

## **Melissa Manak's SWS Transcript**

### **Stephanie (00.09):**

Hi there! I'm Stephanie Hakulin. On today's episode of STEM Workforce Stories, we'll meet Melissa Manak, a UX Interaction Designer at Ad Hoc LLC...

### **Melissa (00.31):**

I fell in love with the idea of interviewing people and getting informational architecture from that information, trying to apply it into a statistic way of telling a story well to go with it...

### **Stephanie (00.45):**

We'll learn more about why Melissa is passionate about interactive design, right now, on STEM Workforce Stories.

### **Melissa [01.05]:**

My name is Melissa and most people call me Meli. I grew up in Downers Grove, Illinois.

And I grew up in the deaf and hearing communities, I wasn't just deaf or hearing. I also went to the deaf program until fifth grade. Then I transitioned to my local neighborhood school because I felt like I would benefit from that kind of culture.

### **Lily Molina [01.29]:**

What led you to your career? What drew you there?

**Melissa [01.38]:**

Originally I was in architecture. It wasn't my dream job, but I really wanted to go Industrial Design, but at the time, when I was in 2003, it wasn't a career that had a really good outlook. So, I went to architecture. But what was the driving point for me was I was in grad school in 2010 to 2014. I actually worked with Gallaudet University on what is called the DeafSpace Plan. I focused more on urban planning and interviewing users, other people who were interested in the DeafSpace Plan, and as an outside community, not the deaf community itself in the university, but the actual surrounding community. I fell in love with the idea of interviewing people and getting informational architecture from that information trying to apply it into a statistic way of telling a story well to go with it.

That was a defining moment for me to realize this is what I wanted to do, but I didn't know what it was called at the time. And so I think that was around the time I was trying, looking through different jobs, trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I ended up getting a role with AmeriCorps and working for Chicago Public School as an education fellow. I fell in love with the job, but it was more of a task management role. And I just started learning more about websites and designing and stuff like that.

I actually worked there for about a year, and then my funding, it wasn't continued. So, I decided I wanted to go back to school. I interviewed different programs, for different roles and stuff, then I ended up going through a boot camp program called "Designation" and they ended up

announcing that they wanted to sponsor me for my scholarship. And what the goal was to help them to make their program accessible.

I feel like in the long scheme of things everything that I had learned from grad school, and architecture and all that stuff, it kind of helped me to do my job now because I'm doing informational architecture. I'm doing organization, and pulling things together to make a good design product and make design decisions, so it doesn't make sense but it works somehow.

**Lily Molina [04.15]:**

Can you tell me where you work and a little bit of what your day looks like?

**Melissa [04.20]:**

So I work for a government contract agency that works with government—We support the VA, which is Veterans Affairs, and we focus on helping the veteran to have a good experience in using the internet. We have a new app— And I'm very excited to be part of this project because it's one of those new revolutionary experience, because most government does not focus on mobile app experience. I work with developers. I work with designers. I work with product owners, scrum masters, program managers, stakeholders.

So, one thing that I like about this job, every day is sort of different, and I just know my general schedule for each week. Typically I have about four hours in the morning to myself, and basically we work on any design, or any bugs or things we need to squash with the product

development team,-and make sure everything; the requirements, everything we need to share for development, for handoff, it's ready to go.

Since I work remotely I get more done. It allows me to have more time for lunch so I can laugh with my daughter, hang out with her a little bit. So, I think that's what's nice. Actually my daughter is four months old today, so I get to see her grow up.

**Lily Molina [05.44]:**

And just a side question, what do you think normal would look like for you? When people talk about getting back to normal, what would that look like?

**Melissa [05.57]:**

I think empathy can be hopefully a goal for everybody especially that now that people have realized how disabling the mask has been, it's been frustrating to go to stores, and people are talking to you, and having to resort back to pen, and paper, because I do not want people to touch my phone. I hope that people are much more understanding of each other, respecting each other and having some sort of understanding.

**Lily Molina [06.32]:**

You took the opportunities and they led you exactly where you were supposed to be. What do you think are the most professional challenges that you continue to face and things that you have faced and have overcome, in general?

**Melissa [06.50]:**

I've learned that as long as you keep your goals and your vision. For instance, when I went to bootcamp, they told me that always have a list of what's your wish list, and then when you interview, you know those are what you want. Don't just settle for what's the first job they offered you overall. And that helped me navigate through all those bad companies or interviews. I knew there's something better out there for me, and that's why I joined Ad Hoc. And that was the best decision I made so far in my career.

The one thing I want to say is there are going to be challenges. And as a woman, as somebody with a disability, just knowing your limits, your goals, your wish list, always have that in the forefront of you, and that will help you able to overcome those... Detractors.

I would say be strong and advocate for yourself. Without these advocates you're going to have a lot of detractors in the industry who don't believe in you. They let your disability speak, thinking you don't have anything to share input. So, having to know... also be in your boundaries and what you are able to handle. Sometimes you're going to have days where they're very difficult people, those detractors are going to try to push you down. So, be standing for yourself and know your limits with those people.

**Lily Molina [08.18]:**

What are some of the bigger, personal challenges that you have faced at work or just in general, and what accommodations do you use in your day to day life?

**Melissa [08.32]:**

The biggest challenge that I run into is that people forget that I'm deaf. So, there are times when we have conversations, and we are talking about something, and I don't understand what's going on, I'm left out. The technology is great, but there are going to be times with internet not working, and things just don't go my way. So, I'm going to miss out on those things, but I know my team has been very flexible for working with me, and making sure I'm inclusive. They're pretty good about letting me know what I missed.

I use Otter.AI. It's probably the best tool I've ever used, and it's company implemented. That's what I like about it. So everybody has the ability to say “Oh there's some spelling errors or announcement errors.” They tend to catch it and let me know that this is wrong or there's something wrong with this.

**Lily Molina [09.31]:**

Is there something you would tell your younger self? If you could imagine yourself, when you were back in school without the benefit of the technology that you have now, what would you tell yourself?

**Melissa [09.45]:**

If I had to go back in again, I would have told myself to stay in industrial design, and do product design as my career, and I'll probably have more years than the rest, but I've been lucky that I've been able to jump around different companies to allow me to advance as much as I can, and

that's the only way you can do that nowadays, especially in STEM, you have to jump around different companies to be able to get somewhere.

Don't stay with the same company. Honestly, you're never going to really get challenged as much as you will be if you stay with one role. So if actually move yourself up, you will actually get a lot of experience and learning growth that that you get than if you stay with one company. I've learned that.

There are good tech companies who have a good culture, but you just have to find them. And it's kind of hard in the nature of the world being so tech. How do you find those good tech companies? One of the things I learned that, look for women-dominate work. That helps you find good culture, because if they're treating women well, they tend to treat people with diversity and people with disability well. So I find that to be the best way to get into a good company.

One advice that I've learned is to find your niche, find your secret sauce. That's going to help you set yourself apart from your competitors. So for me, my secret sauce was going into accessibility and pairing it with tech. That's how I was able to do it. Let's say you're going in engineering, find what your secret sauce is in engineering industry and set yourself apart. Don't do what other people are do, because honestly, I think the people who stand up from themselves and do stuff differently are the ones who actually do go farther in life.

There's going to be so many people in this industry that are working towards the same goal as you, trying to create the best product out there. But what I mean by that is find something that

stands you out from the competitors, and the competitors being your cohort, just people with the same goals as you. What solved it for me, accessibility is my secret sauce. It helped me to sell myself when I looked for a jobs or when I have a role in mind.

Get some real life experience. So, having real life experience, and working at companies like that will help you be able to do the work, and add to your portfolio, and it'll help you transition to your career.

**Lily Molina [12:43]:**

Thank you so much for sharing your experience. The fact that you knew that the world out there was scary and it was going to be a challenge, but you still put yourself out there and you worked through the challenges and there was growth that happened. And that you can find the value in yourself and what you are willing to settle for and what you are willing to tolerate and what you're not.

**Melissa [13.10]:**

Thank you.

**Stephanie (13.14):**

Hi, it's Stephanie again. I loved Melissa's advice about experiencing different things in order to find your passion. The world is full of opportunities, and wonderful stories like Melissa's. Check more of them out on STEM Workforce Stories. See you!



**On screen:**

Thanks for watching!

**END**