

A NEXT CANADA PUBLICATION

GRIT

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SUMMER 2026

SMALL VENTURES, BIG IMPACT

Avril Sun & team
Succession AI
NEXT 36, 2025

SMALL & MIGHTY 14



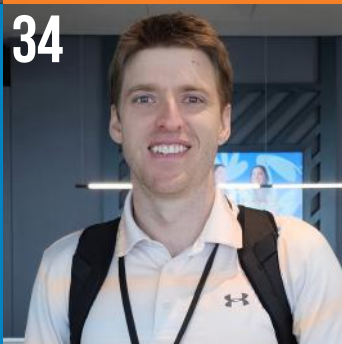
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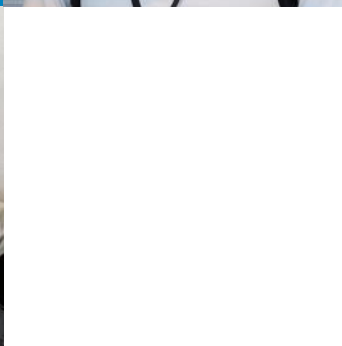
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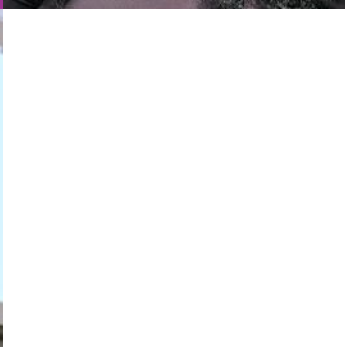
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DEAR GRIT READERS,

THIS SUMMER

has been an energizing and inspiring season at NEXT Canada'. Our office has been alive with the energy, ambition, and ingenuity of the 2026 NEXT Canada cohorts, and each day reinforces my optimism for what lies ahead. These founders represent the very best of Canada's entrepreneurial talent – visionaries tackling complex challenges with bold ideas, breakthrough technologies, and an unwavering determination to create lasting impact.

At NEXT Canada, our mission is to identify, develop, and champion exceptional entrepreneurs. The 2026 cohort embodies that mission in every sense. They are resilient, deeply curious, and driven by a desire to solve meaningful problems that will shape the future of industries, communities, and our economy. We are proud to be part of their entrepreneurial journey and excited to help them realize their full potential.

This issue of GRIT celebrates another defining characteristic of Canada's innovation ecosystem: founders who are achieving extraordinary outcomes with remarkably lean teams. Artificial intelligence is fundamentally reshaping how companies are built and scaled, enabling entrepreneurs to move faster, accomplish more, and compete globally with fewer resources than ever before. Featured in this issue are Avril Sun, CEO of SuccessionAI, Olivia Leng, CEO of Meissner, and Suamik Biswas, CEO of Tenomix – three NEXT Canada alumni who exemplify this new generation of founders. Their companies demonstrate how focused teams, empowered by technology and guided by bold leadership, can deliver outsized impact.

NEXT Canada has always been more than an accelerator – it is a community united by a shared belief in what Canadian entrepreneurs can achieve. It is a place where founders challenge and inspire one another, where mentors generously invest their experience and wisdom, and where partners come together to strengthen Canada's innovation ecosystem. That spirit of collaboration, trust, and ambition is what makes NEXT Canada unique and continues to fuel the success of our founders.

None of this would be possible without the extraordinary dedication of our staff, mentors, advisors, alumni, partners, and funders. Your commitment creates opportunities for Canada's most promising entrepreneurs to dream bigger, move faster, and build companies with global potential. Thank you for believing in our founders and for helping shape the next generation of Canadian innovators.

To our 2026 cohorts: thank you for choosing NEXT Canada. You are building companies that have the potential to transform industries, improve lives, and strengthen Canada's economy. We are honoured to be part of your journey, inspired by your ambition, and excited to see the bold future you will create. The challenges ahead are significant, but so is your potential – and we have every confidence that your greatest achievements are still to come.

JENNIFER REYNOLDS

CEO, NEXT Canada

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At the heart of our alumni success lies our premier programming:

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“

NEXT Canada didn't just help launch my entrepreneurial journey—it shaped how I think about building the future. Supporting the next generation of founders is an investment in Canada's potential.”

MORGAN WYATT

(NEXT Founders, 2015 | NEXT Canada Donor)

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SO

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TO

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DOMINIQUE

ANGLADE

AS

THE

NEW

EXECUTIVE

DIRECTOR

OF

NEXT AI

MONTRÉAL.

WE'RE DELIGHTED TO WELCOME DOMINIQUE ANGLADE AS THE NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
of NEXT AI Montréal.

An engineer by training with an MBA from HEC Montréal, Dominique brings an exceptional blend of experience spanning business, public service, and innovation. She has held leadership roles at Procter & Gamble, Nortel, McKinsey & Company, and Montréal International, and has also served as Québec's Minister of Economic Development, Innovation and Export Trade and Deputy Premier. Most recently, she has been a Professor of Practice at HEC Montréal, helping shape the next generation of leaders.

Dominique's passion for innovation, entrepreneurship, and building strong ecosystems makes her a natural fit for NEXT AI Montréal. We're excited to have her leading the program as we continue supporting Canada's most ambitious AI founders.

Bienvenue, Dominique!



**TECHNOLOGY CAN
HELP PEOPLE START.
COMMUNITY HELPS
THEM KEEP GOING.**

BY MISCHA HAMARA

*Director of Founder Success,
NEXT Canada*

Photography by KAI RONCERIA

O

NE OF THE THINGS I LOVE MOST ABOUT WORKING WITH FOUNDERS

is seeing the moment when an idea starts to become real.

It usually doesn't look polished at first: a rough prototype, a messy customer conversation, a landing page, a waitlist, or a problem someone can't stop thinking about. But there is this awesome moment when curiosity turns into action. Someone stops just talking about an idea and starts testing it.

I've been wondering whether more young people are going to find themselves in that moment sooner than they expected.

For many students and recent graduates, the traditional first step after school has been fairly clear: find an entry-level job, learn inside an organization, and build confidence. That path still exists, but it feels more competitive and less predictable than it once did.

Some of the work that used to give young people their first professional reps – research, first drafts, basic analysis, admin,



support, simple technical tasks – is being reshaped by AI. Getting that first opportunity matters. But this moment is also creating a new question: not just “Where can I get hired?” but “What problem can I start solving?”

And that’s what feels different: you can try something before you have it all figured out.

In NEXT 36, I’m seeing student founders build prototypes and MVPs in a week. I’m seeing founders build AI agents that collect data, surface insights, and help inform strategy. Five years ago, some of this would have required a bigger team, more money, and more time. Now, a small group of committed founders can learn very quickly.

AI doesn’t replace judgment, taste, resilience, or the human work of getting someone to care. But it does make the first step feel less out of reach.

That’s what excites me. Not the hype around AI. What excites

me is that more people can move from “I have an idea” to “I tested something.” More people can build some proof and find out whether a problem they care about is real.

That’s where “small and mighty teams” become really interesting.

The best small teams I see are not thinking small. In fact, some of the most ambitious founders I meet are building with the smallest teams. They are just able to do more before they need more people.

Honestly, there’s something pretty sweet about that.

When the barrier to starting gets lower, the circle of who sees themselves as a founder gets wider. Students, recent grads, non-technical builders, people outside traditional networks, and founders from more diverse backgrounds can test ideas before they have all the connections, funding, or permission.

To me, that’s the most exciting part. Entrepreneurship is still hard. But more people can see a path in.

There is one thing I don’t want us to lose, though: small should not mean alone.

People often romanticize what it means to be a founder. They see the pitch, the raise, the big announcement, or the founder who seems to have everything figured out. But most founders are carrying more than people realize. They are taking risks, making hard calls, managing uncertainty, and often feeling lonely while doing it.

When I meet founders, I pay attention to the small signals. Not just how well they sell the vision, but whether they can be honest about where they need help. I notice the founders who are willing to be vulnerable, and the ones who can inspire others without pretending everything is perfect.

The founders I admire most are brave, committed, contrarian by nature, and deeply authentic.

Maybe that’s what I admire most about founders. In a world where it’s easy to sit on the sidelines, they choose action over apathy.

They care enough to act.

Some of my favourite moments at NEXT actually aren’t the big milestone moments. They are the in-between ones: sitting with Alex*, Fletcher*, and Steph* reflecting on our meetings with founders, asking, “What did we hear? Where can we push? Where can we help?” Sometimes it is about a co-founder conflict, or a founder navigating a hard personal moment while still carrying the weight of a company.

It is not flashy. But it is an excellent reminder that founder support is deeply human work.

AI can help a founder write, build, analyze, and automate. But AI can’t sit across from you over a coffee and say, “I’ve been there.” It cannot challenge you with care. It cannot make ambition feel normal.

AI may help more people start, but community is what helps them keep going.

The new first job might not always be the founder. But for more students and recent grads, the founder is becoming a real first step: a way to learn, contribute, make an impact, and build something meaningful.

That’s the work we get to do at NEXT: surround those founders with community, mentorship, and support – and I think they’re going to continue doing some pretty awesome things.

* ALEXANDRA MCGREGOR, Chief Program Officer, NEXT Canada

* STEPHANIA STEFANAKOU, Senior Venture Manager, NEXT Canada

* FLETCHER McLAUGHLIN, Program Manager, NEXT Canada

THINKING LIKE A STARTUP, DELIVERING AT SCALE



IAN McKECHNIE

is Lead Product Manager for Hatch's Integrated Tailings Management platform, where he works with a small, agile team developing digital solutions that help mining companies improve the safety and management of tailings facilities world-wide. Ian recently sat down with NEXT Canada to discuss how technology is transforming risk management in mining, the importance of safety in a high-stakes industry, and what it takes for a small team to drive innovation within a global organization.

For our readers who are unfamiliar with tailings management, how would you describe the problem you're solving and why does it matter on a global scale?

Tailings dams are often massive structures that contain the waste products of mines that require processing to liberate ore before it can be sold. They contain a mix of slurry and treatment chemicals and, like any dam, when they breach, they can cause serious damage to the surrounding area. It's important for many reasons: tailings failures can and have killed hundreds of people, including adjacent community members and workers, they cost billions to remediate, and they can't always be fully remediated. They're often referred to by the industry as company killers. That combination of massive damage, and the reality that if your mine can't run anymore you're missing the cash required to sustain the operation, can shut everything down. It's great that the industry is finally getting tools that can make a difference in how things are run and how they improve over time.

The problem we're trying to solve covers all the classic technology issues giving teams a common window to view their own data regardless of which vendors they chose for their sensor displays, and bringing a high digital standard of performance to connect to elements. For example: Do I have long range access to my data over decades? Do I own that data? Can I work with it, can I share with it? Can I curate it or uplift it? Can I do all these things that we'd expect from normal data everywhere else in the world?

We're also solving areas neglected by typical technology vendors. We're deliberately targeting the qualitative space, things like inspections, work coordination, engineering notes and records, documents to work, and program management. These are all data sets that were previously neglected, or were modernized and then allowed to lapse after the implementation phase ended.

What this all means, and the most important problem for us to solve, is that we're trying to set the stage for the future. More modern approaches, particularly under generative AI, benefit from having as much data as possible. We're trying to give miners the tools that many other industries have benefited from for decades, as they try to solve this critical risk.

Your work focuses heavily on safety and risk reduction. How do digital tools change the way teams anticipate and respond to potential failures?

The main benefit is a common, reliable standard of performance. Computers don't get distracted, they can be loaded up with nearly any monitoring approach you can think of. The set-and-forget value of deploying a system and trusting it to do its job is enormous, both for operations teams who can then focus on other priorities, and for corporate support teams who need confidence that the basics are being handled correctly.

Once those basics are taken care of reliably and sustainably, clients can start tackling a wider range of problems that are better

sued to digital tools. This typically shows up as more nuanced rule sets, for example, reducing alarm fatigue. The classical approach is predictive monitoring, so don't tell me I've got a breach, tell me when two weeks out that one may be coming. The more modern approach focuses on detecting unusual states: observing a system and recognizing patterns. For example, when it rains, sensors don't respond as expected, that anomaly gets surfaced. Bringing these weak signals to the attention of operators has the potential to be truly transformative.

An engineer can review their operation for inconsistencies in a few minutes and then go about their day. Rather than catching a variance almost by chance, having to spot it in the moment, find the focus to understand it, and then spending hours, or often a late evening or weekend, piecing together what's actually happening. We're aiming to make the loop between detection and resolution faster, more frequent, and far less stressful for the people in these critical roles.

As mining operations face growing pressure to do more with less, how has that influenced the way your team approaches building practical and scalable solutions?

This is dominantly driven by compliance standards and increased regulatory activity, and that isn't expected to slow down anytime soon. There are global requirements, local requirements and often internal company expectations, all needing to be addressed at once. As companies talk with peers, they develop better practices, better standards, better approaches, and of course expect all of those things to be implemented immediately, because it's important and it's safety related.

Doing more with less is a permanent fixture in industry and a lived reality for all of our clients. When commodity prices dip, you're immediately asked how you can make things work with 30% of your inputs because the money isn't there. And when things are great, the pressure shifts to: do we really need this? Can we put the money somewhere else? There's always a better project around the corner. Miners are very guarded with their capital, that's a learned lesson.

So what it comes to building our solution, the first principle is that we meet operations where they are. We can offer advanced functionality, but we need to be able to accommodate sites that haven't sorted their prerequisites. A site still working off of paper notes is going to have a hard time jumping straight to an API-first workflow. So we make sure that for key processes, there are several entry points that don't require much upfront effort, and then they can evolve as capacity allows.

Secondly, we use agile development to target near-term features, but everything we build has an expected solution arc of one to three years. As engineers, we have a sense of that longer-term picture because we've seen clients struggle with it or fail to meet those challenges. In many ways, it's like building a dam: once the foundation is sorted, you build in stages that may change in shape and size, but you know how high the dam eventually needs to be. This lets us socialize the longer journey as part of our story and builds clients confidence that will help them in the short term, and that we're a reliable partner for identifying and solving their longer term needs. Quite unique for a software vendor.

Your team operates at a level of autonomy and agility that's often associated with startups. What does that look like in practice within Hatch, which as we know is a huge organization?

That answer is always evolving. We're definitely an unusual group. Hatch is a firm that's dyed in the wool for project management excellence and the construction of well-planned global projects on the order of hundreds of millions or billions of dollars. Digital development is still a relatively new area, and it's always being reinvented.

The startup mentality gives us the ability to chase opportunities without over-resourcing or trying to pre-solve problems prematurely. It gives us the right scale to pursue something meaningful, but not so much that it has to succeed within six months or we abandon it entirely.

In practice, we flip between agile sprint planning and kanban-style pick lists depending on where we are in our growth phase. When we're deploying, that tends to drive fixed timelines, a client needs something by a certain month, we've committed to doing that contractually, so we deliver. Between deployments, we shift to kanban: figure out what's most needed right now, make some bets on what will resonate, and work with clients to say, "Hey, we think your world looks like this." Often, at our scale, the client will say, "We're really busy right now, try your best and we'll see how it goes." That response would drive larger teams in our organization absolutely nuts. For us, that's where opportunities start.

The biggest accelerator in all of this has been the jet fuel that modern frontier AI coding models have added. Things that used to take weeks, now might take a day or two, particularly when we're working with existing patterns. All that backlog, you figured you'd get to eventually, we're finding more and more excuses to squeeze it in.

Small teams often move faster, they take more ownership. How has that mindset influenced the way your team in a way it's in a traditionally risk averse industry like mining?

Mining is legendarily slow when it comes to digital adoption. There's reluctance to be at the front of technological change, and it's understandable. When operations employ thousands of people and there's millions of dollars of profit a day riding on things running as expected, you're sensitive to anything that could disrupt that. In an extreme case, a mistake in the physical world can shut down a mine for months or years.

With a small team, you often struggle to get that first client runway to really prove out your idea. We get a lot of supporting cover from Hatch on that. The company's a known quantity, a trusted partner, decades of solid and successful delivery, so we're perceived as much lower risk than a new entrant would be. What that translates to is that we spend a bit less time selling and building our name, and we use that time instead to figure out what's really bothering clients in the tailings space globally.

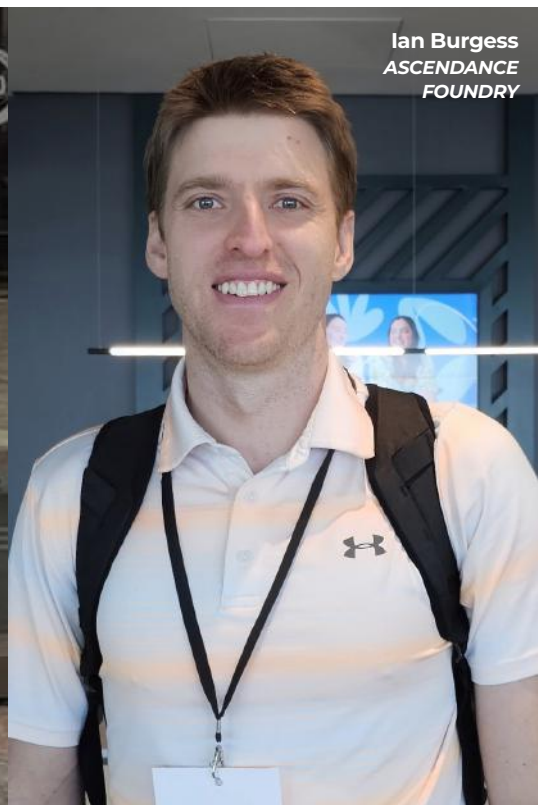
Small teams have this amazing access to a unique value creation flywheel. We can safely target small improvements and are incentivized to target small improvements. We deliver them faster because of our one-to-one relationships with our clients and key experts, we can leverage personal relationships to target that value better. In turn, we have a richer product offering.

And I think that nothing's too small to at least take a look at. A larger or more controlling firm would say no, it doesn't align with strategic priorities, that's not what we need to focus on. And I think for many of our developers and people on our team, it's fun just to do small things.

BIG IMPACT DOESN'T ALWAYS COME FROM BIG ORGANIZATIONS. ACROSS CANADA, FOUNDERS ARE PROVING THAT SMALL, FOCUSED TEAMS CAN TACKLE COMPLEX CHALLENGES, MOVE WITH REMARKABLE AGILITY, AND CREATE MEANINGFUL CHANGE. THESE ALUMNI DEMONSTRATE HOW AMBITION, INNOVATION, AND EXECUTION CAN TURN SMALL VENTURES INTO POWERFUL FORCES FOR IMPACT.



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THE MIGHTY



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ARUNA REVOLUTION



Abdel Ali
KIWI CHARGE



Avril Sun
Succession AI
NEXT 36, 2025

THE EXIT NOBODY TALKS ABOUT

**AVRIL SUN BUILT SUCCESSION AI
SO NO FAMILY HAS TO GO THROUGH
WHAT HERS DID**

EVERY YEAR, THOUSANDS OF SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS REACH a point where they are ready to sell what they have built from scratch. Industry estimates suggest only 15-30% successfully find buyers, leaving 70-85% behind. The main culprits are owner dependency, overpricing, and messy financial records. No one understands this better than Avril Sun. She watched it happen to her own family.

When Avril was 13, she moved from China to Ottawa, Canada, alone. Her family ran a restaurant back home, using its profits to fund her living and school expenses. Fast-forward when Avril graduated from Ivey Business School and spent a summer at Boston Consulting Group, her parents faced a question they weren't prepared for: should they sell the restaurant and reunite with their daughter in Canada? What followed was eight months of not knowing.

Her father, who had built and run a business for nearly three decades, began studying for a law exam just to understand what selling a business even entailed. It was one of the most difficult processes to undertake. The family searched for a buyer but they couldn't find one. The business closed. The storefront sold. Thirty-eight years of work quietly vanished, without a proper ending.

"My family was desperate – life or death – to find a buyer," Avril says.

And while Avril was at BCG, she recalls "I was seeing all those hundreds of million dollars M&A deals happening."

That contrast stuck with her.

Succession AI is her answer to it. Founded and incubated at NEXT Canada, it is an AI-native mergers and acquisitions advisory firm. It was made not for the boardroom, but for the business owner who has never sold anything in their life and doesn't know where to start. The mission is straightforward and enormous at the same time: provide a real exit solution for every business owner in the world, regardless of size, location, or deal complexity.

Traditionally, a boutique M&A firm of ten people handles about ten businesses in an entire year. The model simply doesn't scale down to smaller deals. Succession AI is built to change that economics entirely, using AI agents to handle what would normally require entire departments. And by proving the model on the deals the industry has ignored, Succession AI is unlocking the largest underserved market in M&A – a real exit for every business owner in the world.

But what makes Succession AI different isn't just speed. It's who they show up for. One recent sale involved a founder who had walked away from a corporate career to build something of her own. When she was ready to step back, Succession AI didn't just help her understand what her business was worth, they guided the entire transition from start to finish, so she could hand over what she had built for a decade with peace of mind.

"Behind every business we sell is a story. A family," Avril says. "Whether it's a \$100K business, a \$500K business, or a \$5 million business – to a family, to a business owner, it's the same thing."

**THERE SHOULDN'T BE ANY
DISCRIMINATION OR ANY BOUNDARY
ABOUT WHAT KIND OF BUSINESS IS
VALUABLE, WHAT KIND OF BUSINESS
IS SELLABLE, WHAT IS NOT."**

This is the part of the industry that has always been broken. There has never been a good solution for people at the smaller end. The ones who built something meaningful but not massive, who deserve a real exit but can't access one because the system was never designed for them.

"There shouldn't be any discrimination or shouldn't be any boundary about what kind of business is valuable, what kind of business is sellable, what is not."

Avril thinks about legacy. Not just hers, but the one her parents tried to leave, the one that slipped away before anyone knew how to hold it.

"I want whatever I can build in my life, the impact to last for hundreds of years, because I think time can wash away everything."

Her family's restaurant is gone. But Succession AI exists to preserve what matters – legacy, impact, and the opportunity for a real exit.



THE PART OF CANCER CARE NOBODY SEES

INSIDE TENOMIX'S MISSION
TO MODERNIZE PATHOLOGY

CANCER. A WORD THAT QUIETLY FOLLOWS ALMOST EVERYONE, whether through family, friends, or stories that never fully leave. According to the World Health Organization, it remains one of the leading causes of death worldwide. Yet while most conversations around cancer focus on treatment breakthroughs, far less attention is given to the systems behind diagnosis itself.

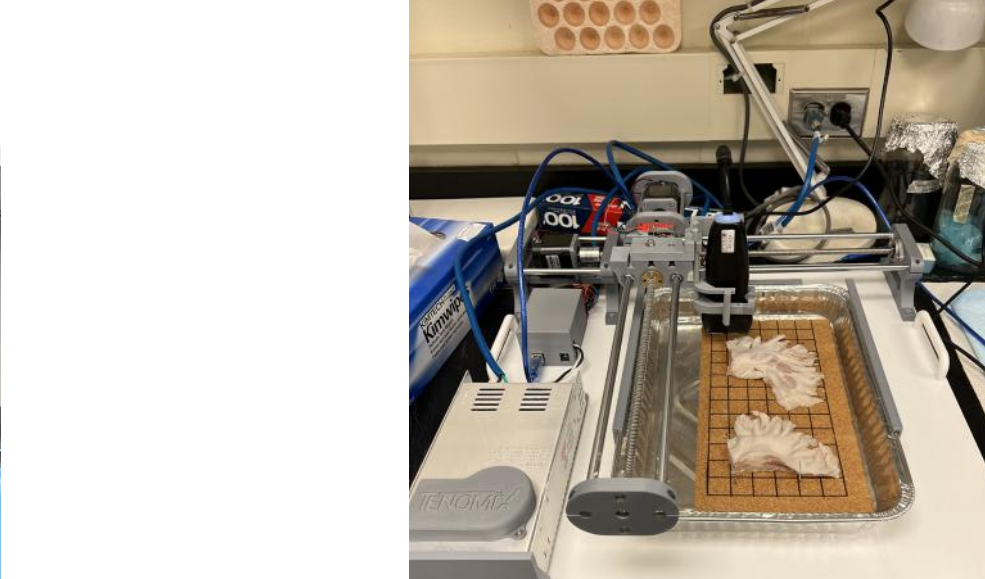
"Pathology has long been the cornerstone of cancer diagnosis and treatment. A pathologist carefully examines an ultrathin slice of human tissue under a microscope for clues that indicate the presence, type, and stage of cancer," states Harvard Medical School. Every cancer diagnosis depends on pathology teams carefully analyzing tissue samples to determine whether cancer has spread, how aggressive it is, and what treatment should follow. But one critical part of that process has remained almost unchanged for over a century.

That flaw became undoubtedly but painfully personal for Saumik Biswas.

When Biswas was 16, his aunt passed away at just 47 after "improper cancer staging". Meaning she didn't receive chemotherapy in time. That experience would later become the driving force behind Tenomix, a Canadian med-tech startup using robotics, ultrasound imaging, and AI to modernize pathology workflows.

The problem Tenomix is solving exists in a step of cancer care that most people never see. After a patient undergoes cancer surgery, pathology teams must manually search through the removed tissue to locate lymph nodes. Those lymph nodes are

“WHEN YOU’RE TRYING TO SOLVE HARD MEDICAL PROBLEMS, ALIGNMENT REALLY MATTERS. EVERYONE HAS TO WEAR MULTIPLE HATS AND LEARN FROM EACH OTHER CONSTANTLY.”



then tested to determine whether cancer has spread, directly influencing staging and treatment decisions.

The surprising reality? This process is still largely manual.

Pathology staff can spend hours physically searching through fatty tissue by sight and touch, trying to locate tiny lymph nodes that may be hidden or altered by prior treatment. According to Biswas, this process can consume up to 75% of a pathologists' assistant's time for certain specimens. In research published in collaboration with the Mayo Clinic, Tenomix identified discrepancies between manually identified lymph nodes and those confirmed under microscopy, reaching nearly 50% in some cases.

"This is not just a workflow inconvenience," Biswas explains. "It is a clinical, operational, and economic problem hiding in plain sight."

Tenomix's solution is an automated bench-top platform combining ultrasound imaging, robotics, and AI to help pathology teams identify, map, and mark lymph nodes more accurately and efficiently. It's designed to support pathologists, not replace them.

Building at the intersection of medicine, robotics, AI, and regulation isn't simple, especially as a small startup. But for Biswas, being small has become an advantage.

"When you're trying to solve hard medical problems, alignment really matters. Everyone has to wear multiple hats and learn from each other constantly."

Unlike larger corporations, Tenomix runs with engineers, strategists, AI developers, and pathology experts working side by side. A robotics decision affects clinical usability. An AI decision

impacts regulatory strategy. That closeness lets the company move fast and learn directly from real labs.

The team initially asked whether combining the three technologies was even possible, then time with pathology teams revealed the harder question: not whether it could detect, but whether it could fit.

"A device could be scientifically impressive and still fail if it made the pathology lab's day harder."

That insight reshaped everything. Tenomix began designing around how tissue is handled, how assistants work with specimens, and how results get documented under pressure.

Biswas believes the future of pathology lies in "automated tissue intelligence". Tissue that can be scanned, mapped, and analyzed by AI to support earlier detection, more personalized treatment, and entirely new diagnostic data.

For now, Tenomix is focused on clinical validation, regulatory approvals, and expanding partnerships with hospitals as it prepares to launch commercially in Canada before scaling globally.

But the company remains rooted in what started it all: a personal loss that exposed a problem hiding inside one of medicine's oldest processes. For any young founder sitting on a problem they can't shake, that's exactly the point.

"We stayed attached to the problem, not our first version of the product."

And for Tenomix, solving that problem could change how cancer care is delivered for years to come.



Rashmi Prakash

Aruna Revolution
NEXT Founders, 2025

HOW TO CHANGE THE WORLD

A SMALL GROUP OF PEOPLE,
A BIG DREAM FOR THE WORLD

BY RASHMI PRAKASH

BEFORE ENTERING THE WORLD OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP, I DIDN'T

know how big of an impact an individual could make. I was always under the impression that larger companies with larger budgets changed the world. I didn't realise how mistaken I was.

With Aruna, our small team was able to change the way people all around the world understood the difference between biodegradable and compostable, which even forced some of the largest companies to change the language on their own green-washed products and packaging. We helped waste management companies accept new circular products, significantly reducing what was ending up in landfills. Real, systemic change. From a teeny, tiny team in Nova Scotia.

That experience helped me understand that small teams move like speedboats, and large organizations, no matter how well-resourced, move like tankers. They can carry enormous weight, not only does that make them slooow, but changing direction takes miles. A speedboat can change direction in seconds, navigate waters a tanker never could, and get somewhere first. In a world that needs urgent change, that agility that comes from a small team is the super power that enables impact.

That's what drew me to take on the leadership of re-generation, a youth-led nonprofit working to build Canada's economy, and what has pushed our small, scrappy team to ask a question that every Canadian is sitting with right now: what's wrong with our economy?

The result is "How to Buy a Country," a four-part docuseries launching this Canada Day that pulls back the curtain on how Canada spent a century quietly trading away its sovereignty to the United States – our energy, our manufacturing, our independence, often without us even realizing it. And more importantly, it explores how Canada's clean economy might be the key to finally breaking free.

That point is at the heart of everything re-generation does. We exist because we believe that before Canadians can build something new, they need to understand what was taken from them and why. Re-generation is a youth-led movement working to shift the culture around what Canada's economic future could look like, rooted in the belief that sovereignty isn't just a political idea, it's a daily reality felt in every grocery bill, every rent payment, every paycheck that doesn't stretch far enough. The documentary is the clearest expression of that mission by sparking the kind of cultural conversation that makes a different future imaginable and seem inevitable. If you've ever felt the quiet unease of wondering how dependent we really are on our neighbours to the south, this is the film that will finally give that feeling a name.

History has never actually been changed by the biggest players in the room, it's been changed by small groups of people who refused to accept the world as it was handed to them. A scrappy team in Nova Scotia. A Canadian youth-led nonprofit with a camera and a question.

I used to think impact required scale. I've since learned it requires something much harder to manufacture: the belief that what you do actually matters. That a small team, in the right moment, asking the right question, can shift the course of the entire world as we know it.

“**HISTORY HAS NEVER ACTUALLY BEEN CHANGED BY THE BIGGEST PLAYERS IN THE ROOM, IT'S BEEN CHANGED BY SMALL GROUPS OF PEOPLE WHO REFUSED TO ACCEPT THE WORLD AS IT WAS HANDED TO THEM**”



FIXING MORE THAN REPAIRS

BUILDING STRUCTURE IN
A CHAOTIC INDUSTRY

HANDLD STARTED FROM FRUSTRATION.

From seeing the same problem over and over again: when something needs to be fixed, people don't know who to trust, what it should cost, or whether the job will actually be done properly. It's an industry that's incredibly important, but still fragmented and inconsistent. There are platforms in the space, but most stop at connection. They don't solve the harder parts of the problem: trust, pricing clarity, and consistent execution.

That's what founder Cristen Phipps wanted to change.

"I didn't want to build another platform that just connects people and steps back," he explains. "The goal was to create a service where the experience is actually controlled, where the client knows what to expect, and the outcome is reliable every time."

In the early days, that meant getting into the work directly. Cristen completed jobs himself, everything from installs to repairs, not just to understand how long things take, but to experience the process from the handyman's perspective. Where does time get lost? What makes a job frustrating? What actually makes the work worthwhile for skilled tradespeople?

That hands-on approach shaped how HANDLD was built.

"If you want to attract and retain high-quality people, you

Cristen Phipps

Handld
NEXT Founders, 2023



“WHAT STOOD OUT TO ME WAS HOW THE TEAM RESPONDED. INSTEAD OF STEPPING AWAY, EACH HANDLR TOOK OWNERSHIP OF THE SITUATION.”

need to understand what a good job actually looks like from their side,” says Cristen. “How it’s scoped, how it’s priced, how it’s communicated.”

Those lessons became systems: standardized pricing, clearer job scoping, stronger vetting, and better communication from start to finish. HANDLD wasn’t built around one breakthrough idea; it came from being in the work, identifying where things break, and building a better way to run it.

For HANDLD, being a small team is an advantage.

“There’s no separation between the company and the customer experience,” Cristen says. “Every job reflects all of us.”

That creates a level of accountability that’s difficult to replicate. Communication is direct, decisions happen quickly, and the team can adapt in real time without layers of approval.

It also changes the relationship with HANDLD’s network of HANDLRs. Rather than treating them as interchangeable labour, the company focuses on building relationships with trusted professionals. Making sure they’re supported, paid fairly, and set up properly on every job.

“When that side of the business is strong, the client feels it immediately.”

One of the biggest tests of the HANDLD model came when the team intentionally took on a larger and more complex project: a smoke and nicotine remediation job.

The challenge intensified when the client continued smoking throughout the process, creating a difficult environment both technically and operationally.

What made the situation especially important was that HANDLD’s HANDLRs are independent contractors. They choose the jobs they take on, and they’re not obligated to stay when things become difficult.

“What stood out to me was how the team responded,” Cristen recalls. “Instead of stepping away, each HANDLR took ownership of the situation.”

The team adapted as the scope evolved, supported one another, and maintained a high standard of execution despite the conditions. For Cristen, the experience reinforced something much bigger than the success of a single project.

“It validated that when you build the right structure, clear expectations, fair compensation, strong communication, you don’t need to force accountability. The right people step up on their own.”

For HANDLD, “big impact” isn’t about growth for the sake of growth, it’s about consistency. Creating an experience where clients know exactly what to expect every time is already a meaningful shift in an industry that rarely offers it.

Long term, the goal is to build infrastructure in an industry that has historically lacked it, bringing structure, reliability, and professionalism to a space that has operated in a fragmented and reactive way for far too long.

THE INTELLIGENCE LAYER

HOW ATHIYA RASTOGI & ARYAMAN RASTOGI ARE BUILDING THE OPERATING SYSTEM BEHIND RETAIL

FOR MOST CONSUMERS, BUYING A PRODUCT FEELS SIMPLE. A FEW clicks online, a quick trip to a store, and the item arrives at their doorstep. What they never see is the invisible operating system behind that moment: product data, images, inventory, pricing, logistics, compliance, and teams trying to keep it all aligned.

Athiya Rastogi and Aryaman Rastogi grew up in a family of jewelry entrepreneurs, learning early how manufacturers, brands, and retailers work. Years later, while working with companies across retail and manufacturing, they kept hearing the same story.

"Businesses weren't lacking data. They were trapped inside systems that couldn't work together."

Product information lived across decades-old ERP systems that companies couldn't replace, spreadsheets patched together by operations teams, supplier documents arriving in every format imaginable, and legacy software that predated modern commerce. Nobody had built a bridge between them.

The turning point came when a shipment headed to a major retailer went off course because critical information had not synced across teams and systems. It looked like one operational error. To the founders, it exposed something much larger.

"This wasn't a mistake. It was the inevitable outcome of how the industry had learned to operate."

As they spoke with more brands, retailers, and manufacturers, the pattern became impossible to ignore. Merchandising, e-commerce, inventory, and operations teams were not short on ambition. They were slowed down by disconnected systems, fragmented information, and the absence of a single source of truth.

That realization became the foundation for SnapWrite.

In the beginning, the team was small. Aryaman focused on building the technology while Athiya led the commercial side, building relationships with major retailers and manufacturers

across North America and translating what she heard directly into the product's direction. The goal was never to replace the systems companies already depended on. Many of those systems represent years of institutional knowledge and millions in sunk cost. Ripping them out was never realistic. Making them intelligent was.

Today, SnapWrite helps mid-market and enterprise companies organize, connect, and manage critical product and operational information across the software they already depend on. What began as a product data challenge has grown into a larger mission: helping companies move from fragmented workflows to intelligent operations.

Customer proximity became one of SnapWrite's strongest advantages. Instead of waiting for feedback to pass through layers of management, the team could hear a problem directly, understand its business impact, and ship improvements quickly.

"Staying near our customers means there are fewer barriers between identifying a problem and solving it."

Perhaps the biggest surprise for the founders has been discovering how much impact a highly aligned team can create. SnapWrite has worked with companies across North America, supported complex implementations, and earned the trust of major national retailers, enterprise manufacturers, and brands managing hundreds of thousands of SKUs across demanding supply chains.



STAYING NEAR OUR CUSTOMERS MEANS THERE ARE FEWER BARRIERS BETWEEN IDENTIFYING A PROBLEM AND SOLVING IT."

For Athiya and Aryaman, the experience has reshaped their view of what the next generation of enterprise companies will look like. They believe the future will not belong to companies that simply store information. It will belong to companies that understand it, connect it, and help businesses act on it.

SnapWrite is proving that sometimes the biggest problems don't require the biggest teams, just the right ones.

Athiya Rastogi

SnapWrite
NEXT 36, 2022





Superconducting
thin film deposited
onto a 4 inch wafer



Olivia Leng

MEISSNER
NEXT 36, 2025

THE FUTURE, MATERIALIZED

OLIVIA LENG BUILT MEISSNER TO SOLVE THE MATERIALS PROBLEM QUIETLY SITTING UNDERNEATH SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST AMBITIOUS TECHNOLOGIES.

OLIVIA LENG'S GRAND VISION BEGAN WITH A MATERIAL MOST people never think about.

Superconductors.

It all started when Leng spent four years studying materials science at the University of Toronto, where this fascination started. Through internships, Leng saw superconductors from both sides: "synthesizing them in the lab and running quantum simulations."

And what stood out was how many industries depended on them.

"They're the missing enabling layer beneath many high-tech industries, from quantum computing to nuclear fusion," she says.

Quantum computing, fusion energy, healthcare imaging, and particle accelerators may seem unrelated. Yet underneath, they share the same bottleneck: many superconductors only work when kept extremely cold, creating expensive cooling requirements that can determine practicality.

"The biggest hidden cost in all of those systems is keeping the materials cold enough to be superconducting," Leng explains. "If you can move an application to a warmer, cheaper temperature, you don't just make one device better; you change the economics of everything built on top of that material."

That insight became the foundation for MEISSNER, an AI-driven superconducting materials discovery company focused on finding warmer materials.

"I watched the momentum building behind AI for materials discovery, and it struck me that the same approach transforming AI-driven drug discovery could be applied to superconductors," she says. "I want to build a true moonshot company and help create Canada's next quantum unicorn."

For MEISSNER, the goal is not to improve one device. Instead, "big impact means removing a constraint that sits underneath many industries at once, rather than improving any single product," Leng says.

That leverage is where she believes a focused venture can make a difference. Incumbents manufacture proven conductors at volume; end customers often do not want to run long, speculative materials programs themselves.

"We sit in the gap between those two realities," she says. "You don't need to be large to start occupying that space; you need to be focused, and you need an approach that compounds."

One insight was that in photonic quantum computing, the best single-photon detectors today operate below one Kelvin, requiring a million-dollar dilution refrigerator per system and dependence on scarce helium-3.

"If those detectors can run reliably at standard liquid-helium temperature without giving up performance, that cryogenic burden largely disappears," Leng says. "We're talking on the order of a twenty-fold reduction in cooling infrastructure cost. That's the difference between a quantum architecture you can scale and one you can't."

From there, the same discovery engine could reach neighbouring markets: high-temperature superconducting tape for fusion magnets, improved thin films for superconducting qubits, and longer-term applications in MRI and high-field NMR.

For Leng, the timing is what makes everything come together for this opportunity. As advances are happening in machine learning, computational chemistry, and simulation infrastructure, it is now feasible to screen and prioritize materials before expensive lab work.

"That wasn't true a decade ago," she says.

For Leng, this topic is not only a fascination, but something personal, "this problem sits exactly on the bridge I've spent my research life building between theory and the lab," Leng says. "It's rare to find a problem this important where your specific skill set is the unlock rather than a nice-to-have."

I WATCHED THE MOMENTUM BUILDING BEHIND AI FOR MATERIALS DISCOVERY, AND IT STRUCK ME THAT THE SAME APPROACH TRANSFORMING AI-DRIVEN DRUG DISCOVERY COULD BE APPLIED TO SUPERCONDUCTORS."

MEISSNER is designed to become stronger with every experiment. "Every experiment we run feeds back and makes the next discovery faster and more precise," Leng says. "A problem that gets easier the longer you work at it is worth a career."

Leng believes this shift is something the market is majorly underestimating. "The most underestimated idea is that the materials layer is a value driver, not a fixed input," she says. "A surprising amount of what looks like an engineering roadmap is actually a materials problem in disguise."

Most people may never see the layer MEISSNER is building. But if it works, it could help determine how much of the future gets built.



Abdel Ali

Kiwi Charge
NEXT AI, 2025

MENDING THE CHARGING GAP

**ABDEL ALI BUILD KIWI CHARGE SO
EV DRIVERS WITHOUT HOME CHARGING
WOULDN'T BE LEFT BEHIND**

TAKE A LOOK AROUND TORONTO, AND ONE THING BECOMES CLEAR.

The city is built upward. Condos, apartments, and multi unit residential buildings fill neighbourhoods across the city. Beneath many of them sit parking garages, many of which were built decades before electric vehicles became part of everyday life.

As EV adoption continues to rise, one major challenge remains charging access.

That challenge became personal for Abdel Ali while living in an older multi-unit building and considering buying an EV of his own. He quickly realized the issue was not the vehicle itself, but access to charging.

"We considered buying an EV ourselves and realized that for condo and apartment residents, charging often depends entirely on public infrastructure."

That experience revealed a much larger gap in the market. EV ownership was growing quickly, but charging infrastructure in multi-tenant housing was falling behind. In response, Ali's solution became evident – to found Kiwi Charge.

Kiwi Charge is a Toronto-based cleantech and robotics startup building mobile EV charging systems for places where traditional charging stations are difficult or too expensive to install, especially condos, apartment buildings, and older multi-residential properties.

The company is tackling a growing infrastructure problem. While homeowners with garages often have easy access to charging, millions of people living in apartments or rental buildings do not. Installing chargers in these properties can require electrical upgrades, construction, permits, and significant upfront investment.

Instead of asking – How do we install more chargers? Kiwi Charge asked a different question:

"What if the charger came to the car?"

That question became the foundation of the company.

Kiwi Charge develops mobile charging robots that bring power directly to parked EVs. As the company describes it, "On-demand autonomous charging vehicles come to your EV" with "no cables, no stations, no waiting."

What makes Kiwi Charge unique is how many industries it combines. The company brings together EV charging, clean energy, robotics, mobility infrastructure, and real estate technology. Rather than functioning only as a charging company or robotics company, Kiwi Charge combines all of these parts into one platform.

Their technology also avoids many of the challenges of traditional EV charging infrastructure. Instead of trenching, rewiring, and permanent charger installation, Kiwi's mobile charging model can serve vehicles where they are already parked. This makes it especially attractive for older buildings, mixed-use developments, commercial parking lots, and dealerships where infrastructure upgrades can be expensive or slow.

As the company grew, the team uncovered another challenge inside dealerships involving vehicle inventory charging and workflow inefficiencies. What began as a solution for residential EV charging quickly showed potential in a commercial setting as well.

**“ON-DEMAND AUTONOMOUS CHARGING
VEHICLES COME TO YOUR EV WITH
NO CABLES, NO STATIONS, NO WAITING.”**

Kiwi Charge's growth continued in February 2026 when the company announced a \$1.7 million project to scale its EV charging technology. The project included \$500,000 in support from the Ontario Vehicle Innovation Network and an additional \$1.2 million from industry partners. The company has also collaborated with the City of Markham, the City of Vaughan, BMW Markham, General Motors Canada, and Pfaff Automotive.

Through Vector's FastLane program, Kiwi Charge also explored the growing EV charging demand, electricity demand patterns, and best locations for future charger deployment. This shows that the company is not only building the robot itself, but also thinking about where charging infrastructure is needed most.

"It's an Ontario-made solution for a global problem," says Ali.

From one founder's personal experience to a venture combining robotics, energy, and mobility, Kiwi Charge is rethinking what EV charging can look like for cities built long before EVs became part of daily life.



THE SOCIAL DRINK FOR PEOPLE WHO DON'T WANT TO DRINK

JESSICA IS BUILDING A PLANT-BASED BEVERAGE FOR A GENERATION RETHINKING ALCOHOL

NOT EVERYONE WHO SKIPS ALCOHOL WANTS A FAKE DRINK.

For years, the non-alcoholic shelf has been filled with replacements. Non-alcoholic wine. Non-alcoholic whiskey. Non-alcoholic beer. Drinks designed to imitate what already exists, just without the alcohol.

But Jessica Bianci Mensah saw something different.

"I realized that a lot of the non-alcoholic beverages on the shelf focused on flavor replication," she says.

The people she was noticing, especially young adults between 25 and 35, were not looking for a copy of something alcoholic. They wanted something that still felt social, but had a purpose behind it.

"They weren't looking for a replication of an already popular alcohol beverage," she says. "They were looking for the function behind it."

That became the beginning of Ginny. Built with plants and adaptogens, Ginny is designed to help people unwind without alcohol. After partnering with a naturopathic doctor, the team created a drink with 4,000 milligrams of adaptogens in every can,

using plant-based herbs traditionally known to help the body manage stress and feel more balanced.

The mission is simple: "to help you feel present using plants."

Even the name carries that idea. Ginny is inspired by "a magical spirit in a can, like a genie in a bottle." It is not about escaping the moment. It is about being in it.

That matters now more than ever. More young adults are rethinking their relationship with drinking, but many still want the ritual, the vibe, and the connection that comes with having a drink in hand.



THEY WEREN'T LOOKING FOR A REPLICATION OF AN ALREADY POPULAR ALCOHOL BEVERAGE. THEY WERE LOOKING FOR THE FUNCTION BEHIND IT."

"We've seen that right now because one in four young adults aren't drinking," she says. "It's the perfect time for something like this, but they're completely not being catered to."

For a team of two, building Ginny has meant moving fast and doing a lot with very little.

"We do everything," she says. "We work off our strengths really, really well and leverage social media events, things like that to look bigger than we actually are."

One founder leads with brand, marketing, and social. Her co-founder brings the operations side. "I'm more of a dreamer," she says, while her co-founder is "very type A, so she'll get things done."

Once, that meant going to Hyde Park and selling Ginny directly to people walking by. They sold 50 cans in an hour before being told to stop. It was risky, but it proved people were curious.

As Jessica Mensah remained motivated in shaping the product. When the team wanted 4,000 milligrams of adaptogens in each can, they were told it could not be done.

"We were told that it's not possible," she says. "A lot of food scientists just didn't want to try."

But they kept going.

Ginny is also about representation. One founder is African. Her co-founder is South Asian. Many of the plants used in wellness come from Ayurvedic, Chinese, and traditional medicine, but the communities connected to them are not always reflected on shelf.

"We really want to find a way to see ourselves on shelf," she says.

Ginny is building more than a drink. It is a brand rooted in plants, presence, culture, and social connection.

Because the future of drinking may not be about drinking more. It may be about feeling present.



WHY SMART PEOPLE STILL STRUGGLE WITH MONEY DECISIONS

JENNIFER SCHELL BUILT FINLITI BECAUSE THE GAP BETWEEN KNOWING AND DOING IS WHERE MOST FINANCIAL PLANS GO TO DIE

EVERY GREAT COMPANY STARTS WITH SOMEONE WHO FINALLY said, “Enough”.

Jennifer Schell felt this way after spending 15 years in wealth management.

She saw the same cycle: a client would come in with a plan on how to invest, save, diversify, and stay calm. Then a headline hit, a market dropped, and the plan disappeared. No one had ever helped them understand why they made certain decisions under pressure.

Jennifer Schell stated, “People were being asked to make serious financial decisions without understanding how their own behaviour changes under pressure.”

This pattern became the founding thesis of Finliti.

The problem wasn't the information. It was behaviour.

Traditional financial literacy hands people definitions, charts, and compound-interest lectures. Useful, but incomplete. Because people don't make financial decisions in a vacuum. They make them with fear, regret, family pressure, social media noise, and market anxiety running in the background. Across Finliti's profile data, roughly 80% of participants show risk-averse or risk-sensitive tendencies, suggesting that the real obstacle is often not a lack of information, but a lack of self-awareness.

As Schell puts it: “The financial industry built incredible infrastructure for people who can stay rational under pressure. Finliti was built for the rest of us – the humans.”

Finliti was built to fill the gap between knowing what to do with money and being able to actually do it.

Insight is baked into the game's mechanics. Game of Gains penalizes taking no risk at all, because in real life, paralysis has consequences too.

Finliti runs on a core team of five, spanning behavioural science, product, technology, design, and business development. That constraint has been a feature, not a bug. With limited resources, every decision has to connect back to one question: Does this help people understand the behavioural side of financial decision-making?

That focus kept the company sharp. Working with discerning investment advisory firms forced Finliti to cut anything that sounded impressive but didn't actually help someone make a better decision. The small team also means the company can move fast: testing, revising, and improving in real time, without waiting months for committee review.

Early advisor feedback suggests Finliti is helping turn behavioural insight into better client conversations, stronger suitability documentation, and more personalized follow-up. The company is now tracking the signals that matter most at this stage: completion rates, engagement, satisfaction, advisor adoption, and whether people leave understanding something about themselves they had not seen before. As Schell says, 'We make behavioural insight easier to see, document, and act on. Trust is not a tagline; it is something advisors have to build, conversation by conversation.'

“WE ARE NOT BUILDING A BETTER RISK QUESTIONNAIRE. WE ARE BUILDING THE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR FINANCIAL TRUST. THE GAME IS HOW WE START THE CONVERSATION. THE PLATFORM IS HOW WE MAKE IT LAST.”

What Finliti tracks is simple: do people leave understanding something about themselves they didn't see before? Do they recognize their own fear, overconfidence, or avoidance?

Financial education too often stops at awareness. People nod, take the brochure, and return to old habits. Game of Gains is designed to make the lesson stick because the experience is personal; you're not learning about behavioural biases in the abstract. You're watching yourself act them out in real time, laughing at a character called Tracy Complacency, and then going on a quest when you realize you are Tracy.

That moment of self-recognition isn't incidental to the product. It is the product.

"We are not building a better risk questionnaire. We are building the infrastructure for financial trust. The game is how we start the conversation. The platform is how we make it last."



THE GAME

Game of Gains is a board game built around one uncomfortable truth: most people don't lose money because they lack information. They lose it because they don't know themselves.

Created by Finliti, the game puts players into real investment scenarios and reveals what happens when personality, pressure, and uncertainty collide. Some bet big and win. Some freeze entirely. Some follow the crowd. And some, armed with every rational reason to act, do absolutely nothing and wonder why the portfolio didn't grow.

Along the way, players meet the Financial Foes: Tracy Complacency, who loves a committee and a very thoughtful reason to do nothing. Molly the YOLO Villain, who buys what's trending and sells when the group chat panics. Regretta, still paralyzed by the stock that got away in 2019. Mr. Jones, who now has a podcast.

They're funny, in the way that only genuinely accurate things are. Most players laugh first. Then they go quiet. Then they say: "Wait. I'm Tracy."

That moment of recognition is the whole point.

Sessions run three hours, consistently, without anyone checking their phone. The first event sold out. The game has been played at the New York Stock Exchange. A Palantir executive was among the first retail buyers.



THE FUTURE OF LEARNING

IAN BURGESS BELIEVES EDUCATION NEEDS MORE THAN CLASSROOMS

"EDUCATION IS NOT THE LEARNING OF FACTS, BUT THE TRAINING
of the mind to think." - Albert Einstein

In 1921, Einstein was asked about a collection of trivia facts. He argued that you do not need to go to college to learn facts that can easily be looked up in a book. And now almost a century later, while schools look completely different today on the surface, the core structural problem Einstein stated remains largely unchanged. Students still spend years inside systems centered around memorization, theory, and standardized instruction, only to graduate into industries that demand practical experience, adaptability, and increasingly, fluency in artificial intelligence.

That disconnect between education and practice is exactly what led Ascendancy Foundry founder, Ian Burgess to rethink what post-secondary education could look like. "I wanted to create a better post-secondary experience before my daughters reached college age," Burgess says.

But unlike many critics of higher education, Burgess does not believe universities are broken entirely. He states that many systems work well. It's the baseline that gives peer networks that shape entire careers, and offering a foundational environment for young people to learn independence and self-management. He believes the area that they fall short is in hands-on apprenticeship experience and structure training in how to use AI effectively, despite its rapid rise as a foundational tool across industries.

That insight became the foundation for Ascendancy Foundry (AF): an apprenticeship-first, AI-first model designed to keep education and real work on track. Instead of learning primarily through lectures, AF places people directly inside organizations, building real systems and automations alongside experienced operators. Learning happens through execution, not simulation.

"We are not trying to become a generic training company or a broad online education platform," Burgess says. "Our ambition is much more specific: to help establish Ascendancy Foundry as

the equivalent of an MIT for this emerging model of education."

That ambition has shaped a certain strategy: to stay small, focused, and perfect the core experience before scaling anything else. Rather than rushing to expand, AF spends its early energy selecting exceptional Fellows (AF calls its participants Fellows), pairing them with experienced mentors, building high-trust relationships with client organizations, and ensuring the work produced is consistently meaningful and high-impact.

"We want to make sure the outcomes are exceptional before optimizing for scale," Burgess says.

Instead of building a large internal faculty, AF operates as a network of practitioners. Many of its mentors are active industry professionals rather than full-time instructors, ensuring Fellows are learning from people who are currently building, shipping, and solving problems in real time. Burgess often compares the model to Y Combinator. Not because AF is an accelerator, but because YC demonstrated that influence comes from the strength of a network and the quality of outcomes, not the size of the organization.

"The leverage comes from strong networks, strong culture, and strong standards," he says.

**"I WANTED TO CREATE A BETTER POST-
SECONDARY EXPERIENCE BEFORE MY
DAUGHTERS REACHED COLLEGE AGE."**

That focus on adaptability has already shaped AF's evolution. In its first cohort, the team identified two clear patterns: most companies were focused on AI automation in either sales and marketing or finance and accounting, and some of the most valuable learning moments came from small groups of similar companies sharing problems with each other. Within a month, AF responded by launching Specialized Sub-Cohorts dedicated to those focus areas, adding targeted programming and structured peer sessions for non-competing organizations working on similar challenges. It was a shift that would be difficult for larger, more rigid institutions to replicate.

At the center of AF's model is its "co-learner" approach. Fellows don't simply complete projects for companies; they work directly alongside employees through the same learning framework, ensuring organizations build lasting internal AI capability, not just short-term output.

Burgess believes this is critical because AI adoption represents one of the largest workforce transformations in modern history, and Ascendancy Foundry is positioning itself at the front of that shift, training the people who will actively build it from within.

Ian Burgess
Ascendancy Foundry
NEXT Founders, 2016

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NEXT





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A COATING CHANGE,
CUSTOMER EMAIL, LAB
RESULT OR INVESTOR
DOCUMENT CAN MATERIALLY
CHANGE THE COMPANY'S
TRAJECTORY.”



THE INVISIBLE LAYER OF FOOD PRODUCTION

ADNAN SHARIF HAS LYRATA SOLVING
THE HIDDEN INFRASTRUCTURE
PROBLEM IN INDOOR FARMING

IN A TORONTO LAB, A SMALL PIECE OF “GROW-MEDIA” RECENTLY traveled halfway across the world and back in under two weeks. A Japanese partner testing Lyrata’s technology identified an issue with a coating used in their system. Instead of waiting through months of approvals and reviews, the team immediately recreated the conditions in Toronto, tested fixes, and shipped an updated version back to Japan within days.

That speed reflects how founder Adnan Sharif runs Lyrata, a company focused on what Sharif calls the “hidden infrastructure problem in indoor farming.”

Indoor farms don’t use soil. Instead, they rely on grow-media, materials that hold plant roots, deliver water, and support growth in controlled environments. Today’s most common option, rockwool, comes with major drawbacks: it is energy-intensive to produce, difficult to recycle, often discarded after use, dependent on global supply chains, and capable of carrying disease between crop cycles.

As indoor farming technology advances, Sharif believes this foundational layer has remained inefficient.

Lyrata’s answer is SmartSoil, a patent-pending 3D-printed grow-media designed to replace materials like rockwool. The goal is to create a reusable, lower-carbon alternative that is adaptable to different crops and operational systems.

SmartSoil is designed to be reusable instead of disposable, more operationally efficient, and easier for farms to integrate into existing workflows.

But Sharif emphasizes that solving the problem is not only about inventing a better material.

“This is not just a materials problem; it is an execution problem.”

Even the best technology has to function inside real farms with tight schedules, existing infrastructure, and operational constraints.

That thinking shapes how Lyrata operates internally. The company intentionally stays compact, with a team core 2-person team and a few part-time and contract employees and advisors.

Rather than building layers of management, the company relies on systems: shared dashboards, standardized documentation, communication protocols, and visible task tracking. Sharif describes the philosophy as being “systematic without becoming bureaucratic.”

Decision-making is filtered through a few core questions:

- Does this improve customer validation?
- Does this improve SmartSoil’s performance?
- Does this reduce operational complexity?
- Does this strengthen partner or investor relationships?

Sharif’s approach is partly shaped by managing more than 70 interns in Toronto, many of whom later joined companies like IBM and Shopify. The experience reinforced his belief that early-stage companies need clarity more than hierarchy.

At Lyrata, customer feedback flows directly into technical development. Business development conversations become immediate lab experiments, creating a fast feedback loop instead of slow approval chains.

The company’s work with its Japanese technology and trading partner became a defining example of that system in practice. After receiving feedback on a coating issue, the team recreated the exact testing conditions in Toronto, rapidly developed new iterations, and returned to Japan with an updated solution within roughly two weeks.

Sharif describes the workflow as a relay system, where information moves continuously between business and product teams without bottlenecks.

That responsiveness helped build trust, especially in Japan, where reliability is measured not only by product quality, but by consistency and speed when challenges arise.

Inside Lyrata, trust is built through visibility rather than hierarchy. Work, deadlines, and notes are shared across the team, and Sharif keeps his calendar open so employees understand how decisions are made.

As he explains, in a small company, “a coating change, customer email, lab result or investor document can materially change the company’s trajectory.”

Looking ahead, Lyrata is not focused on aggressive headcount growth. Instead, the company wants to scale while preserving speed. Its model combines a small core team with automation tools, AI agents, project-based specialists, and advisors, allowing repetitive operational work to be increasingly systemized.

The goal is simple: stay lean, move quickly, and focus human attention where judgment matters most.

Because for Sharif and Lyrata, the future of indoor farming may not be determined by the machines above the plants, but by the invisible material beneath them.

A high-angle, slightly blurred photograph of three people working together at a dark table. A man in a blue button-down shirt is leaning over a laptop, pointing at the screen. A woman with dark hair is also looking at the laptop. Another person is partially visible in the foreground, looking down at a document. The table is cluttered with laptops, papers, and a smartphone. The overall tone is professional and collaborative.

TURNING ACCESS INTO IMPACT THROUGH THE EY ENTREPRENEURS ACCESS NETWORK



DANIEL BAER

Authored by
EY Entrepreneur Of The Year® Canada Program Director
and EY Entrepreneurs Access Network Co-Director

T**HIS IS CANADA'S MOMENT TO THINK BIGGER AND BUILD BOLDER.** Across the country, growth-stage ventures are shaping what comes next for our economy and for our communities. Many of these organizations may operate with lean teams, but they deliver impact at scale. They create jobs, drive innovation and strengthen the places they call home. Their success is not accidental, it comes from speed, ownership and access to the right support at the right time.

THE AGILITY ADVANTAGE

We see it daily. Small companies turn ideas into action with agility because decision-makers sit closer to the customer and the product. They test and adjust in real time. Smaller teams can align on a bold move in a morning meeting and implement it by the afternoon. That kind of velocity is a competitive advantage in a world where customers and markets shift overnight.

There's also an unshakeable sense of ownership on a founder-led team as everyone feels a direct connection between effort and outcome. It creates an environment where problems are solved together and wins are shared widely. The result is a culture of resilience and creativity.

LOCAL ROOTS, NATIONAL IMPACT

Founder-led companies also punch above their weight in building prosperity. They hire locally and draw on nearby partners, sending ripples of growth through their communities. A local win creates more jobs and higher confidence in the economy. Most businesses in Canada are small or mid-sized, and their collective growth drives a huge share of our national progress.

CLOSING THE ACCESS GAP

To keep this momentum going, we need to make sure all entrepreneurs can thrive. Canada's entrepreneurs come from every background, sector and region. Yet they don't all start with the same access to guidance or networks. Often the biggest challenge isn't their ambition or ideas, but it's that some don't have the right doors open. Closing that gap allows a wave of high-potential ventures to scale up.

The recently announced EY Entrepreneurs Access Network 2026 cohort offers a glimpse of what's possible when access meets ambition. These 12 founders hail from small towns and big cities across Canada. They work in industries from consumer goods and media to technology and real estate. Some are turning family recipes into national brands. Others are bridging healthcare or education gaps through innovation. The program connects them with mentors and industry networks that support their growth and helps them navigate complexity. By empowering more entrepreneurs with better access, we can help them reach their full potential and build an economy that benefits everyone.

Now is the time to champion these builders and the ecosystems that support them. We can each play a part – as collaborators, customers and champions of their success. When small ventures thrive, they deliver innovation, jobs and resilience that strengthen all of Canada. Let's recognize their impact and seize this moment to build a more competitive, more confident, and stronger Canada, together.

Learn more about the EY Entrepreneurs Access Network at https://www.ey.com/en_ca/services/entrepreneurship/entrepreneurs-access-network.

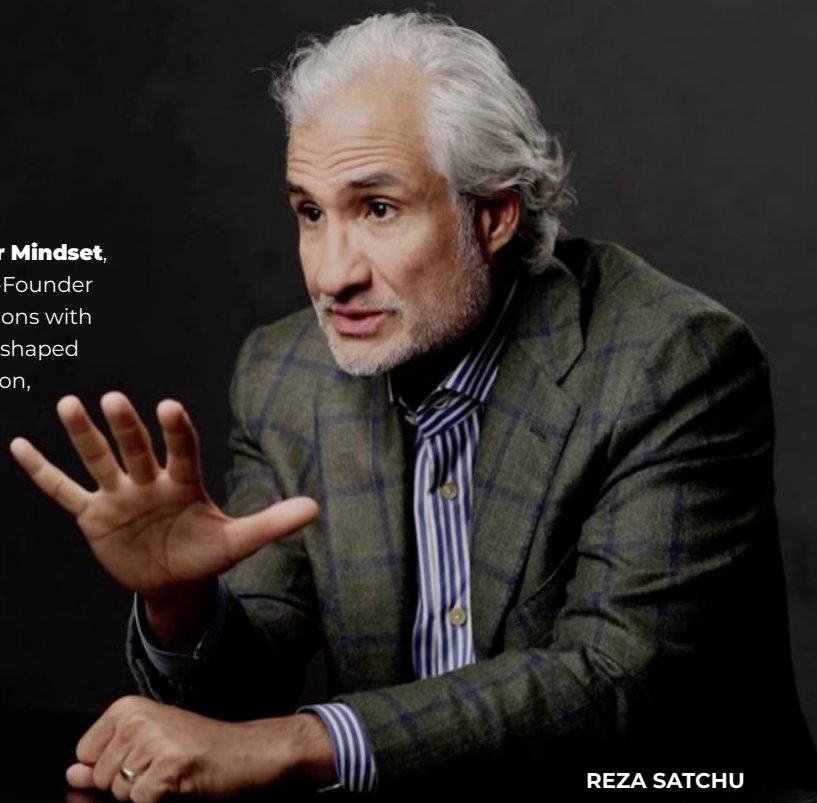
WHO'S LILIS TO WHAT?

IMAGE FROM FREEDIK



The Founder Mindset with Reza Satchu

One podcast that's been in our rotation lately is **The Founder Mindset**, a new series from HBS Foundry hosted by NEXT Canada Co-Founder and Chairman Reza Satchu. The podcast features conversations with influential founders and leaders about the experiences that shaped their journeys. The debut episode features Reese Witherspoon, who reflects on building Hello Sunshine and creating opportunities for women in media. It's a thoughtful listen for anyone interested in entrepreneurship, leadership, and the mindset behind building something meaningful.

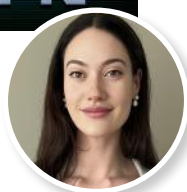


REZA SATCHU

Founding Chairman, **NEXT Canada**
Co-founder & Managing Partner, **Alignvest**
Senior Lecturer, **Harvard Business School**

TENING

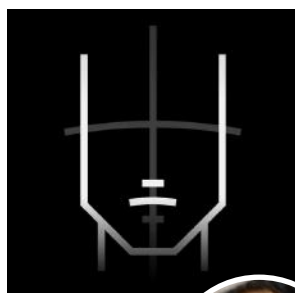
WHAT WE LISTEN TO SHAPES HOW WE THINK. In this issue, we've asked a group of NEXT Canada alumni (and donors!) to share the podcasts they return to for inspiration, insight, and fresh perspectives. Whether focused on entrepreneurship, technology, leadership, or life beyond work, these recommendations offer a glimpse into the conversations helping shape some of Canada's founders and innovators.



KATE WALLACE
Partner

Cannon Project, TCP

I like the **TBPB** podcast because it offers candid, unfiltered conversations with founders and investors who are building and scaling some of the most interesting companies in tech. The discussions provide practical insights into startups, leadership, fundraising, and the realities of company building.



PAUL SHENOUDA
Principal advisor

Polytechnique Montréal

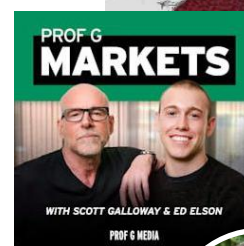
There's a specific episode called 'In the Arena' where **Naval** goes into details on some of his tweets, which I would recommend – but all of Naval's podcast episodes are amazing. I like this one because it really puts the focus on the importance of having done something relating to a subject to really get the knowledge. Give it a listen!



LEXI KAPLIN
Venture Partner

Pender Ventures

I really enjoy Hard Fork, Acquired, **Business Wars** and The Pitch – each of these podcasts provide an interesting perspective on business strategy, emerging technologies & founder stories. If I had to choose just one, my favourite would have to be Business Wars for their captivating series breaking down the titans of industry, and the pivotal steps on their journeys.



MORGAN WYATT
Founder & CEO

Fundspoke

I listen to perhaps a continuous stream of podcasts but the few I'd recommend are: **Rest Is History** – Great to learn about all sorts of historical events by two British historians that have great banter along the way. **ProfG Markets** – Daily insight into what's going on in the markets and tech, along with great guests on a regular basis.

10

FOUNDERS TO WATCH

EVERY YEAR, there are founders whose ambition, execution, and momentum set them apart. This year's list was curated by Noel Webb – NEXT alumnus, donor, mentor, advisor, and longtime community member. Having spent years supporting founders across the Canadian innovation ecosystem, Noel brings a unique perspective on the entrepreneurs he believes are poised to make an outsized impact in the years ahead.



NOEL WEBB

*Founder & Managing Partner,
Lucid Ventures*



SUAMIK BISWAS (CEO) &
MIKE LAVDAS (CTO)
Co-founders, Tenomix

NEXT AI, 2024

Tenomix develops AI-powered robotic pathology technology that automates cancer tissue analysis, helping pathology labs improve accuracy, accelerate workflows, and enable better treatment decisions.



SAROOP BHARWANI
Co-founder & CEO, Senso.ai

NEXT AI, 2017

Senso.ai is a context layer for AI agents that turns a company's raw internal sources into a verified, agent-ready knowledge base. It helps AI systems answer accurately, cite trusted sources, and represent the business consistently across tools like ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and Perplexity.



OLIVIA LENG
Founder & CEO, Meissner

NEXT 36, 2025

Meissner accelerates the discovery of next-generation superconducting materials by combining AI, quantum simulations, and experimental validation to advance quantum computing and energy technologies.



MIKE MURCHISON
Founder & CEO, Ada

NEXT 36, 2012

Ada is an AI-powered customer service platform that automates customer interactions, helping businesses deliver faster, personalized support at scale worldwide.



RAGHAVENDER SAHDEV (CEO)
& **BAO XIN CHEN** (CTO)
Co-founders, NuPort Robotics

NEXT AI, 2019

NuPort.ai builds autonomous trucking technology for logistics operations, especially rail terminals, ports, trucking yards, and middle-mile routes. Its retrofit system converts existing trucks into autonomous vehicles, helping fleets improve throughput, safety, and operating costs.



RAE JEONG (CEO) &
KELVIN CHAN (CTO)
Co-founders, Maneva

NEXT AI, 2024

Maneva AI builds video-to-action AI for manufacturing, turning factory floor video and data into real-time alerts, recommendations, and automated actions. It helps manufacturers reduce downtime, improve quality, increase throughput, and protect workers.



HENRY SHI
Co-Founder, Super.com

NEXT 36, 2012

Super.com is a savings platform that helps consumers save on travel, build credit, earn rewards, and access financial tools through one app.



MYRA ARSHAD
Co-founder & CEO, ALT TEX

NEXT 36, 2020

ALT TEX transforms food waste into biodegradable, carbon-neutral textiles, creating a high-performance polyester alternative that helps fashion brands reduce environmental impact.



ANTHONY AZRAK (CEO) &
JAI MANSUKHANI (President)
Co-founders, General Magic

NEXT 36, 2024

General Magic builds AI agents for insurance brokerages that automate customer conversations, streamline workflows, and integrate with existing systems to improve service and efficiency.



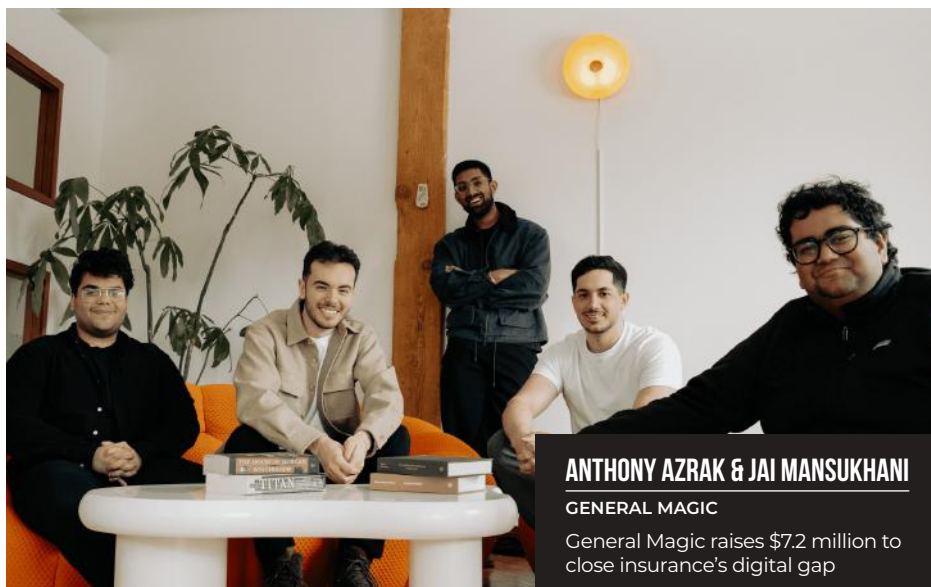
ABRAHAM HEIFETS
Co-founder & CEO, Numerion Labs

NEXT Founders, 2013

Numerion Labs (formerly Atomwise) uses AI, machine learning, and computational chemistry to discover novel drug candidates, accelerating the development of breakthrough medicines for complex diseases.

COMMUNITY NEWS

NEXT CANADA COMMUNITY MAKING HEADLINES



ANTHONY AZRAK & JAI MANSUKHANI

GENERAL MAGIC

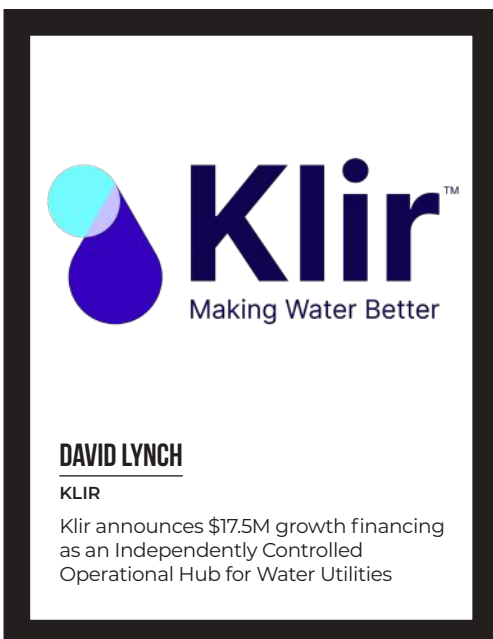
General Magic raises \$7.2 million to close insurance's digital gap



EUNICE WU & CAN UNCU

ASEPHA

Asepha's Eunice Wu and Can Uncu recognized on Forbes 30 Under 30 Healthcare list



DAVID LYNCH

KLIR

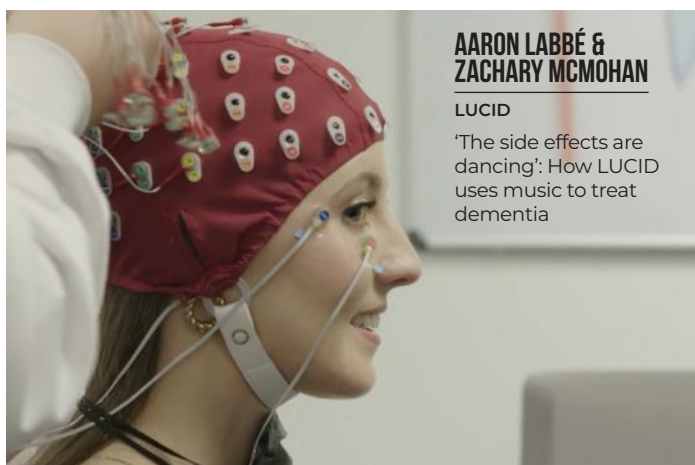
Klir announces \$17.5M growth financing as an Independently Controlled Operational Hub for Water Utilities



BEN SANDERS

HYPER

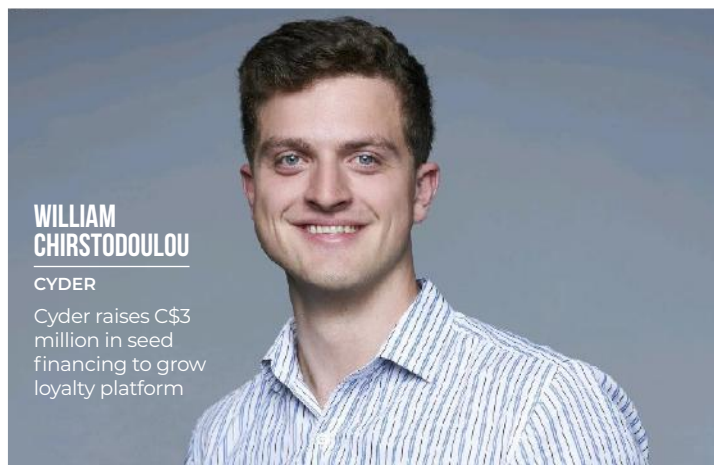
Motorola acquires AI-based 911 call screening startup Hyper



AARON LABBÉ & ZACHARY MCMOHAN

LUCID

'The side effects are dancing': How LUCID uses music to treat dementia

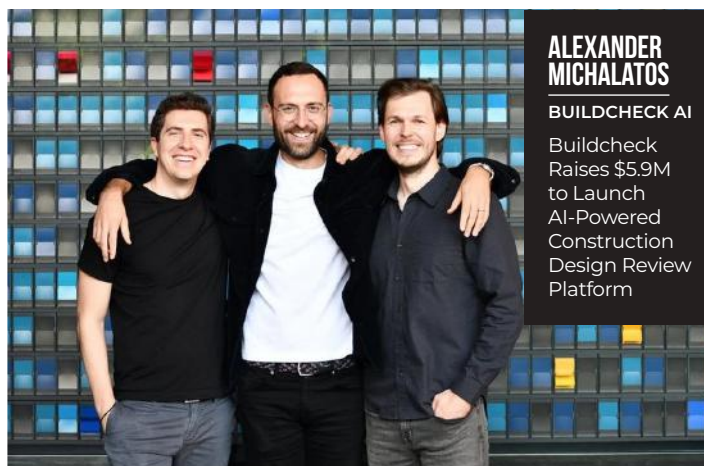
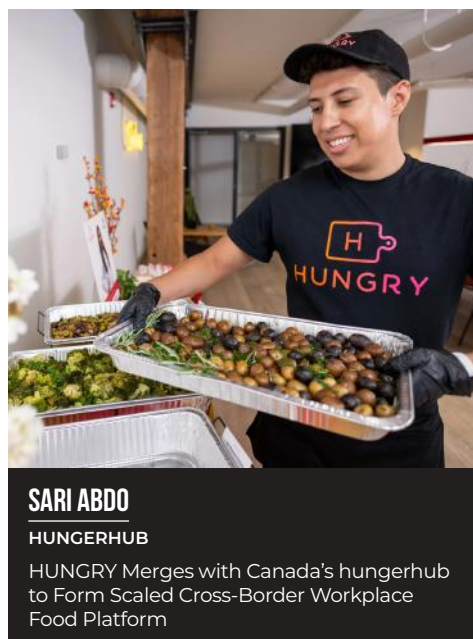
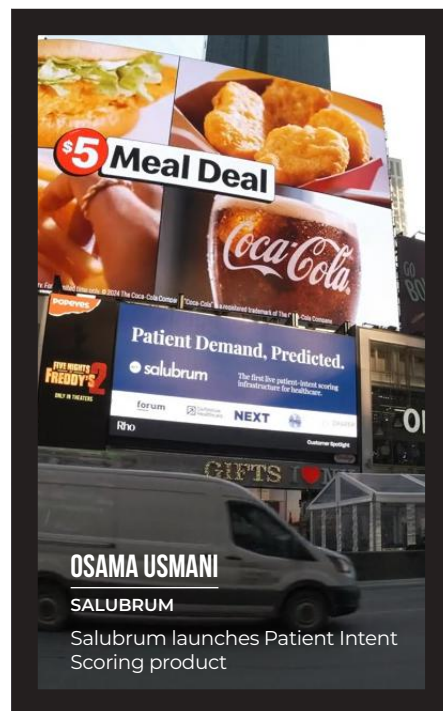


WILLIAM CHIRSTODOULOU

CYDER

Cyder raises C\$3 million in seed financing to grow loyalty platform

OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS, our alumni have captured attention for their achievements in capital raising, team expansion, innovation, and inspiration. Click on the headshots below to explore their accomplishments.



GRIT

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Wild West

NEXTCANADA

GRIT is a NEXT Canada publication created 3 times per year.

NEXT Canada's mission is to provide lifetime founder support with the goal of building a more prosperous and competitive Canada.

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