

Here at AWS - Melissa Ghany transcript

Speakers: Geetha Annamalai & Melissa Ghany

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Melissa: If you are not a technical person, it doesn't mean you can't work in tech because actually, in this industry, there's a need for people who have different types of communication skills, different cognitive abilities, different career experience that we need in the industry.

Geetha: Hi, I'm Geetha. There is no one route to a career at AWS, and that's the way we like it. That way, employees bring with them a really diverse set of skills and perspectives.

We work in so many different sectors with so many different customers, so it's really important that we have these varied understandings of the world. So, in today's episode, I want to see what we can learn from employees' experiences beyond AWS.

Welcome to Here at AWS.

Melissa: At AWS, I work as an instructional designer. So, what that means is I work with our customers, I analyse their training needs, and understand the problem that they're trying to solve with training. And then I work with them to design training courses, maybe even programs, could even be curriculums.

Geetha: Today, I'm speaking to Melissa.

Melissa: So, I worked for 10 years as a primary school teacher, teaching year one to year six, so teaching 5 to 11-year-olds. And then I moved on from that, and then I started to train teachers.

So, I worked in higher education for three to four years as a lecturer in teacher training and also, developing a teacher training program as well. And just various other sort of education roles along the way.

For a long while, that was my career. That was the path that I'd chosen. But I was feeling that and feeling as though this wasn't really the career for me. I didn't think I could sustain it in terms of sort of the stresses that came with the job.

And I wanted to explore what else could I do, because I was sort of in my late twenties, I think when I started to think, hang on, I've got a good few decades of work ahead of me and I don't think this is what I'm going to spend the next 40 years doing.

I was a good teacher, and I was good at what I was doing, and I had a lot of strong skills that I could transfer out of that world. And I wasn't immediately thinking I want to leave teaching and education, because that was what I was good at, but it was more about the context that I was in.

So, I started to explore sort of adult learning, and I was already training teachers when I was a classroom teacher. I started to help more professionals at the university and working with people who had had longer careers, who had expertise that were different from mine.

Yet my expertise was in the curriculum design and the learning and development side of things. And that's when I started to think, well, I'm shaping a career for myself that doesn't need to be in this public sector world anymore.

Geetha: So, how did AWS come into the picture?

Melissa: That's when I started to think, hang on, I've got a talent here that I can offer to the corporate world. I hadn't thought of the corporate world as being a world that I could be part of. It was so unfamiliar to me.

I'd worked in primary schools, in towns, in residential areas, and the idea of working in the corporate world was this unfamiliar kind of glass box, the offices in the city in Canary Wharf or whatever. And so, I didn't think this was really something for me.

But then once I started to work with other people, in the university setting, I thought, hang on, look at the journey I've made already, just from the school to the university, actually, could this be the next step moving into these unfamiliar corporate companies that I had ignored for so long?

So, then I started applying for jobs, and I remember when I decided to leave that more public sector university higher education world, I said to myself, I want to work for a company that people have heard of.

And then I applied for Amazon and AWS, which I think quite a few people have heard of. And I'd applied for other jobs as well along the way and had other kind of stepping stone jobs, but at the time, it was advertised for Amazon.

And I thought, yeah, actually let me have a look at these bullet points that are part of the person specification or the job description. And I was hitting those bullet points. And so, I thought, hang on, I'm going to apply for that job at Amazon, which was a real moment for me.

And when I actually kind of looked at what Amazon was about and read kind of about things like the leadership principles and the culture at Amazon, again, it was so surprising to me to look at companies like Amazon and to think about how I actually do fit into that world.

And once you actually do the research and it's all out there, I started to think, hang on, this is the type of place that I want to work at next.

Geetha: After some research, Melissa saw she could offer something really valuable to AWS, a perspective on people relationships and how we learn.

While we may work in the cloud, AWS and its customers work on earth with each other, and having people that understand human behaviour well is so important.

Can you tell me what the initial transition was like moving into AWS?

Melissa: I felt really welcomed, my skills and the kind of diversity of thought that I brought was needed and welcomed. And it's quite an intensive interview process to get here. So, I knew I deserved to be here because I'd gone through quite a rigorous process to be sitting in that seat.

So, it's a culture that enables you to bring your whole self to work and bring all your past skills, and you're listened to, and you're valued, and I really feel myself here. So, I think that it's completely eradicated all those fears that I had previously.

Geetha: We want to develop a space full of diverse perspectives because that's when you get the best results. So, how has Melissa's experience as a teacher informed the way she works at AWS?

Melissa: So, when I worked with children, I understood that children had their different needs, they had different experiences, and I worked to understand those children and understand their backgrounds and develop empathy for them.

And I'd transfer those skills when I work with adults as well and really get to know them, understand who they are, what it is that they're aiming for, and build that relationship with them, and apply that same empathetic value as well.

So, there's that transition in terms of you understand people, how I understood children, treat them as individuals, do the same with adults as well. So, it was quite an easy transition.

It goes back to people having different needs and really understanding and analysing what is it we're trying to achieve here, who are we working with to try and achieve that, and how do they work, how do they thrive? What kind of environment do they need?

So, that might apply to some of the training that I'm developing, but on a kind of more organisational or strategic level, I guess, it would be do people work better in groups? Do they actually need some time to work from home sometimes — having that conversation, talking to them about what they want from their place of work instead of kind of telling people.

That's something I would've done with children, where I would ask them, "How do you want to learn this? Or what do you think about this?" So, getting that feedback and actually implementing that feedback so that the person you're getting that feedback from can see that it's not a waste of their time that they're being listened to.

And it's part of the curriculum anyway at the moment, is really teaching children to understand how to communicate with each other, how to develop those relationships with people that might be their best friend, but also, those who might be more of an acquaintance and understanding how to work harmoniously together.

And if you know children, that's definitely something that needs to be taught. And I think also for children understanding themselves and how they operate, and how

they communicate and what maybe their triggers are or their challenges or their stresses might be as well, so that they can really understand themselves so that they know how they can then work with other people.

And if you think about that with children, then you apply that to adults, it still applies to adults as well; really understanding who you are, how you work with people, and how you might work within a group.

The positioning of learning and training is really important. So, yeah, being rewarded for training, for learning something new, for learning a new skill, and celebrating that is really valuable because it's not then seen as this kind of aside to your job, but it's actually seen as something that everyone values. And so, learning is seen as a really valuable process.

Geetha: I find the way Melissa talks about her experience working with children really interesting. She didn't just teach children in many ways, they taught her.

Melissa: The leadership principle, learn and be curious here at AWS is a really great starting point for how we can learn from children. Children are naturally curious.

As adults, that curiosity changes and having learn and be curious as one of our leadership principles is really great for us because it encourages us to continue that curiosity, to ask questions or sign up for courses, or sign up for events in areas that might not be directly linked to our everyday work, but it gives us a wider perspective of what's going on out there.

And I think that's a really valuable skill to continue to have as we do our day jobs.

Geetha: And I'm just wondering, do you think your experiences as a teacher have influenced your thinking on a daily?

Melissa: Yeah, I think that very young children tend to be non-judgmental and often, they don't see things like race or gender or ability, and they're more curious about who is this person, what are they interested in, where are our similarities rather than where are our differences?

And I definitely think that's something that adults can learn from, but there might be a period where that adult might need to reflect on sort of their own learnt biases, unconscious biases that they may have learnt as they've grown, and then work to eradicate those and maybe leave their comfort zone when collaborating with other people, when talking to other people, to find out similarities rather than the known differences.

Geetha: I think this point Melissa makes is so interesting. It's the idea that judgmental attitudes are developed.

When we are trying to make workplaces more diverse and more inclusive, it's important to see these comparisons.

Melissa: If you want to impact the widest group of people, then whoever's creating or developing a product or a program or a strategy, that team needs to represent the widest group of people.

I'm talking about diversity of thought, diversity of people, of experiences, of backgrounds, of abilities because all those voices need to be heard so that you can develop something that represents what mirrors that team of people.

So, I think it's very important. It really is something that you need in a team.

Geetha: Melissa has brought so much knowledge with her to AWS, and in some ways, she is still a teacher.

Melissa: I think it's really important to me to mentor other people. I've learned so much through my career transition. So, it was key that I then had those conversations with people who are also looking to make a change in some way.

So, yeah, it's been a really valuable experience for me mentoring other people and hopefully, for them as well, to have a sounding board, to talk through where their challenges might be.

I think one of the main things as well for those that I mentor is to spend some time really clarifying goals, and then really clarifying how you're going to meet that goal, and giving yourself that time to do that.

And then what I do is share my stories and share my experiences, and also, help them to uncover where they do have the skills and where they might not have skills so that they can actually work towards filling that gap and getting that skill so that they can progress to whatever that goal might be.

So, it's really important for me to do that because I don't want to kind of quietly make this transition and not help others to do the same.

Geetha: She's also really keen on seeing other people taking a chance on a career in tech.

Melissa: If you're not a technical person, it doesn't mean you can't work in tech because actually, in this industry, there's a need for people who have different types of communication skills, different cognitive abilities, different career experience that we need in the industry.

So, my advice would be start to research what jobs are out there, but research yourself and what transferable skills you have, research what skills you might not have, and then work to do a short course or talk to someone who does have that skill, or really find out how much of that skill is needed in that area that you are interested in.

And then apply for that job or set up that coffee meeting with the hiring manager or whoever that might be, and take the plunge. And then if it's not successful, then ask for feedback and work on that feedback until you get to where you want to be.

Geetha: It's so interesting hearing about Melissa's route to AWS. She's found a position where her knowledge and skills can be really useful, and she's got a clear idea of where she's going next.

Melissa: So, my plans are to continue to hone and practise my skills in my current role. I'm very keen to grow the team that I'm working in, and to lead the growth of that team.

I'm currently working on developing process documents and strategies to help those that will join me to really slot right in and continue the journey with me. So, leading others is really a big part of my sort of next goal here at AWS.

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Geetha: Thanks so much to Melissa 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 website in the bio, you may just be the person we're looking for.

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