



# slack

# VARIETY PACK

Episode 24: The Little Things Pack

Speaker 1: You are listening to the Slack ...

Speaker 2: Variety Pack.

Speaker 1: Brought to you by Slack.

Speaker 3: All kinds of people, on all kinds of teams, use Slack to do amazing things.

Speaker 4: Hi there. Welcome to the Slack Variety Pack. In this episode: in praise of the little things. All hail the lowly comma, that prince of punctuation. Semicolon, we hardly knew you.

Mary: Without the comma, "Let's eat Grandma" is like a scene from the Donner Party.

Speaker 4: Let's hear it for the text message. In your small guts are riches beyond comparison.

Nancy Lublin: This is actually the largest mental health data set that's been collected.

Speaker 4: Three cheers for the ottoman, that odd-shaped, forgotten piece of furniture. Who knew your power to change the future of work?

Michael Tippett: Do not, under any circumstances, underestimate the importance of a sufficient ottoman.

Speaker 4: We kick things off with a high five to those tiny bits of information, data. We like you in sets, enjoy you raw. We collect, analyze, and visualize you. The patterns you create are capable of making huge changes. Here's to you, data.

Anthony: I'm Anthony Goldbloom, co-founder and CEO of Kaggle.

Speaker 9: Kaggle is a company that brings together data scientists from around the world. These scientists team up on Kaggle's online platform and work together to build machine-learning algorithms. Machine-learning algorithms, you ask? Well, those are formulas that let computers think like humans and predict the future. Data scientists use machine-learning algorithms to solve big problems for companies that help them be more efficient.

Anthony: Machine learning is the most powerful branch of artificial intelligence. It can read different types of data, so it can be image data, it can be text data, it could be data that's numbers. What it tries to do is pick up patterns and learn lessons that it can then apply in the future.

To give you an example, we have built machine-learning algorithms that have learned to grade high school essays. You feed the machine enough essays that have been graded, and it learns the characteristics of good essays and bad essays. In that case, the winning algorithm can match the average grade given by human teachers.

Speaker 9: Companies want to solve their problems with machine learning, they go to Kaggle. Data scientists looking to gain street cred in the way that data scientists do, they go to Kaggle. Kaggle gets the data sets from the companies and throws them at their community of about a half a million data scientists, and then it's a no-holds-barred to see who can come up with the winning algorithm.

Anthony: The data scientists will come along and they'll see a listing of all the different competitions that are on Kaggle at any point in time, so they decide on the insurance problem. They read through the description of the problem, the description of the data. They download the data, they start working on their algorithms, and then when they're ready, they'll submit the results from their algorithm onto Kaggle and then they'll see immediately where they rank on a live leaderboard.

Let's say I make a submission and I predict 40% of accidents and that puts me into 100th place, and the winner is predicting 60% of accidents. That tells me that somebody else has found patterns in the data that I haven't [yet 00:03:41]. I can compete. I can keep trying to refine my algorithm until I get up to 60%. Hopefully, eventually, I surpass that person. Let's say I get to 65%.

Speaker 9: Competitions to solve any given company's problem are usually open for two months. Winners of competitions earn prize money, from hundreds of dollars to thousands. The reward is not exactly enough to replace anyone's day job, but that's not why data scientists join. It's all about the game.

Anthony: The first rank, number one rank, will team up with the number second rank. The next competition, they'll team up with the number third rank. The next competition, they'll team up with the number fourth rank. The reason for that is that they'll team up with each other, they'll learn each other's tricks; then they move on to the next person, learn their tricks, move onto the next.

Marius: My name is Marius [inaudible 00:04:35]. I work as a manager of data science in Dunnhumby.

Speaker 9: Marius is the number-one ranked data scientist on Kaggle, but he's not one to brag.

Marius: I definitely don't think I'm the best data scientist, especially there are very talented people there. I had to work really hard to get that spot.

Speaker 9: Marius has competed in over seventy competitions on the road to number one. He spends about sixty hours a week on them, on top of his full-time job and part-time Ph.D.

Marius: I think when you somehow manage to get quite high in the ranks, you sort of want to finish this journey; otherwise you might always have this question of yourself, could I have made it? I wanted to finish that. I gave everything I got.

- Speaker 9: Marius has teamed up with other data scientists in more than half the competitions he's entered. He knows that group effort makes him better.
- Marius: I met so many people that were like me, maybe not so social, but maybe slightly better in numbers and stuff. Almost with every person that I have collaborated, I keep in contact. I think just because the emotions sometimes are quite strong when you participate in a competition, sometimes there is some tension. I think this makes you closer to the people [who 00:06:06] are in the team.
- Speaker 9: The founder of Kaggle, Anthony Goldbloom, is excited about what these teams can accomplish on his company's platform. They've already created an algorithm that can examine a photo of an eye and detect diseases, like diabetic retinopathy.
- Anthony: A lot of low-income people suffer from diabetes. Many of them can't afford to get the diagnosis made, so they end up going blind as a result of having this disease untreated, when actually [it might be 00:06:39] treatable. Having an algorithm that can diagnose diabetic retinopathy means that people who previously weren't getting diagnosed now have more of an opportunity.
- Speaker 9: Anthony believes there are no ends to the types of problems data scientists can solve, and all types of industries want in. Number crunchers are expected to take the lead in the next wave of tech innovation.
- Anthony: We had a relationship with a large pharmaceutical company, say, three or four years ago, who were just testing out machine learning and data science, and they had a team of five or ten. It's now blown out to a team of three hundred. I use them not as an outlier example, but they are a prototypical example of what's happening.
- Speaker 1: Slack. Working better together.
- Speaker 11: Channel change. Grammar channel.
- Speaker 4: Every once in a while, there's a partnership that really stands out: Lennon and McCartney, Jobs and Wozniak, Kim and Kanye. There's one partnership that not a lot of people are aware of, but it's one of the essentials: writer and copy editor.
- Mary: My name is Mary Norris. I've written a book called "Between You & Me: Confessions of a Comma Queen." It's based on my experiences as a copy editor at The New Yorker, where I've worked for many decades.
- Speaker 4: Mary Norris is not just any copy editor, she checks the Ps and Qs of writers like George Saunders, Pauline Kael, Richard Ford, and Philip Roth. A copy editor makes fixes, tweaks the style, and makes the written article that much better.
- Mary: Writers can be very defensive and protective of their prose, but what I have found is that the better the writer, the more interested the writer is in getting feedback,

and getting a reaction, and trusting a copy editor and make sure that the meaning that the writer wants is getting across.

Speaker 4: The relationship between a writer and a copy editor isn't easy. It's tough for writers to get feedback on their work. As for copy editors ...

Mary: A lot of times when a copy editor is first starting out, he might want to be important. He might want to show that, "I should be getting published, not this writer." You have to have the humility to be not the servant exactly, but you have to have the humility to be helping, and keep your ego out of it.

Speaker 4: Good partnerships happen when both team members trust that they're working towards a common goal: to make the piece of writing better. Mary gets how hard this is. She has been there as a writer, herself.

Mary: I was just the kind of nightmare writer that I now sometimes encounter as a copy editor. I was resistant to everything they tried to change. I thought they were trying to change my style, and flatten it out, and make me say things that I hadn't wanted to say.

Speaker 4: Mary has since mellowed. Now, as a copy editor, she has mastered the art of give and take.

Mary: We negotiate things. We make a suggestion to improve a sentence, or we might notice that a word is not the exact right word. All you're really doing is opening it for discussion. It's not my piece; it is the writer's piece.

Speaker 4: Back in 2012, New York Times writer Ben Yagoda wrote an opinion piece poking fun at The New Yorker's use of commas.

Speaker 12: [Unscrupulous 00:10:39]. Bordering on fetish-istic about commas. Mania for precision and clarity.

Mary: I didn't really want to get into writing about my job, but they asked, and I looked around and I realized, "Well, nobody else is going to do this. I ought to have some team spirit, and it's true. We can't let them make fun of our commas like that." I saw a way to do it, and that column that ran online was called "In Defense of 'Nutty' Commas." That went viral.

Speaker 4: Mary got a book deal from that viral column. Her book, "Between You & Me: Confessions of a Comma Queen," became a New York Times best seller. Take that, Yagoda. Now, it is coming out in paperback this month. As you think to yourself, "I don't need a book on commas. I've got spell check and autocorrect. Technology is my friend." Think again. Does spellcheck really know where to place that lowly but powerful comma?

Mary: [Represents 00:11:35] ambiguity, as in another famous expression: Without the

comma, "Let's eat Grandma" is like a scene from the Donner party, but "Let's eat, Grandma," is a lovely meal together.

Speaker 4: Here's a couple more of Mary Norris's grammar tips.

Speaker 3: Lesson number one.

Mary: An unnecessary comma in a list of adjectives in front of a noun, that's something like the long-sleeved white shirt. You wouldn't, "long-sleeved," comma, "white shirt." Or, "beautiful brown-haired girl." You don't need commas between "beautiful" and "brown-haired," or "white" and "long-sleeved" because those adjectives are not coordinate. The test for that is usually to see if you can substitute "and" for the comma.

Speaker 3: Lesson number two.

Mary: The difference between "masterly" and "masterful" or "masterfully"; you see it on the backs of books all the time. People are always giving blurbs that say, "This is a masterful expression of poetry in our society today." It should be "masterly." "Masterly," to me, means, "in the manner of a master." "Masterful" indicates some kind of force. You might say Norman Mailer was a masterful writer; also masterly.

Speaker 12: Mary Norris isn't just passionate about punctuation. She believes in the written word, and the English language is an ever-evolving tradition to master, masterfully. I think.

Mary: The written word is what we have received from the past, and it is what we're going to give to the future. Our language, our grammar, our sentences, the shapes of them, the spelling; everything comes out of a tradition and goes forward. It blends with new traditions, of course, but it is our link to the past, our concern for the language, and our desire to be part of a continuum.

Speaker 12: Before we let Mary go, we needed to ask her one more very important question. What would a New Yorker cartoon be like if all the characters were copy editors?

Mary: There would be a lot of crazy people with funny hair, and they would all be cackling. They would be arguing about a light bulb, a single light bulb hanging down in the middle of the room. There is a pretty good joke about how long does it take a copy editor to screw in a light bulb. The answer is, "Is that hyphenated?"

"Light bulb" is two words, actually.

Speaker 1: Slack Variety Pack. Tweet us, with or without punctuation, at @slackhq.

Speaker 11: Channel change. "Office-Not Office" channel.

Speaker 4: What comes into your head when you hear the word "lounge"?

Speaker 3: Chill. Cocktails. Velour. Barefoot. Lazy.

Speaker 4: It turns out, these are more the words you should be thinking of.

Speaker 3: Productivity. Efficiency. Speed. Research.

Speaker 4: Who knew?

Michael Tippett: My name is Michael Tippett. I am the CEO and founder of Wantoo.

Speaker 4: Michael has been in the innovation space for over two decades. His latest venture, Wantoo, is a platform that lets organizations figure out if their ideas are any good.

Michael Tippett: Any idea that you have, it allows you to figure out if it's good or not.

Speaker 4: That's great and all, but Wantoo, the product, isn't what we wanted to talk to Michael about. We wanted to talk to him about Wantoo, the office, because really, it's the anti-office.

Michael Tippett: Whenever I say "lounge-based innovation," which is hyphenated, by the way, everybody always smiles.

Speaker 4: Lounge-based what, now?

Michael Tippett: If you think about conventional office space, it's typically desks and chairs. That's really a historical accident. The fact that you had paper at some point, and you needed a place to put that, and you needed a phone, and that needed to be plugged in; all those things are no longer true. You show up in an office these days, and you've got your own laptop typically; you've got your own phone.

We thought, well, what is the ultimate place to have a conversation? The answer to that was, a lounge. You see lounges everywhere for that reason. Plus, it's kind of fun to say "lounge."

Speaker 4: The Wantoo team took their whole office, got rid of the desks, and turned it into a lounge. Michael realized that the lounge approach was a great way to bring his team together to work on their product and to generate ideas. In fact, there's been precedents, from way back, for this work style.

Michael Tippett: I think you can go all the way back to almost the ancient Greeks, if you want to, and look at the way that they tried to figure the world out. They used conversation. They had something called the dialectic method, which is where they would sit around and just talk. That was how they figured out how the world worked. I think that still holds true now. I think the best place for an idea to become great is in conversation. Conversation is the foundational cornerstone for everything we do here.

- Speaker 4: Dave Humphrey is Wantoo's chief product officer, and he is a lounge believer.
- Dave Humphrey: It's almost at the speed of light that we can develop and build out a product. If we were in a more traditional office space, we would have to create shared calendars, set up events, create a meeting space that we're all going to meet in. There's a lot of prep to those type of meetings. There's a lot of communication back and forth in how you organize those meetings. Here, we can honestly just turn our heads.
- Speaker 4: Front-end engineer, Danny Beton, likes the level playing field inherent in lounge culture.
- Danny Beton: I have my CPO, my CTO, and my CEO, and I they're all at the same level of colleagues sitting across from me. That's really cool, I think.
- Speaker 4: Michael explains.
- Michael Tippett: It's informal, people are a little more frank and honest, there's not a lot of hierarchy and structure. When we come in here in the morning, we all make a point of sitting in a different place, so everyone is fluid and floating. You're as likely to sit next to someone brand new as someone who you know well.
- Speaker 4: The only disadvantage to having a lounge for an office: It's hard for people not in the know to believe you're really working.
- Michael Tippett: Some people are just naturally chatty, so you have to develop a good "stink eye" that you can give them, like, "Come on, please. We're trying to work here."
- Dave Humphrey: It's kind of funny. We have had people visit the lounge, and they were visibly angry. They thought that we weren't working. Sometimes the appearance of lounging, people just don't get it.
- Michael Tippett: One of the critical elements in a lounge is, you need to have configurations that allow for single, double, triple, and quadruple meetings. This setup is basically a single. This is the closest thing you're going to get to privacy. It's basically a single couch, single ottoman; this area is the closest thing you're going to find to a conventional office setting. These technically are desks, but they're typically used as standing desks. We call this the Kraftwerk station. Stand behind those standing desks, and if there's four people standing there, it actually does look like a Kraftwerk show.
- Kate Armstrong: My name is Kate Armstrong. I'm the director of Living Labs at Emily Carr University of Art and Design.
- Speaker 4: The craziest thing to come out of Wantoo's lounge, its lounge-based innovation, is now the subject of a research project on the future of work.



Kate Armstrong: Work is so blended with life now, and you can look at the work space from so many different angles. There's been an ability for the whole idea of work space to blow up to include elements that were not historically involved in a tradition work space. Cloud-based computing, laptops, everything going super mobile; also this kind of global nomadism of work. I think the lounge starts to be a space where a lot of those elements coalesce, and that people are paying attention to the social elements of work space.

Speaker 4: Is the "lounge as office" the future of your workplace? Or will your sciatica prevent you from fully embracing lounge culture? If you want to give it a try, and transform your office into a lounge, Michael's got one important tip.

Michael Tippett: One of the most important dimensions of sound, lounge-based innovative practice is the abundance of ottomans. They serve a very practical purpose in that you can put your feet up, so you can put your laptop on your lap. It is good ergonomics, and they're also very portable. Do not, under any circumstances, underestimate the importance of a sufficient ottoman.

Speaker 4: Academic researcher Kate Armstrong couldn't agree more.

Kate Armstrong: I think ottomans are key. Ottomans are absolutely key.

Speaker 1: Slack. Making work less work-y.

Speaker 11: Channel Change. "Texting" channel.

Speaker 4: Before we go on with the rest of our episode, we have a content warning. Our next story contains accounts of traumatic events, including suicidal thoughts and sexual assault, that some people might find uncomfortable or upsetting.

Every day, all day and night, thousands of text messages are sent. These ones in particular are no ordinary texts. These are one sent out of desperation. They are cries for help, and they find their way to the people behind an extraordinary kind of tech company.

Nancy Lublin: My name is Nancy Lublin, and I'm the CEO and founder of Crisis Text Line. Crisis Text Line is the first 24/7 support line exclusively by text in the United States. If you're feeling a crisis, whether it's substance abuse, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, we are here for you 24/7.

Speaker 4: Crisis Text Line was born out of another social change organization called dosomething.org, where Nancy was the CEO at the time.

Nancy Lublin: We would send out a message by text about a campaign, like a peanut butter drive for food pantries. We would also get a few dozen text messages having nothing to do with peanut butter, but things like, "The kids are mean. I don't want to go to school tomorrow." Or, "I think I might be addicted to crystal meth." We were

triaging these.

We got a message from a girl who said she was being raped by her father, and we thought, "Oh, my gosh. They're sending us such personal, desperate information. We need to respond. Clearly, there is a need for a help line by text. Clearly, they trust this mechanism."

We set out to build it.

Speaker 4: Crisis Text Line launched quietly in 2013. Within four months, they were in 295 area codes across the country.

Nancy Lublin: You're somebody in crisis, you text us, just like you would text your best friend or your mom, but you're texting us. It's available 24/7. The number is 741-741. It makes a line up the left-hand side of your phone. You get a response, from a human, in less than five minutes.

Speaker 4: Crisis Text Line grew through word of mouth: friends telling other friends, people tweeting about it or posting it on Facebook. With no marketing, it exploded with a 40% increase month over month. Hockey stick-like growth.

Nancy Lublin: We tend to think of texting as a young person's game. When we launched it, it was primarily for young people. Now, we're seeing at least 30% of our users over the school age. A good 30-plus percent of our users are older, we believe, than their mid-twenties, including, it looks like, a full 10% middle-aged men, which makes sense, because that's really who suffers from depression in the United States. That's who dies by suicide.

Speaker 4: Nancy Lublin and her team at Crisis Text Line realized that texting is a great way to do counseling.

Nancy Lublin: It's private. It's anonymous. No one hears your voice. No one overhears you. We spike every day around lunch time, because people are sitting having lunch somewhere public, and the people around them have no idea that they're texting us. You don't say the word, "like," "um"; you don't hyperventilate. There's no crying. There's no repetition. You just text facts.

Speaker 4: The people who text back are the volunteer crisis counselors. They are the backbone of the Crisis Text Line. There are over 1,600 active counselors across the country. By the end of the year, that number is expected to grow to 4,000.

Kaley Leshem: I'm Kaley Leshem. I am a trainer here at Crisis Text Line. I also am head of training product.

Speaker 4: Kaley started as a crisis counselor. When you're new to the system, you're dealing with one texter at a time. As you get more experience, you take on two or three conversations at once. Kaley explains the process.

- Kaley Leshem: You basically press a button that says, "help another texter," and it gets pulled from a queue. That queue is prioritized by risk. You start to talk, introduce yourself, and it's really about building rapport with the texter at first. I think a lot of what we teach in training is about empowering the texter. We're not therapists. We're not there to give advice. We're not somebody's mom or friend. We're really there to help the texter figure out how to make themselves feel better.
- Speaker 4: If the crisis counselors see that the texter needs help beyond what they can offer, they give national referrals and help the texter come up with coping techniques. Still, sometimes an active rescue is necessary. It is a really tough part of the job as crisis counselor. This is Sarah Buckingham, head of supervisors.
- Sarah B: I think the biggest challenge is probably the anxiety-provoking moment of when an active rescue is going to be needed, and which we would initiate the police, and contact them to get them out to do a welfare check on the specific texter that we're working with. Sometimes they are unable to locate the texter, and I think that's the hardest part, is letting the crisis counselor know that, "Hey, we were here, and listening to them is more than they probably had, that kind of support in this given day."
- Speaker 4: A text message is a powerful thing. Think of it like a complex data fingerprint. In the less than three years since the Crisis Text Line began, there has been over 15 million messages exchanged. All of the data they have accumulated has given them something amazing.
- Nancy Lublin: We can use AI and natural language processes, and auto tag all the messages in real time. This is actually the largest mental health data set that has been collected.
- Speaker 4: The data shows some very interesting patterns. Crisis Text Line started a site called [crisistrends.org](http://crisistrends.org) to help people understand the crises Americans face, by visualizing data trends in real time. Nancy Lublin explains.
- Nancy Lublin: For example, if you go to [crisistrends](http://crisistrends.org) and look at the national map and anxiety, you'll see that it's almost entirely an East Coast and Utah issue. If you look at the worst time of day for substance abuse, you might be surprised to find it is 5 and 6 a.m. If you look at the worst day of the week for eating disorders, I found it surprising that it's Sunday. It's a family issue, not really a "girls at school, peer pressuring each other" issue. Think about that data in the hands of police departments and school boards, and hospitals and families, and journalists.
- Speaker 4: Now, Crisis Text Line takes it one step further. They have opened up their entire data set to researchers, for non-commercial use.
- Nancy Lublin: This is going to change the entire field of mental health. We have already heard from researchers at more than forty universities, who are interested in getting their hands on this. This is the kind of data that normally would have taken them

multiple years to put together, and hundreds of thousands of dollars. Now, they will have it hopefully within two months of applying. We will approve them, and then they will have it in minutes.

I think my biggest takeaway since we went live, is that you just never really know what is going on with somebody else. You just don't know the battle that somebody else might be facing in their own home. I am humbled by what we see. It's the kindness of strangers. It's the ultimate altruistic act. It is one person communicating with another person, and neither of them knows who the other is, and will ever meet. It's beautiful.

Speaker 4: If you are interested in Crisis Text Line's work and want to get involved, there are many ways to do so. Number one: if you want to join the amazing team of volunteer crisis counselors, apply at [crisistextline.org](https://crisistextline.org). Number two: if you want to see Crisis Text Line's data as trends, go to [crisistrends.org](https://crisistrends.org). Number three: if you are a researcher and want access to their mental health data set, go to [crisistextline.org/open-data](https://crisistextline.org/open-data). Finally, number four: if you, or anyone you know, is in crisis and need help, text 741-741 any time, day or night.

That's it for episode 24 of the Slack Variety Pack. For more information about this podcast, go to [slack.com/varietypack](https://slack.com/varietypack). Subscribe to this podcast on iTunes or Stitcher. If you like the show, please rate us on iTunes. Thank you for listening.

Speaker 2: Slack Variety Pack.

Speaker 3: All kinds of teams use Slack to do amazing things.