

David Dylan Thomas

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[00:00:05] **Amy:** Hello and welcome to What is Wrong with Hiring, the podcast where we talk about why hiring people and getting hired in tech are both absolute nightmares and try to figure out what we can do about it. I'm Amy Santee, a career strategist and coach for user experience professionals. Today I am excited to be talking with David Dylan Thomas. David is the author of Design for Cognitive Bias and creator and host of two podcasts, including the Cognitive Bias podcast and Lately I've Been Thinking About. He is a 20 year practitioner of content strategy and user experience, and has consulted large clients in the entertainment, healthcare, publishing, finance, and retail spaces. David has presented at TED NYC, South by Southwest Interactive, CONFAB, and Event Apart, UX Days Tokyo, UX Copenhagen, and many other events on topics at the intersection of bias, design, and social justice. He offers workshops and presentations on [00:01:00] inclusive design and the role of bias in making decisions, which is the focus of today's conversation. Welcome, Dave. So glad to have you here.

[00:01:07] **David:** Glad to be here. Thanks for inviting me.

[00:01:09] **Amy:** All right, let's jump right in. In my work with coaching clients who are going through the interview process, we talk a lot about the importance of telling a good story to communicate who you are. What you know how to do, and the kind of problems that you can solve for a business. And we have the opportunity to tell the story at different touch points in the hiring process.

[00:01:31] And the whole point is to be seen as not only a viable candidate for the role, but also to get the job. But something that comes up time and time again are concerns about certain aspects of our stories and our identities that may trigger a negative bias and how other people perceive us.

[00:01:50] So things like race and ethnicity, gender, religion, disability, body weight. And we know that there are a lot of issues with discrimination regarding these and [00:02:00] many other factors.

[00:02:01] But then we have things that society has traditionally labeled as shameful or negative or something to downplay. Like having a resume gap or being laid off, which is happening to a lot of people. So ultimately we have to decide if something is a concern, okay, do I want to do something about it? Can I do something about it? Given all of this, and given your focus and expertise in bias applying that to the hiring process, is this something we can do anything about individually?

[00:02:36] **David:** It's complicated because if you think about the hiring process as a purely transactional thing. I, the job seeker, want money from you, the hirer. The hirer wants labor from the job seeker. So both of us are gonna be in this semi adversarial relationship where I am trying to get labor [00:03:00] from you for the lowest price, I am trying to get the maximum amount of money from you, the hirer.

[00:03:05] for perhaps the least amount of labor . So looking at it from that point of view and purely from that point of view, absolutely there are things you can do. And it's sad, but the truth is, in studies, people who whiten their resume, which is to say remove any thing from their resume that would imply that they are black, that they're Asian.

[00:03:28] These are actually the specific two groups they did the study with was black people looking for jobs and Asian Americans looking for jobs. If you whiten your resume for black people, they doubled the likelihood of a callback. And for Asian Americans, it was a 1. 5 increase in the likelihood.

[00:03:44] Those are facts. If you whiten your resume, if you hide your identities in these particular ways, you increase your odds of getting a job. And this is even at companies that tout their diversity values,? And that and the reason I talk about that as a purely transactional [00:04:00] thing is that's a cost ?

[00:04:02] There's something icky about saying, I have to hide who I am to get a job. That just feels wrong. And this is why I think it's actually a very personal decision, whether or not to do things like this. Cause the alternative is you starve, you lose your visa you lose your healthcare.

[00:04:19] The flip side of that, obviously, is that, okay, if that works, and you actually get the job, you are now working for a company that does not value who you really are, and in fact, maybe doesn't like who you really are.

[00:04:31] And again, that is a very personal choice if that's something that you are A, willing to live with, or B, feel you have to live with in order to survive. In that sort of version of like, what can the individual do about it, it's very grim, but that is what the individual can do about it. As part and parcel of this moral calculus and survival calculus around what am I willing to do, what am I willing to live with eight hours a day or probably more in order to survive, in order to complete this transaction.[00:05:00]

[00:05:00] And in a weird way, this is a UX principle, right? We're encouraged to create frictionless design. So if I fit into a box. That you already accept as this is what a developer looks like. This is what a nurse looks like. This is what a grocer looks like.

[00:05:15] Whatever that thing is, if I can make myself look like I fit that shape already, You're gonna, it'll be a more frictionless experience for you, the hirer, to imagine me in that role.

[00:05:26] **Amy:** Yeah. Coming back to storytelling I have found myself talking with clients about this idea of mitigating bias. And I kept saying this phrase over and over. And then it occurred to me one day, I need to bring Dave on here to talk about this. You're the one. Um, but you know, This idea of Getting ahead of or in front of assumptions or like being preemptive about addressing concerns that might come up, right?

[00:05:51] Let me try to predict all of the reasons why someone doesn't want to interview me or give me the time of day for my application. And yeah,

[00:06:00] it's bullshit. We shouldn't have to do it. But it is a concern across all kinds of identities. I've had clients who have the ability to work in the U. S., but are currently based in India. And we've had conversations about What location should this person put on their resume? Technically they're in India right now, but if someone sees a place that's outside the U. S., would they automatically assume that this person will need visa sponsorship? Or, things like having a resume gap, right? You can get laid off. You have to be a caretaker for a family member. You decide you don't want to work for a year. That should also be okay. But then, when you're in the interview seat, or when you have to put your resume together, there will be a gap.

[00:06:43] And someone might see that as well, you weren't working and you weren't building your skills. What were you doing? And other people might go, okay, that's totally normal and fine. And I'm not going to care about that as much, but people worry about what should I say?

[00:06:57] What should I fill my gap [00:07:00] with? What skills can I talk about working on while I'm like being a caretaker for my family member? So it shows up in a lot of places.

[00:07:09] **David:** Yeah, and it's funny as you talk about these things Where people have to come up with excuses for being people. And I get angry. That's my emotional reaction. And I keep thinking on the one hand, yes. We have to think about, this is true for any target of oppression in an oppressive system.

[00:07:27] You have to think about how to survive and navigate that system. At the same time, though, we want to keep, especially those of us with some portion of privilege, want to keep in mind, okay, let's not get so focused on that. That we start to believe the onus is on the person looking for the job to make themselves fit into this role, right?

[00:07:48] To what degree do we still need to pay attention to the unfair expectations of the employer? And so on the one hand, we talk about what the individual can do, but on the other hand I endorse[00:08:00] at least in the short term for where we are now, Things like saying, hey hirer, why do you care what ethnicity this person is?

[00:08:08] Why is that even something that I should have access to in the resume itself, right? So we've heard a lot about anonymized resumes where I will remove the name because the truth is even if you aren't actively prejudiced towards women, towards people of color, there is a pattern that has probably been built up in your mind by living in this oppressive system where you're like, yeah, but can women really be programmers?

[00:08:31] Yeah. But can black people really do content strategy, because the image that you have in your head if I say content strategist. Might be a white lady. If I say web developer, you might think, skinny white dude with glasses or whatever.

[00:08:44] You might have these like things that are patterns that if you were to be asked explicitly, Hey, do you think this is the only person who can program? You'd be like, no, that's ridiculous. But the gut reaction, right? That's been built up from years and years and years of seeing this pattern.

[00:08:59] Give you makes you [00:09:00] give a little side eye when you see a resume that doesn't look like that There's even a study where if a white and a hirer is in person interviewing a black candidate They will sit further back and ask fewer questions Now I doubt highly that white hirer woke up in the morning

and said hey black guy walks in this office I'm gonna sit further back and I'm not gonna ask as many questions No, they probably didn't even know they did that but this is the reality.

[00:09:26] So I'm like hey Are there steps we can take from a design perspective to say, let us design this so on the employer end, you have as few of those triggers as possible. So I that's another part of the picture.

[00:09:39] I don't want to. Leave out is yes. Here are all the things that an individual can do to try to fit into this unfairly shaped hole, but Hey, maybe here's some things the employer can do to change the shape of the hole.

[00:09:50] **Amy:** And there are stated values, say, on company websites or internally in terms of employee diversity and all of that stuff. And then there are the actual [00:10:00] behaviors and actions that are taken in the hiring process or just, within the workplace in general. So yes, having policies and having an intentional approach and plan for how all of this works and should work to make hiring more equitable.

[00:10:15] Yeah, of course. That's great. That's needed. The next thing is accountability with

[00:10:20] that. Um, you know, Measuring progress towards particular goals, right? We need all of that stuff. But then, maybe there isn't a very precise way that they're doing the hiring and doing it according to a systematized. plan or process so that they're evaluating everyone equally. Do they have a checklist in front of them? Are you making sure you're not being biased towards people?

[00:10:41] Right? Like There's all that we can try to put all these gates in place and make things go as well as we can. But, humans are messy too.

[00:10:49] **David:** I think that's where like the humans are messy part is actually, I think the easiest part, what I mean by that is. Each case is actually different.

[00:10:58] I think, on the [00:11:00] whole, when you zoom out, you have many companies behaving very badly because that's the momentum, that's the system, that's what's been done for literally hundreds of years. If you really want to get into it, a lot of these behaviors stem from slavery, right?

[00:11:12] Because if you think about all the behaviors we've seen, and again, it goes back to that transaction. It's as the hirer, I want to get as much labor out of

you for as little money as possible. Okay. That's slavery. The ultimate of that is I will get labor out of you for nothing. I will buy you, and I will do the bare minimum to keep you alive, and then I will do the maximum to make you work.

[00:11:35] And slave owners would literally Trade notes on how to quote unquote motivate their slaves, which means how cruel can I be without killing them? And in some cases, even that wasn't a deal breaker uh, to get to extract the maximum value. Because at the end of the day, they weren't laborers, they weren't people, they were a means to an end.

[00:11:57] To get more cotton, to get more tobacco, to have [00:12:00] more Product to sell right so that basic philosophy of how do I extract labor? How do I extract value from this person and to say that they're thinking of them as people is generous But how do I extract value from these things? From these units in order to have the most amount of things to sell at the best margin, right?

[00:12:20] Like that basic concept has never left capitalism, and if you look at the layoffs that are happening now in tech, it's very much around this notion of How do I maximize shareholder value?

[00:12:32] They are actually my biggest customer. They are who I am most beholden to. Cause the thing we haven't talked about with accountability is incentivization, like at the end of the day, what are you incentivized to do? Companies are incentivized. To lay people off. Why are they laying people off? Because it makes the shareholders happy.

[00:12:50] **Amy:** Yeah, can you say a bit more about incentives in this regard, when it

[00:12:54] comes to hiring and .

[00:12:55] **David:** A lot of bias study was part and parcel of [00:13:00] something called behavioral economics like that. So there was this relationship between thinking about.

[00:13:10] So you end up studying things like incentivization, and at the end of the day there was a if you remember the Wells Fargo debacle, where Wells Fargo employees created I think, 2 million fake accounts. In order to hit sales quotas, right? Harvard actually did a study, like this was such a clusterfuck.

[00:13:27] And one of the things they learned was, like one of the quotes was something like, I don't care what you have up on your values board or whatever.

At the end of the day, people will do what you pay them to do, right? They weren't paying people to hold, to ascribe to these values.

[00:13:42] They were paying people to bring in customers. By any means necessary. I don't care how many people get hurt, make money. And once you have that as your like baseline, once you have that as your incentivization, I don't care who gets hurt. As long as I [00:14:00] don't get hurt, I don't care.

[00:14:02] So yeah that's at a very base level, that's the role that incentivization plays in a lot of this honestly sometimes mind boggling behavior.

[00:14:12] **Amy:** On your podcast and in your book, you have talked about this idea of de biasing the decision making process.

[00:14:20] And there's two points that I took away from what you've discussed with that. One is someone compromised because they have something to gain from a decision or recommendation that they make?

[00:14:30] And then this need for an external group or person to keep decisions in check. And we touched on that a little bit before, but I'm wondering if you can say more about this concept of de biasing decision making.

[00:14:41] **David:** The term de biasing makes it sound like, oh, I have somehow reached into your mind and pulled out the bias and nah, yay, now we can make unbiased decisions. That's not really how it works. So it's actually worth, I think at this point, just defining terms, right? So when I talk about bias, when Actual cognitive psychologists, don't want to pretend I am one talk about bias.

[00:14:56] What they're referring to is the fact that we the mind [00:15:00] in order to get through the day has to take shortcuts. Like we have to make something like a trillion decisions every day. I'm right now deciding how fast to talk, where to look, what to do with my hands. If I thought carefully about every single one of those decisions, nothing would ever get done.

[00:15:13] So it's a good thing we spend a lot of time in our minds, a lot of our lives on autopilot. But sometimes the autopilot gets it wrong and those errors we call cognitive biases, right? So that's what we're dealing with here. So I can't de bias. I can't live without it. Like I have to make these shortcuts.

[00:15:31] So the question is how do I mitigate it? How do I get to a point where it's not, it's causing as little harm as possible? I think, I love the term harm reduction because I think that's a more realistic goal, right? So in this

context, so one of the things you can do, and I'd like to There's an article that Daniel Kahneman wrote for the Harvard Business Journal, I think. That talks about in a corporate setting can you create a flow for decision making that kind of reduces the likelihood that someone's going to fuck up, [00:16:00] right?

[00:16:00] That someone's going to make a decision that's based on the facts that's based on their own shortcuts, and it's a really fascinating study, but at the end of the day, what it reminded me of. Is something that if you're in the tech world, you are very familiar with, which is quality control,

[00:16:14] or QA, quality assurance, which is before a line of code, right? Goes out into the real world. You have a team, who goes in and debugs the code. They look for errors, they test it, they try every, they click on every single link, they think of every single permutation of what people could do to try to find the fuck ups before they happen.

[00:16:36] So to me, when I think about this sort of like. Ethical flow that's meant to reduce harm that could come from bias.

[00:16:43] It's just ethical QA. It's just bias QA, right? So that flow, I think makes a lot of sense. And what you're part of what you're doing is you're just taking time worn approaches, that are just good at detecting bias or detecting, Hey, you're about to go down a really bad path.

[00:16:59] [00:17:00] But part of it is also you are bringing in it. Okay. Other biases that are not your biases that might detect something that your bias is going to miss. So complimentary, interference biases triangulating down to something more ethical.

[00:17:12] **Amy:** Yeah, which is why diversity within any human organization is

[00:17:17] really important, especially when you're building world changing technologies

[00:17:22] like AI and LLMs, and we've seen a lot of messiness and Poor decision making and lack of diversity in those decisions. And actually that, reminds me of one thing, which is the implementation of AI technology for hiring.

[00:17:37] And

[00:17:37] so one example could be like some kind of software that will potentially read and judge whether or not you're qualified. Now that is not something that is used currently like an ATS or applicant tracking system. That is not what that is. That's. What people assume that is a lot of the time but it's definitely being explored.

[00:17:59] Or even this [00:18:00] idea of video interviews, like having someone answer interview questions up front that then the recruiter or hiring manager gets To watch right that seems like a huge potential for biases to come up.

[00:18:13] **David:** Oh, so many directions to take this in, and it troubles me that it's still relevant. So at least five years ago at this point, Amazon had a hiring bot that would sift through thousands of resumes.

[00:18:27] Trying to figure out who people should focus on. And it was the most sexist thing you ever saw. It would, it was so sexist that if it saw the name of a woman's college on a resume, it would downgrade that resume. So they're like, okay, what happened here? Let's look at how we trained the AI.

[00:18:42] They trained the AI by having it look at the previous ten years of applications to Amazon, which seems like a perfectly reasonable thing to do until you think about it for 10 seconds and realize, Hey, what did most of those resumes have in common? Mostly guys. So [00:19:00] the AI takes one look at that and says, gee, I sure must like dudes.

[00:19:02] And then just keeps recommending dudes. And we think of AI as this like Mr. Spock, like this cold, rational machine that can be brilliant and like figure out all these connections and at the end of the day, it is a glorified prediction engine.

[00:19:15] And it's able to look at way more data than any human can, and it's able to make more statistical inferences than any human can. But at the end of the day, it is just looking at stuff and making predictions based on the stuff it looks at. So if you point it at a racist and sexist world, guess what?

[00:19:28] It's going to make racist and sexist predictions, right? So I think that's an expectation we need to set up, and it frightens me that we're still going after that. But the other piece of it, and I think this is worth examining too,

[00:19:41] why were those ten years of resumes mostly guys? Why were let's take a look at the path for women through STEM. Most women drop out of

STEM in about the eighth grade. Let's look at the path for people of color in STEM. Most black kids drop out of STEM third, fourth grade, right? The reason even a beautifully [00:20:00] designed, anonymized resume hiring system would still have this limitation of, hey, So even if you're not looking at their races, most of the people in that hiring pool are going to be white.

[00:20:08] Even if you're not looking at their genders, most of the people in that hiring pool are going to be male. It's still like this thing. Oh, we're talking about systemic issues. So AI can only do so much.

[00:20:21] If it's being introduced into a system that has for hundreds of years been sexist and racist, you would have to basically lie to the AI and set up false expectations and say, what if when you saw women's college on that resume, you upgraded it?

[00:20:36] What if we just put these little things into the code that just said, hey, you're going to look at the same data, but you are going to evaluate it differently.

[00:20:43] Because if you evaluate it the way we've been evaluating it, You're just going to scale the terribleness that we've been doing this whole time.

[00:20:52] **Amy:** Is it fair to say that this is a form of affirmative action for AI in a way?

[00:20:59] **David:** [00:21:00] Absolutely. And for those who, I don't know why they would or wouldn't know this. I am a black man, just describing for people who are like listening to this. I had my own journey of blackness around this when I was like in my twenties, I was a very.

[00:21:12] I am ashamed to say a very O. J. Simpson kind of black man in which, by which I mean O. J. has this famous line of I'm not a black, I'm O. J. I was like, I don't see color. That was my vision of what it would look like to be in a racially free world. So I was against affirmative action at the time.

[00:21:26] I think once you, for me anyway, the reason I changed my mind on that was, oh, context is a thing ? History and power are two extremely important contexts to think about when you're achieving equality, ? True equality isn't just saying, I'm going to treat everyone the same ?

[00:21:47] True equality, if you're trying to say everyone's going to get equal access to the thing, which is living your life, has to take into account, oh, if

you've been kept down for hundreds of years, If I [00:22:00] just snap my fingers and say, okay, you can also apply to these jobs. Guess what? The people doing the hiring also have hundreds of years of being in power and thinking you're less

[00:22:09]

[00:22:17] **Penn Design Ad:** Hey everyone, I want to take a quick moment to tell you about the Executive Program in Design Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania Stuart Weitzman School of Design. This is a fantastic offering for design professionals who want to maximize their leadership potential, build their networks, and grow their careers at a world class design school. With everything going on in the tech job market and, well, the world at large, now may be a good time to reflect on the direction we want to take our careers in, And how we can move from vision to action toward our desired impact on society. The Weitzman executive program in design leadership could be just the place to help you chart your path toward creating a more intentional future for design, technology, and humanity.

[00:22:59] [00:23:00] What I like about this program is that it's geared toward a mix of design professionals, including established design leaders who want to be more effective and emerging design leaders who would benefit from new tools, frameworks, and coaching to get to the next level. Taught by renowned educators, practitioners and experts in leadership development

[00:23:17] this six month program features self paced learning, live instruction, one on one coaching, lectures from world class speakers, and opportunities to interact with instructors and peers from a wide range of design disciplines.

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[00:23:43] The next cohort of the program starts on May 4th, 2024. Applications are now open with a deadline of April 27th, so head to the link in the show notes to learn more.

[00:23:54] [00:24:00]

[00:24:03] **Amy:** If we bring it back to job seekers, putting their materials together, telling their stories, we have to choose what parts of our story to tell.

Based on the kind of impression we want to make, what information we want people to know about us we're ideally representing ourselves in the best light, we're emphasizing strengths, we're minimizing or not focusing on weaknesses as much because as soon as you do that you start to give people information that may go against your candidacy, right?

[00:24:34] And so, we try to craft the story, But we have to choose individually what that is. And like, are we willing to fit ourselves into a shape that might not quite match? Are we willing to tell people the narrative that they want to hear? Are we willing to play this game? And yeah, we have to, in large part, play the game unless we're independently wealthy.

[00:24:58] We're playing a whole other game, right? But [00:25:00] we have to play this game as workers in order to get a job to Live and not die, to have access to health care. Maybe some housing, maybe some food that sort of thing But yeah, can we talk more about like the ethics and the trade offs of these decisions?

[00:25:15] Yeah,

[00:25:17] **David:** it's funny. Cause like I had a conversation once with a guy who worked at a very big tech company and he was like, look, here's the thing about where I work. If you try to make yourself fit into this hole and you get in, that is the hole you will be in for the rest of your life.

[00:25:34] Like they don't have imagination here. If you take that shape and get the job, that is all they will ever see you as and the alternative strategy he suggested was. Create who you are and show value in that. And for me, that would be through things like speaking gigs, or content I create, however I can put myself out there.

[00:25:55] And then if they see value in that, they will create a Dave shaped hole in the [00:26:00] company and invite you to fill it. And that way, when you come in, they will see who you are and value that.

[00:26:06] And if you can get them to value that, then your job then is being you. And I think that's the goal. That's always been my goal. This is to what degree can I be. Can I increasingly be me in the jobs that I have? And like checking my privilege at the door like, I've kind of been all over the place. I've been so poor that, I'm living week to week and I'm almost out of money at the end of the week and I have to choose between buying bread and buying cigarettes. And spoiler alert, I chose cigarettes.

[00:26:31] But I've also been on the end where it's eh, I can casually look for a job and wait until I, I find something I like, so I've been all through that spectrum, what I have found is that progression has looked like, okay, I'm going to take this piece of shit job that weirdly, here's the thing the make yourself look like a certain thing to get the job

[00:26:52] I started from that kind of we don't really care. In fact, we think you might be overqualified world to the, okay, now you're getting into the rarefied atmosphere. And each job, I [00:27:00] basically would be like, okay, let me fashion my resume to what I think you're looking for right now.

[00:27:05] And that's the other thing to keep in mind is it's like. Companies are different and the more you can learn about that company, what they're specifically looking for right now, the better, cause it isn't always one thing, right? Their business model, and I cannot stress this enough, wherever you are applying, understand how they make money.

[00:27:21] If you do not understand that, you're going to be a disadvantage in how you position yourself. Because understand every company that is hiring is trying to solve a problem.

[00:27:29] And you have to decide A, is that a problem you're, you have any interest in solving, right? But then B, is that something that you can sell them on being able to solve?

[00:27:39] My point is all of that though, okay. Is not a monolith. That is more likely to be successful based on how much you deeply understand. Your adversary, because honestly, the way we're talking about this is a very adversarial thing.

[00:27:52] **Amy:** And that power dynamic requires the candidate typically, unless they have more freedom and ability [00:28:00] to not do this, which is it requires them to sell themselves as hard as they can. And the company, the employer really doesn't have to put that much effort into it, right? If you're trying to go for the top, iOS developer in the entire country, right?

[00:28:16] And maybe they've been an apple for a long time, but they want to go do something else, you're going to have companies like fighting for that person and giving them whatever they want. But for your typical worker, you have to show up, you have to be passionate. And you have to talk about your background and your story and your skills and People also don't always feel comfortable tooting your own horn in that way. Like women who are like,

Gosh, I need to meet all of the requirements on this job posting. Not taking a step back and going this is an ideal list, right? Do I meet most of them? Do I meet the ones that are required to fundamentally do the job? Okay, yes, let me apply to that, right? I think some people judge themselves harshly and it can be uncomfortable for a lot of folks Especially from communities or cultures [00:29:00] where being like individualist is actually not something that is as common

[00:29:04] or it's not received as well, right?

[00:29:06] So we always have to be like thinking of the audience and our positioning and what to emphasize and what to de emphasize and what negative biases do we want to avoid triggering?

[00:29:16] **David:** What you are describing when you keep talking about trying to not trigger these

ative

[00:29:20] **David:** biases. I keep thinking about an abusive relationship, right? I keep thinking about someone who's in a relationship with someone who has these triggers and will have either a physically or verbally abusive outburst if you mention this, or if you bring up that, or if you wear this,

[00:29:38] it's and so you end up walking on eggshells, and it's I don't wanna incur their wrath and it's this, it's horrible, right? But I can't not see that. When I think about the hiring environment today of people really trying to contort themselves into these positions.

[00:29:56] To enter into that abusive relationship, right? They're not even in it [00:30:00] yet. It's Hey, here's a company that treats its employees horribly objectively. It has been shown they treat them horribly, but they're the best game in town. Again, the narrative is forming in my head. I live in this small town.

[00:30:14] I don't have a lot of options. And I can't live on my own. I guess I got to hook up with this person and just hope that I can avoid setting off any of the bear traps that litter their house. Yeah.

[00:30:28] **Amy:** fair comparison and here's why capitalism is an abusive relationship, right? Slavery, the institution of slavery is

[00:30:36] abusive, right? And so it's not just the relationship with the employer. It's the relationship with the system because,

[00:30:42] you know, people, People always say Oh, you're in an abusive relationship.

[00:30:45] Why don't you just leave? Sometimes you can't leave.

[00:30:47] Sometimes you have to

[00:30:48] **David:** And go where?

[00:30:49] **Amy:** So you can't leave capitalism, sorry, you really can't You can leave employment by another person and become self employed, but you're still within that system, and self employment is not an option for everyone, right?

[00:30:59] **David:** [00:31:00] The other thing I want to bring up though is. We talk about the individual, and that makes sense and is valid, but at the same time, I also want to talk about what the individual can do with other individuals.

[00:31:11] Mike Montero hates the term individual contributor, the reason he hates it is because it gets you to focus on the individual and makes you forget that you are one of 10 developers, 20 developers, a hundred developers. And if you all said, Hey, we're not going to work on this. It's not getting built.

[00:31:28] They can replace one person. They can replace 10 people. They cannot replace a hundred people. At least not quickly enough to ship this thing by the end of the quarter and make the shareholders happy. So we got to talk about unions. We got to talk about communities.

[00:31:41] There's the content and UX Slack, which is a community that one of the thing that tells you what their values are, they have a a job board in that Slack where if you don't list the salary, you cannot post there.

[00:31:54] And that is a collective action with teeth, because if Adobe or Google wants [00:32:00] to post a job there and they don't want to disclose the salary, they don't get to have access to that pool of UX workers. And that is a not small community, right? So I think we also need to start thinking about. As you do, frankly, in any oppressive system about what can the people do together?

[00:32:15] Because that's pretty much the only thing that fights the system. Historically, as a whole bunch of people get together and say, enough, there's more of us than you. What do you want to do?

[00:32:26] **Amy:** Yeah, absolutely. And yeah, you know, you can go into a company and join or start a union in that company or some kind of workers unit, right? To try and get what you want and what you deserve. But I think this is an interesting question about what can be done outside of that. And as say part of the hiring process this idea of a collective that is collectively negotiating for hiring. If you want these people, you need to provide the salary up front, but there are so many other things that can be discussed. I do see individual [00:33:00] actions out there that I think do add up to a collective wave.

[00:33:05] There's people who if they see a job posting on LinkedIn that gets shared just by, the hiring manager, whatever they comment, what's the pay? Just reminding people that they should talk about that. Or pulling out of an interview process because it's too demanding.

[00:33:19] It's taking too much time, which can be unfair to people who don't have that time. It could be unfair to people with disabilities, right? There's all of these things that individually, the more that we push back on this stuff, the more of an effect it will have.

[00:33:34] But imagine, yeah, getting a group of people to collectively go, okay, here's how we're all going to participate in the interview process. And it would take some sacrifice, all of these movements in history that have created some important change in society have required and will always require on a daily basis sacrifice sacrifice of money, resources, time, whatever that might be.

[00:33:59] **David:** Yeah. And I [00:34:00] think, you can't think of a more public example of this than the SAG and WGA strikes of last year. And I think those are particularly good examples. Cause like I am in the process of putting together a movie and I already want to work with unions. But here's the thing.

[00:34:13] If I didn't, I would have a problem, right? Cause as soon as you hit a certain budget level, if you're not involving unions, nobody will work with you. There's a certain level of power between the Teamsters, between IATSE, between SAG, between these different unions and the different resources.

[00:34:30] Where it's like, Oh, you're not a union shoot. Yeah, I work with unions. I can't give you this equipment. And what I think that's a good example

is because those unions aren't limited to a particular studio, a particular company.

[00:34:42] They are a guild. They are a trade union. So that's the level of protection I think you want. If you're dealing in a world where there are developers, UX strategist, whatever, like you want that kind of general, it can even be an AOTC thing where it's cause AOTC covers all sorts of different skill sets.

[00:34:57] You can just have a general tech trade [00:35:00] union. Whether it's content, whether it's development, whether it's design, these are the sets of laws that follow you wherever you go, every. Interview you walk into, you have the protection of the union. And if you get the job while you're on the job, you have the protection of the union.

[00:35:14] And Hey, if they start doing dirty, we have the vote. We're going on strike. It's, and we're, we are seeing the start to play out.

[00:35:22] There's the New York times. One of the first ones to have a tech union in house. And they are without telling too many tales out of school, stuff happens, right? Like that is not a toothless union. So I think that would be an ideal set of circumstances to strive toward, at least in terms of what we've seen work in general, in the world, when it comes to relationships between labor and management, is having that trade level of protection that at least means you have something on your side more than your own tenacity and your own precarity around, okay, how long can I go without health insurance?

[00:35:55] **Amy:** Absolutely. I can't remember which tech [00:36:00] union it was, it might have been Kickstarter. Actually, there was a layoff. And because there was a union, they were able to negotiate better terms. But something that they really tried to focus on is when there is a layoff. hiring in the future at this place, please start with the people that you laid off, right? So that comes

[00:36:18] **David:** Oh, I love that.

[00:36:19] **Amy:** Yeah.

[00:36:19] something upfront that isn't okay, once you get in the workplace, here's what a union can do for you. But here's how we can help you. If that is to happen. So yes if people are interested in learning more, definitely check out tech workers coalition, which is just like a support organization out there for different tech workers with different projects. There are several tech unions,

New York Times Tech Guild that you mentioned Alphabet Workers Union. There are unionization and organizing efforts happening at, several companies, right? So, um, It's definitely something that I think, now is the right time.

[00:36:54] It's better late than never. Yesterday would have been ideal. Um, But especially given the [00:37:00] tech layoffs that we've seen over the past couple years these sorts of entities can help in the end to end, worker experience, essentially.

[00:37:08] Last thing I want to chat about is the idea of self censorship as bias mitigation. So we've talked about Job applications interviewing all of that, but many of us show up in public and we share our thoughts in public whether that's on social media platforms or you know doing talks or going on podcasts Whatever might be and It's pretty common for people to go, okay, I need a job.

[00:37:37] I got laid off. The most important thing is I find a new job so I can get a paycheck. I'm going to be careful about what I say publicly about any given topic ?

[00:37:46] I'm curious, what do you think about this idea of self censorship again being a personal choice um, but as it relates to basically lowering the risk or maximizing the potential of us landing [00:38:00] the job that we need to survive?

[00:38:02] **David:** Yeah, I am. I am very conflicted about this one. I'll give you a personal anecdote. I have a friend who is Palestinian who has been posting about that on social media and I was DMing with her and she was explaining how this is like she's getting blowback for that at her company. And I wrote to her like, yeah, this is fucked up.

[00:38:23] No one should have to censor themselves or not be, no one should be punished for their political beliefs, on LinkedIn or at their job or whatever. And I have stand by that at the same time. I'm like what if instead of posting about, asking for a ceasefire, she was saying, yeah, I don't really like black people.

[00:38:41] I feel like there should be consequences for that. So why can I be okay with that? Which is a. Political position, let's say versus a sea star, which is also a political position and with both of which have very deep, very emotional, very real stakes and histories and all this other stuff going on as well.

[00:38:58] And what you really end up getting into in [00:39:00] part is this definition, this between uh, what is hate speech and what is free speech? Cause

you, when you, as soon as you use the term self censorship. You can't say censorship without talking about free speech and we'll move past the whole it's LinkedIn.

[00:39:12] It is not a, it is not a public square. Censorship doesn't apply. This is Mr. LinkedIn gets to decide what people say or not say on that because Mr. LinkedIn owns the

[00:39:21] **Amy:** It's, it is a public square. It's just that it's private.

[00:39:25] **David:** Okay. So this is, yeah. And there is a, there's a whole other really interesting discussion around how big does a private space have to get before it is effectively a public space? And when public services are run on those spaces, at the end of the day, though, what we're really talking about is to what degree.

[00:39:45] Do I have to agree with your political beliefs slash moral beliefs? Because there are very few political beliefs that are not in fact moral beliefs. Before I can say, no, I'm not hiring you because you're a Republican. I'm not hiring you because you're hateful, [00:40:00] right?

[00:40:01] And do I have the right to say, I don't want to hire you because you're hateful. And at the end of the day, it's really coming down to vibes, right? It's I don't like your vibe. I don't want to hire you, but can I give the reason you don't think Trump's so bad as a reason for not hiring you? So I can't just be purist and just say, oh, anyone can say what they want on LinkedIn, as long as it's not hate speech. That's fine but if you are in this sort of liminal space of I really disagree with you politically, and maybe morally, do I want you to shut up and self censor?

[00:40:29] It's maybe I'd prefer if I didn't know your opinions, and if you never brought it up at work, would it matter? I don't have an answer is what I'm saying but I definitely have questions. These are the questions I ask. So regardless, I still come to the same conclusion with my friend who's Palestinian.

[00:40:42] You should be able to say whatever the fuck you want about Palestine there and not have it blow back on you at your job. Because I agree that Palestinians should not die in the tens of thousands, right? But if I didn't agree, would I feel the same way and be like, I keep saying black lives matter, but maybe shut up about [00:41:00] Palestine, right?

[00:41:00] Like how much of that to go back to the personal choice thing, how much of that is just, where do you fall politically? And is that really the reason you are for, or against quote unquote free speech on LinkedIn? The final thing I'll say about this, which just complicates it even more is I like That LinkedIn has become a political space.

[00:41:20] I think it's better that way, because I think it's better that we are humans at work. And that work does not become some place where we turn ourselves off. I do not believe that work is a place where we should go to become less human.

[00:41:32] And this brings us right back to slavery, right? Slavery works great if the people aren't human.

[00:41:38] **Amy:** It's is it profitable for companies to allow for people to be fully human? They would say no, which is why they don't want people to waste their work time talking about stuff that has nothing to do with the job. They want to minimize It's the humanness of people because they want people's time to be focused on [00:42:00] producing and creating the capital. So even though you and I would go, actually workplaces would probably be better if we could just show up as humans. And if we had the safety and the environments designed to be that way like, sure, businesses could be more profitable or collectively owned businesses could exist, right?

[00:42:17] Like that, that's another model. But I think that's really what it comes. Down to is people see all of this as a distraction. That takes people's attention away from producing.

[00:42:28] **David:** I think it's more identity based than that. Because, there are studies around how much more, how much better companies do if there is a smaller gap between the highest paid person and the lowest paid person. Innovation increases when there's more diversity.

[00:42:39] Like, all these sort of woke shit things that companies do not reduce their profits or at the very least do not eliminate their profits. There's plenty of profitable companies. They just aren't as profitable. And in some cases they get more profit. The calculus of if I start acting ethically, I will make less money or I won't be able to be sustainable and make money [00:43:00] is bullshit.

[00:43:00] If you come into this with a fundamental belief that some people are just better than others, even if it makes you more money to treat people well, it goes against your very identity.

[00:43:10] Because if I'm treating them better, am I better? How am I better than this person if I'm like, leaving money on the table? Why should I have to pay for their health insurance? Why should I have to pay them more money than I have to? What does that say about me? I think it's an identity thing.

[00:43:28] And where I see this the most is in perfectly reputable, equitable companies and business owners who in every other way are socially progressive, who balk at the idea of a union. I have seen this again and again. Kickstarter became a for public benefit corporation and has to produce documents every single year talking about how they're keeping the salary gap thin, how they're doing salary transparencies, all the things we say we want, but they were straight up anti union.

[00:43:57] And I have to imagine on some level [00:44:00] that is an identity thing, because if you're an employer and your workers say we want a union you might take that as a slight. Are you saying that I'm treating you badly? Because that's what people think. Part of it is just the mindset around unions.

[00:44:10] People are like, Oh, you want a union? That must mean I'm a terrible boss. Everything I've done for you, and this is how you repay me? You want a union? And again, I think that comes back to identity. And I think the sad part is a union is more like, A fire exit, right? It's Hey, this is something every business should have built in because someone has to look out for the workers.

[00:44:34] You the employer, I don't care how nice you are, there's going to be a decision point where it is in your best interest, or your shareholder's best interest, for you to fuck over your employees.

[00:44:44] There's an identity thing, and to be perfectly honest about it, a masculinity thing, that's all about power and domination, that is, hey, if I am not subjugating somebody well, who the hell am I?

[00:44:58] **Amy:** And [00:45:00] interestingly, the CEO of Kickstarter is a black man.

[00:45:04] **David:** Oh yeah, we do it. I'll do you one better, the most conservative member of the Supreme Court is a black

[00:45:09] man.

[00:45:10] **Amy:** yeah. Yeah.

[00:45:11] **David:** Most conservative by far.

[00:45:16] **Amy:** And to go back to your point of say, progressive organizations that want to do good things for society Code for America.

[00:45:23] Yeah. Yeah. Finally got its union straightened away, right? They went through a two year bargaining process with management because management was union busting and stalling, ? But Code for America is supposed to be like a pro democracy. Let's use technology to improve society. But when their workers were like, Hey, we want to make a union like we want these things that we think we should have with regard to yeah. Like work life, health and well being um, you know, rights and all of that stuff. They're like, Oh no, sorry. So then they busted for two years. Then they fired a bunch of people.

[00:45:58] And right around that time the [00:46:00] contract, the bargaining agreement was approved. So I think that's another good example of organizations or people we would expect to have a much more open minded or All right. amenable perspective on these things, but actually follow the traditional route.

[00:46:16] And I think your point about identity makes total sense.

[00:46:20] **David:** Yeah and, not to put too fine a point on it, but I think it's, I think it's a trauma response. Lumina Jimenez talks about this a lot, the sort of cycles of oppression. So yeah, like in the idea of black people becoming oppressors is not so far afield when you think about, oh yeah, I can see how that could be a trauma response, right? I'm sure there's some version of the Clarence Thomas stories like Oh yeah, now is his chance to do all the shit that was done to him.

[00:46:44] No idea if that's actually how it's playing out, but if that were how it played out, I'd be like, oh yeah, that makes sense.

[00:46:49] **Amy:** Tell me more about your movie.

[00:46:51] White Meat

[00:46:52] **David:** So yeah, this is actually a labor story. When I first moved to Philadelphia, I heard a story about an urban park here called [00:47:00] Washington Square Park. And this is a true story. Buried under that park are the bodies of hundreds of enslaved people. Because yes, Pennsylvania, free state, but there were slaves here.

[00:47:09] George Washington slaves were here actually. But anyway, so I've learned this fact and I'm like, huh, what if one night they all came back from the dead as zombies, but. They only ate white people. So that's where you get the title, White Meat. And it was, at first it was just this oh what a funny little idea for like maybe a Key Peele skit or something.

[00:47:28] But then speaking of Peele Get Out came out, and I'm like, oh. Horror movies can be a thing, they can say stuff. What am I trying to say with white meat? And I came to realize one of the things I really wanted to talk about is white guilt over slavery. And things like performative allyship and all these other pieces.

[00:47:46] So I have a main character who's a black woman with mostly white friends, who is actually very much in this world of like exploitative tech world, where she just got a promotion but she didn't get a raise? LAUGHS And they're all out celebrating that one night. And [00:48:00] she as the black friend in the white group, finds herself in the position, often, of helping them navigate blackness.

[00:48:06] So when this starts popping off, she has to literally help them navigate blackness, because she's the only one who can keep them safe, because the zombies will only eat white people, they won't eat black people, so she almost has to run defense throughout the night as these attacks are coming. So anyway, I ended up doing a lot of research into slavery into the history of abolition in Philadelphia, which is absolutely fascinating.

[00:48:27] There's so much rich history there. That it was one of the major stops on the underground railroad and a lot of, and a center of black activity then. And still today, actually just for black activism, but and built the plot around certain locations based on that. And then wrote the screenplay I'm at a point now where I've just finished creating the budget and I'm going to be spending the rest of 2024, just fundraising, trying to get financing to get this picture made which I also intend to direct.

[00:48:52] So in thinking about the budget, one of the things I've been thinking a lot about, especially in light of the IOTC near [00:49:00] strike of a couple of years ago is like the stories. That were told of like workers who were going home and almost falling asleep on the road because they just worked this ridiculously long shift, or workers who had to choose between sleeping or eating because that's how much time they had before they had to be back on set, or like straight working for 60 hours, like no, no nonstop, like all these terrible stories.

[00:49:20] Gee, wouldn't it be the worst irony in the world if this story I'm making about unfair labor practices used unfair labor practices. So what are the things I can do? Pay people what they're worth, treat them well, do all these different little things that actually make it a good work experience, right?

[00:49:40] And that's the other thing I think we have to think about when we talk about these systems of oppression. So the job market, a lot of these are based on tradition, not a necessity. Like a lot of the hiring practices we have we do because that's the way we've always done them like literally if we're starting from scratch and it's how do I hire?

[00:49:58] I don't know. Google hiring, [00:50:00] right? And you'll see, oh, you did this, and this. And it's unquestioned. It's received wisdom. And it's like, where is the innovation? Like the innovation that interests me now isn't, oh VR or AI. It's what are the innovations in hiring?

[00:50:12] What are the innovations in equity and social justice where it's like, Hey, we've been doing it this way forever. I think there are amazing possibilities for how we make movies, how we organize, how we hire, how we search. And I want the conversation around. The survival level, how do I get a job in the shitty market and stay alive to be inextricably tied to the, how do I actually tie to these groups that are making it better, that are giving me paths maybe to jobs that aren't trying to be shitty about it and maybe are organizing to actually change the way we do things

[00:50:44] I want it to be like inextricably linked. This is survival, right? Survival is both figuring out the hole I got to fit in and doing all this, covert shit to be like, okay, we're going to fuck up the system.

[00:50:57] **Amy:** Love it. Love it. Yeah, thanks for [00:51:00] sharing about your movie and dovetailing it very nicely back into the topic of our discussion today. What's the best way for people to learn about white meat or keep up to date with what's going on?

[00:51:12] **David:** What you should do is come to David Dylan, thomas.com. That's one stop shopping for Dave. So you can buy my book there. I've got an upcoming workshop. That is actually about trying to influence maybe the less ethical people at your company. And the main thing you could do is join my mailing list because right now that's where I'm putting all the updates for white meat.

[00:51:29] **Amy:** All right. Fantastic. Thank you again. I love that we were able to touch on some practical considerations and actions we can take individually and collectively as well as some of the concepts around psychology so thank you again for coming on to the show. Everyone thank you for listening. That's all the time we have for today. If there's a question or topic you'd like us to discuss, please reach out to me on LinkedIn. And if you're so inclined, we'd greatly appreciate your support on the podcast. So if you like the show, please [00:52:00] subscribe and leave a rating and review. Once again, I'm Amy Santee, and Laura and I would like to thank all of you for listening. We wish you all the best of luck with your search, no matter what you're looking for. We are rooting for you.