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Scott Barlow: Welcome back to Happen to Your Career. I am, I was going to go for ridiculously excited, but I don't think that covers it. The person I'm having a conversation with today has an amazing and unique story that has had twists and turns, opportunities and missed opportunities. I'm excited to dig into that and remote work as well. Not just about it but how you can think about it differently and why you would want to do it and how you can make it happen. Welcome to Happen to Your Career, Adda. I'm excited to have you.

Adda Birnir: Thanks for having me. I'm feeling a lot of pressure.

Scott Barlow: There is a lot. We try to do that and set the bar really high. 82% of our guests get there. I think you will. (Joking). The thing I was really interested in first is how you tell people that don't know about coding or technology industry what you do?

Adda Birnir: That is a good question. What I did when I was a fulltime developer. What I do now is different. I set out to get more people in to development and that led to me almost never coding. At this point people are familiar with websites so it used to be I'd say I build them but now I say I teach people how to build them. I put it in the output people are used to. If you dive deeper there is more. It is interesting and exciting because we all interact within the output of what coders do all day long. I remember talking to my sister in law and saying think about the impact Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook has on your life. You used to not know it but now you go there like twenty-five times a day. We are all interacting with it but the actual work that goes into it is so hidden from view. It is hard. I think I was trying to explain and I had to build a whole class and series and a company around the process.

Scott Barlow: Here is what is fascinating to me. You haven't always taught other people to build websites and code and everything with it. That started somewhere. Where did it start?

Adda Birnir: That actual process of doing it myself?

Scott Barlow: Yes and what led up to it. I know it wasn't just one particular event but a series.

Adda Birnir: Absolutely. I graduated from college and moved to New York. I was a studio art major and moved to New York expecting to make a living as an artist which is hilarious now but at the time seemed reasonable. Quickly found out some hard knocks and started, I was a photographer, and parlayed that as a photo editor at an online magazine. That was my first exposure to the production side of digital media. Meeting my first developer, up until that point I didn't realize that was a job title or a thing. Up until that point websites arrived on my computer and I gave no thought as to how it happened.

Scott Barlow: It's hidden in the background. You see a website, pretty or not, and you don't realize how much has went into that. Even if it's only five pages.

Adda Birnir: I think one of the big revelations for me was understanding everything we interact with was made by someone. More and more it's becoming obvious. Apple just had a big demonstration. There is some laboratory somewhere. I think it's disembodied to some of us. It was a big revelation that when I go to google.com someone decided it would look like this. I think we think it just comes from the machine. I was working on an online magazine and had my first exposure that there is code and it runs the websites and people write it. That was interesting to me but also intimidating. If you are feeling intrigued but scared I really felt that way for a long time.

Scott Barlow: What caused that? As you got exposure and were intimidated what made it intimidating?

Adda Birnir: Part of it is the sort of magic nature of it that we don't see it. Even if I'm intimidated of building a table I can look at it and see it used to be a tree and someone cut it. You can put it together but coding isn't the same. We interact with websites every day and yet most of us haven't seen a line of code. I think there something about the name even, it's cryptic. The culture, which is part of what we are working on changing at Skillcrush. Like I know a secret and you aren't in on it. It's a masculine culture with a lot of resemblance of math, geekiness, and baggage around it. That comes together and resulted in me being intimidated and for a long time I wanted to learn to code and was afraid to try because I wouldn't be able to do it. I was convinced. I had graduated from college. I hadn't accomplished a ton but conquered most things I'd tried, but I thought this would be the thing I couldn't do. I was terrified of that.

Scott Barlow: What happened from there?

Adda Birnir: I got laid off in 2009 and working in New York it was a bloodbath. I was really poor. I had only been working a couple years with no savings. Here is \$300 I was getting a week for unemployment. I don't think it barely covered my rent. I was desperate in a corner. It's unfortunate that we often have to hit a big bump in the road or

hit bottom to force us into action but it happened to me. I see it as a gift now but it didn't feel like it then. I literally got laid off and had nothing to do. Someone gave me good advice and said when you are looking for work don't spend all day to send out resumes. Limit yourself to an hour or two a day and then spend time doing something productive otherwise you'll spend eight hours refreshing Craigslist. Its diminishing returns.

Scott Barlow: Responding five minutes earlier than the next applicant.

Adda Birnir: We all know applying online is not the most effective way to get work. I had a lot of time on my hands. Now my need to make a change in my life and get work that is better and more valued and higher paying was greater than my fear of learning to code. I went for it. It changed my life and faster than I could imagine.

Scott Barlow: In what ways?

Adda Birnir: It wasn't the next day, but I got a paying gig. Someone hired me and paid me like \$1000 to build them a website, which was life saving money. I can live off of this forever... Then she recommended me to someone else and I tripled the rate. I started doing projects with friends for free and submitted to a competition and got third place. I then kept meeting people. At the time I had been trying to make my way in the New York media scene. It's not necessarily an industry that is growing. It is struggling. It felt like trying to get a foothold was so hard. There are ladders to climb. On the flip side I was walking into these technology meetings and awards with the carpet rolled out in front of me. It was so different.

Scott Barlow: You are facing adversity over here but over on the other side its working better than expected.

Adda Birnir: Completely. I look back at the skills I had at the time. I wouldn't say I had no business being there but it was mainly interest and willingness to show up. I wasn't skilled but it was enough to get me opportunities and meetings. I switched from working on writing and editing and photography to media production to the digital side. Night and day doesn't begin to explain it. It felt like doors I would be beating against on one side were being flung open. I was freelancing for every major media organization I respected. It was insane.

Scott Barlow: That is amazing. How did that lead you down the road? What happened that you started thinking about Skillcrush and what you do today to teach others?

Adda Birnir: I think there aren't a lot of people that can work in tech industry long without wanting to create something on your own. For the first two years I created a business with a friend and we worked together to freelance and getting hired by media organizations to do data visualizations. It snowballed quickly and we got bigger and bigger clients. I learned so much because you go from project to project and learn so much in different environments, technology, and problems to solve. I started to find that I was wanting to work on one project for a longer time. You work so hard on something and then hand it off and have no idea what happened or get feedback. You don't get to go around a couple times. I wanted a project of our own. We experimented. Startups

were everywhere. And you think why not me. We were playing with different stuff. We had a bunch of irons in the fire. Skillcrush, which wasn't that at the time. It was Digital Divas. The great part of it is I can send you a picture. It was a deck of cards not a website. We designed the cards and each one was beautiful designed and explained a technical term. It was a side project for fun. It was an interesting experience that most entrepreneurs can understand, you don't always know what people will respond to. We were working hard on other "serious" projects and no one cared. The card deck would catch wind and people loved them and responded. It was an experience of understanding to listen to what the market tells you instead of doing what you think is the right business.

Scott Barlow: I don't think that is just true for entrepreneurship. If you are thinking about your career at the same time if you have that sensitivity for what is working and people are responding to. Whether it is I'm a badass at excel, why are they responding to that? That can be useful everywhere, especially when starting a business.

Adda Birnir: If you look back at my coding story I think it's the same dynamic. I thought I wanted to write or be a radio producer. I beat my head against the wall and got laid off. It was different with developing. I believe that making your way in any career ladder and entrepreneurship share that. What are people responding to?

Scott Barlow: You mentioned that you had the why not me? Do you remember what led up to those why not me moments?

Adda Birnir: I think an important part of Skillcrush is it's a woman led company with mostly women students. It's about making sure that women and minorities know this valuable skill and they are capable of doing it to change their lives. That is a core mission of our organization. There is an extent where this crazy stuff was going on in tech and these young guys were starting outrageously successful companies. It's a double edged sword. On one hand being a woman in the technology industry and entrepreneurship has made me very insecure because it's hard to be one of the only ones with no role models. There is this fundamental question of can I do it or women do it. Even rationally I say we can doesn't mean you feel that. I also think that was like challenge accepted. There was an extent where I was attracted to the challenge. Here are 300,000 reasons why not you. Okay now I really want to do it and prove I can, even though I don't fit the profile. It's complicated because I do fit the profile perfectly of the young tech entrepreneur, except that I'm a woman.

Scott Barlow: I think that you do and I love the impact you've had on paving the way so it's not just the white male, I'm a white male so I guess I'll take any advantage I can get but it's been up to the last few years kind of that closed off secretive club.

Adda Birnir: I'm not defending people treating it like a secret club but they were into something really good.

Scott Barlow: Let's share the handshake a few more times.

Adda Birnir: This is not a zero sum game. If more people come in it just gets bigger.

Scott Barlow: What is the quote about all ships float?

Adda Birnir: A tide lifts all boats.

Scott Barlow: Thank you.

Adda Birnir: And just the idea that the more people that are part of it the bigger the innovations get there. The more applicable they become. I don't know if we want to go into it but what is the problem of having a nondiverse group of workers? They have a limited view of what problems need solved. The more people the more interesting the solutions can be and the more innovation will happen faster.

Scott Barlow: I couldn't agree more. I'm biased because I used to do HR for a while. Part of my job was bringing in more diversity, not just about women, race, and like that but more about broader sets of experiences, cultures, experiential definitions and it creates a richer product.

Adda Birnir: This becomes particularly acute if you are creating products for an audience not on the creation side.

Scott Barlow: Very cool. I know especially after interacting with your team and how fantastic they are that all of them are remote and spread all over. Where are they from?

Adda Birnir: I'm trying to think of the most exotic. I have someone in Finland and Romania and another in Singapore and Germany. Otherwise all over the United States and Canada. It's great I've learned, but don't test me, I knew all the major, not territories but the equivalent of states in Canada. I didn't know that before until I started hiring all these Canadians. Provinces.

Scott Barlow: It was escaping me too. I used to go there all the time. I had a Canadian accent almost from growing up near the border. We have our entire team remote too. We have one in Bali for three months.

Adda Birnir: That is exotic and hard too. There are challenges growing a remote team. It's been difficult to accommodate. When we started it was easier. It's been harder to accommodate time zones.

Scott Barlow: It's been interesting. She is the only one in Bali, most of the others are spread closer to US time zones. I want to dig into that but I'm curious. People have probably heard of remote work and it's getting a lot of buzz and press but what is the deal with remote work? Why is it potentially desirable?

Adda Birnir: Remote work or distributive work is working outside of an office environment. Outside of a headquarters environment. In some instances a team will work in an office but away from a main office. For us it means everyone works from the area in which they live. We just live on the internet. There aren't restrictions on terms of where people live. As we've grown we have had to make sure people work in time

zones that work for us. If they want to live somewhere crazy and work crazy hours that is fine. That is what remote means at least for us. For a lot of people, this is easily the number one thing people are looking for when they find Skillcrush. There is an enormous demand. My sense is for a lot of people its they live in a place with not great opportunities so they are looking for better or looking for more flexible work. Accommodating their need not to commute.

Scott Barlow: With that flexibility I'm curious what are some of the reasons you encounter that people are desiring that flexibility? I have my own reasons and opinions but curious about your perspective?

Adda Birnir: Most of the reason are what you would think. They are taking care of their families, children or parents and looking for a situation that they can contribute and still meet the needs of their family without losing their minds. People want to live outside of New York and Silicon Valley.

Scott Barlow: There are other cities in the world?

Adda Birnir: There's a whole state called Washington. I think those are the main two. But then you have a lot of people who are married. It's hard to be married. There is a negotiation. Whose career comes first? I've had several employees that had to move several times because of their spouses careers and if they hadn't worked remote they wouldn't have been able to work.

Scott Barlow: That is interesting for me too. I don't think remote work is for everybody because some people need that environment interacting with people in person regularly. For certain personalities. The opportunities around that, like whose career comes first, it may not be relevant anymore with remote and flexible work. It changes some of those questions. I'm curious, since you have a remote team and people are coming to you to do that what are the differences in autonomy in remote environments?

Adda Birnir: It's an interesting question. The first company I ran had an office but it was a smaller team. What are the really big differences? When you run a remote team you have to build a lot of trust in your team members because you don't have the dynamic of me sitting here watching over you. It's trust and accountability. We work hard. How much flexibility do people have? We don't have a set policy. You have to be accountable to your team and don't let them down. Take a yoga class in the middle day unless it blocks your team members. Is it working for the team? You need to be a self-starter because you aren't getting the same oversight. I don't know if it's that different. We meet all the time and track processes. We aren't working independently we are tightly structured. And have a structured process with enormous collaboration. You have to be more intense about processes. I was talking to a friend at a startup that is 50 people and there is little structure. No process or documentation and I couldn't understand how that was functional. The conclusion we came to was that when you are in person if relationships are good you can get away with it longer than remotely. Once we got to like 12 people but really with 25 it was nonfunctional until we had structures. It forces you to be more rigid and disciplined that is healthy.

Scott Barlow: That is interesting. How much does it influence the ability or need for decision making on how work gets done? Or does it?

Adda Birnir: It does. You can't run remotely without processes. My guess, not having experienced it personally, is those things can get patched over in person but the wheels fly off the bus when you are remote. I think a lot of people thinking about hiring remote workers worry about how I make sure they are doing the work and putting in the hours. We have had the other side of the problem. We have to make sure they set appropriate boundaries and don't burn themselves out. They tend to work too much.

Scott Barlow: We've had the same experience. I've seen several studies showing the same thing. It's totally counterintuitive.

Adda Birnir: It's so funny, I hear from people that I couldn't work from home because I'd do my dishes and whatever. But what I see happening is you have your computer on your lap at all times typing away; weekends, nights, and holidays.

Scott Barlow: Do you think that because remote work is a novelty still and people value it that it's attracting the people that will put in the extra hours or more than is healthy?

Adda Birnir: I think there could be some truth in that. I can use the example of my students. They are looking for remote work. A lot of the women are spending the tiny bit of free time they have working their asses off learning to code to make a better life. They are so smart and motivated and caught with geographic or time challenges. I think to an extent what you are saying is true. The people that have the smarts to know to look for remote work are somewhat on the forefront.

Scott Barlow: It's those types of people that are creating a better life that value it more and willing to put more into it. I have no data.

Adda Birnir: Obviously we are talking about it being these great people to know to do this, but I think there are a lot of people who would love to work remotely. Let's talk about women that leave the workforce. There are horrifying statistics that 60% of women that leave for a year never go back to fulltime work. I quote that to people and they say but how many of them want to work? I was on an interview and I hadn't had data but this woman told me there was a survey where they asked women that question and 70% said they want to work but couldn't find an opportunity. It's hard to find these opportunities, so I think that the ones that find them are extremely motivated. That said, I think that the other people who haven't found them yet would still be amazing contributors. That is part of the mission of Skillcrush to let them know it's available to them. Freelance and remote work and technology. I think there is a lot of opportunity for people and not enough people are helping. Our economy and the way we work is inefficient. There is all this data of unfilled jobs and yet unemployed people.

Scott Barlow: There are inefficiencies.

Adda Birnir: To talk in a macro economic sense, that is what we are trying to figure out and solve the problem on both ends.

Scott Barlow: We are passionate about getting rid of inefficiencies. There are so many people out there that are in jobs they feel like they have to be in but it's not what they should be doing with their skillset, strengths, and potential. When you are in that role you aren't producing as much as you could be compared to one that is a good fit. That creates a lot of inefficiencies. Remote work based on what we talked about isn't for everybody but can help with a huge part of that and make those happier situations happen. How would you advise people to get to that if they are interested in working remotely, having more flexibility? What would you advise them to consider to make it happen?

Adda Birnir: One of the challenges we have is the limitation of how many employers are hiring remotely. I think there are more people that want remote work than employers offering it. I don't think it means that people looking to work remotely can't have their problem solved. Technology has brought down the barriers of starting your own business or working freelance. I got really lucky getting into a startup incubator for Skillcrush that gave me a little money. I believe the value of the money was less the money than someone saying it's a good idea and I will support you in it. The cost of starting the company was really low. I had \$0 to put into it. I had my own sweat equity. Why isn't everyone doing what I did? I think the only reason is they don't know how to or that it is possible. I think that is our mission to explain that to people. We focus on technical skills because they are marketable and so much work to be had. The quotes from the Bureau of Labor is that there are over 700,000 open jobs with no one to fill them. The next crop of computer science graduates won't fill all of those.

Scott Barlow: And the demand is growing.

Adda Birnir: I think that is a conservative number because it doesn't account for businesses needing short term help. I believe learning technology skills will help everyone in every industry. It's the new way we do business. It's finding the perfect Venn diagram of something you enjoy and where it meets a real demand in the marketplace. It depends on your situation whether it's freelance or open jobs. I feel it can sound like a tall order but I think there are ways to figure it out.

Scott Barlow: What are ways you have encountered that have been helpful?

Adda Birnir: It's a process of aeration. You have to start somewhere. I tell people that come to me saying I want to start a business, here is my idea, and I don't discourage them but give them the hard cold truth and see what they do with it.

Scott Barlow: I like that about you. You have done that here today. I greatly appreciate it.

Adda Birnir: I think it's interesting. I was having breakfast with a friend of mine that wants to start a clothing line. I said you are going to have to come to the point of whether you are more interested in running or business or executing your idea of what the clothing will look like and the brand. You shouldn't throw everything you care about away but I've experienced that you have to come to terms that running a business is

number one about running a business and then everything else. I think that when you hear that it sounds negative, but the truth is it's easy from the outside to be discouraging but it's beautiful. I means you have to put the needs of your customers ahead of your own visions, fantasies about what something can be. I think everyone fears it will be brought to the bottom and soon you'll be making diet pills or something. If you have focused on a specific group of people and clearly defined their problem and put their needs first and serving them and not just executing on your own vision leads you to a product that is better than what you could have created on your own. Learning to embrace that process and it starts small, I'm learning to code and all these people need websites, I'll learn more about that. I think it can start small but before you know it you will be running a thirty person company. I hope that was clear.

Scott Barlow: That was super clear. I have found it fascinating as I've gotten older and experienced and realize how much I don't know. There are so many things that get quoted like the business of business is business, that have become clichéd and people don't understand the layers. Your first order of running the business is business. I think you broke down the layers well because most people miss those. It has to be about the business and the people you serve first.

Adda Birnir: This gets to the heart of why I love being in business. I find the process gratifying. I've only lived for a clear ranking system I can conquer. That is business. Its straightforward are you making money and it is profitable then you are doing a great job. It's terrible and painful when you aren't making money. It has tons of problems and issues and things people don't pay for that they should but it's one of the most straightforward pure things especially when you are selling directly to your end user, I value it.

Scott Barlow: I couldn't agree more. I so appreciate you taking the time and making the time. I have two more quick questions. I read an article talking about your favorite backpacking trip in Iceland.

Adda Birnir: It's funny I just went on another one that has supplanted that one.

Scott Barlow: Tell me more about that.

Adda Birnir: The second one I just went one is also in Iceland in Hornstrandir a nature preserve on the northwestern side of Iceland. The western fjords. It's incredibly remote and no roads to get there. You get there by boat. This summer my dad took my husband, brother, his girlfriend, my aunt and uncle, cousin and me. You get dropped off in a fjord and hike over a mountain and on the northern coast of the reserve there is a lighthouse you stay in. Which is nicer than camping. You pack everything in and do two days of day trips and then you pack it out on the fourth day. It was literally the four best days of my life. I have been running Skillcrush for five years and it was the first four days I have been completely disconnected and it was incredible. It's so funny because I have workaholic tendencies and think how I should go on vacation and go to Tahiti and sit on the beach but in my experience I just end up on the beach being agitated. Backpacking is so good because you are in nature and occupied. You can just check out. It was amazing and I'd recommend it. It can be dicey with weather and I

recommend you have a guided tour because there are almost no trails. Especially when you are packing in you need to know where you are going. It was life changing.

Scott Barlow: That is awesome and I'm so glad I asked. My last question where can people go that want to learn more about you and Skillcrush?

Adda Birnir: Skillcrush.com. We have an awesome newsletter and downloadable free e-books and are launching our own podcast which is exciting and nerve-wracking. You can go to skillcrush.com/podcast you can sign up for that. I didn't get the opportunity to ask you lots of questions about podcasting. We are in the infant stage.

Scott Barlow: Any way we can be of help we love doing it.

Adda Birnir: You have a lot of them. A lot of episodes.

Scott Barlow: They add up and we don't even produce that frequently. I have a lot of friends that do three to four a week. Happy to help in any way. I think you so very much and I appreciate you taking the time. This has been super fun.

Adda Birnir: It was such a pleasure. I love to talk to anyone that wants to talk to me about business and technology so the pleasure was all mine.

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