Aaron Delp (00:01.1)
Good morning, good evening, where you are and welcome back to the Cloudcast. We're coming to you live from our massive Cloudcast studios here in Raleigh, North Carolina. And no Brian for this week and it is Aaron for the interviews. for those that have been listening for a while, I've not been the primary person on the interviews for a bit, just kind of had some job stuff going on and some other things in life, but it's good to be back in the primary seat, if you will. And we've got a great guest this week and a topic that...

I feel like, you know, a lot of folks reach out, especially when things aren't necessarily great in the industry when it comes to careers. But also too, I feel like over the years, a lot of folks have also reached out to us just looking for advice of how do I get to that next stage? How do I do the next thing in my career? And so for that today, we're going to be talking about really the path to

being a tech executive. And for that, have Drew Sauer, founder at Drew Sauer Coaching. Drew, how are you?

Drew Saur (01:02.57)
I'm doing great, happy to be here and thanks for the invite.

Aaron Delp (01:05.452)
Yes, absolutely. And I'm going to ask you to talk a little bit about your background and how you got to where you are. But kind of full disclosure here on all of it, too. I engaged Drew. What was it? Gosh, about a year ago now. And, you know, my latest role where I am with my day job over at Equinix, head of AI technical marketing, was actually through Drew's coaching.

So, you know, I'm a proponent of it and a customer as well. with that, Drew, why don't we get started with, tell everyone a little bit about your background.

Drew Saur (01:47.564)
Yeah, of course. you know, my background, started on the technology side. I was an engineer in college, coder right outside. I went to Accenture, did consulting for a few years, and ultimately ended up in financial services in New York City. And I had a great career. I sort of moved up the ranks, you manager, director, you know, a little pause point in the middle, which we can talk about as we go forward. But ultimately, my last role was actually the chief operating officer of a technology group.

where I had about 750 people reporting me. It was like a $700 million budget. So pretty big role, which got me very, very close to kind of those sort of CEO type roles, which I eventually decided not to do. We can talk about that as well. And really what happened was my boss retired and I had to decide kind of what I wanted to do for the second half of my career. And in financial services,

very important, but there's a lot of auditors, there's a lot of regulators, there's a lot of work that's very, very important, but not exactly as close to the technology as it used to be. And I decided that 10 years was enough doing that. And I always had a passion around leadership development. It took me a little while to figure it out. I sort of helped with my own staff when they were trying to grow. And it seemed like a real need in the market of people who want to grow their career, and they get a lot of great.

but generic advice around build your executive presence, just be more visible, things like that that is well-intentioned but not super helpful. And that's when I decided to start, know, Drew's Hour Coaching, which is all focused on how do you make that kind of executive transition. And I've been doing that just over four years now. And it's been great. I've also had to learn how to start my own business and all that kind of stuff, but it's been a great journey.

Aaron Delp (03:26.968)
Fantastic. So let's kind of start at the start. Let's talk about some industry trends. I know we're we're definitely going to talk about moving forward in careers, but I feel like we have a foundation we have to cover. And what I mean by that is, is I mean, pretty much almost every day, it feels like in the headlines here in twenty twenty five, a lot of the tech headlines, somebody is doing a layoff writer, somebody is doing some consolidations. And so if you don't mind,

Give everyone an idea because you literally, this is your job to talk about the state of the industry, if you will, right? Tell everyone a little bit about where the job market is in 2025 before we talk about individual career plans.

Drew Saur (04:00.982)
Yeah.

Drew Saur (04:11.978)
Yeah. And it's one of those, it's been, I mean, just the last year or so has been tough for many people because ultimately it's a, as you said, there's been a lot of layoffs. And so it's this weird scenario of there's actually lots of hiring going on. There's lots of opportunities. There's lots of places to go, but there is a ton of people looking, right? And so if you think of supply demand, like they're both there, but the supply is really, you know, quite a lot these days. And that's why, you know, it kind of comes down to

You know, how do you differentiate yourself? How do you stand out amongst a large group of people? And the interesting thing is for many people in their career, back when it was sort of the tech heydays and it was super easy to get a job and everybody's getting called every, every few minutes from, from a recruiter, it was very easy. You just had to quote unquote, be good at your job and have a skill that was desirable. But now it really is, well, they have a menu of choices, right? And so what is it that makes you stand out from all the other people? Which also happens to be the challenge of any executive role.

Right, so even back in the day when the job market was great, the executive rules were still really restricted. So you sort of have this same idea of how do you not just be quote unquote good at your job, but start to figure out why would somebody want me in particular. And I would just say these days it's just become even more important to figure that out.

Aaron Delp (05:29.548)
Yeah. And I'll just add this for everyone listening out there. Even if you're not interested in becoming a tech executive and kind of making that that next step, a lot of the things we're going to talk about is extremely timely. And I have kind of my personal journey story I'll share as we go through this podcast. But but here's here's the biggest thing is it comes down to there's a few key areas you just need to watch out for. I think some areas in which

the industry has maybe changed a little bit as well. So maybe let's talk about a little bit of that. think many of our listeners, they're technical folks and a lot of them are senior in their careers, but some I admit like me really struggled to take that next step, if you will. And the reason why is the game changes pretty...

dramatically. And I think you're kind of thrown in the deep end and there's some deep dark secrets to our industry at times. so tell everyone about that, that ceiling, if you will, or that step from say like a manager role to a director role or a director role to a VP role.

Drew Saur (06:42.86)
Yeah, no, that's a great question. And it's the place that I sort of got stuck myself. And so just kind of origin story, right? So I was, for me, was, it was director to, we had called it executive director, which is, which was kind of like a vice president type role. And I was, you classic technologist. I was focused on delivery. I would try to be really good at my job and I got stuff done and I was really, you know, well regarded and well rewarded. And they said I did a great job and I was all set to get promoted. And for the first time in my career, I didn't, right. And so what did I do?

I buckled down, I worked harder, I did even more hours and more projects. actually got a bigger bonus and I still didn't get promoted. And that was kind of the aha moment for me when it was, it's not just work harder, do more. There's actually a different sort of scale, a different set of things that people look for in the more senior roles. And that was really eyeopening for me. And in hindsight, like once you kind of get past it and you kind of see it, it's much easier to kind of recognize, but ultimately we're all trained to deliver.

Right. And so for most of your career, you're rewarded for getting the job done. But when you think of the more senior executive roles, it's no longer about execution. It's about what should we do? Where should we go? How should we allocate our resources? And that's really why, you know, you have to start to think about you're no longer working in the system, right. As an execution person, but you're starting to think about the system itself. How is the organization structured? How are these teams built? How is the money allocated? And it's just a very different set of things that you need to learn kind of in addition to the execution stuff that's always gonna be important. But there's this whole new layer that you kind of have to add on top if you wanna kind of keep moving in your career.

Aaron Delp (08:21.454)
Yeah, yeah, it makes makes perfect sense. And yeah, I completely admit to I definitely suffered from that as well of, think I came up through the ranks and did well as an individual contributor and even did well as you know, that first line leader, if you will, and built out some pretty successful teams at some companies over the years, but

but really struggled to make that next jump. I was like, what, you know, why am I not, you know, again, it's like, yeah, performing really well. The results are all here. Why am I not taking that next step? And I think it also goes to something, you know, I had a mentor once upon a time in the industry, they, they, they said your sphere of impact, if you will,

can only get so big as an individual contributor and can only get so big as even a first line manager of teams. And everyone just kind of assumes that next promotion, it's just about doing the exact same thing. And that sort of impact gets a little bit bigger, but it is an entirely different second set of skills without a doubt. So let me ask you this then. So Brian and I, like we talked to lot of folks in the industry on an ongoing basis and

I feel like a lot of the conversations the last few years, they can kind of fit in a few different buckets, but it's all under one big common theme. Many have this

idea of where they want to go in the industry or maybe they like they did and now they're not sure and now you've got things like working from home mandates kind of ending and changing family dynamics and you know as some of us age we you know the kind of the sandwich generation if you will of like we've got parents that are aging plus kids that are getting older as well and so how do you coach folks

Aaron Delp (10:10.188)
to kind of find that happy medium because you kind of mentioned it like you were like, all right, next step is potentially be a CEO and but not everyone wants to be the CEO. And so like some folks kind of are happy where they are. Some folks, you know, like, hey, I want to go for this. then they when they kind of realize the commitment it takes or the work life balance it takes like, how do you have folks approach that and think about it of like, how much is enough, if you will?

Drew Saur (10:39.306)
Yeah, and there are kind of two halves to that equation that I find. So the first is really exactly to your point, like what do you want, right? If you had a magic wand, that kind of question, which you could design the job, the job that you want, I always encourage people to actually write it down. Like the more detail you can put to it, the easier it is to actually figure out whether or not you're gonna actually find it, right? So when people say work-life balance, that's great, but then what exactly does that mean?

Right. So I'll just give you my own example. So for me, it was really important, you know, dinner with the family, right? That was just kind of one of those things that I put out there and said, okay, I want, you know, it can't be a hundred percent of the time. That's really difficult, but like 90 plus percent of the time I want to be home and have dinner with my kids. And I want to be able to, you know, no, I can't, probably can't pick them up at school every day, but whenever they have an event, I want to be able to go to it. Right. And those are kind of my personal criteria. And so the more you can kind of put that on paper and say, what exactly does it mean for you? That's really step one.

is do you actually know what it means? Because once you have that, then you can start to look at the opportunities, you can start to look at your own job and say, how do I basically craft that myself? How do I set up my own role and shape it to the point that I can still do the things that are really important to me? And what you find is that if you're stuck doing a lot of things you don't wanna do, one way to sort of really change that is to make sure, back to what we talked about earlier, the value that you're offering,

is that much more, right? So if I need you at the office all the time, it's probably because basically I don't think you're being productive enough or I need you to do something that I think requires you to be in the office. And so my job is if I want to go home and eat dinner with my family, I have to come up with something that's just as valuable, if not more valuable in terms of delivery or ideas or something such that you don't honestly care that I go home and have dinner, right? That's not the criteria you're using, but nobody's going to do that except you.

Right, and that's kind of the first thing I would try to tell people is, unfortunately, it's great to have sponsors, it's great to have mentors, but nobody cares as much as you do about your own life. And so the more time and energy you put in to kind of figure out what does that look like, the easier it's gonna be for you actually to figure out how to get it.

Aaron Delp (12:50.956)
Yeah. And I'll share a little bit of my experience too. And this goes back to conversations you and I had last summer when I was starting to look for roles. And I kind of had this path and I have a background in startups and I have a background at big vendors. And so I've done a little bit of both. Right. And we'll get to unique value prop here in a little while. But, you know, I was going out and I was doing interviews and some of them were at startups and some of them were at larger traditional vendors.

I knew I wanted to stay in the vendor space. Like didn't want to go back to the customer area. But I had to like sit down and it was interesting because at first I was like, I just, you know, I'm just looking for a challenging role. So I'm going to kind of cast a wide net. And I remember you and I kind of having conversations as I was going through the interview process. And there was, you know, a couple of startups actually where it was like, Hey, I could go run, you know, marketing at this startup. And it's like, And that's going to be a lot of work. And, and don't get me wrong, it sounded, it sounded fun. It sounded engaging. It's you know, and when I first was interested in all of this, I'm like, yes, that's what I want.

Drew Saur (13:45.198)
Exactly.

Aaron Delp (13:57.698)
But I think you and I had some conversations around that of like, hey, is this really what you want to do? And then we kind of found a middle ground, if you will, in my hiring process that kind of worked where I was last year. so kind of a word of advice to everyone out there, find what

is your happy medium for all of this. And actually, I won't name names, but I had a conversation with a well-known person in our industry and actually past guest on this podcast.

And I, you we were just kind of talking a little bit about it and he's not in Silicon Valley. But it was like a little bit of like, OK, you know, what made you kind of decide where you went with your career path? And he's like, look, he's like, I'm not in Silicon Valley. I want to spend time with my family, you know, and all these other things. It was just a balance thing for him. And he decided because I felt like he definitely had the potential to go pretty far in the industry. He's like, I just flat out. He's like, yeah, when I first was on, like, absolutely, I'm going to go really far. And he's like,

Maybe not.

Drew Saur (15:06.508)
Right, right. Finding what works for you is critical. The other thing I'll throw in there is, don't have to decide your life right now. I always encourage people to do it for like a two to three year horizon, right? You can always change your mind. And so rather than trying to figure out all of it, because it is very hard to predict the future, I always recommend just for the next three years, what is right for you for the next three years? Because you can always revisit it. And that sometimes makes the problem a little more bite sized, right? And easy to solve.

Aaron Delp (15:31.224)
Yeah. Fair, fair. So let's talk about, cause this was probably the, you I certainly found your advice valuable with that, but the other big thing I wanted to talk about was I feel like the interview process has changed somewhat. And it's probably because what you mentioned earlier, changing dynamics of the market, more candidates for positions and, in the supply and demand scenario, employers,

have a benefit right now in that there is a pretty large supply in the industry. So they can be a little bit more picky. can, you know, we hear like folks going through 10 rounds of interviews and 11 rounds of interviews or big panels or big, you know, projects that they have to do on the side.

And so we're definitely seeing the requirements increasing. So that raises the bar and they're, you know, the idea there is to get better candidates. But at the same time,

how do you stand out and be a better candidate in this whole idea of this unique value prop? And it was really eye-opening to me as we went through that process of like, okay, like they don't just want somebody who's really good at their job. Like it was like, they have 10 other people that are really good at their job. And so tell everyone, you know, a little bit about that and then I'll have a kind of a follow-on question regarding the,

the process and how to approach it. But how do you how do you think how would you want folks to think about how to stand out?

Drew Saur (17:06.624)
Yeah, I mean, it's a great question because it's tricky and it's non-intuitive in many ways, right? Because when you go to an interview, and even when you think about your value proposition, you think it's about you, right? They're asking you all these questions, they're asking you all this background, tell me about a time you did this, tell me about a time you did that, and it sounds like it's all about you. And, you what I always tell people is it's not about you, it's about the problem that they're trying to solve. And interviews are proxies, right? Because what they really want to know is if I hired you in this job,

How would you succeed? That's what they actually want to know. And since they don't know that, they start asking you questions. And you say, tell me about a time you had a difficult experience with a coworker or you had to do something. OK, great. But what I always tell people is remember the context of the question. And so the idea is, and why do I care about your answer? That's the thing you want to append to every story that you tell is, tell me about a time that you had a difficult experience with a coworker and

Why would I care about that in the context of hiring this physician for this problem at this time? Right? Because it is all about, can you solve the hiring manager's problem? And so if you keep that in mind, right, that sort of takes away, 80 % of the mistakes people make because they tell this really interesting story. Now, like that was a great story and they're very engaged and it went great. Like we, you know, I hear this all the time, which is, it was a great interview. Did you get the offer? Well, no.

Well, then it wasn't that great an interview because you didn't get the one thing that we're trying to do. Right. And oftentimes when people start it's because they're telling quote unquote, a good story. But if you ask yourself, does that solve the problem for this job? There's a very specific thing that this hiring manager is looking for. And so one of the easiest ways to stand out is always keep that in mind. Right. So whenever you're asked a question, you answer it and you think about it from their perspective and you say, okay, here's, here's what we did. But based on my understanding of your company, the research I did, the questions I asked you, does this resonate? It sounds like this could be helpful to you, right? And so always trying to turn it back to how can I help them solve their problem is really the point of the interview. So again, it's just a slightly counterintuitive way to approach it. That makes sense.

Aaron Delp (19:15.436)
Well, and I'll add this because I think this so, you know, I was doing some interviews prior to talking to you. And then I think that this was kind of that light bulb moment. Like, yeah, OK, I had my unique value prop. But also to the way I felt like I turned around my interview process personally was so I again background in marketing, but I would have to do analysts and press interviews. And any time you did analysts and press interviews, it was

it's not about you and it's not even necessarily about the product or the press release or whatever you're talking about. You were trying to get across a very specific message to that one individual person. And we would have to do a bunch of interview prep for this person or the research they did or what is super interesting to them. And so I never thought of it in the context of when I was interviewing.

And so like I was going through interviews and this was prior to this, is a couple of years ago. And it was like, I was just going for various like VP of marketing jobs or senior director marketing jobs. And they would be like, what's your experience with PLG marketing? And I would try and, know, stumble through the questions, but I didn't necessarily have it. And so like, it made me also realize twofold things like...

what's in it for them specifically. So you had to kind of research not just the role, but each person you're interviewing so that you can really relay that to you're talking about, but also to pick any role in our industry, that job title, what they're looking for.

may be very specific or very unique and you may not fit it. Like sometimes it's just not a good match and you just need to and and that was really hard for me of like, what do you mean I won't be good at this role? Like, it's you know, I've done all these other things, I could do that. That's no problem. Right. But it but it made me realize how to tailor all of these much more so and, you know, increase my success rate dramatically.

Drew Saur (20:53.004)
Right, yeah, yeah.

Aaron Delp (21:17.112)
with something like that. So let me ask you this though, because we've already covered a lot and this is just scratching the surface. I think it can be really overwhelming. If if somebody tries to tackle all of this at once, right, and I'll give you for instance, I had a gentleman who used to work for me and he was impacted by layoffs in the industry recently and we went and had lunch and he was like, I don't know where to start because he hadn't interviewed anywhere in like 15 years.

Drew Saur (21:22.252)
Sure.

Aaron Delp (21:46.638)
And it was like, well, okay. You know, I like, you need to do this, do this, do this. And you could kind of just tell his eyes were like glazing over kind of thing. It's like, oh my gosh, this. And I was like, okay, let's, let's break this down. But like, and okay, what's the first step we're going to do. Right. And so what's your advice when it comes to like breaking all of this down and what matters most? Is there a specific, like, this is the path or is it like, there's multiple paths or how do you coach folks to

Drew Saur (21:50.86)
Yeah.

Aaron Delp (22:16.204)
go through this journey.

Drew Saur (22:18.036)
Yeah. And when I coach people, mean, in my sort of practice, we have this thing called the executive blueprint, right? And there's, sort of six different areas. And the trick though is, as you said, you can't work on all six at once. And so for every individual, depending where they are, like there's one or two things that they need to focus on. And, you know, for somebody starting out there, there are almost two that are all pretty universal in terms of where you can start. And it depends on how well, you know, what you want. Right? So one is.

I don't really know what I want. I want to do something different. I want to something new. That's where you should focus your time. You should go talk to people, find out what real jobs exist, go talk to those people and figure out is that actually what you want to do all day, right? And so that's sort of setting your target is very important. And then the second place is your value, right? Is going through all the stuff you've done and saying, what does make me unique? What are the things that if you line 10 people up who want this job, I have something that

nine out of 10 other people do not have. Like what is that thing? And those are usually the two, you know, by far most common places to start is again, it's either trying to figure out you want, the targeting, or trying to figure out what it is that you offer. Cause those are the first ingredients before you actually got to figure out, then how do I convince somebody to hire me? How do I do interviews? There's a lot of other stuff that you can add in there. But I always start with the basics, right? What is it that you offer or what is it that you want? And if you start there, that usually gives you a great foundation to build.

Aaron Delp (23:45.326)
So that's about all the time we have for today. Before we close out Drew, if anyone out there is interested, can they go for both more information and also how could they contact you?

Drew Saur (24:01.388)
Yeah, of course. mean, you know, drewsour.com is my website. Uh, there's a lot of, I have a YouTube channel that has a lot of videos on, these kinds of topics. You've got to always check it out to Drew sour coaching. Uh, we have a community and always happy to talk to people who are interested in improving their careers. So it's a go there, uh, check it out. Lots of free stuff. And again, the goal is to help people take control of their own careers. I mean, that's really why I do this. I am lucky enough that I got to kind of choose my second career.

And as you talked about in the beginning, the job search and promotion process can be very overwhelming and there's not a lot of information out there. And that's really my goal is to try to provide some structure, some clarity and a few starting points so people can get in the driver's seat and hopefully get where they want to go.

Aaron Delp (24:41.582)
Fantastic. Thank you very much, Drew. So for everyone out there, I'll go ahead and close this out. Thank you very much for listening. And as always, thank you for leaving us a review wherever you can. And if you have any feedback, show at thecloudcast.net or you can reach out to us too on all the various social media channels as well. So on behalf of Brian and myself, thank you very much for your time this week and we will talk to everyone next week.