we built Symba with three different types of user interfaces. One for the administrator, which is the program coordinator, or any leader on the HR team that wants oversight and is responsible for curating that internship experience. Then secondly, we have the manager and that is the full-time employee, that mentor or that manager that is working with an intern on a day to day basis. And then lastly, the intern user.

All three of them are able to come to their private instance on Symba, receive their onboarding tasks, their guides, their documents, engage in discussion boards, forums, learning center, jam packed with lots of videos and tools for them, as well as create projects and get assigned to projects, even track your feedback and performance on each of those projects. And then most importantly, building that community learning what other skills, other fellow interns are great at, who you can go to for a question, and staying engaged with them even post the program. And what we're seeing on Symba was that we have helped our customers improve their conversion rates by 20%. Now, their students were even more engaged than ever before, just because of

the nature of how the internships were over the past year, year and a half. Our users are logging into the platform at least six times a day. So, that's a great indicator of some of the engagement that we have on Symba.

**[00:08:45] KP:** Definitely, what are some of the activities those users who log in on a daily basis are engaging in?

**[00:08:52] NG:** So, for example, if a manager is creating a project, and they're assigning it to the intern, the intern can log in and check out their project, upload their submissions, let their manager know if they're stuck, and they need help. When I was an intern, I was afraid to let my manager know that I needed help and I was also nervous that I had to wait until the next one on one meeting that I had that could have been a week away or even two weeks away. So, we've made it really easy for interns and managers to engage to get their work done and stay productive, as well as an intern who wants to meet another intern who has a skill in Python, so that way, they can collaborate on a project together, or happen to be in the same city and like to run around the city. They can go and do those types of activities together.

And then also, let's just say, an intern gets their offer in December or January, but the program doesn't start until May. How can companies stay engaged with that town for five months? So, instead of the administrators having to send the interns five to seven emails on average, they have now this onboarding portal on Symba, which we call the Launchpad where I'm able to access all the important documents that I need, get some tasks setup there as well, and just stay engaged with those program coordinators so I can be ready as an intern on day one and ready to go and succeed.

**[00:10:08] KP:** So, if I'm a student or maybe one of those other personas you'd mentioned like a stay at home parent that wants to get back into industry or switch jobs or something, where does my journey with Symba begin?

**[00:10:19] NG:** So, the journey with Symba begins after that company has hired and extended that offer letter to that program participant. Symba comes into play, post recruiting or matchmaking. We have actually worked and partnered with some incredible firms that help companies find talent. But where Symba comes in is once that talent has been hired, everything

from their offer letters, you starting on day one and beyond, that's where they are looped into Symba. Managers and admins will continue staying on Symba as long as they are managing that program or working with those program participants within those cohorts of those participants are the ones that are going in and out, staying engaged as alumni, or coming on board as new students.

**[00:11:00] KP:** You'd mentioned conversion rate is one of the metrics. Can you talk about what's being converted there? Is that from offer letter to acceptance?

**[00:11:07] NG:** Yes. So, accepting the offer letter and accepting that offer, to join as another full-time member is what we're helping companies to track and help companies improve. With the current situation and companies losing talent, and a lot of challenges wanting to experience and hop from one company to another, Symba's serving that placeholder where we're able to curate that best experience, and then understand these different types of metrics.

Early on in the program, instead of having to wait for a mid-program check in or an end of program check in, what Symba's able to track is how those students are doing from day one. Are they meeting with their manager on a regular basis? What types of skills are they working on or nurturing? Are they working on impactful projects? The manager can also record if that intern is even trending towards a full time offer, and what strengths or weaknesses they find in the intern every two weeks that they wanted through some pulse surveys on Symba.

So, when we spoke with these dozens and hundreds of HR leaders, we realized that each program is different. There's no standard template that can be applied to all. But there were these different metrics that matter to each company to understand the success of their program. So, we've been able to implement these pulse surveys, these tracking, collecting all this data into beautiful dashboards, that really helps the company from early on, understand what's going on with their program, to be able to continue improving it and helping them convert that intern into a full-time employee.

Over \$50,000 on average is going into investing just on that intern. If you count just the intern salary and their relocation costs. But if you even look into the manager salary, it's well over \$100,000 per intern, and what's invested from a company's end. So, when companies are

investing so much money, they want to be able to see a return of that and as well as nurture these leaders because they'll be coming back as full time later on.

**[00:12:58] KP:** So that path is a common one. I know a lot of people who started as an intern and got their first job that way, and we're really grateful to have that path for them. But it's not necessarily a case an internship could be a learning experience that then I take those and go elsewhere, and which isn't necessarily a bad outcome for the employer or the intern. What do typical outcomes look like? Is it a company is trying to hire the majority of interns? Is one in four on average? What are some of the general stats?

**[00:13:25] NG:** So, that really depends on each company. Definitely, it's going to hurt a company, if they hire everyone just for the sake of having a high retention rate. What they're able to track now, which they weren't able to do before is that performance and progress. They want to make sure that they're bringing on those rights students as full-time employees, those that are excited about the work that they were doing, and are staying engaged with the rest of the company. For some companies, the truth is that yes, conversion rates matter, especially when you're working with such large cohorts and you can kind of find a place for any student in any type of work. But for most companies, they want to make sure that they're extending the offers to promising students. And that really just depends, and there's no clear answer for that. I think more companies are now learning more and more now of what it means to retain talent. And when they understand the type of investment that goes into it, they'll be able to make better decisions on how to retain them and keep them on if they're going to be a good value add to the company.

**[00:14:23] KP:** I think a lot of interns, it's a point for many of them that early in their career. It's a first job or a pre job, depending on how you want to look at it. There's a lot of uncertainty. As you'd mentioned, I may be afraid to approach my manager that I'm stuck in need help or these sorts of things. Can you share any common misconceptions or advice you have for people who are getting into their first internship?

**[00:14:23] NG:** Of course, and to even preface that, internships for me really helped me define what I wanted and did not want out of my career. I am so grateful for having done over six internships throughout my college and high school career and it really helped taught me how

large companies or Fortune 50 companies for that fact work, as well as how do startups operate? How do you build a relationship with a manager? How do you ask for the types of projects that you want to work on, and not just fetch coffee for someone, for example?

But what we do is that we provide a lot of resources to help these program coordinators and managers, especially because sometimes managers are working with interns for the first time. And some of them are also well seasoned, or some of them might have some traditional ways that they look at it. So, what it really comes down to, and this is based off of a lot of studies that we've done, and a lot of people that we spoke with, and internships are tricky and it really does matter on how you're able to keep that program participant engaged.

So, for managers, it comes down to having regular check ins with their students, or those program participants being available for them in case that they need help on a project. Keep like a cadence of weekly meetings, or just let your intern know that they can reach out to for important questions, and we don't want those interns to be nervous to reach out to their managers, which is why on Symba, on a click of a button, your manager will know that you're stuck and you need some assistance.

Also, the project assignment as well. Making sure that the interns are getting some projects, which is a use case of those skills that they want to apply to in the real world and something that will make an impact in the company and something that these managers can use going forward after the intern leaves. So, those are actually three of the main things. From the admin side, though, they want to make sure that the interns have been on boarded very smoothly. That they know what the corporate culture is like, who is on the executive team, what types of social events to expect out of the program, and a lot more. And having that seamless onboarding experience, even before they start on day one really helps them get set up for success so they can go right when they begin, as well as keeping them engaged, understanding how many projects those interns are completing, or what their performance is looking like, what their engagement is like, are they meeting other students as well. Those are all important data points to track too. And then for the intern, again, just being a curious soul working on projects that are helping you understand your skills and applying that and then just building the best relationships is what we see.



**[00:17:16] KP:** Well, I'm thinking now of a professional who maybe did or didn't have an internship, but wound up in a software engineering position. And typically, for a lot of people, the first two years are intense learning. You pick up a lot of skills, and somewhere along the lines, maybe the opportunity comes for you to be the manager of some interns as a first step towards a more permanent manager role. So, just in the way that the intern could be the first time in a corporate setting, the manager could equally well be the first time managing with an intern. Are there any key takeaways that someone like that should be considering, especially when they prepare work and projects and things like that?

**[00:17:50] NG:** Definitely. Just to what I alluded to earlier, it's about creating that experience, keeping your interns engaged on important projects, making sure that their onboarding is seamless, and that they're well aware of what to expect out of their program, and then just being there as a resource for those students. My co-founder was ghosted multiple times during her internship experiences where projects were lost via translation and email, the manager never got it, there was no response. And those are the types of things that we're trying to eliminate on our platform where you can upload your submissions, immediately get feedback on it without having to wait until your next one on one to continue improving.

So as a manager, just being present, being there, and just serving as a resource, as well as assigning important projects, and just helping the intern understand what's to come out of the program, are the top three tips for the managers.

**[00:18:42] KP:** You'd mentioned some of the dashboarding and metrics that a user can get logging in and we've touched on some of those. Could you expand more on that? Maybe if there are some that are particularly insightful or the ways in which people consume and use the data?

**[00:18:56] NG:** So, our dashboards are fully customized for our customers, and every program has their own metrics that help them define what success means. But anything from project analytics and performance to being able to track how long is it taking that intern to complete that project? Are they able to go from in progress to completed or were there multiple times where they had to indicate that they were stuck and need additional assistance from their manager? So, those kinds of insights give good information on how that intern is doing on their project sense.

We're also able to track demographic information. For a lot of companies, especially with those who are investing a lot in their DNI initiatives, they care about the backgrounds of the students are coming from the different schools, the neighborhoods, the gender, their educational background, and so much more. We are able to track that to some of the information which is provided by that user tool to help them understand how diverse their programs are, and how diverse they're able to continue growing to as their cohorts increase.

In addition, we're also able to track just performance analytics. So, understanding the skills at the intern started in the internship program with as well as the kinds of skills that they end the program with. And whether or not they were trending towards an offer and how they were able to improve their projects and their internship journey. Were also able to track anything from their engagement rates. How much are they engaging with other interns? Are they posting on the forums? Are they watching the learning materials and a lot more? And this has been really helpful for even administrators to know that their content is being watched and absorbed by the students rather than having to send them one off by other platforms, or just basically understanding that the content that they're serving, that they're providing is actually useful to those program participants.

So those are just some of the data points that we track. Symba is right now at its early stage. We're still seeing and we're still blossoming. So, as we launch more features, and as we collect more information, we're going to be able to better provide insights. I'm personally excited about using AI to help administrators even predict what their intern is about to do or how their performance is going to be like or giving them heads up that an intern might seem disengaged right now, it might be a good idea to set up a coffee chat with your manager or do something fun for them. So, those are the kinds of things that I'm really interested in as well.

**[00:21:17] KP:** Very neat. I know that might be an R&D aspect of the work, but I'm very interested in AI and machine learning. Could you share any details on either the vision of what you want to predict or maybe what some of the interesting features you're considering are?

**[00:21:31] NG:** Definitely. So, we have not implemented AI yet. But we are already starting to do some research into predictive models. And a lot of that data will come from the features that

we've launched that are able to help track that information. So, earlier with all of our engagement types of metrics, or the project types of metrics, we are starting to develop models that can help us categorize levels of activity, for example, for that intern, and just like the project sense.

So, if something is consistently low activity, then that might be a trigger for a manager. If something is a high activity, that's a good sign. And even the program coordinator should know about that, that this intern is highly engaged, getting all their work done, not too much to worry about for that specific one.

That is just one example. We are excited to launch features that are going to be focusing more on the community building and social aspect of these programs. So, launching calendar features, which is on a roadmap and being launched very soon, where administrators will be able to create these events, even schedule these random coffee chats between students and managers, people to foster more community in the organization, and pair them up and just get to learn more. Those are just some of the features.

And then next up, we also have integrations. So, like I said earlier, Symba comes into play after the company has hired and given that, extended that offer to that talent. So, whether it's with workday or greenhouse, right when they're accepting, right when they've accepted the offer, triggering their Symba account, all the way to even possibly supporting with payroll, and even recruiting and matchmaking in the future, those are some integrations that got us really excited to make Symba a cohesive tool for these cohort-based learning experiences. And then obviously, there's just other exciting features that we have in our roadmap that will help companies build those best experiences, too.

**[00:23:24] KP:** Has the rise of remote work affected the way you approach these issues?

**[00:23:28] NG:** Definitely. So, as you know, the last one and a half years, there has been this immediate rise of remote work, and now we know that remote work is here to stay. So, what we have been able to do and every time we develop a new feature, we keep in mind the type of user that it will be serving. Is it going to be for a remote program participant? Or is it going to be for someone who's in the office, or hybrid? And from our research and from us talking to all of

our customers, we're actually seeing more and more companies excited about continuing their programs in a remote fashion. And to what I said earlier, they're now able to hire talent all year round.

So, one of our customers in the FinTech space, actually, you wouldn't believe it only signed up for 25 interns and a couple of admin seats last year. Then they came back two weeks later to us and their managers or those full-time employees of the company were saying, "What is this Symba? We want to get started on it. We're hearing so much about it. How do we get an account?" So immediately, we on boarded 25 additional managers as well. Now, about 20 months later, their program is already in the triple digits and expected to – and we're expected to be supporting over 600 even including their new grads next year.

We're seeing a lot of growth and cohort sizes increasing because of the accessibility to talent from geographies that weren't accessible before, as well as flexibility in students who can offer part time for some of the months but then come for full time and then offer part time again. So, a lot of great trends are helping us understand that remote work is here to stay. But there are also some companies who are looking towards hybrid models. You'll see more and more that they'll have this structure, 12-week summer internship program, where they'll invite the students a couple of times, or maybe twice during those 12 weeks to come for specific social events that are going to be on the campus or on premise with everyone else. And there's no doubt that being there physically, is a whole new level. There's a whole new type of physical relationship, more brainstorming on the physical whiteboard, it's a different feeling to be there physically, and I think that when companies understand that balance of hybrid or of being remote and being on site, there will be a good balance. It'll strike well at that time. And for every company, it's going to be different.

**[00:25:49] KP:** Are there any growing pains a company should look out for when they're going from, I think you said 20 seats to triple digits?

**[00:25:56] NG:** Again, it all comes down to the resources that they have to be able to support those triple digit internship programs. So, having excited mentors and managers, having enough projects to assign all those interns, definitely the financial resources to pay those salaries or stipends and what Symba is doing and that's why sharing this example of a company scaling

makes us show proud and is actually kind of a metric that we track internally. More than 80% of our customers have actually scaled their internship programs because of Symba. So, Symba, it helps alleviate not just the time and resources that are spent on interns, but has also helped them track metrics and understand and tap into different geographies. Those are the types of things that are contributing to these companies scaling their programs.

**[00:26:46] KP:** So, as I was describing earlier, there's this kind of stereotype impression of a college student or maybe a high school student doing a summer internship, which is common, I suppose, but not the only persona that you've seen. Could you talk a little bit at a high level about the statistics? How does it all break down into different groups?

**[00:27:05] NG:** So, just to repeat your question, like the statistics around students who were able to obtain an internship program?

**[00:27:13] KP:** Yeah, I guess I'm curious about the variety of people you see coming through Symba. Is it you know, 50% students, 50% pivoting professionals, something along those lines?

**[00:27:22] NG:** So right now, Symba is serving the internship market. It's an untapped and underserved space and most of our customers are the ones that are focusing on recruiting the college students. A majority of our users are the college students. The second majority group is going to be high school students who are going through these different apprenticeship programs or professional development programs. And then the third category is actually veterans. We are super excited to be supporting a company that will be bringing on veterans to obtain STEM skills, and go through a program with them on Symba. And then also other pivoting professionals, including woman too.

But taking the or just understanding what the landscape looks like for getting an experience like this is quite fascinating. So, before, pre COVID, when we saw that internships were offered to such limited students, because it's such a competitive thing to have. And also, it filled – there were so many filters that were applied or barriers, I would say, being able to relocate to expensive cities like San Francisco, New York, DC, being able to commit to the 12 weeks, being able to apply certain skills, there were definitely a lot of barriers that came in the way. But now we are seeing companies tap into geographies, they're accepting more students and for Symba,

where our mission is to open up the workforce. That's what we get really excited about, that now, me years later, I can see more people that look like me in the room together, or on the Zoom gallery together, when we're going through our internship experiences.

**[00:28:59] KP:** What can companies do to help promote that?

**[00:29:04] NG:** Diversity is key. I think it's not just the way that you look like it's also diverse perspectives, diverse thoughts, diverse ideas. So, companies who are really excited to just grow a diverse future leadership at the company are the ones that are able to invest and attract some of this talent. And in order to promote that, I mean, they just have to be ready to tap into talent that they're not used to recruiting from before with new platforms that are out there to help with college recruiting that can be done through hosting virtual career fairs. Now, they don't have to worry about going to the same four to five schools every year, and tapping into different backgrounds and neighborhoods, being able to extend offers to these working moms who need to still stay around home, but can work remotely during their own flexible hours. Once a company is willing to open up and realize that, then that's They're going to be able to promote it. But it all just comes down to hiring people that are coming from different backgrounds. It just helped that company grow.

**[00:30:08] KP:** Well, I'd love to explore some of your entrepreneurial path. You'd mentioned having, I think, six internships. To start with, could you talk about the ways in which those informed the decision to start Symba?

**[00:30:20] NG:** My first internship was with an animation company out in the Philly area, and it was me and 10 other folks, and I was the only female intern or rather the only intern on that team. This was in high school. So, I didn't obtain my computer science degree yet and I didn't really have that much of a technical skill set. But that first taught me how it was like to be an intern at a small and fast paced company. I was able to intern for Martha Stewart as well. I'm a huge foodie. So, getting an internship in the Martha Stewart's everyday food was awesome. It was a great mix of tech, and food for me, and that helped me understand what it's like to just be a part of a company that really isn't always tech forward.

So, different types of industries where I can apply some of my passions, and it just doesn't have to be, your Bay, Apple or Google, for example. And then I've also had internship experiences at organizations like Apple and Bank of America, which I'm super grateful for, was able to meet some incredible folks, had a lot of different projects that taught me different skills. But some of the things that I felt that I was limited to was just technical freedom, or creative freedom.

So, having to go through such rigid structures or rigid processes on getting something super small launched, or not being able to work as fast as I wanted because of some backlogs, and especially also being the only intern that actually look like me in the room. All in all, these experiences really helped me craft that narrative of why I wanted to start Symba and not just because of giving students the opportunity to just have an internship because you have to, but also to be able to apply your skills that you're learning in college or through whatever education in the real world and understanding what works for you, and what doesn't work for you, and how that can help change your career trajectory. So, that's my narrative of how I started Symba. And I am a problem solver. I love building technology or use – I love using technology to build things. So, I got really passionate when I met Ahva on how can we use technology to fix this problem in this nice in this niche space.

**[00:32:35] KP:** I know you have a degree in computer science. Can you talk a little bit about how that informed your decision to start the company and how you built it?

**[00:32:44] NG:** I actually have a very unique way of how I got into computer science, and not your traditional path. Growing up, I love food, I love eating, I love cooking and would cook a lot for my friends and family. It got to the point where I really wanted to go to the CIA, so not the Central Intelligence Agency, but the Culinary Institute of America. But my dad is actually a tech entrepreneur and I was influenced a lot about pursuing a career in technology. So, one day, in high school, my father came up to me and he said, “Hey, let's figure out a way to monetize your passion for cooking, just something you can do as a side project.”

So, I actually built my first website, it's called nikitaskitchen.com, and I was able to – it was a whole family affair. My dad was recording my videos, my mom helped me in the kitchen, and we put those videos up on my food blog, and shared it with the rest of the world. And that first website, I coded, using WordPress, but was able to add a lot of CSS and HTML to my liking,

and that was the first exposure that I had to computer science or development. At the same time, being able to share my passion with the rest of the world. Little did I know that computer science is not as easy as building a website, but that there's so much more into it.

When I went to college, I studied computer science, I got a minor in business as well, and also was able to participate in a lot of different entrepreneurship organizations, and also tap into food tech there and a lot more. And again, just having this entrepreneurial drive and just willingness to take the skillset that I have, and solve problems or being able to apply my passions with this degree that I have is what got me excited. A part of the reason why I was excited to start Symba was because previously to Symba, I was working for another startup. It was an incredible experience where I was working directly underneath the CTO and really learned how a startup works. I was able to take a lot of that learning with me and I was ready to take a risk at that time to start Symba, because I thought that, I can take this risk now. It's better to take it now when I don't have a lot of responsibilities. And why not just give startup life a try and it's something that I'm passionate about and can use my background into building something and that's how that journey with Symba started.

**[00:35:01] KP:** Were there any surprising challenges around getting the company going?

**[00:35:06] NG:** There are so many obstacles in starting a company and success does not come overnight. So, first of all, and this is kind of what I tell to a lot of fellow aspiring founders is make sure you have the resources ready to go, if you're going to commit yourself to a low paying startup or not even paying yourself at all in the beginning. I was lucky that I had at least one year's worth of savings for my job that I had after I graduated college and before starting Symba, so that was able to sustain me for quite a bit.

First thing first is we used to create mock ups of our platform and would go around pretending to sell it like the product was actually built to our customers during focus groups. And that really helped us understand and polish what Symba had to include. And when we got a good idea of what our platform was going to look like, then we went ahead and started to develop it. There were urges that I wanted to start building the platform beforehand. But had we known or seen the different types of changes that we had gone through, then that investment in the beginning or that time and effort would not have been worth it.



So, those were just two big learning lessons that I had. And that definitely when you're growing a team, you always want to work with people who are smarter than you who are coming to the team with skills that you don't have and that are also complementary, and it's just really important to hire a team that is passionate about the mission that you're solving.

**[00:36:32] KP:** I know prior to Symba, you launched Girls Who Code in Ithaca and also, you're involved in Women In Computing. Can you talk a little bit about these organizations and what they do?

**[00:36:43] NG:** So, both Girls Who Code which was focused on exposing computer science to high school students, I was able to open up that chapter in Ithaca. And then Women In Computing at Cornell was an organization that I was a leader for, in promoting more CS opportunities for the female students on campus. I'm a huge advocate for women in tech. To my personal narrative before where I was put in rooms where there were not enough people or not anyone rather, that looked like me, it was that kind of narrative that I wanted to change. Women who are sometimes scared about software engineering in the future, or what their career could possibly look like, that was the kind of fear that I wanted to get rid of, and show them the endless possibilities.

As we know, right now, computer science is prevalent in every single industry. There is not an industry that does not use some sort of software, or some touch point, that required someone to code something. So, I've been able to convince myself that, "Hey, I had this passion for cooking before. I have this passion for the workforce development and AdTech, what are ways that I can mix these passions together in doing what I'm doing, and what I love?" So, these organizations like Girls Who Code and Women In Computing helped me portray that story to the community members, and that was just something that I was always an advocate for on increasing diversity and just promoting more women to enter the STEM fields.

**[00:38:11] KP:** When you look at STEM in particular, you see kind of disheartening statistics. There are just less females joining some of those fields and things like that. Do you have any advice? I don't know, that we can fix the problem here on the podcast, but I don't think anyone's

happy with the situation either. Do you have any broad stroke advice for how we get things more unbiased?

**[00:38:30] NG:** It's the openness of companies, again, that want to hire that diverse talent. Also, just kind of understanding that women can and are, in fact, even possibly smarter than their peers. But it all really comes down to understanding, for a company, if my talent is not diverse, am I ready to take the step to increase the diversity in my company? So, it sucks. The statistic, like you mentioned, is very low in all aspects for women in tech specially. But I think again, a part of that is the company willing to invest in hiring diverse talent, but it's also teaching that community, that there are endless possibilities that they should give these opportunities to try. Unless they try, they won't ever know, and just to not be afraid.

One thing that I was raised was like, you know, try not to take no for an answer and go for what you can and the worst case that happens is you learn something out of it, right? It's not a mistake, it's actually, it's a growing experience. So, work into it and then try to make it an inclusive environment, try to promote and support other women just like you too, because you can help create a pedestal for everyone to succeed at the same time.

**[00:39:46] KP:** Good advice, and what's the size and composition of the current team?

**[00:39:51] NG:** We are about 23 folks. We are 23 folks all a mix of engineering. So back end engineers, front end engineers, security, product manager, sales, marketing and growth hacking team, customer success team. We are a fully remote distributed team and we're really looking forward to staying that way throughout the US and even internationally, too. We are already looking to grow team members in certain parts of Europe as well as India. So, really excited for not just what we can do to change the landscape of workforce development in America, but also internationally as well. There's a huge opportunity out there.

**[00:40:31] KP:** Well, I should ask a food question as well. Have you been able to use Symba, their interns about?

**[00:40:38] NG:** We actually do. We use Symba to manage our entire team. So, not just interns, but even all of our full-time folks as well.

**[00:40:44] KP:** Do you see that as a long-term growth opportunity or strategy for the company?

**[00:40:50] NG:** Definitely. So, we have actually heard from our customers, a handful of them that they want to use Symba to manage their entire team. They always tell us that the interns are interacting with such a beautiful platform. But as soon as they leave, or if they were to come back for full time, they're going to have to go back to using those ugly legacy tools that we already use. So, that has been a point of consideration for us. However, because we are talking about this topic, it is a very saturated space with workforce development for full time employees. So, we're entertained internally and just strategizing kind of where else can Symba tap into, and we have some really exciting ideas about how we can change the recruiting landscape for these early talent development programs, help companies build this great community where they're able to tap into the great students, understand what types of internship experiences they're coming from, helping them build these vetted portfolios of all of the great work that they've done. Or, also focusing on integrating with other tools that really help them understand that Symba is the go-to place for anything to do with a cohort-based program. So, internships, apprenticeship, mentorship, rotational, new grad programs, and so much more.

**[00:42:05] KP:** I'm not aware of anything that's quite like Symba. Maybe you can correct me if I'm wrong if there's a competitor out there. But it seems like in some ways you're defining this space. Is that true? And if so, do you have an estimate of the market size?

**[00:42:17] NG:** So, we are actually indeed defining this space. For just the internship market, I would say that, yes, it was very underserved and companies on average, were happy using 9 to 11 different platforms or spreadsheets, and slaving away dozens of hours, a lot of effort and a lot of work in doing what Symba can do in a 10th of that time, in a much easier process. So, it was being done before. Clearly internships have been going on for dozens of years, but Symba is making it better, it's making it easier, and we're also offering a lot more on our platform.

There have been some competitors that have emerged in the last year, but Symba is still the leader in this market, and we are already making waves by going beyond internship programs. But our niche is on these cohort-based learning experiences. Then the entire workforce

development is a market size of over 300 billion. When you look into just the early talent space, we and what Symba can actually service, that would be in the 120 billion range.

**[00:43:24] KP:** In terms of outlook and growth, you mentioned getting in other spaces or things like that. Five years out, where do you guys want to be?

**[00:43:33] NG:** Five years out, I think Symba just wants to be recognized as a place where we are helping companies grow. I get the most satisfaction when I hear that an internship program grew from 25 to triple digits. And for me, when our mission is to open up the workforce, we personally have a goal of helping support over 1 million job opportunities or these program-based opportunities in the next three to five years. That is what is driving us and waking us up every day, really excited about the work that we're doing. So, helping companies grow their programs to over 1 million positions, helping companies scale, being able to tap into talent that they weren't able to before from all different parts around the world, that is the goal that we are striving towards.

**[00:44:22] KP:** Well, let's imagine a company that a few years ago was a startup, they did well, double digit growth, A round, all of that, but they've yet to institute an internship program and it's about time to start. But they want to do it well and create something that's a yellow brick road for the interns and also is going to deliver value for the company. Do you have any advice for how to check myself and see if I'm ready for that or what steps I should take to prepare?

**[00:44:46] NG:** Yeah, step one, check out Symba's blog. We have so many resources out there, everything from how to get started, to how to even create expectations for internship programs. So, obviously the first step is understanding your financial resources that you have. At Symba, we support organizations that pay their interns. I personally don't believe in unpaid internships, so it's a model for us that you are investing in those students. And obviously, if they're investing of those students, they're the ones who can also pay for a platform like Symba.

So, first step is understanding not only just financial resources, but your team resources. How many people can actually be there to mentor or work with those students on their projects? And then secondly, would be defining the projects that there are. So, what kind of work can be done by someone who might not have a lot of experience, if you're targeting college students. But if

you're targeting people who are trying to pivot industries, or get back into the industry after some gap years, then how can you adjust projects or create projects that will tailor to that skill set.

And then thirdly, it's about just having this internal excitement and fire to nurture this talent to become future leaders. So, creating a seamless onboarding experience, creating enough events to keep them engaged, giving them learning materials that you're able to post on Symba's learning center, the project assignment, having the managers be available there, and really just creating this best experience that you can for that program. So, those are just some of the higher-level tips that we have and I can easily go on and on about this for hours. But again, it's about companies who are really excited to nurture talent, give them impactful work, and see them grow to become future leaders is when that company will – is a good stage for that company to realize whether or not they're ready for a program like this.

**[00:46:35] KP:** Makes sense. Well, maybe to wind up, I'm curious if you've heard any feedback from interns who've completed some programs?

**[00:46:41] NG:** We've heard some incredible feedback and have received some amazing testimonials from our customers. Interns, from one perspective, just love how easy everything is on Symba and how they can actually stay engaged with the company before and after their program. We've also given interns just oversight and insight onto their program. What is going on with them? All of the great projects that they're working on having this portfolio, or this report card of everything they've done in this internship experience. And most importantly, also helping them build and stay engaged and build relationships with other fellow, not just interns, but even managers or executive leaders at the company.

From an admin's perspective, again, helping them save time. For about a majority of our customers, we have actually helped them reduce their onboarding time by over 80%. So, something that would have taken them 20 hours per week now takes them just 10 minutes on Symba. And with that, now they're able to invest their time into and focusing on other important aspects of the program like creating those events and keeping their students engaged and understanding how to hire more talent. So, helping them understand and have oversight is key, but then also helping them make the experience better, and understand where the resources

are being allocated and helping them grow their programs is the type of feedback that we're helping our admins realize and that's the kind of stuff that we come back and hear from them.

One of our customers in the pharmaceutical space actually, this is one of my favorite quotes, they said that without Symba we would actually be moving a step backward. But with Symba, we would be able to propel five steps forward.

**[00:48:22] KP:** Oh, very eloquent. Well, Nikita, remind listeners where they can learn more.

**[00:48:26] NG:** So, check out [symba.io](https://symba.io). Again Symba, not for the Lion King but for symbiotic relationship.

**[00:48:30] KP:** Well, thanks again for coming to Software Engineering Daily.

**[00:48:32] NG:** Thank you, Kyle.

[END]