

Opportunities in Tech Are Opportunities for Women

Q & A with Heather Cape, software engineer

The range of choices for women in tech is endless. Just ask software engineer Heather Cape, who accepted a position at Microsoft in Seattle before she'd even graduated. Heather is stoked to embark on her new career this summer — and she's glad she gets to stay in the Pacific Northwest, where her heart resides.



Heather graduated with her Bachelor of Engineering from the University of Victoria in 2018, where she completed four co-op work terms at General Dynamics in Calgary, Isolation Network Canada, Redbrick and Microsoft Canada.

We caught up with Heather to ask her a few questions about her experience as a student and a worker in the tech industry.

Q: *Can you give us a snapshot of your current job?*

A: I'm moving to Seattle in a few months to start my job with Microsoft. Because they hired me pretty far out, I don't yet have a set position or team. My last co-op was with Microsoft in Vancouver. I worked at The Coalition Studio on the gameplay programming team for the *Gears of War* video game franchise!

Q: *What were some of your challenges as a woman in this field?*

A: People are often surprised to hear that the challenges I've faced have been in the industry rather than on campus. When I'm in classes with my peers, there is definitely a huge majority of males (especially in software) and although I notice it, I never seemed to have problems — everyone is respectful and friendly in my program. In the workplace, it can be harder. I've been on four co-ops and usually am the only woman (although sometimes there are one or two others) on teams of 10–25 men. In school, I always feel like I belong, but at work I usually feel like an outsider because of the age and gender difference. I'm known to be shy initially, so that doesn't help! But I do notice that the male co-op students often relate better to our co-workers than I can. I've also had several cases of inappropriate comments from coworkers, something that surprisingly never happens at school.

Q: *What kind of supports could make a difference in keeping more women in the area of computer science, engineering and mathematics?*

A: I think one of the biggest reasons someone would want to be in a certain field is because they enjoy it. I enrolled in general engineering and didn't decide on majoring in software engineering until I had my first exposure to programming in university and really loved it. I think a big way to get more interest in the field would be to show women all the different possibilities there are in engineering and computer science, maybe through programs or workshops at a younger age. I think there can be a lot of preconceived stereotypes about what something is — especially programming or computer-related jobs: “Oh, you're in engineering, you must like fixing cars!” etc. I think introducing the possible job paths to high-schoolers could help more people get into these fields.

Q: *As you see it, where are the biggest opportunities for women in tech?*

A: I think any opportunity in tech can be one for women, and there are really tons and tons of opportunities. If you are making a product for the general public, I think it's really important to have a team that reflects that. Once at work I used I headset for Skype calls and every single time I took it off it got tangled in my hair. To me that's a sign that no one on the design or testing team was a person with long hair.