

Here at AWS_S1E06

Speakers: Constance Souchet & Mark Isaacs

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Mark: So, another thing about AWS is that there's no lack of ambition. If you have ambition to move to a different part of the business or you want to try a different role, there's no limitations from AWS, you're encouraged to experience that.

Constance: Hi, I'm Constance. One thing I love about AWS is that it's sort of like a collection of startups, and within those startups, you've got some incredibly ambitious, positive and talented people all working on a wide variety of projects.

And I think positivity and ambition are rewarded here. Regardless of where you come from if you have a vision, you can make it happen, and AWS can give you the tools to do this.

So, this week, I wanted to chat to someone who's made things happen with a great mindset and a little sprinkling of AWS magic. You're listening to Here at AWS.

Mark: I feel like I'm a go-getter. So, if I set myself a goal, I'll get out there and I'll really go for it.

Constance: This is Mark.

Mark: I am a solutions architect manager at AWS. So, I look after a group of solutions architects in Dublin, Ireland. I really enjoy the solutions architecture management role, and the reason why because you still have to have that technical expertise in certain situations where I still speak to customers.

But at the same time, I help like flex their people management side of things as well. I actually started AWS as a solutions architect. I did a solutions architecture role there, and then I did that for about a year.

Then I moved on to the startup organisation. It was like a new organisation that was kind of like in been bought in Ireland. So, I decided to join that organisation. And I moved over, and I was a solutions architect there for two and a half years before I got the call from a previous manager saying, "Look, the team's grown and I need someone to come and help me manage the team now."

We spoke about this when we first started. So, kind of like I reapplied back at my old team. So, I'm there again.

Constance: Moving from France to the UK, I've experienced the culture shock you get from moving to a new country. It's all new sites, new smells, new people. It was a big change and something lots of people in our global workforce experience.

But Mark has experienced change in a way I found hard to comprehend. Growing up he lived through a truly dark period to have his home country's history.

Mark: I'm originally from Cape Town in South Africa. I actually grew up during the apartheid era, so that was where the government actually took all non-whites, and they essentially took away anyone that had homes and land.

So, my family's home and land was actually taken away from them and we were shipped off to the Cape Flats where I grew up. A lot of people grew up in extreme poverty. The education system wasn't great and there was a lot of challenges growing up in South Africa.

But I mean, thankfully, both my brothers and I didn't succumb to what we were given in life. My mother always pushed us to go beyond that. I can actually remember like scenes of growing up when we were in our teens, when we were in high school. We had to travel by bus to school and as I said, this was in the middle of the apartheid era when there was lots of protests going on.

So, on our way home, the bus wouldn't go into the area because of those protests. The bus would be stoned or burnt or whatever. So, they would stop, and we would have to do an eight-kilometre walk all the way home.

So, you'd have to walk eight kilometres to get on cause there's no transport now. But at the same time, there's protest and the police are shooting tear gas, they're shooting rubber bullets, so you got to walk and dodge all of this. But at the same time, it was an education.

And I remember the challenges we faced that when we were at school, we were being encouraged by the teachers, "Now, as soon as you finish school you've got to go off and get a job just so you can support your family." That's what everyone does. That's what you have to do.

But very early on in life, I had this dream of becoming an engineer and I said "No, I'm not going to do that."

I can even remember a scene when I was in high school. We were sitting in the classroom and the protests had started going on outside probably about 500 metres away from our school.

And the teachers stopped the lessons and they said, "Right, we've got to go outside. There's a protest going on, we should be joining the protest." And I remember arguing with the teacher and saying, "How does that help me? Like why can't we first finish the lesson, and then we go outside and do that." And the teacher's like, "No, but this is gutter education." But I'm like, "But it's the only education I can get."

Constance: Wow. And how old were you?

Mark: I would've been about 15, 16.

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Constance: Between 1948 and 1994, apartheid cut a deep one in South Africa. It's one that's still there today and Mark lived through it. But as a young man, he had dreams of a different life.

Mark: Probably when I was about 12 or 13, I decided I want to be an engineer. So, that was my big dream and that was my big goal. And thank goodness for my mom because we were very limited in the schools that we could go to. But she found a school that was technical so we could follow up that dream.

And there, I remember tinkering with things like building little alarms or little amplifier where you could connect speakers, have your own little radio. So, that was my first foray into electronics and like really getting into technology, and that just reinforced what I wanted to do, I wanted to be an engineer. And I was also the very first person in my family to actually graduate from a university or a college.

Constance: Wow! That's amazing. It's funny, I think we can all remember a moment in childhood where we found a hobby that we obsessed over. There's that moment as a child where you find something that you have to keep doing. So, where did that leave Mark?

Mark: So, I started out as an electrical engineer. That was my passion I wanted to do that. But while doing that I realised that I actually enjoyed software development. So, I became a software engineer. And I worked in the financial industry in South Africa for quite some time.

The very first startup that I joined, that was all the way back in 2000, we built the very first online only bank in Africa. I remember I was the second developer there and the two of us built that from scratch, which was pretty amazing.

And so, my journey started through the software development world, and that very first startup is also where I met a group of friends that we later in our careers founded a software development company.

So, I was a co-founder of a software development company there, where I had various roles from team leads to software development manager. I was also head of architecture and technology there and I was also the CTO and I spent 12 years there.

Constance: Now, you're probably wondering where does AWS fit into this story? Well, Mark needed to take the next step.

Mark: And then I decided I want something bigger, and I decided to join AWS. I'm in the largest cloud technology company in the world and it kind of made sense that was our next option.

I was actually speaking to a friend in London, so I had been working with someone in South Africa and he had made the move from South Africa, and he was living in London, and I contacted him and I said "Look, we are looking at kind of like moving out of South Africa, interested in some roles."

And then he's like "Why don't you just reach out to AWS? You know you've got all the skillsets for it. Just apply and see what they have. There's roles available in Ireland and in London."

I said, "Okay right." Well, we were really interested in going to over to Ireland. So, I explored it further. But what really interested me, what caught my attention at AWS

was the culture and like the leadership principles because building our own company, we also were looking at those types of things, and like it really attracted me because there were similar values there.

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Constance: This is really interesting to me. Mark found success in his early career by living by a set of principles. And while AWS is obviously a big company, the ethos and culture is the same as if you were working in a small company.

You are still building something, you are still innovating, you still make mistakes. And back to the move to Ireland, I wondered what it was like taking those first steps. Was it scary?

Mark: In my mid-forties, just uprooting my family and deciding to move to a different country and start over, that was pretty scary as well. Like it was quite a hard decision to make but I feel like it was the right one.

We were looking for a place that we felt where we would be safe, where we could continue to raise our family. I've got a 16-year-old daughter, almost 17 now. When we moved over, she was 13. Those were the things we were looking for in a country.

But also, our experience of when we did come to Dublin was that everyone was really friendly, we enjoyed the culture. It really comes down to opportunity for my daughter as well. We didn't feel that she would have the opportunities in South Africa. If you think about it, it's hard to travel to the rest of the world.

When we made the move over, eventually, I arrived two weeks before my family so I was kind of like I could see all of these things. I could see the difference in how people were walking around at night, and I remember the day they arrived, they arrived later.

I said, "Do you feel like going for a walk outside? Like do you want to go and look around in the area?" And they said to me, "No, but you can't do that. It's too late." And I was like "No, come with me. You just come and see." And they were quite shocked because it was summer, it was still fairly light and there was people walking around.

Constance: I also wanted to ask Mark about support available to him as a new hire, how can AWS help you get on your feet?

Mark: The team that I joined were very accommodating. They understood that I was new to the country, they understood that there was going to be challenges, there were things that I would learn but I mean it's not all roses in Ireland of course, any country has its problems.

Housing is a problem in Ireland. So, for the first few months we really struggled. We got help by Amazon, they gave us a temporary rental for the first month and I ended up extending that by an extra two weeks because we still hadn't found a rental.

My manager was very accommodating and said, “No look, if you need to just run off and go look at home so that you can find a rental, absolutely do that because we know you can't go look at it after work because most of them don't allow you to do that.”

So, I really can't complain about joining the team. And I think the other thing was like we were quite a small intimate team at the time, but the team has grown phenomenally since then. But we were only four SAs at the time, so it was like we were really quite an intimate team. It was nice to get to know people that way.

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Constance: I think it's comforting to know that there is support there. A core principle of working at AWS is giving employees the ability to do their best work. But AWS is not just about employees' personal career path.

As Mark says, “A huge part of working here is social responsibility. Being successful at the AWS is about passing on the baton as well. So, I wanted to ask what Mark has been doing to pass on what he's learned.

Mark: One of the things that I participated in last year was GetIT helping out with the schools. So, what we are doing with GetIT is we actually go out to the schools and kind of like encourage students to explore a future in technology.

I also work in communities in Dublin. So, we've got into communities Dublin. So, for example last year in December we were packing Christmas boxes for families. And actually, coming this week, we'll actually have a group of students from one of the schools coming to the office where we are going to tell him about what we do at AWS.

Like get the message that it's not just a technology role that you can explore. If you love music, you can do music producing. We've got a game tech section; you can do graphics for that. And we've got marketing roles, we've got all these roles. AWS and Amazon's not just a technology company, there's so much more that you can do there.

And I'm part of the mentorship program and I actually like working with that. I actually worked with one of our Tech U candidates that actually came through our startup community and actually mentored her for about a year. So, as we get new people in the organisation, I make myself available for that as well.

Constance: And do you have any proud moment as a mentor?

Mark: Oh wow, I would actually say the Tech U candidate that graduated and not only that, is now a very successful solutions architect in the startup team. I was here in London the other day and I caught up with her and we had coffee together.

Constance: Mark's actually got another mentee he's very proud of as well. She's a bit closer to home though.

Mark: Ongoing proud moment for me would obviously be my daughter who's actually exploring a career in engineering. She's currently in her second last year of high school.

For a very long time, she's been saying that she wants to be an engineer to the point that she's actually chosen probably the hardest path in school, doing mathematics, physics, chemistry at school.

And then because the school wasn't offering applied mathematics, she's doing that outside of school as well. So, she's got an extra workload outside of that. I'm really proud to see how driven she is and how hard she's working to get there. Like she's doing the same thing, I want this, I'm going to go and get it.

So, I'm really proud of her for actually doing that. And there was only two girls in a school that wanted to do applied mathematics so they scrapped it cause of that. But my daughter was determined, she said "We've got to find another place. I'll go and do it somewhere else. I'll go and do it after to school." So, I'm really proud of her for going beyond what's required.

Constance: Mark's super confident when you talk to him but that wasn't always the case.

Mark: If I think back, I was quite a timid child. I know it might not sound like it, but I was quite timid even just getting up and speaking to people was really hard for me. So, I think I've grown quite a bit in terms of coming out of my shell, being able to speak in front of people.

I mean, doing the solutions architectural role at AWS as well, doing public speaking. I've been privileged enough to speak at re:Invent. I speak in front of a big group of people.

I would not have even thought that possible, and I would always get scared. Even this, I would never think of doing something like this, and I mean if I look back then, I would never even have thought that this would've even been possible. So, I think I've grown quite a bit in that area.

Constance: And what he says about diversity at AWS is so important.

Mark: Look, when I joined at the time, most of the team was Irish and I remember myself and one of the account managers was the two that was the kind of like the foreigners in the team, but we never felt that way because I think we were made to feel welcome.

However, I must say now, I mean, as the team has grown there's really a huge diversity. It's not all Irish. We've got members from different countries, from different cultures. We have a female SA as well, which is great because it's so hard to find like females in tech.

So, we really try and encourage that as well. I think we would never have the broad skillset, we had just stuck hiring one type of person. If you look at in general, if you limit yourself to only males for example, you are also going to limit your talent pool.

The other thing is that different people and different cultures bring different perspectives and how to reach out to people. Can you imagine [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), the website, and we only had one type of person working there. The customers would only have one type of experience.

So, we could think of it broadly, like if we don't have this diversity in our cultures and within our teams, we'd be very narrow-minded in what we deliver.

Constance: So, what's next for Mark?

Mark: At the moment, my goal is to like really grow the Irish team. Like the ambition is to be like the shiny light in Ireland. Ireland's got a great economy, it's continuing to grow and for me, the ambition is to play a role in that within AWS and really grow Ireland to stand on its own as a country.

Constance: But I want to go back a little bit to South Africa. Do you miss it?

Mark: Oh, absolutely. I miss the sun, most importantly. Obviously, the weather in Europe's very different. So, I miss the sun. South Africa's a beautiful country, but at the same time, my family and friends that I grew up with are all still there. However, Dublin's become our home.

So, I remember when we actually went to visit South Africa a few months back, we were there and I think just before we came home, my daughter turned to me and said, "Dad, when are we going home?"

[Music Playing]

Constance: From South Africa to Ireland, Mark seems to have found somewhere he can truly fit comfortable. If he was a quiet child, he's grown up to be confident, motivated, and excited by what's capable at AWS. He's also making sure there is a next generation of talented IT superstars.

Mark: I think the biggest thing is don't be limited by what's around you. There's no limit to your dreams. Dream what you want and go for it. I dreamed of being an engineer and every step along the way, there was challenges but for me it was a dream that I could pursue and it's anything's possible.

I could give you another example. I actually do dog agility and so I train my dog and we run around doing agility. Proud to say that we actually qualified last year to represent Ireland at the World Agility Open this year.

So, later, we'll be running at an international competition, and this is a dog that was rescued off the side of the road in South Africa. So, even he's gone all the way. So, if a dog can do it, anyone can do it.

Constance: That's a great story and congratulations to your dog.

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Mark: Thank you.

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

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

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

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

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