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TECHNOLOGY

She Messed Up Amazon's Website. Now She's One of Its Leaders.

Beryl Tomay is open about her early career mistakes, in hopes her experiences can help others who are now just starting out. (And those early mistakes included a couple big ones!)

By [Sebastian Herrera](#) [Follow](#) | Photographs by Chona Kasinger for *The Wall Street Journal*

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In her first year at [Amazon](#) AMZN **0.84%** ▲ .com, Beryl Tomay made a software code change for Amazon's order-confirmation page that caused it to appear blank for customers for over an hour. Later on, she made a change to the database of the Kindle e-reader that prevented users from signing in or downloading anything. That error was so large that [Jeff Bezos](#), Amazon's founder, noticed and emailed to ask about the problem.

Today, Tomay is in charge of a crucial part of Amazon that is in its busiest period right now: She oversees businesses and technology at the company's "[last mile](#)" delivery unit—the logistics business that gets packages through the final steps on their way to customers' doorsteps. It's a chokepoint that will help determine whether Amazon is successful during the make-or-break holiday season.

Tomay, 41, says she learned much from her early mistakes, including how to pick herself up after a setback. She eagerly discusses the missteps she made as a young Amazon developer, speaking at company events and writing about the lessons she learned in hopes that her experiences can help others who are now just starting out.

Tomay has spent her entire professional career working for Amazon in Seattle. But before she began her ascent up the company's corporate ladder, she used her entrepreneurial skills as a teenager growing up in Toronto in the late 1990s.

That was when Tomay built a fan website for the English rock band Radiohead, one of her favorite groups. Her site, named Follow Me Around after [an unreleased song](#) by the band, became so popular that Radiohead noticed and began to send her memorabilia, and handed exclusive news to her to share with her readers.

Eventually, a startup approached Tomay to buy her website, which it hoped to add to a community of fan sites. It was fortuitous timing. Tomay was headed to college and could use the cash. She sold the site and used the proceeds to fund her computer-science degree at the University of Waterloo in Ontario. She interned at Amazon in 2004, while still in school, and landed a full-time job there after graduating.

A Radiohead poster in Tomay's office.

She was just six months in when she made the coding error that blanked out the order-confirmation page on the Amazon website.

With that error and the other mistake with Kindle, Tomay had to undergo a formal review process, where she had to write out what happened and which actions she'd take to not

repeat the errors. The blunders didn't rise to fireable offenses, in part because coding missteps are understood parts of developer work, but the incidents, she said, strengthened her ability to bounce back after failures.

"It was a pivotal moment for me," Tomay said. "Especially early on in my career, one thing I've struggled with has been building resiliency. How you deal with that and how you pick yourself back up, learn from it and move on."

She did move on, and found success with the Kindle team. She led a group that perfected the automatic synchronization that takes place when Kindle users read a bit of their book on one device and then switch to another. The basic idea, she said in 2015, was: "I'm at the grocery store on my phone. I'm waiting in line. I can read for five, 10 minutes. Then I go home, pick up my Kindle, and just continue exactly where I left off. It just works." The feature, called Whispersync, was a hit, and Tomay, who was then still in her 20s, was listed alongside Bezos and eight others on Amazon's patent for the technology.

She's now named alongside Amazon colleagues on 18 other patents. The most recent, issued in October, is for an automated system for generating safety tips for delivery drivers.

In the early 2010s, Tomay led teams working on Amazon's Fire Phone, a smartphone designed to compete with the high-end devices of the time. The phone, released in 2014, never caught on—and it quickly became [one of the company's largest flops](#).

Although the project was a miss, Tomay said the failure taught her again that positive lessons could be gained even in mistakes. Some of the technology for the phone, for example, was redeployed for other devices like the Kindle. And Tomay said she gained experience in hiring teams and in trying to create a vision for a new product, which she carried into her later leadership roles.

Following her work on the Fire Phone, Tomay sought to challenge herself with the delivery side of Amazon, which was new to her. She joined the last-mile unit, and eventually led teams that built a business named Prime Now, which provided quick deliveries of toiletries

and other consumable products.

An Amazon delivery van in Poway, Calif. PHOTO: SANDY HUFFAKER/REUTERS

Prime Now was eventually folded into Amazon's broader efforts to speed up deliveries for groceries and other products, a service that became [critical during the Covid-19 pandemic](#) when people were stuck at home.

The health crisis became one of her career's biggest challenges, both because Amazon became overwhelmed with orders overnight, and because of her role as a senior executive responsible for people who were facing challenges in their personal lives. Some of her colleagues were juggling child-care duties while on video calls for work. Others told Tomay they were struggling with loneliness and the blurring of work and personal lives.

Tomay, who describes herself as analytical, saw a need to shift her leadership style to be more empathetic. She helped create an Amazon program named "org days" that allows employees to set aside work tasks eight days a year to focus on personal growth, mental well-being and big ideas inside the company, and to volunteer in their communities.

Tomay said she had to quickly adapt to the crisis, with daily meetings during the height of the pandemic to meet the increased demand for products, while [deploying new policies and workflows](#) at the company's hundreds of warehouses. She said she is still trying to evolve

as a leader and create better ways for her employees to learn and grow within the company.

The e-commerce giant has been rebounding from a 2022 slump that saw its sales growth slow. Amazon last month said its profit tripled to nearly \$10 billion from July to September, and it has moved to cut costs in the past year as it has sought to wring more efficiency out of its businesses.

The fourth quarter is typically Amazon's most important of the year. As the holidays approach, Amazon is signaling that the stretch will be a strong one this year. The company planned to hire 250,000 people for its warehouses in full-time, part-time and seasonal roles in preparation for the crush, tens of thousands more than it hired last year during the same period. It kicked off the holiday shopping period last month with a sales event called "Prime Big Deal Days" that it said outpaced a similar event last year.

The company's delivery abilities—and Tomay's team—will be put to the test over the next few weeks as it works to deliver millions of holiday packages. But if there are problems along the way, Tomay has said she's learned to adapt and move on.

"Every year, I'm learning something new," she said.

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