



By [Karen Clark Cole](#)

On November 16, 2017, our CEO, Karen Clark Cole was interviewed by Forbes senior editor of entrepreneurship, Loren Feldman on his Sirius radio show called Mind Your Business, powered by the Wharton School.

Karen talks with Loren about designing complex systems through Evidence-driven Design, examples of how voice is changing healthcare for seniors and people with disabilities, and how voice can make it safer for truckers. She also talks about Blink's growth plans, including our acquisition strategy, building scalable systems and creating a cultural framework.

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Transcript

Loren Feldman

Hello. Welcome to a special two-hour episode of Mind Your Business, live from the EY Strategic Growth Forum in Palm Springs, California. You're listening to Sirius XM's Business Radio powered by the Wharton School. I'm your host, Loren Feldman. I'm a senior editor of Entrepreneurship at Forbes. EY's Strategic Growth Forum is an annual invite only event with over 2,000 CEOs and founders in attendance. We're honored to be here and send a big thanks to EY for hosting us.

We're gonna do something a little different today. Normally, as you know, the show is all about you, our listeners. We take your calls, offer advice, kick around what you're struggling with, whatever your pain point is at the moment but today we're going to speaking with some pretty impressive entrepreneurs about their own stories of success and failure. Let's get started with our first guest, Karen Clark Cole, the CEO and co-founder of Blink UX. Welcome to the show, Karen.

Karen Clark Cole

Thanks, Loren.

Loren

Really appreciate your being here, taking the time. Let's start with the basics. I think more and more people know exactly what UX is but not everybody. Tell us. You guys are a consulting firm, you help businesses with their websites but what exactly sets you apart from somebody who builds a website? What do you do with UX?

Karen

Sure. UX stands for user experience. How we really refer to our business is evidence driven design. What that means is the design work that we're doing is all based in actual research, understanding the people what we're designing for so what are their motivations, what are their needs, what's their environment that they're using the system in. Largely, the things that we're working on these days are complex backend systems, enterprise level systems, a lot of internet of things, devices, systems, you name it, and everything coming up, a lot of voice nowadays, a lot of AR, VR.

Loren

That's such a wide range. It seems like the transition from helping somebody with a website to helping them with voice, I assume you're talking about devices like Alexa, is that something that you had to gear up to do or is it a natural transition?

Karen

It's pretty natural. The websites that we originally were working on they're all application websites so it would be online banking systems, something where there's a complex interaction and where there's not a model out there for how people use this thing. We don't do a lot of e-Commerce work for that reason. Amazon has set a pretty good defacto standard of how people expect to work through an e-Commerce site and it's better in those cases just to use what people are expecting and what they have been accustomed to using. We're in there re-designing things like loan origination systems so that big companies like Farm Credit who give billions and billions of dollars every year to farmers for their property as well as their homes, it

used to be multi-week process and now it's really down to hours all based through a well designed user experience of a system and designed in the sense that it's for the people who are coming and specific what their needs are.

Loren

Interesting. Give us an example what you would do with a voice system. How can you help somebody improve that kind of system?

Karen C. Cole

There's a couple of things that are fun that we just finished and are working on. We're working with Moen to help them create a voice activated digital shower. If you didn't think you needed that it's really fantastic. You can be lying in bed and have the shower turn on to the right temperature. Another one that's really a great ...

Loren

Why do we need that?

Karen

Because it's fantastic. That's in the delight box of if you can make life more enjoyable in any way that's ultimately our goal.

If you're really focused on the technology or the app or the system chances are it's because there's trouble and you have to work your way through it. If it's seamless and it's designed for your needs and your mental model, how you think, then the technology is really out of the way and you can get back to having real conversations with real people.

Voice, in particular, is really helping in the healthcare space for people with disabilities as well as seniors in the homes. You can have your lights turned on with the voice command. Things like that are really helping people live their lives in a way that's less friction and allowing them to spend more time living again.

Loren

Can you give us an example of what kind of role you would play? Are you talking about vocabulary? How are you helping make a voice system or user friendly ...

Karen

Yeah, that's a great question. It's the vocabulary as well as the sequencing so what should somebody say, when should they say it, and what should the response from the system be? In a lot of cases for voice we're just helping companies more strategically think when they should use it and really when they shouldn't, in a lot of cases. Another good example is with Pilot Flying J. They're truck stops across the country and they provide food, diesel, showers, bathrooms, all those kind of things for the people who are on the road constantly. Getting to a station and having to wait in line for your fuel is really damaging to these truck drivers who, they're paid by the minute, in many cases.

If they can find out ahead of time where there's gas or diesel pump available and then pull into

the right stop when they've made a booking and do that all through voice in their trucks it's really a lot safer. There's all kinds of ways that it's enabling just a better, safer way in those cases.

Loren

At Forbes we picked your company as one of our 25 Forbes Small Giants in 2016.

Karen

One of our greatest honors.

Loren

That's nice of you to say. We think you have a very special company. The idea with Small Giants is we look for companies that have passed up opportunities to grow faster than they really have. Perhaps they haven't taken investment capital, there are things they could have done differently if their only goal was growing fast. You are getting to the point though where it seems you might be more interested in being a giant, giant than a small giant. I know you're thinking about your growth. How big is the company now?

Karen

We're close to 80 people now. Loren: Do you say what your revenues are? Karen: Yeah, about 11 million, in there.

Loren

You've been looking at buying other similar businesses in other geographic areas. What's that been like because you have a special ... I know you have an interesting culture for your company, the idea of bringing other companies into it I'm guessing must be a challenge for you.

Karen

Yeah. We're about to have a little growth spurt, it's kind of like a kid, we've been growing steady and really for 17 years and so it's not that fast in the scheme of things. We've been around for a long time. In particular, the last three years I have been entirely focused on building scalable systems, defining our culture, and knowing how to grow it and how to talk about it.

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Loren

Scalable systems to manage your tracking.

Karen

Yeah, quite literally like our time tracking system, our resource management system, our project management system, all those kind of things. Making sure that they're set up to handle multiple offices with hundreds of people instead of one office with 50 people.

Loren

You're doing this in part I think because you happen to be a Forbes contributor as well. You recently wrote a very interesting post in which you talked about how you did a survey of your employees and didn't quite get the answers you were expecting to get. Can you tell us about that a little?

Karen

Yeah, that was kind of the beginning of this planning for growth, trying to make sure that we could define our culture so that we know how to talk about it when we're hiring and when we're looking for new companies. The first thing they want to know is describe your culture and if we can't do that it's hard to grow it. Doing a cultural survey we did three years ago with some consultants that had used called Calibrate. They're cognitive psychologists and they came in and they measured things that are known to connect to a thriving culture, a productive culture where people feel valued.

Those are generally the kind of things that create also a happy workplace where people get along and they like to be together. We did that survey and the results were ... I had thought many of the things would be great and certainly things we were working on. There would be clarity, people would know what their jobs were, their responsibilities but in many cases they really didn't because I was trying to create this really flat, open structure but it was too flat and too open and people weren't being taken care of. They didn't know how to get a raise, for example so it really caused people to not have clear purpose at work and that's a big part, it's hard to feel valued if you're not quite sure what you're supposed to be doing.

We really stopped and took that seriously and created what I call a cultural framework, which has six dimensions to it that we can measure.

Loren

I guess in some ways it forced you to focus on what's important to building a great culture.

Karen

Yeah. Great to me is it's productive, people are hard working, we're adding the most amount of value possible to a client every single day. It's coming in, and it's really being focused and it's a lot of smart people working hard. It's not the beer in the fridge and the ping pong table, those and the parties. Those are fun things to have ...

Loren

Do you have them?

Karen

Oh yeah, absolutely, they're really important for building friendships and community but they're not what define a thriving culture that's measurable and repeatable.

Loren

I think some people think it is what defines a thriving culture.

Karen

Yeah, you get beer in the fridge, but that's not going to give people clarity in their jobs. You win the ping pong tournament that's not going to give them the awards that they need for doing a good job and working hard for a client.

Loren

You did that survey where you found that the clarity you were hoping for wasn't there, people didn't fully appreciate or understand the things that you thought they would. What was the next step?

Karen

To really work with these consultants and figure out what do we need to do to create more clarity to create a feedback system where people are getting and giving constant feedback. How do we foster team commitment? How do we make sure that people understand what their responsibilities are so they're accountable? We just sort of worked through that and some of the things are really basic like feedback, you've just got to give it. You've got to ask for it, and those are things that seem obvious but they're really not in a day-to-day basis in a company generally.

Loren

How do you ... You talked about trying to track this with a system. How do you ...

Karen

Yeah, so I created a software tool. I tried to buy one and I couldn't find one so we designed one internally, we called it the Grow Tool. It measures all the six major things that you can actually track; things like when you get an email from a client talking about how that project went or good and bad feedback you can forward that to the system and it tracks it in connection with that project that you're working on. You also can give self-feedback and it tracks your metrics in the projects. It tracks goals that you're setting.

Loren

Metrics on projects, meaning how quickly ...

Karen

Net promoter scores, are you on budget, are you on time, those are the main things that we look at. Then we ... We do things like ... I'm trying to understand the cause and effect when a project goes really well what is it that caused it to go well and vice versa if it didn't. We're looking ... It helps us focus in on what we need to pay attention to.

Loren

This software sounds like it could be useful to a lot of other businesses. Have you thought about how ...

Karen

Yeah, we've actually just spun it into a separate product companies ...

Loren

Have you really?

Karen

Stay tune on that. Yeah.

Loren

Interesting. Is it available for sale now?

Karen

It will be, not yet.

Loren

How soon?

Karen

Six months maybe.

Loren

Interesting. I think that you'll, I think you'll get a lot of interest with that. Have you tested the waters at all?

Karen

Yeah, we've got a lot of interest, particularly from the C Suite people because they can really ... It produces a beautiful time line where you can see all the cause and effect of somebody's performance over the course of a year. There's a lot of data in this system, it's very data driven and so my approach is let's talk about culture from a data standpoint.

Loren

Does that scare employees? Do they worry that the human element is disappearing and that

they're being evaluated by an algorithm that they ...

Karen

No, it's not an algorithm at all, they can see exactly where the data's coming from. In a lot of cases they're putting the data in there because it makes it richer for them so they can also track their own performance, which they're really interested in doing. Then come annual review time it prints up this great time line that allows them to see the year because generally they can't remember. They don't remember what projects they work on, they can't remember that they broke their arm last year and that's why everything went in the tank. It's like, "Oh, we don't need to worry about that." It sort of frees them up from having a more meaningful conversation come annual review time and monthly check-ins as well. It takes the guess work out of it, the data's provided, and they can actually get to having a real conversation. Their manager's job is to meet with them and talk every month, every week, and they don't have to worry about collecting data.

Loren

Have you done another survey since you implemented this system? Karen: No but we're ready for it, yeah. We do a lot of informal ones but not the same official one that we did last time but it's coming.

Loren

That'll be interesting.

Karen

Yeah, it will. I hope it's better.

Loren

How does this translate in terms of bringing in an entirely new office? If you buy another company and you essentially adopt all of their employees, people who've been trained in an entirely different system, how will you approach bringing them into your culture?

Karen

Well, culture is the first conversation we start having with these companies that we're looking at buying. It's the first stopping point as well. If we can't get past being on the same page about what matters and why having a productive, thriving culture is important and here's how to get there then we don't have anymore conversations, that's it. When we get past there then generally people are really excited about it because you can actually define it instead of it being a loosey, goosey, free flowing kind of word and thing. There's actually some real numbers and people really actually are excited about it.

Loren

What are the red flags? How do you know something doesn't feel right and it's time to move on?

Karen

People are working purely to make profit, that's one. People, they're working really long hours, they expect their employees to be hammering it out 60 hour a week because they're billing hours. For us, I really believe that you have a good night sleep and get some exercise and time with your family, then you're going to come back and you're going to be smarter and more focused. That's the kind of productive culture we want to have.

Loren

The companies you're buying, are they essentially doing the same kind of consulting work that you're doing but just in different areas?

Karen

Yeah, different cities so it's a way for us to grow more quickly because we really need to right now. Our clients are asking us to have bigger teams that can mobilize more quickly and also be closer to them. Historically, it hasn't been a problem being located in Seattle working across the country but as we get bigger and the teams are larger it's nicer to be closer and so we're really trying to do that. A lower risk way to do it, oddly enough, is to buy companies that are already doing it in those locations. They come with revenue, they come with profit, they come with people.

Loren

Did you try the alternative of opening your own office?

Karen

Yeah, we've been slowing trying to grow. It's just hard because you have a cat and mouse game in consulting and services because you don't want to have people sitting on the bench while you're waiting for the work and then when you get the work you need a team quickly and so it's really hard to scale that way. We've done it, obviously we've gotten to pretty big numbers.

Loren

Well, Karen, you have a lot going on between implementing the new system, rolling out a software product that you might sell. I'm really interested in hearing about the next survey so will you come back and tell us when some of these things, including the purchases, play out?

Karen

Absolutely, yes. Loren: We'll want to hear more.

Loren

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