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Smart Talks with IBM: Working Together While Apart

JONATHAN STRICKLAND: Welcome to TechStuff, a production from iHeartRadio. Hey there, welcome to TechStuff. I'm your host, Jonathan Strickland. I'm an executive producer with iHeartRadio, and I love all things tech. Today's episode of Smart Talks focuses on education. In Smart Talks, I sit down with people who are using technologies developed by IBM to tackle big problems out in the real world and how the tech actually effects change. In our past episodes, we've looked at tech design for disaster mitigation, localizing COVID-19 data so you know what's happening in your region and using supercomputers to research COVID-19 in an effort to develop effective treatments. If you haven't heard those episodes, I urge you to go back and check them out. Just check further back in our subscription feed; you're going to see all those episodes laid out. It's really inspiring stuff. And speaking of inspiring, I'm sure many of you out there have had to deal with massive shifts in your routines as the COVID-19 crisis continues.

Those of you with kids who would normally be in school are definitely seeing a huge change, whether you're working from home or goodness having to still go out and work for an essential job while your children stay home. It's an added challenge on top of an already challenging time, and I'm sure, as we've all learned over the last few weeks, there's no shortage of online tools that can help us deal with this. But in many cases those tools were built for general remote working, learning, or communication, and they weren't necessarily designed to meet the needs of a much larger population searching for solutions. In some cases, the tools might have a steep learning curve, or they might not be packaged together, leaving educators, guardians and parents to jerry-rig a set of assets to try and meet the educational needs of students. In today's episode I speak with Kristin Wisnewski, vice president of design in the CIO's office at IBM, and Grace Suh, vice president of education at IBM, to talk about efforts to make powerful educational tools available and accessible, which are two related but distinct things.

You can find the resources we talk about at ibm.com/remotelearning, and there you'll see tools like video broadcasting services, which provide a one-way communication tool useful for lectures or announcements; videoconferencing for classroom discussions or parent-teacher conferences; curated educational programs, including practical workshops that help students train real-world skills that companies of the future will need; and a digital education platform called Open P-TECH for students aged 14 to 20 that really dives into topics that will help students interested in tech careers to build the skills and knowledge they'll need for the workplace.
We'll start with Kristen Wisnewski, VP of design in the CIO's office, to talk about the challenges her team faced when they received the task to package together remote-learning assets. Because as it turns out, making these powerful technologies easy for the average person to access comes with its own challenges. Kristin, I want to thank you for being part of this podcast, and before we dive into the DesignOps section, which I'm really fascinated about, I was wondering if I could just sort of get from you your own personal perspective of what it means for us all to be adapting to what a lot of people are calling “the new normal” here while we're going through these efforts to flatten the curve of the COVID-19 crisis. What does that actually mean for a lot of people? Because I think a lot of people out there might feel, in this world of isolation, like they are alone in their experience, and I don't really think that's the case.

**KRISTIN WISNEWSKI:** Right? Yeah, exactly, Jonathan. So, for me personally, I now am working out of my home in Long Island. I had a three-hour commute to my New York City office for a bunch of years where we built out a designer hub. I have two sisters who have two kids, and they are parents now at home, part-time educators. They're keeping up households; they're working full-time. And I'm seeing the gravity of what people are dealing with as I hear about these stories and look in the community and my neighbors and my friends who are teachers. And I'm hearing the heartbreaking stories, and I'm also hearing the heartwarming stories that just really uplift you and remind you of the resilience of the human spirit. And I think for me professionally, having worked at IBM for nearly 20 years, it's been an odd transition. I first transitioned from home to the office; after nearly a decade, now I'm transitioning back. And while it was new and unforeseen, it was fairly straightforward, which I think is a testament to the tools that we have available and the approaches that we've learned and the investments we've made in our ways of working, and the fact that we can leverage and lean on and rely on the human connections that we've spent time forming. And that's really critical, I think, during this time of need and adaptation, and it was a big driving force behind the project and the contribution that we felt we could provide to the world, which is what we'll talk about here today—but I think it's just an uncertain time for a lot of people. And to know that we're all in it together and we're all collectively finding ways to adapt, I think, is one of the most comforting thoughts I can give myself and others at this time.

**JONATHAN STRICKLAND:** How has the team that you work on been affected by this? I'm sure a lot of people were working in more of a close, cooperative environment. Now we're talking about a lot of people in different remote locations collaborating. Have you seen any changes in that regard, or has it been a pretty easy transition—adaptation—into that work/life kind of experience?
KRISTIN WISNEWSKI: Yeah, I think as IBMers we've been accustomed to working in distributed ways. We've learned a lot in terms of the ways of working, in terms of etiquette, in terms of how to connect with one another and how to effectively leverage. When there's even just one person remote on a squad and the others are together, there's a whole different way of interacting, rather than if the whole team were sitting in one room together. Design has the ability to impact the human experience in really big and bold and meaningful ways. And so, we've looked internally at what we're doing and thought about how we can share that with others. And to your point, we've had also to make adjustments. It was certainly not seamless. We've had some trial-and-error ways to go about things, and we've introduced new remote forms of staying engaged and connected. For the most part, I think the majority of the ways of interacting are leveraged by the tool kit and the tool stack that we have at IBM, which we've made available. But I do think that relying on the softer side of things is so critical at this point.

JONATHAN STRICKLAND: When we talked before, we had this recording session, you had mentioned this whole philosophy of DesignOps. I was hoping you could talk more about what that is—DesignOps—and kind of give us an overview of the philosophy behind that.

KRISTIN WISNEWSKI: Absolutely. So DesignOps—we have a design shop that is about 140 people at IBM. It's a large shop, and it has different subdisciplines that contribute to the broader sense of what we call design. It's user-experience design; it's visual designers, user researchers, multimedia designers, content and communications. We also include design and business strategy, the engagement function, agile. So, there's a lot going on. And the way to orchestrate all of this in a highly functional fashion is to implement a DesignOps function within your team. So I think that the DesignOps—the way that we run our team and the focus on DesignOps—has enabled us to quickly line up and to tap a number of people from each of those subfunctions and to bring them together in a seamless as possible to attack this really big challenge and opportunity, to try to leverage what we know and what we can do and to bring it forward to fruition in a way that's really meaningful to people. And I think people can tell when you care and when you put care and thought into a product or an experience that you're creating. So DesignOps enables us to come together and really try to solve big problems in meaningful ways, and it requires a lot of empathy more than anything else.

JONATHAN STRICKLAND: You alluded to a really quick time turnaround, a four-day turnaround for a project. I thought maybe it'd be interesting to learn more about the specifics of that project. What was the goal that you were aiming for, and what was the
process like in that incredibly quick turnaround, to go from “Here's what we need to do” to actually having something to show?

KRISTIN WISNEWSKI: I got a phone call on a Monday night a few weeks ago, and it was an idea, which is basically: kids are being thrown into this new digital world. They're learning an entirely new culture that's going to shape them and potentially their future careers, how they're interacting. It's such a huge change from what people know, and they don't have weeks or years to adapt like I have, and some of my colleagues at IBM; they had to adapt in days, if not hours. And so that became the challenge. And so many of us are connected with teachers in our real lives, where we're watching the struggle firsthand, and we're parents or sisters of parents, and our friends are teachers and all of that. So, it felt very real and we jumped right into action, deciding that we're going to make a site that offers resources to—primarily to teachers in this time of need, in this new world that we find ourselves in.

We could have just probably put up a technology table just saying, “Here's what IBM does.” Instead, a big focus of ours from the design perspective became “What's the mental model of our users? Let’s not lead with the technology. That's probably not how they think.” Teachers and educators and maybe administrators and parents and guardians are probably thinking, "Well, I'm hoping to do X—how might I do that? What are my options?" I think at the end of the day, just take a little—it's a daunting thing for people to try to transition and recreate the social interactions they have physically in a classroom, to do that virtually and with all different age groups. I think it's just such a daunting, overwhelming task. And our whole impetus was, let's try to take some of that away. Even from the imagery we use and the way—the words we choose, everything was very thoughtfully applied with this thought in mind.

JONATHAN STRICKLAND: Do you have any observations about the shift of etiquette from the real-world space to virtual space, or anything that you've particularly learned in this rather accelerated development phase?

KRISTIN WISNEWSKI: So, we put these sections of the site together that provide tips for most effectively leveraging technology while you're trying to do this. And it's things like: Join a couple of minutes early. Learn where your mute feature is; use it when you're not talking. Avoid excess noise. Try to look at the best position for your camera. Avoid backlighting. And if your video is choppy, you might turn it off. Look at the various layouts that the tool you're using provides so that you can get the most out of it or it can best suit your preferences. Read facial cues. Use your hands when you're talking. There's things that we've learned that make you feel more connected, and so they're provided in various parts of the site. And it's sort of like, no matter what you're doing and using, we hope you can find some value here because we're sharing some
ways of working that are pretty ubiquitous, or can be, and hopefully can be valuable at this time.

We thought about different ways for the six-through-twelve age group to do. Maybe it's “Students are the teachers for the day.” Maybe there's a morning announcement and it gets rotated. There's book clubs or podcast clubs, and so we tried to consider what would be fun. We play lunch roulette now that—with my team, now that we're remote. We do that just so that randomly you can pair up with someone and have lunch and see how it's going for them. And why couldn't that apply also in an education setting? It definitely could. So, have a guest speaker, have somebody come on, do “show and tell,” grab an item that's meaningful to you from the room you are sitting in. And we played—literally, at my job, my boss hosted a “Guess whose office this is?,” and we had to send in a picture beforehand, and we had a lot of fun with guessing whose office that might be, considering the broader surrounding that you can't really see on video.

And so, I think there's lots of ways that we can stay connected. And then there's reminders to educators to take breaks, let people get up and move, let them have a sense of control, pass the mic around, ask questions, let people submit. And then we try to think of various ways that others can just even suggest different content. We definitely did not think of an exhaustive list, but I think that there's a good starting point, and that hopefully the creative juices will flow from having read that. And then we hope in time we'll have some sort of—whether it's synchronous or asynchronous—some sort of feedback mechanism where people can interact and say, like, “Here's my hack. Here's what I did that really worked.”

**JONATHAN STRICKLAND:** You touched on a lot of things that really resonate with me. Kristin can tell you, because she can see my video as I record this right now, that I do talk with my hands quite a lot, and that sort of level of expression, that level of body language, is something that is incredibly valuable. Those social cues are incredibly informative, and anyone who has had an experience of misinterpreting a message sent via text or email because it lacked that part of human communication can tell you it's very easy to have a misunderstanding when you don't have that element in your communication. So, having the tools there to be able to enable that communication, I think, is incredibly useful. I’m old enough to have reached the point where I did not realize that sometimes using punctuation in text messages could be interpreted as being very stern or directive. I used it because I was trained as a writer and punctuation is how you end sentences, but then younger friends of mine would say, "Oh, no. In our culture, this text-based culture where we use that as a way of communicating, we interpret that as a way of being much more stern with one another. So, it's like you're yelling at someone or you're chiding them.” And so that was a learning experience for me.
KRISTIN WISNEWSKI: I've been smiling, listening to you, because it's all too real. And we've been on the other end of those texts, and we've sent those texts and received those ones, and we know how this goes. So, I think we have almost no choice but to become better at interacting, right? And being expressive and communicating with one another in new and different and varied ways that I think will serve us well longer term. And I think the underlying point is that we need each other, people. We are a community of people, no matter how you slice and dice it, and we're human beings and we need to be connected. And we need to remember that people want to help. Tools and people and services and offerings are out there to an almost overwhelming degree right now. But nobody's alone in this. And I think that there's such comfort in that thought. And so, we're here to all work together through this.

JONATHAN STRICKLAND: Kristin's team worked on the design side of these remote-learning tools. My next guest, Grace Suh, is the vice president of education at IBM, and she and I talked more about IBM's programs that provide resources to students and educators, including programs that extend beyond the online world. Grace, before we talk about IBM's initiatives in education, what sort of broad trends are we seeing right now in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis as people try to adapt to a new type of life in this era of physical distancing? Obviously, that's created a lot of disruption. So, what are some of the trends we're seeing?

GRACE SUH: When it comes to schools, what we're seeing is that educators are really trying to pivot quickly, and I've talked to a number of education leaders and they are working 24/7, tirelessly finding alternatives for academic learning—but not just learning. Schools are such—the centerpieces of our communities. They provide so much. So, for many schools, they're also looking for ways to provide food for young people who rely on their schools for food. They're also thinking about other social services as well, so they're really running the gamut of many different kinds of services that they've got to figure out for children.

JONATHAN STRICKLAND: Can you talk a bit about some of the services and applications that IBM has been involved with as far as education?

GRACE SUH: Yeah, in terms of what we're providing for students around the world with distance learning, we actually—and the timing has been really spot-on. Unfortunately, there is a pandemic, but we have just launched something that we call Open P-TECH. And Open P-TECH builds off of a program that we have for brick-and-mortar high schools. Within these brick-and-mortar high schools, the idea is that students are learning the skills that they need for the future of work. So really, a focus on, I guess, the academic competencies, but also technical competencies as well as professional competencies. Professional ones being what some people refer to as soft
skills, like problem solving, critical thinking. And we took the—those kinds of learning that are happening within P-TECH schools and we've put them online. And so, if you go to Open P-TECH, which is off of P-TECH.org, you have the opportunity to—for free, and anyone can access it—go in and participate in digital learning.

So, you can learn about cybersecurity and blockchain and data science. You can participate in free webinars around a number of different subjects, and you can earn digital badges, which is such a great inspiration and motivation for students. And these are the same badges that IBMers earn. So, we know that they have cachet in the labor market, so students can put them onto their LinkedIn profiles or other kinds of digital wallet. And it signifies that they have mastered a very specific skill. So, we're making that available worldwide. We know that it's in a number of different languages. And we also have developed a skill site where learners can get a huge number of other kinds of skills off of ibm.com/skills as well. And we know that not everybody is going to be able to access these things, but for those students that can, this is an opportunity for them to be able to augment learning that's happening within their schools and build upon their expertise in really key areas that employers are looking for. So really getting prepared for college and career.

**JONATHAN STRICKLAND:** And also, it's something that can see to a need that I think a lot of school systems are probably underequipped to do. Not saying that all of them are, but I think a lot of schools are very much focused on traditional curricula. And so, something like this that is incredibly applicable today would possibly be something that people wouldn't even encounter unless they were doing special after-school programs or perhaps a college-prep course or maybe not even until they got into college if they started to be interested in something like computer science.

**GRACE SUH:** I think that this speaks to the larger fact that we know schools can't do the hard work of educating children on their own, and businesses need talent. And it's really incumbent upon businesses to help develop and nurture that talent, working with educators on the ground. So if we're very deliberate about articulating the skills that we need so that students build the skills that they need to engage in the economy and in future jobs, then it's really a win-win for everybody. And the other thing that we're very attuned to in our work through the P-TECH brick-and-mortar schools is really a focus on access and equity. So through our P-TECH's actual schools, of which there are 220 across 25 countries around the world, we are serving students from underserved backgrounds and working to give them the skills to participate in the future of work and also experiences that their families may not have access to because they don't have the financial capability or the social networks to engage. So we provide our students with opportunities to have mentoring, paid internships, and opportunities to be first in line for job interviews.
So ultimately our students in our P-TECH schools are earning a high school diploma and a two-year associate’s degree, and we're trying to take some of those opportunities and now put them online to reach even more children.

**JONATHAN STRICKLAND:** That's great, and I'm glad you brought up the issue of underserved populations. That's something I definitely want to speak more about, because while a lot of us, like, myself included, have the luxury of being able to import my work to a different environment to be able to continue to contribute—even if I don't have access to the office; I would normally be in the studio—a lot of people don't have those luxuries, whether it's because of the type of work they are in or because they just don't have access to those sorts of things. We unfortunately don't live in a world where everyone has access to ubiquitous networks and ubiquitous technologies. So, since that's something that we often kind of gloss over in these conversations, we talk about the, the online tools and the tech tools that enable distance learning. What about for people who are in those positions? Are there any initiatives that are aiming to help underserved populations that wouldn't have access to those tools traditionally?

**GRACE SUH:** Well, we need to do much more. We certainly know that there are students during this pandemic who are not going to be able to participate in distance learning because they simply don't have access to technology and connectivity. And research shows that students who miss school—they do not achieve it at the highest levels. And I've talked to a number of educators during this pandemic, and they have very deep concerns that the loss of learning over this period of time can affect our most vulnerable children across their entire lifetimes. So, this is something that we really need to think about seriously. We always think about education as a civil right, but we have to think about technology and the opportunity to learn from a distance as a civil right too. So, I think that's the next area that we need to tackle. And it's certainly not just technology, it's really also about connectivity. It's about giving teachers the tools that will empower them to be able to help teach their students in classrooms. So there's a huge range of different areas that we need to start thinking about.

**JONATHAN STRICKLAND:** Shifting over to kind of a “tips and tricks” sort of approach—I hate to even phrase it that way—but do you have any insight on things that you think are valuable for either the average student or perhaps average educator or maybe parent or guardian? What they should do to help support a remote-learning experience? Things like best practices, perhaps?

**GRACE SUH:** Yeah, I think there's a huge range. I think for students who have connectivity and are able to be learning from home, a lot of the best practices mirror what happens in the workplace. So, we need a good setup. You need lights, and the same for the teachers. And I think I've seen teachers, my son's teacher in particular,
doing a wonderful job of helping students learn how to participate in an online classroom. So how do you mute? How do you raise your hand? What is the best way to participate and ask a question? So it does remind me a lot about just work, the world of work. So, they're getting a jump start on that, which is great to see. I think for schools and educators and leaders who are working with students from vulnerable populations, I know that the challenges are just greater, and different—how do you get kids to come to the table and participate in online education?

A lot of that has to do with making sure—I know I've heard a lot of school leaders who are calling families twice a week just to check in. I think the emotional part of school, and how amazing teachers are with our young people—we can't forget that piece too. So, finding ways to make sure that we're creating these inclusive classrooms where students feel heard, where they continue to feel nurtured, and—I think that we've got to experiment with ways to do that. I know some teachers are experimenting with smaller classroom opportunities, or they might be having their own kinds of office hours, just like you would do in a university setting, to help students who are falling behind. So, there's a huge range of different kinds of ways that educators are trying to help. And I think it mirrors many of the best practices that we're seeing in the workplace.

I think for us at IBM, what the pandemic has done is put a greater sense of urgency around our work. We know that innovation happens through diversity. We know that there's so much untapped talent around the world, and we're really committed to bringing the very best experts and skills to the table to drive our business forward and to enable us to help our clients and to solve some of the world's greatest challenges. So, our goal is to be able to nurture talent wherever it exists, give them the tools and the skills that they need by working with the public sector, with educators and government officials and nonprofits, to be able to build the next generation of leaders and workers and IBMers. So, it's great to be part of all of this kind of work.

**JONATHAN STRICKLAND:** Thank you to Kristin and Grace for coming on the show to talk about IBM's work and creating and making accessible these tools for students, parents and educators. To learn more about what is available, go to ibm.com/remotelearning. You'll see links to lots of resources that can be a huge help. Before I sign off, I also want to remind everyone of the Call for Code initiative. This is a sort of hackathon in which IBM invites app developers and others to form teams and pitch app solutions to really big challenges. This year there are two tracks of challenges. First is response to COVID-19. IBM is already evaluating the initial batch of submissions to put three proposed solutions into implementation by the middle of this month. However, if you have an idea for an app to help in the fight against COVID-19, you're still welcome to submit that idea until July 31. That date is also when the final
submissions are due for the other track of Call for Code, which aims at the broad issue of climate change.

So, if you have an idea for an app, or you want to see what ideas are already out there and how you might also get involved, there's still time. And you don't have to be a developer; you might be someone with deep knowledge on the subject matter, in which case you can add your expertise to people who are developing apps. To learn more, visit developer.ibm.com/callforcode. The next Smart Talks episode we'll publish on *Stuff to Blow Your Mind*, so make sure you check that out, and be sure to subscribe to the show, because if you like science, you're going to love that podcast.

Join Robert and Joe as they speak with IBM's global managing director for consumer industries, Luq Niazi, as they unpack how the pandemic has forced rapid adaptation in the ways we shop and manage supply chains. You'll find that episode over at *Stuff to Blow Your Mind*. And as always, I hope you are well, and I'll talk to you again really soon. *TechStuff* is an iHeartRadio production. For more podcasts from iHeartRadio, visit the iHeartRadio app, Apple podcasts, or wherever you listen to your favorite shows.