



Laura Yecies: "Good Life"

Season 2: Episode 14

- Speaker 1: Welcome to Stayin' Alive in Technology. A series of conversations with Silicon Valley veterans touching on war stories from the past and practical advice for today. And now, here's your host, Melinda Byerley, founding partner of Timeshare CMO.
- Melinda Byerley: First, I'm going to give you the bio of our next guest, and then I'll talk a little bit about what you're going to hear in this episode. Laura Yecies is the CEO of SyncThink, a leading brain health analytics company. We'll talk about what that means in our episode. A Silicon Valley veteran, she has successfully led multiple startups and top brands, including being the CEO of two venture-backed startups. One of them, SugarSync, she led for four years through an aggressive business and product growth phase from zero to \$25 million in revenue, and along the way had the company acquired by j2 Global after significant valuation increases. She then joined the Catch.com team as the acting CEO to help develop the company's business model where they expanded the product footprint and built strategic alliances before successfully selling the company to Apple in 2013.
- Melinda Byerley: After leaving Informix, she was the Vice-President of the Netscape browser division at AOL where she was responsible for the development of Netscape 7.0 and the launch of the Netscape browser in 23 languages. After leaving Netscape, Laura joined Yahoo!, where she served as the Global General Manager for the Yahoo Mail division, and after that she was the VP of Marketing at Check Point Software, where I met her and where she served for three years. Prior to all of that, she led marketing and Latin American sales at Informix Software. She also has her MBA from Harvard University and her Master's degree in Foreign Service from the Georgetown School of Foreign Service. She also received her Bachelor's Degree Magna Cum Laude in Government from Dartmouth. She's been the recipient of many awards, such as the 2011 Gold Medal and 2012 Silver Medal for Female Executive of the Year for the Stevie Award for Women in Business. She's also been the Top Female CEO of the Inc. 500 for the

year 2012 and was a previous U.S. Department of State TechWomen Mentor.

Melinda Byerley: As I mentioned before, I worked for Laura at Check Point Software, where she was at that time the acting CMO of the company, and she was one of the most beloved managers I had ever worked for. I didn't understand the way everybody would say, "We work for Laura," and they'd have this awed and hushed tone about how much they liked her. But then as I watched her in her job and as I watched her in her career since, I've watched that play out with the people that continue to work for her, and the additional people she meets and grows with in her group. This tribe of Laura-people grows every time and in every way.

Melinda Byerley: She talks about some of the fun days she had in the early years of her technology career, including being at Netscape after the AOL acquisition, a really important period in our history. She also talks about what it's like to be not only a marketer and an executive, but a mother of four with a thriving and happy marriage of over 30 years. It is true that I have observed that Laura doesn't seem to need much sleep, but sleep she does and have a wonderful marriage she does. It's not fair that we only ask women this question, and it's not fair that we don't ask men how they balance work and family life. But we need to keep asking this question until the support systems in the United States at least are in place so that each woman isn't faced with navigating this tightrope all by herself.

Melinda Byerley: Laura's stories from the trenches of raising her four kids are not only helpful from a practical advice standpoint, including why the math of childcare in the early years isn't actually the right way to measure whether you should stay home or not, to the honest truth of what it feels like to be the first and only woman CEO in a room. Laura also talks about the fascinating technology of her current company, called eye tracking, and its profound implication for neurological health.

Melinda Byerley: If you heard Philip Rosedale's episode where he talked about how our brains predict the future, you'll especially love Laura's explanation for how that tendency plays out with the way our eyes move and how virtual reality is already presenting an opportunity for impact in people's lives. From the benefit of 30 years of hindsight, Laura's story



is a wonderful example of why Stayin' Alive In Tech exists. I hope you'll enjoy it.

Melinda Byerley: Laura, welcome to the podcast.

Laura Yecies: Thank you.

Melinda Byerley: Why don't you tell us a little bit about where you grew up? While you're telling that story, maybe how... when you first became aware of technology? Whether it was using a computer or when it came into your consciousness?

Laura Yecies: Sure. Well, I grew up on Long Island and my interest early on was very much in medical, and then I got super interested in public policy and economics and that's what I majored in when I got to college. Dartmouth had this thing where, even if you were a political science major, you would take... they called them distributed requirements. I think it's still pretty common with most schools. I was introduced, when I looked at the possible distributed requirements, Dartmouth had a very strong computer science program, and so that's what I chose to do. I ended up taking two computer science classes and right when I was getting into my junior year, Dartmouth, who was an early adopter on these kinds of things, decided to get into a program with Apple where you could get a lease on a computer. I didn't have my own, but I was with a group that had one that we were able to share, and then when I graduated from college in '84 I decided I had to have my own computer.

Laura Yecies: In '84, when it wasn't necessarily that common, I had my first AT&T, it was essentially an IBM PC, XT compatible computer, which was made by AT&T. I think it would have an 8086 microprocessor, two five and a quarter inch floppy disks. I got to be a big user of WordPerfect to write my master's thesis and shortly thereafter, when I had my first job, I was an early user of the Internet because I worked for a Unix software company. I've been using email in my professional life since '88.

Melinda Byerley: What languages did you study? When you said you could study computer science in college? Just, I didn't know this. I was curious what you studied.

- Laura Yecies: It was BASIC, because Professor Kemeny, John Kemeny, invented the BASIC programming language, and he ran the computer science department at Dartmouth. He had been the president of the college. He worked on the Manhattan project. Yeah, fascinating guy, really an early thinker. Unfortunately, BASIC was not particularly useful after college, but it was the concept, and I still found it very helpful.
- Melinda Byerley: Yeah. I think it's still stays with us. I mean, even when we're working with Excel functions or back rows, the BASIC, for next, and if then, and all of that, it helps us understand the logic.
- Laura Yecies: Right, yeah. What I would say is I was an early adopter and very enthusiastic user and when I graduated from Business School and I looked at the possible things to work on, I knew that I wanted to do marketing. But it just seemed like this was an area of so much growth that it was what I really wanted to get involved with.
- Melinda Byerley: I was fascinated by the fact that you majored in government, at least according to your LinkedIn profile, and-
- Laura Yecies: Yes.
- Melinda Byerley: You got a Master's in Business Diplomacy, and one interesting question that's come up with our guests, especially those of us of a certain age, if we didn't major in computer science for various reasons, like in my case, my university didn't have it. I've always been curious to ask you how that has affected the way you view your work today, or how it's affected the way you think? Because I have a theory that what we study in college, especially at the undergraduate level, almost gives us a framework for thinking, and those different frameworks could be useful in technology.
- Laura Yecies: Yeah, I would say that the frameworks that were most...the things that I carried forward were more on the business side. The political science stuff...I was most interested in International Relations and Diplomacy and at that time it was, Ronald Reagan and power politics. I don't think that those frameworks, while very intellectually interesting to me, and I still, I'm a politics junkie, I don't find I use that in my work, but what I do use are the things I learned in economics and those theories. If I were in school now, I think I would definitely go deep in the Behavioral Economics. I read quite a lot about that in my spare

time, because I think that's very relevant to business. I'd say mostly bringing those economic and business dynamic theories.

Melinda Byerley: How did you actually get your first job in tech?

Laura Yecies: That's a good question because it was challenging. When I got out of business school, I knew that was my target, I really wanted to work in technology, and the classic profile for someone that would be hired...Oracle and Sun and Microsoft were the bigger employers that came to my business school to interview graduates...was, that you had an engineering undergrad, worked in either engineering or sales and tech, preferably engineering, and then you could go into product management if you had sales background, maybe marketing. I was at a bit of a disadvantage and frankly had to be super persistent and did a slight pivot where I focused much more on the pure customer acquisition and even channel marketing side of things.

Laura Yecies: My first role was at a database company. I didn't get a job at Oracle, which was just as well. They came to campus but Informix didn't. But I did get connected with an HBS grad who was there and the company, we had a great technology. We were slightly smaller and younger and therefore, I think as entry level professional I was able to do a lot more, and I was able to learn from really great colleagues.

Melinda Byerley: I also, as I was looking through your LinkedIn profile, you started in Informix, and I've heard some great stories from you over the years about the leadership and management there, and then you found yourself at Netscape as a VP. How did that transition happen for you?

Laura Yecies: Well, there were a bunch of steps in there. The summary version is, I joined Informix as a marketing professional, worked on channel marketing and then product marketing, and then did sales for two years, worked for a couple of years consulting in the database business, then worked for a small company called Gupta, also in the database business. And joined Netscape in '97 as a Director of International Product Marketing, and I was managing a small team of about four people. Then it was a few years to get to VP and certainly a lot of sweat equity, but also very much a lot of luck went into that. As Netscape was organizing these sort of, they call them Divlits within divisions. The idea is it was a cross functional organization.

- Laura Yecies: I was managing marketing within the international product group. I was promoted to run the international product group, which was cross functional, and I was one of maybe six or eight directors for the browser division. When the VP of that division left the company, I was promoted to lead that team. It was about a 230 person organization, primarily a technical engineering organization, but also had UI, UX, product marketing, and some business development work. I think one of the keys was that I reported to the president of AOL products and was one of the few leaders in that division who I think appreciated and wanted to leverage the opportunity that came from the AOL acquisition to gain broader distribution of the browser.
- Melinda Byerley: When you started your career, as you said, you're working for an... you work for database company, you're working for a Unix company, then you're working at Netscape. I'd like to go just go back in our time machine and talk a little bit about what that was like, because it was... the Netscape was, for those of you who didn't live through that. It's really the dawn of Internet companies. I'd love to hear what that experience was like, what the company culture was like, or what you... anything that you remember from your first days there that makes you smile?
- Laura Yecies: Yeah. Well, I mean, a few things. First of all, there was no textbook. Literally when I got to Informix and I needed to learn a lot about database technology, I went to this bookstore that existed that doesn't exist anymore, called Stacey's in Palo Alto, and they were known as the place to get books on technology. And I bought one of each book on databases. I came home with a stack of books and my husband said, "Did you buy the shelf?" I said, "No, not the whole shelf. I only got one of each of the books," and I brute-forced my way through them. Well, there wasn't an equivalent in '97 on the Internet. The people who knew it were the practitioners. I was just as motivated to learn, but the tactics needed to be different.
- Laura Yecies: In that sense, it was very much a developing field and less mature. That being said, I found that the management of the company was really quite good, very strong leaders and that sounds more mature. Jim Barksdale is regarded as just one of those leadership gurus. I think he's retired so we don't see him, and he's not out blogging. But those of us that had the good fortune to work with him, and not just him, there were many others on his staff, people like Mike Holmer, the

person whose role I took over, Jim Hammerly on the browser team, Bob Lisbon... It's really great leadership and so I really appreciated that it was a great place to expand and take smart risks and learn really how to move projects forward.

Laura Yecies: One of my favorite things I remember Jim Barksdale saying is, let's say we would be in a meeting and people would be proposing different approaches and would state different reasons, and he would press people all the time like, "Okay, is your point of view backed by data? Because if you have data to support it, essentially who you are in your role in the company doesn't matter." If we're only talking opinions and sometimes you have to go by opinions, right? Then we go by experience and the level of the person in the room, they get to make the decision. But it really taught me how important it was to bring data to the table, and that that data can and should be an equalizer. It shouldn't matter what you look like, what gender you are, what color your skin is. If you can make a compelling case for your program or project or that be that investment. That's what matters.

Melinda Byerley: Back in those days what was marketing a browser like? I mean, this is before Google. I loved asking Larry Friedberg about buying ads in the back of PC magazine. How did Netscape get the word out and build its marketing chops?

Laura Yecies: When I joined, we were at a stage where people knew what browsers were and they were starting to be used. The marketing question was, which is the best browser? Okay, not should you use a browser at all? Which I'm sure was an interesting marketing challenge, it's just not one that I personally worked on. I'll answer your question with this other framework. We focused on a few things. One was PR. The press love a head to head, I don't know if you remember, they called it the browser wars.

Melinda Byerley: Sure.

Laura Yecies: There was a lot of concern around antitrust tactics. We focused very diligently on having really the top features, having the best product, what was most of interest to the end user and really pushing those messages hard to the journalists. I think that was pretty effective. The other thing that we did, and I view this as marketing, but you could... it really extends into sales, is distribution. If you think about it right now,

if someone wants a new product for their computer, you can download it in a few seconds. At that time, that wasn't the case. We didn't have the same type of broadband access. We marketed browsers in retail stores. We had boxed product, I still have a couple in my garage. You had some old fashioned channel marketing and retail distribution, and that involved packaging, involved coming up with appropriate incentives for the channel.

Laura Yecies: Similarly, we would partner with Telcos. I personally worked very hard in a partnership with a subsidiary of Deutsche Telekom called T-Online. T-Online was like an AOL, a dedicated online community, and we were the standard browser. Now, we didn't have complete success on these distribution channels, for the reasons that came out later in the Department of Justice lawsuit against Microsoft, which is they were illegally or in an anti-competitive way influencing those distribution channels, which led to later settlements. But it was still a big area of our effort and I think gave us more distribution than we would have had had we not done those activities. We would track which announcements or which features would lead to more downloads. We had instrumentation in the browser to analyze how it performed, in a very early crude way to help us really instrument the product directions because we really felt that in the end those product improvements and optimizations were what was going to get us more use of the product.

Melinda Byerley: That's of course changed. In your current role it's... we can measure so much more even than we used to be able to.

Laura Yecies: Yeah. I remember when AOL I guess acquired ICQ and we started looking at incorporating some ICQ functionality into the browser and our messenger platform. ICQ instrumented every menu item in their product in those days. They knew down to the quick. This was already starting. People were wanting to do these things and in some cases doing it. They knew which features got the most clicks. AOL I think was able to do that to a certain extent. When Marty Fisher would have staff meetings, and this was, yeah, I was the one Netscape person. A lot of the focus was on the core AOL product. They instrumented every bug fix or nearly every bug fix that could tie back to how many customer service calls that that generated, and what that cost. Because remember AOL included free support.



Melinda Byerley: Yeah, I forgot about that. Yeah. You could just call up the phone and talk to a person.

Laura Yecies: You could talk to a real person. We had multiple large call centers. In fact, I spent some time at the one in Jacksonville, Florida. Those bugs equal time on the phone for callers, and it could've been not even a bug, something that was unclear in the product. Right? A feature name that was confusing. It was very tightly instrumented. You could look in the bug report and there would be data on dollars and time associated.

Melinda Byerley: Did you work virtually with anybody? Or was all of your work always done in an office?

Laura Yecies: We were pretty early to having remote workers. First of all, AOL was in Virginia. We were in northern California. The browser team had acquired a team in San Diego. They had an office, but it was an integral part of the team. Then once we had the open source community going, we would have open source contributors literally all over the world, literally of all ages. I think we hired someone who was 16 and brought his mother to the Bay Area because he was too young to live alone. Really it would give us access to top talent, and not just talent, people who were passionate about our product. To the open source community we had... we did have people working remotely. Netscape created a lot of tools that facilitated that. Bugzilla, Tinderbox, these code management and bug tracking systems, some of them basically became foundational because we open sourced them too, to later iterations of commercial products.

Melinda Byerley: Laura, I'm going to take a moment, with your permission, and we're going to spool out on your personal life for a moment.

Laura Yecies: Okay.

Melinda Byerley: The reason I'm doing this is because I've worked with you personally. I've had the benefit of learning from you and working with you. I've always been fascinated by the fact that you really do seem to have it all. While I first acknowledge that saying that it's not fair that we ask women these questions and not men. It's still unusual and it shouldn't be, and as a result, I love asking other women about this. Just looking at from the outside, you've got four successful children, a marriage

that has stood the test of time, and for those of you who don't know, Laura, you'd have to see this to believe it. But it seems to be true.

Melinda Byerley: I thought, I've always learned from the advice you've given me about how you and Steve set yourselves up for success from the beginning when you got married and how you have moved forward together as a couple to raise a family, but also to build both of you very strong careers in tech. I thought it'd be fun place for you to share some of that advice you've given me and others.

Laura Yecies: We got married right out of college. I was 20 when Steve and I got married, and at the very, obviously, beginning of our careers. I was very much in a mode of, "Okay, how do I want to build my career? What do I want to do?" As was Steve. There was always an assumption that we would both be building our careers, and that it was a joint enterprise on our careers. I'd say another thing that was maybe unusual is that both of our mothers worked. In fact, my grandmother worked for a big part of her adult life. She would work with my grandfather in his office. I mean, I recall that from my childhood. I remember being very proud of the fact that my mom worked and that she had this great career and contribution, and so the going in assumption, netting this up, the going in assumption is that we would both be working and pursuing our careers.

Laura Yecies: I think we also had an experience of needing to compromise at the beginning. As we were navigating grad schools and where we were going to live, the decision to go to DC was pretty mutual. But it was something that Steve particularly was interested in pursuing that opportunity. Then afterwards when we went to Boston and went to Harvard Business School, that was not Steve's first choice of what he wanted to do. He wanted to go to California. We made an agreement that as soon as we finished business school that we would go to California and so he could do what he wanted to do then. I think from the beginning we made compromises and trade-offs, and I think by the way, all those compromises worked out fine. I think Steve's, my time in DC was great. I think Steve, in the end, the MBA was more helpful for him than he anticipated, and the Bay Area, given my interest in tech, was great.

Laura Yecies: I mean there was, it was more than a silver lining. It was some sunshine amongst the clouds. But it was very much in our... when we

were making those decisions though, having to decide things and navigate that path together, and then that continued through the years. Our careers had ebbs and flows, we had times where one or the other have a longer commute, or more travel, or more flexibility, or less flexibility, and we just would manage that together. Yeah, I think it's important that some of those bigger goals and assumptions around career are explicit from the beginning.

Laura Yecies: Just like we had those conversations about kids, do you want to have children? How many? You want to be fairly close on that. I mean, although people sometimes can navigate that, but those could be challenges, and in "Lean In", Sheryl [Sandberg] talks a lot about: is your partner truly a partner in supporting you on your career? Or is it something where they want you to have a career as long as it doesn't interfere with theirs and dinners on the table. I've been really lucky, although making conscious choices I'm thoughtful that it's really a partnership.

Melinda Byerley: You've talked a little bit to me about it. I know we talked a lot about in the pre call, was talking about this idea of whether people, how to think about the decision to put your career on hold if you have a family. I think it's true for men or women. I thought maybe you might want to talk more about this, the short term horizon and long term horizon thinking.

Laura Yecies: Let me start off by saying that I believe that the working world, and not just business, academics, medicine, all of them should not penalize people as much as they do for taking time out of the workforce. But when people are evaluating... what I saw happen frequently with my colleagues or especially like some of my business school friends or friends from college is the time in their career when they were starting to have kids was relatively early on. They were earning decent money but certainly not at the level of their later potential. They have either their first child, or I think more commonly with the second, and it gets pretty busy, and they look at that their life is pretty crazy. They're spending a lot of their earnings on childcare.

Laura Yecies: By the time you pay your taxes and if you live in the Bay Area and nannies need to make a fair amount of money to be able to have a living. If your spouse is earning a lot of the money, it's just very common for people to look at that... do that math and just say, "Why

am I working this hard?" And they step off the escalator. I think the problem is that that math of, "I'm working and what I'm making is the delta between my after tax income and what I pay the nanny," is not the right math. The right math is, "What is the impact on my future earnings or my likely total career earnings by either not working or not working for a large number of years?" I think when viewed through that lens, those few years it's more tolerable.

Laura Yecies: Also I think that when you're in those years of young kids and trying to work and juggle young children and doctor's appointments and nannies getting sick or quitting or, all the various challenges, it seems like that that level of challenge is going to go forever. There's a saying: The days are long; the years are short. But when you're in that "days are long" stage, that's all you see.

Melinda Byerley: They're very long, the days are very long.

Laura Yecies: You get to a point after some number of years where your kids are in school. Then you have the really amazing thing when they can drive.

Melinda Byerley: Hope is coming.

Laura Yecies: I just like to remind people who I talk to about this topic that it does get easier. The financial lens that you look through needs to be long term. Still of course, it's a personal or family decision. There's no right or wrong, but I just... When people ask me my advice, I just want to make sure they think about it with the right information.

Melinda Byerley: That's totally fair. It's one of the beauties of this whole podcast though, is asking people sometimes who are looking back, you can get good insight from it. I mean, I think you're mostly out of the woods. I think most... Are they all graduated? I think the fourth one has graduated or will graduate soon.

Laura Yecies: All four have graduated from college. Two of them are in their residencies, the older two and married, and the younger two are in the early days of their careers. Which is so, it's been very fun. I miss those days of having them at home and all of their activities, but I am really enjoying their, all of the things that they're doing as adults.



Melinda Byerley: Hi, it's me again. Thanks for your support of the season in Stayin' Alive in Tech. Can you believe that we're now being heard in almost 70 countries? I love seeing the stories of our guests travel far beyond the confines of the apartment where I'm recording this podcast. If you love tech, you know how algorithms work. I'd consider it a personal favor if you took the time to write a review for us on iTunes, Google Play, or wherever you get your podcasts. Also, we're a labor of love, but if you or your company would be interested in sponsoring our podcast to offset the cost of our sound engineering, domain hosting, social media marketing, And audio equipment, please visit stayinaliveintech.com and let us know. Enjoy the rest of the episode.

Melinda Byerley: You told me about an experience that you had as a woman in tech at an investor meeting. I was wondering if you would be willing to talk about that and what you learned and how it affected your perception of being a woman in tech.

Laura Yecies: People will sometimes say, "What got you interested in women in tech? Or promoting women in the tech field, or encouraging more women in tech?" Because frankly for the first 20 years of my career, I didn't think a whole lot about it. In my early days in marketing there were... Marketing typically had a fair number of women. I had plenty of female colleagues at Informix and Netscape. There weren't that many women engineers, but in the other functions there certainly were. At checkpoint, our VP of engineering was a woman, the CFO later during my time there was a woman. It felt like a very egalitarian environment. It frankly, it was not top of my mind as a big issue. By the way, there are a number of women my age who have blogged about the fact that the environment has gotten a bit worse, like the bogrammer culture, and I think there's some truth to that.

Laura Yecies: But the main point is that, this was not top of mine I've had, if not, it certainly wasn't 50/50, but I had plenty of great female colleagues. I even knew a decent number of female CEOs. I knew Diane Greene and Meg Whitman and Donna Dubinsky. I saw a number of successful women CEOs, and after I got my first CEO job for SugarSync, one of my investors had their annual CEOs Summit. It was the first time I was going to be meeting many of the partners and certainly all of these CEOs. When I walked into the room, after being greeted by the female receptionist who gave me my name badge, I was the only woman in the room, and they were at least 40 or 50 people. So, probably eight

or 10 partners, and probably about 40 CEOs. I was just shocked. I was like, "Is this going to be like a really boring meeting? Maybe the women may not have come."

Laura Yecies: It was really very shocking to me, and to them too. I certainly... they looked at me as an outsider, when I came in. When we broke for lunch, I went up to Greg, who was the investor and I said, "Greg, where are the women?" Then he said, "Laura, well, you're our only one." I said "How can that be?" He goes, "Well, Laura, actually it's more than that. Not only are you our only one, you're our first." And this was a firm that was a respected VC firm that had been investing for, I think 20 years. They've since gone on, by the way, to have a couple of other female CEOs, and one founder who I think the next year was made CEO of her company.

Laura Yecies: That's all great. I am not picking on this firm because as we know, it's a ubiquitous problem. My first year in that role was very, very intense. I joined the company at the end of '08 during a huge financial crisis, needed to raise money, needed to get the business going, and so... But about nine or 12 months into it, I had made up my mind that if anyone was going to listen to me, I was going to try to do some advocacy and support for women in tech.

Melinda Byerley: How has that impacted you since? How have you... what have you done to address, not address it, not that it's your fault, but more like how has that impacted the choices you've made going forward?

Laura Yecies: I mean, primarily I view it a couple of ways. Number one is, try to lead by example, try to be, not outspoken but transparent or visible with what I'm doing and where there's an opportunity, if someone wants any mentorship or if I can share content and experiences, to do that as well. It's not my day job.

Melinda Byerley: I know. You've got another one we're going to talk about in just a moment.

Laura Yecies: But yes I've done some blogging on it. I've certainly given some interviews. I look forward to opportunities such as here to share that part of my experience. I think it's something that should be shared. You're right, the question gets asked of women more than of men, but I think it's important that women who have had diverse

experiences share those so that other women will listen and say, "Oh, I want to be a CEO of a tech company, and I also want to have four children." I guess that's actually possible.

Melinda Byerley: It is possible. That's a good segue back into the day job. I've been dying to get into this because it's something we've talked a lot about, and it is... How you've made... I'm going to call it a transition into Digital Health and Medicine and Tech, but I know it's been part of your life. I'd just love to talk to you a little bit about your interest in tech, medicine, and digital health. How could that arc of your life and how you got into the CEO role that you have now?

Laura Yecies: Sure. I'll preface it by saying I, as a child aspired to be a doctor. When adults ask kids what they want to be when they grew up, that's always what I said. I grew up in a family of both my doctors and I met... both my parents, excuse me, are doctors and several of my family members, and then two of my siblings, and several of my cousins. I grew up in this medical family and it was just like in the ether, in the air. My parents would talk about it at dinner and so I would learn a lot. I guess in high school I did that typical teenage thing where I wanted to do something different than my parents, or different than my family, and so I got interested in political science, in economics, and then I got interested in technology.

Laura Yecies: Oh, by the way, I want to mention that I think there's something also in the family gene on technology because my parents, as physicians, I see them as being pretty early adopters of technology.

Melinda Byerley: Medicine and Tech, yeah.

Laura Yecies: Just interested in using it clinically.

Melinda Byerley: In some ways it's an early tech field. I mean, that's what medicine is, the evolving-

Laura Yecies: Right? My parents had email. We had all CompuServe accounts to communicate amongst the family. I think there was a family latent interest in tech, as well. My brother is an engineer in addition to being a doctor, my sister practiced at the VA, I mean, which was the first I think, big user of electronic medical records. But anyhow, I had this interest, went on a different path and found myself enjoying that

path, and the technology world is thrilling on a couple of fronts that I want to particularly mention.

Laura Yecies: One is the rate of change, right? Our worlds are constantly changing. It's very stimulating as a result. Second is the leverage of impact. I actually went through a time period where I was getting bored. My sons were in Med school or about to go to Med school. I didn't even take biology in college, and I was feeling not medically literate. So I took a year of biology and a year of chemistry classes at Berkeley, and I thought, "Do I want to do something clinical?" But then what I realized is I'm addicted to the leverage of technology and this idea that you can create something in technology, which if you can successfully apply it to the medical field could impact a large number of people.

Laura Yecies: I wanted to have more of a humanistic and health impact. I think it's part of my values. I had some experiences where I saw some of the shortcomings of the use of technology in health care. I very much wanted to be able to have an impact there. And these worlds of health care technology are truly converging. I thought it was a great way that I could use some of my experiences and skills that have an impact in this field that I'm so interested in.

Melinda Byerley: Tell us a little bit about what the company you work for now does.

Laura Yecies: Sure. SyncThink is a brain health platform. We leverage eye tracking and some other cool technologies to both measure and then, depending on the condition, improve your brain health. I'll make that a little bit more specific. We use eye tracking that's deployed in VR goggles, and as we get into next generations of VR and AR, we'll be tied to other kinds of brain health feedback systems. We currently also have vestibular assessments on our platform. And we believe that this will be the next big biomarker and one of the most important biomarkers for brain health. If you think about the trajectory that heart monitoring has gone on, from EKGs that were in a specialty setting, to every primary care doctor would have an EKG, to now you can have an EKG on your watch-

Melinda Byerley: Incredible.

- Laura Yecies: Your neurological health, we think we'll go in that same trajectory. Eye tracking is really the key because it's objective, it's fast, and there are very specific eye tracking patterns, and error patterns that are tied to specific clinical conditions. Then, as I was saying, for some of the conditions and dysfunctions that people have, you can retrain and rehabilitate and even improve performance with eye tracking. For concussion and vestibular issues we can... people can do the rehab within the SyncThink environment. That allows us to extend the platform to more settings and potentially provide better access to, and lower cost, care.
- Melinda Byerley: If I have, you mentioned concussion, vestibular. Just to make sure I understand, as a lay person, if I have experienced a certain type of concussion, there is a chance for me to help my brain recover from that by working with my eyes in a virtual environment? Have I captured that correctly?
- Laura Yecies: Yeah. Maybe I'll... let me peel the onion that one layer and talk about the science of what we're doing. The fundamental observation that drove the technology development is that our brain is wired to do prediction. To interact in the world, you have to predict. To hit a tennis ball, if you wait until the tennis balls in front of you to swing, you'll be too late, right? To drive a car, you need to predict when the car next to you is going to, let's say cross your path. Okay? Even to have a conversation, you're listening to the other party and predicting when they'll pause and that allows you to decide when to join in the conversation. A large percentage of our brain cells actually are involved in prediction. Therefore, it's not surprising that if you have some type of injury to the brain or condition, it would show up in your prediction ability.
- Melinda Byerley: Oh, fascinating.
- Laura Yecies: Then the next question is, okay, well how do we measure prediction? Right? It turns out that the eyes are a good way to do it because the brain moves the eyes directly, right?
- Melinda Byerley: Okay.
- Laura Yecies: You don't... it doesn't matter, if we asked you to do predictions and do bicep curls, right, how fast of twitch your muscles are? The brain is

directly controlling the eyes. We have to make very precise eye movements to follow a target. Actually only primates do this. They call it foveated rendering, where the eyes will track a target, you can do that tracking without moving your head. Dogs can't do this.

Melinda Byerley: Right. As a dog owner, I can tell you. This is true. They always have to move their head.

Laura Yecies: Right. Therefore, we can use eye tracking as the way to measure prediction. Just like the tennis example I gave you, if you wait for the light to move, to move your eyes, your eyes will be behind. Therefore, you have to predict to move your eyes ahead, and if you move them ahead then they can be on time. We've taken this assumption, and we've done all huge numbers of clinical testing in both healthy individuals as well as people who are experiencing a number of conditions including concussion, ADHD, sleep deprivation, and we measure their eye tracking. We've been able to classify and find different patterns in the eye tracking for different conditions.

Melinda Byerley: For somebody who suffers from ADHD, this is very exciting.

Laura Yecies: Yeah, no, it's exciting... If you think about it, most neurological conditions, if they don't show up on an MRI or a CT scan, the other diagnostic measures are pretty subjective.

Melinda Byerley: The psychological ones. Yeah, if they can't measure it in some ways-

Laura Yecies: The screening tools-

Melinda Byerley: A character flaw.

Laura Yecies: Well, but more than that. Even if you don't view it as a flaw, do you actually have it? Or is it that you're younger, and a boy and you move around a little bit more and the kindergarten teacher thinks that's a sign of ADHD, and it might be normal and appropriate behavior for that child? Or is something being missed because you don't exhibit classical symptoms, right?

Melinda Byerley: Girls in particular are who don't run around. Yeah.

- Laura Yecies: Right. The lack of having objective measures leads to a lot more angst and difficulty in medication decisions. By the way, this is... it's not just ADHD, other conditions also, neurological conditions lack objective measurement, especially in the earlier and milder versions. We see this as is just really something that's very important clinically. One question people ask is, "Well, why now?" Right? Because if you know that eye tracking, what you'll know is, many of these fact findings have been around for quite a while. For instance, you can look back at research on eye tracking and schizophrenia, some of those studies are, I think they're over 30 years old.
- Melinda Byerley: Wow.
- Laura Yecies: But what's changing is, like many other areas of technology, just like the heart rate example, the EKG example I gave you, is that we're standing on the shoulders of technology giants that are dramatically reducing the cost footprint, and the availability footprint. What an eye tracking, a desktop eye tracker that might be used in your research institution that five years ago, literally costs over a hundred thousand dollars, not only is it expensive, it's quite difficult to use. It requires a lot of training. Now we can provide a device at much lower cost, and we can train any medical professional, medical assistant even, to use it. It's the availability of the technology has dramatically changed.
- Melinda Byerley: This is, I think, would the best part about working in tech is being able to watch these things come forward and to have such an impact on people's lives.
- Laura Yecies: Right. Specific to eye tracking, and these trends in technology, many of the major platform companies have invested in eye tracking. Google, Apple, Facebook, they've acquired eye tracking technologies. Apple acquired SMI, Google acquired Eyefluence, I think Facebook acquired Eye Tribe. There's recognition by these platform companies that eye tracking is important, both for health as well as potentially content rendering. If you can measure attention, right, then maybe you want to display content only to people who are paying attention, or when and where they're paying attention. I think eye tracking is a very foundational technology. But from my point of view and what we're focusing on syncing, just has a tremendous possibilities to improve healthcare.

- Melinda Byerley: This is phenomenal. Since we're drawing close to the end of our time, I have just a few couple of last questions. The first is something that I like to ask a lot of our guests is to ask if you could go back in time and talk to yourself when you started an important job, doesn't have to be your first job in tech, but a time when you were changing in your career, if you... a lesson that you wished you had known then. If you could internalize something you know now that you wished you'd learned earlier, what would that be?
- Laura Yecies: One thing I frequently have to remind myself of is the, it's the "Moneyball" lesson, and I'll tell you what I mean by that.
- Melinda Byerley: Please-
- Laura Yecies: Moneyball was that the famous Michael Lewis book and then movie, and to me... I read that book before I was involved professionally with sports. Right now our company sells a lot to sports organizations, but at that time that was not the case. That book was not about sports, it was about challenging conventional wisdom, right? Those scouts thought that they could just spot who the high potential players were, and sometimes they could and sometimes they couldn't. It turns out that there was better ways to measure. I've seen this over and over again in my career that I'll come into either a company or a field and there's a conventional wisdom around people around certain judgments.
- Laura Yecies: When you peel back the onion or when you really look into it, it turns out that they're just not true. They're just not true. When I got to Zone Labs, there was this assumption that the free firewall users were the more tech savvy, and the full suite users were not. That was just not correct. The free firewall users were the tech savvy people and their family members who they installed it, whose computer they installed it on to. It changed our marketing strategy, significantly.
- Laura Yecies: When I got to SugarSync there was a thought, and there's actually a good reason for the thought, it just turned out that the environment changed. When the Sharpcast came out with Sharpcast Photos, they tried to freemium product; freemium didn't work. When they came out with SugarSync, they therefore decided not to do freemium.

- Laura Yecies: Then a competitor, namely Dropbox, came out with a freemium solution and it turned out that the market was right for that. I joined them within three months. We launched a freemium product, but there was time lost and market share lost. It was really about, are you being open to new data? I see this in the medical world where we are lucky to work with a lot of thought leaders and early adopters in the neurological space and the concussion space. But we need to break through to people who are just accustomed to doing it a particular way. It's worked for them. I think, I guess there's two points in here. One is around challenging conventional wisdom and challenging your own assumptions and always getting the data, but also one of openness to change.
- Melinda Byerley: It's hard to be successful in tech without both of those. You have to know what you think, and you have to have an opinion, but they go together, don't, they? You have to be open to change even when you think you know something, because you might miss the next thing if you're not.
- Laura Yecies: Definitely.
- Melinda Byerley: My last question for you is, what's the best advice that anyone has ever given you? We always... People will say, "Oh, what's your advice for so-and-so?" I always find it fascinating to hear what advice successful people like you have heard in their lives and internalized.
- Laura Yecies: Yeah. I got a piece of advice from my husband once, that I think was a big A-ha for me. I'd been fortunate that I've had people who were tremendous performers come join me at a subsequent company, right? Either a startup or a big company. By the way, that's a whole 'nother discussion. You don't want to comprise the new team of only people from your old company, But oftentimes some of those key people can help you seed talent and certain skills in a new organization. That's something that I've been proud of, I've enjoyed, and I think has really helped me from a business point of view.
- Melinda Byerley: Phenomenal.
- Laura Yecies: I joined SugarSync and things were really challenging those first few months, I mentioned it was during the financial crisis at the end of '08. We needed to raise money. We had a very small team, and I had this

one engineer who came to me and basically said that he was due a bonus based on a verbal commitment that he would be paid it at the end of the calendar year instead of at the anniversary of his hire date. The CEO had left before me, the CFO left, and there's no documentation. I did talk to the CFO, who I hardly knew, and he verified it, but I wasn't even sure if he was frankly being up front with me because I knew he was friends with this person, so I had to make a decision. My gut was that there was something fishy going on. But I decided to err on the side of paying the bonus, and the payroll hit on a Friday and Saturday morning he quit. It was a significant amount of money, and we didn't have a lot of money at the time at the company.

Laura Yecies: I felt duped, and I was kicking myself. Not because it surprised me, but because I had this intuition, and I had gone against my intuition. I was quite upset about this and talked to my husband about it. Finally, I think he was tired of hearing about it, like, "What's was done is done, let's move on." The rest of the day happens, and then we're getting ready for bed, and I'm still distracted. He goes, "What's going on?" I'm like, "Oh, I still can't believe I let him trick me into paying this bonus." He goes like, "You're still at this?" He goes, "Look, I think you're looking at it wrong." He said, and he gave me examples of people who had joined SugarSync, like someone who you admire, Gary Smith for instance. A couple of people had come to SugarSync during this really scary time, right?

Melinda Byerley: Brave people.

Laura Yecies: He said, "Why do people torment... want to do this?" Obviously it's an interesting role, but they know that you will treat them fairly, right? And that you will honor commitments and do the right thing. And you're known for that, and 95% of the time, that will be helpful and it will help you recruit great teams and really do motivate and do good things with that team. Some percentage of the time, maybe it's five, I hope it's less, it means that you'll get tricked or duped, but net/net... you wouldn't change who you are and mostly, of course because it's the right way to be, but also because it's actually, it's the right... it's a good business decision too."

Laura Yecies: That has stuck with me because I have found myself in the case where I've had to make those kinds of decisions and to me it all comes down to the people, and you're not going to build a great business without



great people. You're not going to get great people if you aren't someone that those people want to work for, and they need to know that you'll treat them well.

Laura Yecies: That is as good advice as any, I think. It certainly has been my experience with you. Laura, thank you so much for coming on the podcast.

Melinda Byerley: Oh, it was really my pleasure, always great to talk to you, Melinda.

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