

Here at AWS S1E09 - Nataly Hoyos transcript

Speakers: Geetha Annamalai & Nataly Hoyos

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Geetha: Hi, I'm Geetha. In my conversations on this podcast, imposter syndrome has popped up repeatedly. It plays a huge part in people's lives at work. We all want to know that we're all valued in the workplace, but often we can be our own worst critics and that can be damaging.

But overcoming that period of your working life or at least learning to recognize and deal with those feelings should be a goal for everyone.

So, in today's episode, I wanted to chat to someone with a really healthy outlook on the subject. Diving a little deeper into where imposter syndrome originates from and how we can combat it. Welcome to Here at AWS.

Nataly: So, I most recently moved into a new role at AWS but I have been working in sales operations for the last few years and that can encompass a number of different things.

I used to focus quite heavily on analytics and then also, just focusing into like standardising processes for sales organisations and making them really efficient.

Geetha: This is Nataly.

Nataly: I worked for a startup. It was a unicorn, it was before it kind of got their big rounds of funding or anything like that. So, it was very, very scrappy and I joined just after I left university.

Definitely like a baptism of fire in terms of the corporate environment and leaving full-time education, but it was probably one of the best experiences just in terms of learning how life works.

And I joined AWS after I'd had my first role as an account manager. And I was there for about a year and a half or so and kind of wanted a change.

And I think after you've been at Amazon for more than I guess six months, you kind of start to understand where the areas of growth are for sure and AWS is always top of the list in that sense.

So, I was really excited to join and I'd heard some great things and so, decided to apply, got the job, which was amazing.

It's a brand new team that was formed kind of halfway through last year. Everybody on my team is brand new. Some from externally, some internally. It's a very small team with a large scope. But yeah, really enjoying it so far.

Geetha: But Nataly hasn't always felt as confident in her role. I asked her about her personal experience of imposter syndrome. How has she felt it in her career?

Nataly: So, I definitely felt, especially when I first joined AWS I was like, "I don't belong here. When are they going to pull the rug out from under my feet? Like everybody's a hundred times cleverer than I am and they seem to just understand everything and I don't."

And then you kind of start navigating it and I definitely navigated it on my own. And I wouldn't say it was a mistake but I wish that I knew I could ask other people for help for sure.

And also, what I've learned now, is that being candid about what you don't know and how you feel, particularly with people having a very similar experience, they're going to be very generous and they're going to tell you I feel the same or I felt the same.

And that's definitely been my experience. So, I would definitely encourage anybody and especially for somebody like me where I'm like a little bit of a control freak and not knowing what you should know and not knowing who you should know and what you should be doing can make you feel like you are not contributing or you shouldn't be there.

And I think especially when you're like in your early 20s leaving university, of course you're not going to know anything but nobody really tells you that you shouldn't know anything.

So, you kind of feel a little bit useless sometimes, which is such a silly concept because of course you're like so young and you haven't had any kind of real work experience at that point. So, of course, you're going to feel that way.

But not having the reassurance as well definitely exacerbates that sense of imposter syndrome as well.

So, there are definitely things that I can do and my peers can do to help somebody navigate those feelings for sure.

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Geetha: It's also important to note where these feelings arise from. In Nataly's case, some of this stems from her identity as an immigrant to the UK. As a young child, she felt somewhat different to her friends and classmates.

Nataly:

So, I moved from Colombia when I was quite young with my mum and my sisters. I was about five and we moved in the early 2000s.

And the way I remember it was this very exciting thing. I remember I'd never seen the sea before moving to Colombia. So, on the flight over from Colombia was the first time I'd ever seen the sea and obviously getting on an aeroplane for the first time.

And also, we moved around this time, so in wintertime. And we were driving through in the car and all the leaves had fallen off the trees and I started crying because I was like, "Oh my gosh all the trees are dead."

And my uncle had to explain that, "No, that's fine. It's a thing in the UK." But no, it was a really, really amazing decision, I think scary one for my mom doing it alone with three young girls. But yeah, incredible.

But I never really thought about myself as like an immigrant or anything like that because I learnt English relatively fast. It's not something that I really noticed until I got maybe into secondary school for the first time.

I'd moved around a couple of different schools just because we were obviously trying to find a more kind of permanent place. But my mom said that sometimes our teachers didn't fully understand that we didn't speak English at the beginning.

So, they were like, "Oh, they're a little bit slow." And my mom's like, "They don't speak English."

But yeah, so, didn't really fully understand that I was an immigrant until you hear it in retrospect. And then moving into secondary school I was the only person from my primary school to go there. So, again, very much feeling like an outsider.

And I think people naturally ask me where I'm from as well because of my name and my surname. So, I mean, I don't sound Colombian, it's a very British accent. So, I think a lot of people are surprised with my background.

And it happens a lot as well in the workplace where some people are in this environment but they come from very different backgrounds whether that's from a different country, from a different social class, from anything like that.

And not a lot of people knew I guess that much about Colombia other than the very negative things, especially at that time, so they kind of focused on that. But also, were just curious as well. So, it was a mixed bag, I would say.

But also, I think it's one of those experiences that I look back now, and I'm so grateful for. Especially moving into new teams, new roles, new companies and new social circles.

Even going to university, like having those skills to adapt especially like from a young age have served me so, so well. So, I'm really grateful for those experiences for sure.

But I would say being an immigrant definitely kind of puts you in that imposter syndrome because you don't look like everybody else around you. It's very tangible.

And then also, when you go back home you don't sound like everybody, you didn't grow up there or whatever it may be. So, you always feel like a little bit of an outsider regardless of where you are. If you're home, or you're here, wherever it may be.

And then I would say moving around loads of different schools as well. Just always feeling like you don't necessarily belong or you're trying to find your place.

Geetha: Nataly also thinks imposter syndrome is felt acutely by young women in the tech industry. I asked her if being a woman has had an impact on her career in tech.

Nataly: I would say so, yes. But again, it's one of those where you only really notice them in retrospect and even just kind of sharing my experience with my male and my female peers, it's just different experiences, different hardships, I would say.

One of the ones that I noticed was the sound of my voice, which is such a mundane thing but I think I naturally am quite a loud person and so, I've been told, "You're too loud," as a kid. So, I think subconsciously, I've quietened my voice quite a lot, especially in like a corporate setting to the point where sometimes people can't hear me.

I don't know if a man necessarily goes through that same kind of experience of having to be conscious of how loud or quiet they are. So, that's just one of those things. And again, it's in retrospect that I kind of came to realise that.

I think probably the one that has been I guess more of a challenge is my age, honestly. I tend to be one of the youngest people in the room, especially in the environment that I'm in now.

I don't think people fully clock on obviously in a virtual environment. But then when they meet me in person you can see they're like, "Oh." Tone changes. Or even when I tell people how old I am, they're like, "Oh." And then that head tilt thing.

And then they probably ask you like personal questions like, "Oh, and are you married?" And it's like why is that your next question when I tell you my age kind of thing?

Most of the time people are I think impressed I am young and I am where I am, which is really great.

And then whenever I'm asking for advice, they're more willing to give advice as well because they kind of see themselves in you and they want to like live vicariously through you to have had the advice that they would've appreciated I guess.

So, yeah, the people are very, very generous, especially in where I am now, and at AWS generally speaking for sure.

Geetha: Do you see any younger colleagues who are suffering with imposter syndrome?

Nataly: Definitely and I've definitely kind of started collecting some mentees because you have that new generation of people coming up all the time, so recent grads, whatever it may be.

And I definitely see it but I think similar to me, they don't know that it has a name. Obviously now, there's a lot more knowledge around it and it's not necessarily just anxiety, it's a very common feeling, particularly in the workplace.

So, definitely helping them navigate those feelings for sure. And just saying like, "I felt this way too. So many people felt that way too." And I think one of the best ways to combat it, like I said, is just being candid about it.

So, I'm very candid about my experience now, and how it's a positive, it's not just a negative. So, framing it from that perspective definitely helps them actually realise that they can use it to their advantage. It's not necessarily something that's holding them back.

Geetha: A healthy work environment is one where you don't feel anxious or out of place. Obviously, this is how Nataly feels now, but how did she get to this place?

Nataly: I don't think you can ever overcome it. I think it's an insecurity or maybe like a useful anxiety because it keeps you sharp and it keeps you wanting to improve and be better. But also, it's one of those you have to learn to live with for sure.

So, when I moved into this new role, I felt super, super confident going into it and I feel really, really great and I still have those occasions where I'm like, "Oh, I don't know what to do." Or like, "I don't know if I'm the right person to answer this question, or this is too much responsibility."

But also, I have the inner confidence to know actually they hired me for a reason. And you kind of go back to that. So, that's about learning to live with it where you're like, "Okay this is always going to be my first reaction, what's the second reaction to feeling that way?"

So, I would definitely encourage anybody if they feel lost, just to ask for help from their manager, or from their peers, or you could even ask for help anonymously in some different forums and also, seek out advice.

So, not necessarily from people at work but seek out advice from like podcasts. I definitely did that a lot, or like books, or whatever it may be. It doesn't necessarily have to come from a person.

My teammates have been really, really useful when I have felt it more strongly and it's from just being candid and also, from them being candid. So, sometimes I think especially if you are experiencing imposter syndrome, you don't know that it's okay to talk about it because you feel like an imposter.

Whereas when you hear somebody else say like, "Yeah, I feel so insecure or I feel like I don't really belong," or whatever it may be, it gives you the licence to kind of feel the same or at least ask them questions and then kind of draw some sort of comparison.

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Geetha: That's something I want to pick up on. And it's a really big part of life at AWS. It's a collaborative space and we're all on the same journey. If you need support, you can access it. So, who has really been helpful towards Nataly?

Nataly: I think especially the women that I work with, they are incredibly generous with their experiences and giving advice and also, like I said, just being candid about some of the things that they felt throughout their career, not just at Amazon but other workplaces and in life generally.

I think one mentor specifically who's really incredible at listening. So, all I do is I kind of like spiel on and tell him about my experience and I can be talking forever and he will just turn around and say, "Why are you so hard on yourself?"

Doing that self-reflecting thing when it's like, "You are talking about my friend." He's like, "You're being really hard on my friend right now." So, treat yourself as a friend.

Geetha: It's also great to hear that mentoring others has had a positive impact on Nataly's sense of self.

Nataly: When you start giving people advice, you're like, "Why don't I give myself this advice? Why am I so hard on myself?" If I was in the same position which I have been, I'd want somebody to be really generous so I'd apply that same generosity to myself.

So, you start kind of changing your thinking and actually being more positive about your feelings and your experiences as opposed to being really hard on yourself. And that just happens with everything I think especially when you start giving advice.

I think if somebody is suffering from imposter syndrome and I think nearly everybody is, it's not very obvious.

So, I think just checking in genuinely and just being like, "Oh, when I started two years ago, (whatever it may be) I felt I had these feelings. I just want to make sure, are you feeling this way? Do you have everything that you need?"

And giving them the space to actually feel like they can actually express that. But also, if they don't want to express it ... because I think sometimes, especially for me, like I had such a silly way of thinking, but it's almost like you're admitting defeat sometimes.

So, I think also, just kind of saying this is my experience. If you're feeling that way, that's fine, but if you do you can always come knock on my door.

But also, I mean, you can tell, everybody's so different. And I think especially introverted people, it's very hard for them sometimes to really feel comfortable expressing those hardships.

So, sometimes you do have to push it out of them a little bit. So, yeah, just I think treating everybody very differently and just being as candid and open and honest about your own experience could definitely help that.

Geetha: Nataly has so much wisdom to share, she really understands herself, what motivates her, and how to handle these feelings when they pop up. So, what big pieces of advice can she share with others at the start of their journey?

Nataly: I would say definitely take risks. I would say I've been a little bit more careful than I maybe should have been, but at the same time, I don't have any regrets.

But yeah, definitely taking more risks in putting yourself out there. So, taking those public speaker training courses, there's so many resources at Amazon to help with those.

Asking for advice, attending all the different kind of career development sessions, and webinars, and panels, those are happening all the time. And networking as well. Learning from other people outside of just kind of your current team, knowing that there is a different world.

Even within Amazon, every team is so different and what may be good for you today maybe is not what you want to be doing and you can experience something else just by learning about how somebody else works and what their team is like and what type of work that they do.

Geetha: Nataly also thinks you need to keep working on yourself and your skills.

Nataly: I think knowing how to learn something is such a useful skill. I think especially when you're at university, you kind of have a very prescribed way of learning new skills or just anything new.

But you kind of forget how to learn, which sounds a little bit strange, but I mean, it definitely happens. And then you also, learn how you learn. And what I mean by that is I'm definitely like a very words person.

So, for example, if I am going to be cooking something, I look at the recipe, whereas my boyfriend, he would watch a video, so he's a visual learner.

And I never really thought about different learning skills. But yeah, learning new skills allows you to actually know how to be successful in learning.

Geetha: So, what are Nataly's plans for the future? She's obviously an incredibly hard worker. How far is she thinking ahead and what does she want to achieve next?

Nataly: I guess that's a good question. I tend not to think about it more than like maybe a year or two in advance, because I used to be like in my 15 year plan.

But yeah, I never think about it more than maybe a year or so in advance because I like to keep things a little bit vague and I think anything can change so quickly.

But I would say my career aspirations for the next year is definitely to feel like I'm an expert in something.

I feel like in the previous role that I was in, I felt like I could do it in my sleep. I knew the job like the back of my hand and I want to feel that again because that sense of confidence just gives you so much energy. So, I'd want to have that feeling as well.

And learn some new skills for sure. In my previous job I was able to learn SQL, which is a data analytics language, which was incredible. And I think that definitely keeps your mind fresh.

Learning a new technical skill like that would be incredible. So, I haven't decided what it's going to be, but we'll see.

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Geetha: Nataly has reached a really healthy mindset. If the way you feel at work is negatively impacting you, ask for help and talk to people, you don't have to bottle it up.

At AWS, your career is not just a job, it's also about working on yourself. It's important that you feel happy and in control.

Thanks so much to Nataly for a fascinating discussion and thanks to you for listening. It's always so fun to chat with new people from this AWS family.

Constance: Exactly. No one here is just an email address. Everyone is building something and they all have a story to tell.

Geetha: That's it for now. So, don't forget to subscribe.

Constance: And hey, if working up here in the cloud seems like fun, why not check out our websites in the bio? You may just be the person we're looking for.

Geetha: We'll see you next time on Here at AWS.