

30X30: Fable Tech Lab's Abid Virani and Alwar Pillai on How to Build a More Inclusive Society

Lance Chung: Okay. Thank you so much for joining us today. We have Abid Virani and Alwar Pillai from Fable Tech Labs, co-founders, and we're so happy to have you going us and being featured in our 30X30 issue this year. How are you doing today?

Alwar Pillai: We're doing good.

Abid Virani: It's nice to have a chance to see the sun and get outside today. So feeling good. It's been a bit of a dreary week.

LC: For sure. So why don't we get started, you're the co-founders of Fable Tech Labs. Can you briefly describe your company and what it does?

AW: Yeah, for sure. So what Fable does is we work with large companies, enterprises in education, finance, e-commerce, government: anyone that has an online website and app and we help them make it accessible for people with disabilities. We do that by helping test all of the different websites and apps with real people who live with a disability so they know what kind of issues are there on their products and they can fix it.

LC: Right. So what has been your background or experience with working with the disabled community? Are you both able-bodied and how do you bring your experience to work with a community that you may not have direct experience with?

AV: Cool. Yeah, that's great. I mean, we are both able-bodied and the way we've been able to build this company is by not making assumptions, kind of acknowledging that position, and - so when we started this company, the first person we brought on to work with us, Sam Proulx, himself, lives with a disability and has managed communities of people with disabilities for decades, and notably the blind Reddit community is something he's been really active in. He's really guided the direction in which we engage with the community.

AV: One of the most important things to know about how we kicked this company off was understanding the problem of employment that people with disabilities face, the unpredictability of it, the barriers within the workplace, the limitations when it comes to flexibility and just trying to absorb some of those problems and saying, "Which one can we tackle first? Which ones can we tackle second?" And build the framework so that we could actually make engaging in the economy easier. There's no lack of skill to

contribute, there's no lack of eagerness to work. There's just barriers that need to be overcome.

Title Card: In 2015, Alwar and Abid met each other when they began their Masters of Inclusive Design at OCAD University. Their first collaboration was designing Abid's 93-year-old grandmother a prototype for an accessible remote control.

LC: How do you define disability and accessibility? Obviously, there's a spectrum between invisible disabilities as well as physical disabilities. How do you define it within the context of your company?

AV: Yeah, good question. I mean the first thing is that the notion of disability is not binary and it's really hard to kind of hold that as a truth while we live in a world that creates a very binary definition of disability. Either you have one or you don't. But the reality is that every single person, regardless of age, regardless of gender, regardless of ethnicity, has a spectrum of ability and that really factors into our definition. Now when it comes to what we've built in regards to a company and a tool, we look for that unique skillset. So, depending on a disability, a person might use a form of assistive technology, and that's a unique skill that creates a unique qualification in that someone who knows how to work with a piece of technology that rarely does somebody who's on a digital team, building and designing the products we use everyday, know how to use. And so the unique qualifications is that skill set with the technology and that's why we call these professional jobs. That's why we pay technology wages, because there's a unique skill set with a piece of technology that almost nobody else knows how to use. And even if they learn how to use it, they're not native users, whereas people with disabilities are experts in using the technologies they use to navigate the digital world because they do it every day. That's really the skill set that we look at. Then when we look at disability as a broader thing, we look at it as a mismatch with the environment and the spectrum as opposed to this binary distinction.

AP: Yeah, and just to add to that, the thing that really made me understand this a bit more is that it's the whole thing of, it's not binary and that you can have situations where you feel disabled because you know the environment or the technology is not designed for you. So a lot of what we did in our inclusive design programs as well as that, yes, you have permanent disabilities, you have temporary disabilities, and you have situational disabilities. And let's face it, we all are going to grow old. Our abilities are going to change and we should have products and environments around us that adapt to our needs and not make us feel like we don't fit because that's what technology is doing right now, rather than adapting to our requirements and our needs.

AV: Yeah. Going to keep building here. This is the bread and butter of everything we do, is really removing that idea that you have an average. We don't subscribe to that. There is no average person. It doesn't exist. And then that idea that you can't create anything in this world that's one-sized-fits-all. The best products, the best solutions, the best experiences and one-size-fits-one.

AV: Again, this is all just pulling from a framework of inclusive design. It really means that everyone's different. We can accommodate difference by embracing them. And when we do that, we end up with products that are way more robust, way more customizable, way more adaptable and ultimately innovative.

AV: And so this is, while this is our approach to building our company, it's the same approach that we're actually selling. It's the same approach to that desire to learn, and that Canada Post and that Shopify are getting to tap into through Fable because they're engaging the community that we've built and building their problems. And so that's what we're trying to extend outwards.

LC: That's great. Now building on that, what would you say is currently the biggest issue or hurdle in our dialogue around people with disabilities?

AV: It's still the lack of voices. It's still the fact that we're having this conversation without someone with a disability in it.

AP: Yeah, it's a lack of voice and I think it's also the way society, the government, looks at this population. They look at the population as dependent. They look at the population as a population that cannot contribute to society and that does not have skill sets. And that's why you have programs, like social assistance and everything, which is valuable, but we have to start looking at people's abilities as skill sets.

AP: I think that's what we're trying to do with Fable, at the core of it is that here is this population that is eager to work and has a skillset, and we've built this work environment that does not integrate them. So let's make that easier. And the way we've tried to make that easier is by providing flexible working opportunities. Anyone with a disability anywhere canAP: just work from home and they have flexible hours.

AP: So we can pick the hours that work for them and then contribute to work. It's adapting your needs and making sure your employment and making sure you hiring, making sure your work processes are a little more inclusive. I think once you start seeing more of that, we will see this population integrate into society more. But, I think the biggest gap is the fact that they don't see people with disabilities as contributors

