



By [Karen Clark Cole](#)

We're extremely proud and excited to announce that Karen Clark Cole is a finalist for this year's [Pacific Northwest Ernst & Young Entrepreneur Of The Year](#) award. The awards program recognizes entrepreneurs who demonstrate excellence and extraordinary success in such areas as innovation, financial performance and personal commitment to their businesses and communities. Karen was selected as a finalist by a panel of independent judges. Award winners will be announced at a special gala event on June 5, 2015 at the Sheraton Seattle Hotel.

We'd like to share with you the essay we submitted on her behalf as part of the consideration process. Congratulations, Karen!

Who is Karen Clark Cole?

Karen Clark Cole is an exceptional example of entrepreneurial spirit in the Pacific Northwest. Karen is the CEO and Co-Founder of Blink UX, a Seattle-based user experience (UX) research and design firm. She studied fine arts and art history in her native Canada before a shift toward information technology and multimedia laid the groundwork for a career in UX, a type of design that encompasses an end user's interaction with a company and satisfaction with its product or service.

Karen employs a "user-centered leadership style," putting people first. Karen's high standards apply to how she builds her team: she personally interviews every Blink candidate. Empathy is her goal and [she forms close relationships with every employee](#) to understand individual goals and delights.

Karen didn't set out to be an entrepreneur. She began her career as a design practitioner, but when the opportunity to create a niche UX consulting firm became apparent, she leapt at the chance.

Founding Blink UX

Karen co-founded Blink UX with Kelly Franznick in 2000 when, after working together at a design and advertising firm, they recognized the market need for knowledgeable user experience consulting expertise as separate from larger all-in-one firms. At a time when the rest of the tech industry was slashing costs and eliminating positions, Karen and Kelly opened the doors of Blink UX, a small consultancy focused on the UX of digital products.

Karen launched Blink UX before the industry was a recognized field, thereby trailblazing the way in Seattle to be one of *the first* UX consultancies. It took only one year of operations before Blink UX became profitable.

Over time Blink UX grew. By 2013 the 45-person firm saw 287 percent growth in three years, with 53% in 2013 alone as the industry gained speed. Today Blink UX is a successful mid-sized firm, staffed by sharp employees, working on the newest digital products from divisions at Amazon, Starbucks, and Microsoft, to name a few.

Last year, Blink employees conducted field research around the world in Brazil, India, Spain, China, Japan, Canada, England, France, Germany, and in most major cities across the United States. You name it, chances are, Blink staff worked on it. Karen also saw the opportunity for expansion, opening the doors to a Blink UX lab in the competitive San Francisco market.

Growth & Vision

Blink UX has won several awards for growth including the *Puget Sound Business Journal's* Fastest Growing Companies in 2012 and 2104, as well as The Women Presidents' Organization's "[7th Annual 50 Fastest Growing Women-Owned/Led Companies](#)" in 2014. Blink was also named to the [Inc. 5000 list of fastest-growing private companies](#) for the past three years.

Despite these obvious markers of success, Karen is committed to growing the company at a measured pace to protect the organization she values — at Blink UX culture and authenticity are paramount for success. Karen grows the business carefully, partnering closely with her clients. She thoughtfully selects each new employee to ensure he / she will bring something special to the team. She maintains transparency in everything she

does, even going so far as to hold a workshop on [What Gets You Fired](#) to assuage employee fears and boost awareness. Perhaps most importantly, she is always looking for opportunities for individual employee growth, which is why in 2013, she upended her management structure.

Values-Based Leadership

Like many small businesses, Blink struggled to provide a career path for its high-performing team members. Because project directors controlled so much of a project’s activity, some consultants found themselves working to please directors instead of focusing on client needs. They did not feel personally responsible for the overall success of the project. People were beginning to find limits and were leaving.

Karen’s greatest desire is to have her highly skilled workforce stay with Blink UX until retirement. To encourage this, she needed a sustainable long-term solution that would create a company with no limits to an individual’s personal growth trajectory.

Karen created an organization focusing on roles and areas of practice rather than titles. She abolished formal reporting structures, asking everyone to manage him or herself, and take full responsibility for their work and exceeding client needs. Now, team members play different roles on each project. Coaches are assigned to team members taking on a new role for the first time, to ensure both the project and the employee are successful.

In addition, Karen formed the GROW Group, an internal panel of employees dedicated to helping find growth paths for all Blink individuals while protecting and growing the business.

Blink UX rallies around a single value: Authenticity. Karen encourages Blink employees to be authentic in everything they do and empowers them to do the right thing for the client, every time. Karen works daily to be “fully present” with her employees, clients, family, and friends. She eschews emails for face-to-face conversations. As she puts it, “It means that I am with the person in front of me, fully. No multitasking, no planning or working on my to-do list. I’m all eyes and I’m all ears.”

Girls Can Do Is Born

While still busy with her day job at Blink, in 2014 Karen founded the Washington state non-profit organization “[Girls Can Do](#)” with an aim at providing inspirational low-cost events in cities around the world. The organization provides positive role models who are everyday yet extraordinary women to teach young girls about determination, resilience, and overcoming hardships to find success.

Girls Can Do provides a fun, engaging, and supportive afternoon of listening and interacting with women who are living their dreams. Karen’s goal is to help young women see that they can make a difference in the world, big or small.

Karen also continues to be active in various business and advocacy organizations, and supports [The Tronie Foundation](#) in its mission to end human trafficking. She is currently enrolled in the Values-Driven Leadership Ph.D. program at Benedictine University in Chicago, Illinois.

Karen is a mother, a wife, a student, an entrepreneur, a humanitarian, a visionary, and in her free time, practices to become a world-class kite boarder.