

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES

AUGUST 2020

LEADERS IN ACTION

TeLisa Daughtry
Founder, FlyTechnista



PAVING THE WAY FOR WOMEN IN TECHNOLOGY

TeLisa Daughtry, Founder and CEO of FlyTechnista, established her company in 2015 to support women to overcome the barriers she herself had faced starting a career in technology years before. Today, FlyTechnista has served over 8,000 women and girls through education, employment opportunities and community engagement in the field of technology. The FlyTechnista mobile app has over 800 partners in the global tech ecosystem.

TeLisa began her path in technology over 22 years ago when she was still in high school. As a first-year student at the Boston Arts Academy, TeLisa initially began training as a dancer but weeks in she decided that she wanted to be an artist and changed her major. During an elective in digital art, TeLisa saw the potential creative opportunities computer-based work offered through graphic and web design.

"I just fell in love with creating on the computer," TeLisa said.

Shortly after, TeLisa wanted to dive deeper and learn website coding. It was 1998 and no web development software was yet available. She needed to learn how to write code but had no idea where to begin and teachers at her high school were unable to help. TeLisa was told she needed to learn HTML and CSS, two types of technology for building web pages. She went to the local bookstore, found a how-to book, hand copied the code into her own notebook, returned to school and inputted it. To her surprise, the hand-copied code worked!

"My mind was blown and then I kept going. That's how I began my journey in tech, that's what inspired me," TeLisa said.

When she saw those lines of code that she wrote, she was inspired. "I thought, oh my goodness, I can create in this virtual environment," she said. TeLisa was able to teach herself six programming languages in a year and a half by doing that.

Knocking down barriers

TeLisa continued on her non-traditional path towards a career in technology by blending the worlds of art and coding. After six years building websites as a self-taught coder and then becoming a classically trained engineer with studies in computer science, TeLisa finally secured a paid position that utilized her skills in graphic design, web design and web development. Eight years into her career and several paid positions later, TeLisa became the very first woman interactive designer in the firm she worked for, and was also the first and only woman of colour in a company of 800 employees.

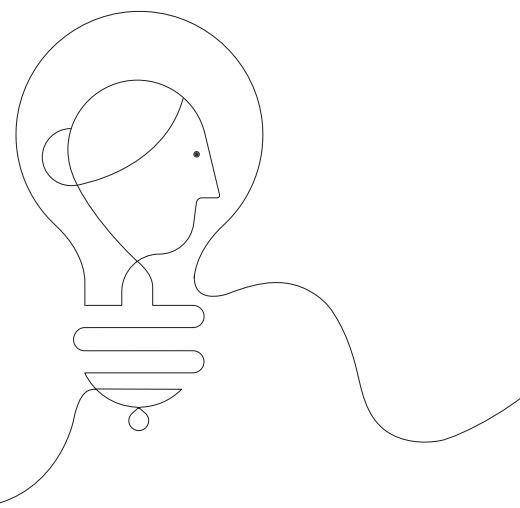
TeLisa shared that she often felt there was significant pressure to not "mess it up". "What does that then look like for the next woman after me or the next person of colour they decide to hire? It was tremendous stress and pressure, but also a joy to be able to set the benchmark... I superseded myself," she said.

Throughout her early career, TeLisa did not have a role model or a mentor to guide her. It was not until the eight-year mark in her career when she finally gained a mentor in her manager. "That's the first time I ever felt valued, even though I was in an organization as the first and the only," she said. This was the first person who gave her a voice and visibility, and provided her with opportunities to work on enriching projects. "We had nothing in common," she said. "There was no reason that he needed to take me under his wings and yet he did."

Being valued and having a voice is vital in keeping employees invested in their company in the long run. Despite having gained support through her mentor, TeLisa still had a much slower advancement compared to male colleagues in her field. She did not land a senior role until she was several years into her career.

"I would definitely say as an intersectional woman... I have faced real systemic barriers and obstacles to advancing in my career. I kept receiving great feedback, great internal reviews in growth and development plans, but still [was] not able to secure the raises, the advances, the titles, and that became very frustrating to have to continuously prove your worth and why you should be promoted to leadership," she said.

TeLisa did not want her experience of slow advancement and lack of support to develop her career to happen to other women and girls.



Boosting gender equality in technology

In 2014, TeLisa left her job and in 2015, she founded FlyTechnista to give women and girls a chance to be on the same playing field as men and boys for careers in technology. Reflecting on her own career and the barriers she faced, TeLisa did not want this same journey to be repeated time and time again for women and girls around the world.

FlyTechnista started off as a newsletter to share employment opportunities in technology. TeLisa had developed so many connections over the years that companies would reach out to her with contract offers for jobs, such as web development and graphic design. Since she was only one person and did not want to hoard all the opportunities for herself, she instead shared them with women in her network. The work was two-fold for TeLisa: helping place women in technical and creative roles and then ensuring that the women stayed with their employers. TeLisa began creating and sharing solutions to help companies retain the women that they were hiring.

The work grew from a newsletter to a website with additional training and development for women to grow, through to computer science classes, coding boot camp and scholarship opportunities at various institutions. FlyTechnista then became an Artificial Intelligence-driven product designed to help women and girls better understand relevant jobs in software development, which has now evolved into today's mobile application connecting women and girls with over 800 partners in the global tech ecosystem.

Confronting the status quo

Going off on her own and starting her own business was not without its challenges. TeLisa went from one male-dominated industry in technology to another male-dominated space: accelerator programmes for starting your own company.

Facing a male-dominated culture in the accelerator programmes was “very different for me to navigate, me looking like me, and navigating at the intersection of woman and black. I often found that these barriers I faced as an entrepreneur, I'd also faced as a professional within my career,” she said.

TeLisa also found challenges in articulating why FlyTechnista was needed to help women and girls get into technology. At the time, investors did not understand why women and girls needed a centralized place for resources to support them to enter or stay in a career in technology.

TeLisa overcame these obstacles with perseverance and a determination to stick to her vision.

“At the forefront of everything that I do,” TeLisa said, “I always think if I don’t build this, are we ever going to see equality in this industry? Are we ever going to see balance? Are we ever going to see the products and the solutions that we need? In our world, if women and girls are not in these spaces now, are we ever going to see it? And I just cannot wait 120 years for us to be equal, I need to see it now.”

TeLisa explained that she has seen a positive shift in the past four years for women in both the field of entrepreneurship and technology. Far more communities of female founders and women venture capitalists have emerged, and a gender lens is being used to support women to launch their enterprises. For any woman who is not quite sure whether to start a business, TeLisa says that now is the time.

"If you don't, who will? What does our future hold without women in this space, without women building businesses we need? What kinds of products will we not have if you are not an entrepreneur? What kinds of solutions will not be solved in our society? I need women to feel confident to be the person who can usher in or create this impact and make change doing it," she said.

Telisa continues to persevere and has pivoted her company in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. FlyTechnista is now fully available via mobile application with the aim of upskilling and finding work for the 10.55 million women unemployed and underemployed in the US due to COVID-19.

FlyTechnista became a Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) Signatory in July 2020 and is committed to implementing the WEPs through their work in supporting women and girls to become innovators and leaders in technology.

Women's Empowerment Principles



High-level corporate leadership



Employee well-being and safety



Supplier diversity & marketing practices



Workplace HR



Measurement and reporting




Education and training for women




Community engagement

 weps.org

 weps@unwomen.org

 [@WEPrinciples](https://twitter.com/WEPrinciples)

 [@Empower_Women](https://twitter.com/Empower_Women)

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**WOMEN'S
EMPOWERMENT
PRINCIPLES**

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