



“I Will Survive: How Deirdré Straughan Built a Career in Tech Without Being An Engineer” Season 1: Episode 5

Speaker 1: Welcome to Stayin' Alive in Technology. A series of conversations with Silicon Valley veterans touching on war stories from the past and practical advice for today. And now, here's your host, Melinda Byerley, founding partner of Timeshare CMO.

Melinda Byerley: I am looking forward to introducing you to Deirdré Straughan. She's got a big job at Amazon Web Services. If you're new to tech or you're just looking at her resume on LinkedIn, you might think it was inevitable that she would have the job that she has, but like many people of a certain age, including me, Deirdré had to survive a series of obstacles and challenges, and not the least of which was not having a degree in STEM, which you'll hear us use a lot on the show. It means Science, Technology, Engineering or Math. In addition to not having a degree in STEM, Deirdré had to move to Italy for a new marriage. She also lived through this explosive growth and change in the internet which made it even harder to stay in front of new technology.

Melinda Byerley: This is a longer episode than what I have typically been recording. I think it's because there's so much information here. I've noticed that my recent recordings have been trending towards an hour. I think it's because by the time we talk about someone's past and then we talk about where they want to go in the future, half an hour just isn't enough time. Please let me know what you think of that, but for this episode, I actually think it will appeal to about three different groups of people. I think the first group will be for anyone who's new to tech. You're most likely to be of a young person if you're new.

Melinda Byerley: "When I was your age," and yes, I'm putting that in quotes and you can roll your eyes right now. I can't believe I'm saying it, but when I was young, I would look at people who were more senior to me and think, "Well, I'm as smart as they are, why can't I be in charge?" As I've grown older, I started to see the value of experience. I asked you to

ask yourself, and as you listen to Deirdré's story, how much of her work today do you think is informed by what she's learned in the past. Ask yourself if she would be as successful or as effective as she is without that experience. For those of you who find yourselves in this industry accidentally like me, or like me who don't have a STEM degree, you're going to love Deirdré's story, both to be inspired by and to learn from. I think that this group of people should listen for the qualities that Deirdré possesses and also, the attitudes that she displays that enable her to keep moving forward in her career in spite of the tremendous challenges she faces.

Melinda Byerley: For those of you who are interested in desktop publishing, you're going to love hearing Deirdré talk about the early days. She was a godmother of desktop publishing. There's a lot of fun to be had in just hearing her reminiscing about different technologies and tools at the time period. Please let me know what you think of both the episode of the longer format or anything else about who we should interview in the future. You can either leave that in the comments on this episode or comment to us on Twitter @StayinPodcast. Lastly, please consider this my plea to leave us a review on iTunes. It really helps us get the word out. It lets people know what to expect. It helps us get new subscribers, which helps us keep going. Thank you very much and enjoy meeting Deirdré.

Melinda Byerley: Today, I'm here to talk with Deirdré Straughan. Deirdré helps technologies grow and thrive through marketing and community. She's got product experience across consumer apps and devices, cloud services and technologies and kernel features. Her marketing toolkit or professional toolkit includes words, websites, blogs, communities, events, video, social, marketing, and more. She has written and edited multiple technical books and blog posts, has filmed and produced videos and organized meetups, conferences, and conference talks. In Deirdré's career, she has worked for companies like Ericsson, Joyent, Oracle, Sun. Most recently, she is now the open source content lead for Amazon Web Services. Welcome, Deirdré, to the podcast.

D. Straughan: Thank you so much.



Melinda Byerley: Deirdré, we're here to talk about your career in tech, but I love to ask our guests to tell me about the moment, if you can remember it, the first time you put your hands on a computer.

D. Straughan: Yeah, I can, actually. Yeah. My family had no STEM background. My dad may have been the first person in the family to actually get a college degree even. In the early 70s, he went back to school to do a PhD in education, which he never completed, but part of that, at some point, was doing a class in statistics. That involved doing something with Fortran on whatever the University of Pittsburgh had as a main frame at the time. I was, I don't know, probably 10 years old. He took me along one day to keep me amused while he was having to do some work and had me play Tic-Tac-Toe with the computer, which at that time, you could only see what was happening by printing it out on tractor-feed paper. I was absolutely enchanted with this idea that there was a machine I could play games with.

Melinda Byerley: You would enter one move and the computer would have to print out its move and then you would enter and it would print out? How did that work?

D. Straughan: Yeah. I can't remember how. I suppose there was a keyboard that I was using to enter. There was no screen. I don't remember how I signaled what my move was, but yeah, I basically had to print out every single move.

Melinda Byerley: Did you use computers again after that? Was it a one time thing during this time period while your dad was in school? When was your next big memory with working with computers?

D. Straughan: I did not lay hands on a computer again until my freshmen year of college. Partly because we moved back to Asia when I was about 13. I was in places where there just weren't any computers. When I went to my freshmen year in college, I did a Pascal programming course ...

Melinda Byerley: Wow.

D. Straughan: ... which I absolutely bombed at. Many, many years later, I finally got around to thinking, "Maybe that just wasn't taught very well" because the-



- Melinda Byerley: You blamed yourself.
- D. Straughan: At the time, I did. I just thought, because also, my dad had a long thing where he had always said he was bad at math. I knew the two were somehow related and I always thought, "Well, maybe I just don't have the gene for that."
- Melinda Byerley: It sounds like you think that's changed. It sounds like you don't think that way anymore.
- D. Straughan: I realized, at some point, because the big project in that class for the semester was to have the computer play Mastermind. You remember that old game with the colored pegs?
- Melinda Byerley: Oh, yeah. Yeah.
- D. Straughan: I do not remember the concept of an algorithm ever being mentioned.
- Melinda Byerley: Crazy. What were they doing with the computers?
- D. Straughan: Well, that was a thing. It's like I was attempting to what I would now, so brute force this thing. There was no way it was going to work. I don't remember the instructor ever saying anything like that. Yeah, it was crazy and dumb. I didn't learn anything. I learned how to find my way around a UNIX operating system. I felt like I could drive the machine. I could make it do the basic stuff, but I couldn't program it.
- Melinda Byerley: You didn't get a degree in Computer Science?
- D. Straughan: Not at all. No. I ended up majoring in Asian studies and languages. Partly because I had gone to ... I had spent my high school years in India and learned Hindi for three years there. When I got to college, one thing I knew I was good at was languages. I was still interested in India and Indian culture, Indian history and so on. When I got to University of Texas my sophomore year, I discovered that there were scholarships available if you studied these exotic languages. I financed the remainder of my tuition by studying Hindi and then Urdu. The scholarship still exists. It's the foreign language area studies, scholarships, which the U.S. Government even back in ... this was back in the 80s when Reagan was cutting a lot of educational funding.

Weinberger argued to keep these particular scholarships in hopes that people would study languages and go work for the CIA, which...

Melinda Byerley: Well, I would ask if you work for the-

D. Straughan: No.

Melinda Byerley: I would ask if you work for the CIA, but you probably won't tell me that that was the case anyway. We'll assume that your career did not include the CIA.

D. Straughan: No. That's always an option, I guess. Spend the rest of my life in a basement lonely.

Melinda Byerley: It's fascinating that you lived so much of your early life in India where there were no computers and yet, now, of course, India is such an important technology hub in the world. That's fascinating too.

D. Straughan: Well, it's even funnier because at the time, I was doing Asian studies at the University of Texas. We were a very small department and a very big university. When non-majors came to this department, it was because they were studying Japan and Japanese because that was the hot thing for business majors at the time. I'd intersect with them in some classes because I did some East Asian classes as well. They would ask me rather sneeringly and say, "Well, what are you going to do with Hindi?" It was like "Yeah, okay." Well, 30 years on, India is more of a tech powerhouse than Japan these days.

Melinda Byerley: Do you use your language skills in the work that you do today?

D. Straughan: Hindi, it's funny. Hindi, you really don't need because everybody you're going to interact with from India speaks English, at least, as well as I do, but it's still useful or at least nice to know something about the country and the culture. It always surprises people. I've had some very good tours doing business travel in India, which was fun for me and again, people there just didn't expect that I would know as much as I did.

Melinda Byerley: One of the reasons I've asked you is that you and I share this and that neither one of us has a STEM degree. For those of you who don't know what that means, it's Science, Technology, Engineering or

Mathematics, which is typically considered the entry point for a degree in tech. One of the ways that Deirdré and I have bonded over the years is that neither of us has that. She has her degree in East Asian studies, correct, languages?

D. Straughan: South Asian.

Melinda Byerley: South Asian studies and mine is in theater. Hers, I think, is slightly more relevant than mine is.

D. Straughan: No. Actually, that's a theater. It probably is.

Melinda Byerley: Maybe I'll do my own solo cast on that. We didn't have science backgrounds. Deirdré has not only survived, which is the theme of this episode, *I Will Survive*, a multi-decade career and technology, but she is working with some of the largest and most established tech companies. She is working with global marketing in some of the most technical marketing. She's not marketing consumer products. She's marketing technical products to developers, which I would argue as one of the toughest areas for someone without a background. I'd love to hear you talk a little bit about how you got into the work that you do. We'll get into what we can learn from it, but I thought it'd be fun to start with, how did you make this transition from studying South Asian languages and now, to do the work that you do for companies like Amazon and Ericsson?

D. Straughan: It actually goes back to the fact that I am left-handed.

Melinda Byerley: Okay.

D. Straughan: I had a terrible time all through elementary school with handwriting. It's painful. My handwriting was always bad. My teachers, it was a torture for them too. I'm sure it was illegible. When I got to high school, I took typing class. This was, again, we're in India. We didn't even have electric typewriters. We had these huge old, heavy, clunky, mechanical uprights and I learned to type. We had a very old-school typing teacher who had the ... it was hilarious. They had these music tapes that would have a really heavy beat and there was songs and things.

Melinda Byerley: Oh, wow. Like a metronome.



D. Straughan: Yeah. It was da, da, da, da and you jive along. It was very old-fashioned. It was very effective. By the time I finished that class, I was typing 50 words a minute. I just started typing everything I did. I was always a writer. I was always good with words. I love words, and had been since childhood, but it was just the struggle of getting words onto paper with by hand was so hard for me. I was extremely motivated to learn to type well. By the end of 10th grade, I was doing all my school assignments typing.

Melinda Byerley: I bet the teachers loved you for that.

D. Straughan: They did. They certainly preferred it to the violently magenta and felt pen I was using before that. I was on the school newspaper. I, also, was between the newspaper and the school year book, I learned about things like typesetting and layout, page layout, the old-fashioned way when you had to cut pictures and size them and all these things. I was getting all this experience and then when I got to college, I had enough ... my tuition was covered. My dad was paying some of my expenses, but I still needed a little pocket money. I was looking for just odd jobs I could do in between classes. I started doing things back in the day other students would pay me to type their papers and sometimes edit them. I found a job with a small printing services company in downtown Austin that had an early electronic type setting machine. This thing was about the size of a deep freeze.

Melinda Byerley: Wow.

D. Straughan: When I first started working on it, I had to learn what I now know to call a markdown language. I didn't know then what to call it. I had to understand the concepts of fonts and type sizes and all these things and be able to essentially program a piece of text into a markdown language. To see what the result was, it had to actually print it out on this expensive thermal paper. It was big revolution about six months later when we got this tiny, little black and amber screen that I could see it on without printing it.

Melinda Byerley: Wow.

D. Straughan: I was doing that part of the time and then they, also, were providing basic word processing services to little businesses. I learned to use early word processing machines. It's like a size of, I don't know, a

suitcase or something. I think it was a Phillips machine. I was learning early word processing. I just went and did all this stuff. I learned it on the job. I didn't really have any training, but all those concepts were interrelated and then later on, I ended up spending six months in Indonesia visiting my dad. Again, I just needed something to do and needed some money. I ended up working at the Counselor Section of the U.S. Embassy ... I'm sorry, the Commercial Section. Just secretarial jobs, but again, using what was then the most advanced word processing system available, which was one of these centralized Wang systems. Again, dealing with just printing things out and knowing these concepts.

D. Straughan: In the meantime, my father had, at one point, bought me a Commodore VIC-20 computer. Extensively, he wanted me to learn programming. The real reason was that he was living on my sofa recovering from knee surgery and he wanted to play Space Invaders. I had zero interest in video games. I could not really see the point of getting the computer to type out, "Hello World," and basic on TV screen, but this VIC-20 came. It was a cartridge-driven thing. One of the cartridges was a modem. When we got it, in the box was a flier for CompuServe.

Melinda Byerley: Wow.

D. Straughan: I got on CompuServe in early 1982.

Melinda Byerley: My gosh. That is early.

D. Straughan: Yeah. At the time, they had what they called The CB. I don't remember. They called it a form or something. It was taking the concept of CB Radio where you had a handle and you could anonymously chat with people.

Melinda Byerley: People forget that that's why we call them handles ...

D. Straughan: Yeah.

Melinda Byerley: ... is that they came out of CB Radio. I had forgotten about that too. Break 1-9, yeah.



- D. Straughan: Well, the funny thing, that's something that's been proven over and over again in my career is that I have a talent for doing things the unexpected way. It's like I'm good at testing software because I will always find the bugs. With CompuServe, I accidentally got into the CB Chat the first time via a back door, which instead of asking for my handle asked for my name. I said, "Well, I'm Deirdré." I never had a handle. I was always Deirdré. People did know it was a female name and I was one of a very small percentage of women on the thing. I was very popular.
- Melinda Byerley: When you listen to Cora's episode, you'll have a good laugh. Yes, indeed.
- D. Straughan: I had this twin thing where I was learning concepts of typography and fonts and so forth that now, people know these things but at the time, they didn't. At the same time, I was learning about using computers to communicate with.
- Melinda Byerley: You're learning to use a computer as a tool. You've clearly got a mind set up to solve problems. When did it occur to you that this tool like a lawnmower, essentially, right? It's a tool you were using to get stuff done could be something that you use to earn a living.
- D. Straughan: I'm not sure it ever really did. Up until the last 10 years or so, my life has largely been reactive where I have been put in situations, initially, by my parents and then later by my husband in which I just had to make the best of it and figure out how I was going to survive and then how I would thrive and what I needed to do to make myself happy in whatever situation. For me, it was always a matter of stumbling along and saying, "Well, this looks like interesting. Let's do that." Or be in a situation where I got a job and then grew it into something more interesting.
- Melinda Byerley: Why don't you tell me about the first time you did that with technology.
- D. Straughan: I had these weird skills that didn't seem to fit together. I had a degree which I knew was not going to be any use to be unless I wanted to go on and do a PhD and become an anthropologist, which one of my professors actually wanted me to do and I rather rudely said, "What would I do with that?"



- Melinda Byerley: You mean, be like you?
- D. Straughan: Yeah. I got out of college and I really didn't know what to do. I did my final year of college back in India on a study abroad program where I became absolutely fluent in Hindi to no use whatsoever. When I came back, I had met this Italian guy. I discovered that I had enough credits to graduate college and I didn't need to go back to Texas. I decided to move to Washington D.C. partly because, frankly, I had a friend of my dad's that I could go live with for a while because I had arrived back in the U.S. completely broke, and partly because it was at least a bit closer to New Haven where this Italian guy was doing his PhD at Yale. I just settled in in suburban Virginia and started looking for jobs and ended up, of course, doing secretarial work. Did that for about a year and a half including interesting stint with a K Street lobbying firm.
- D. Straughan: A friend of my dad's had been in international development which was my dad's career all along. He wanted to start a small systems integration company, which was a thing you could do back then. You could have a small shop that would sell people a bundle of equipment. Ideally, Apple, if you were going to be doing printing kinds of things, but Apple were very snobby in those days about who they would allow to be dealers. He was not able to get a license to be an Apple reseller, so he invited me to join him. We ended up selling desktop publishing on Windows.
- Melinda Byerley: I didn't know this. This is great story.
- D. Straughan: This was actually pre-Windows. It was x86 machines running-
- Melinda Byerley: Dos.
- D. Straughan: Yeah. Running the GEM interface and venture a publisher. It was also that he came in a little too late to be at the wave of where you could actually make any money putting systems together. Because he was a trainer and he had this background, he said, "Well, let's do training." We were initially doing desktop publishing as a service, which, given my background, it was pretty easy for me to figure out. This was in the days when desktop publishing meant you changed one word in a page and you had to wait a minute for the page to redraw.
- Melinda Byerley: Right.



- D. Straughan: He started selling training to government organizations, other companies and so forth. I basically designed this training and delivered it. It was-
- Melinda Byerley: You were how old at this point? In your 20s?
- D. Straughan: Oh, geez. I would have been 23, 24. I was designing and delivering these five-day training courses in desktop publishing. Did it for a few different kinds of organizations around the Washington D.C. area. Because the boss had all these connections in international development, I ended up going to Africa twice for the World Bank which was a lot of fun. My career could have gone that way, but in the meantime, I had this developing relationship with this Italian. He was not happy with the idea of me traveling to exotic countries. We had become engaged to be married and I also got pregnant. I married him, moved to New Haven and had a baby. About 15 months later, he had finished his PhD and he got an academic position in Milan and off we went to Italy.
- Melinda Byerley: You added Italian to your roster of languages.
- D. Straughan: Eventually. Yeah, I had started studying it after I met him, and then of course, it takes actually being there to become fluent.
- Melinda Byerley: As I understand correctly, you were in Italy for a long time.
- D. Straughan: Altogether, 17 years.
- Melinda Byerley: Yeah. Not an insignificant amount of time.
- D. Straughan: Yeah.
- Melinda Byerley: You kept working with technology during that time if I remember correctly.
- D. Straughan: Yeah. While I was in New Haven, I had worked part-time as long as I could up until a week before giving birth. I did some other little writing and tech-related odd jobs after that. When I got to Italy, our daughter was, what, 15, 18 months old at the time and I was anxious to get back to work. I did this the very American way of sending out



resumes. I couldn't even figure out what to call what I did in Italian. I looked-

Melinda Byerley: You didn't have the words yet in Italian to describe it.

D. Straughan: Yeah. I looked in the Yellow Pages and I found Editoria Elettronica, which seem to me an electronic publishing which is the closest I could figure to desktop publishing. I never really leave a couple of companies listed. I sent out resumes blindly. Didn't hear anything from anybody. Then several months later, I got a call from this Italian saying, "Hey, I got your resume a while back and do you think you could write a software manual?" Which I had never done but during the stint in Virginia, D.C., we had actually hired in a friend of mine who had a degree from MIT, although it was not a STEM degree either. We'd hired him in to write a software manual. I had sat alongside him and desktop published the thing while he was writing it. I had a pretty good window on what he did. I thought, "Yeah, I could do that."

Melinda Byerley: Love it.

D. Straughan: I said, "Yeah, I can probably do that." So Fabrizio brought me in as a contractor to write a manual for this OCR software that he was producing. He was a very unusual breed of entrepreneur for Italy, especially then. This would have been 1991. It was something that was not even common around here at the time, but extremely unusual in Italy. Software entrepreneur, he saw market niches and would try to fill them with software. He had this OCR idea. We produced it. It never did all that well, but at the same time, the reason he had listed himself under Editoria Elettronica was that he was producing CDs as a service. At the time in Italy, there was this weird surcharge on phone lines if you use them to transmit data. At a time when things like LexisNexis were taking off in the U.S., that kind of data in Italy was more likely to be distributed on CD because it was cheaper.

Melinda Byerley: Wow.

D. Straughan: A company that was doing this kind of publishing would actually send you a CD-ROM drive to go with your subscription and even given how expensive those were at the time, it still worked out better for them than trying to transmit stuff out of phone lines. He was in the



business of producing these CDs. Microsoft, at the time, use to run these CD-ROM conferences where they were trying to get people to adopt CD partly because at the time, to install Windows was like 32 floppy disks.

Melinda Byerley: I remember installing it off the little five and a quarter or three and a half inch disks. I remember it was like 15 or 20 of those. Yeah.

D. Straughan: I remember, at one point, it was 32 floppy disks.

Melinda Byerley: Oh my God. Yeah.

D. Straughan: Clearly, CDs were a lot cheaper. Microsoft didn't want to be doing that.

Melinda Byerley: Right.

D. Straughan: He would go along to these CD-ROM conferences to learn about the latest technology and so on. He saw when the first half height CD recorders were being announced. These were still they were the size of VCRs at the time. At the time, the pricing started out around \$15,000.

Melinda Byerley: Wow.

D. Straughan: This was a huge change from because the machine he was using was a \$100,000 thing that was a size of a mini fridge.

Melinda Byerley: Right.

D. Straughan: It was command line driven. It was a difficult command line. If you screwed it up, you blew a \$100 CD blank. He saw this market coming. He said, "There has to be an easier to use software that consumers will use," and set his company to develop it. Not too long after we finished the OCR stuff, for a while, I didn't have anything else to do. He said, "I love the way you work, but I don't have any more work for you right now." A few months later, he called me back and said, "Hey, do you think you could write a book? I want to write a book to help publicize this software I'm doing about CD recording." We co-authored the book, which ended up being him explaining things to me and then me going off writing them.



- Melinda Byerley: This is in Italian or English?
- D. Straughan: No, this was in English.
- Melinda Byerley: Okay.
- D. Straughan: He got Random House to publish it.
- Melinda Byerley: Wow.
- D. Straughan: It was called "Publish Yourself On CD-ROM." It was one of the first, if not the first book in the world to be published with a CD in it.
- Melinda Byerley: It's amazing. You have copies of this. I think I remember you showing this to me.
- D. Straughan: Yeah, I do. We knew that on the CD, we wanted to include, of course, a ... at the time, you can do a trial version of the software, but one or two chapters of the book were the documentation for this. Of course, I was writing that as well as writing the book. I had also done several side gigs as a journalist writing articles for Italian tech magazines. Those were in Italian. Occasionally, I got paid stints to things. I had gone to one of the early announcements of Adobe ... I'm blanking on the name, the reader.
- Melinda Byerley: Acrobat.
- D. Straughan: Acrobat. Yeah, and the whole concept of PDF. I wanted to use that, but it wasn't ready at the time. I ended up ... because I got paid separately by Random House to do all of the layout on the book, which I did using FrameMaker. FrameMaker, at the time, had a thing where you could create a high protect end. It supplied a reader software for it. I made available on the CD a hypertext version of the entire book, which, now that I think of it, was a lot of work.
- Melinda Byerley: Yes. I can't even imagine.
- D. Straughan: I came up with a lot of concepts that I felt were useful like the book had a very extensive glossary. I linked from the text into the glossary. You could just look up a word right then.



- Melinda Byerley: Yeah. I just did that on my Kindle the other day. That's pretty amazing.
- D. Straughan: I did all this work to produce the book in this cool CD. We had one minor hitch. We had sent a master CD to Random House and they had had it duplicated by some company in the U.S. Nobody checked the CDs when they were manufactured.
- Melinda Byerley: Uh-oh.
- D. Straughan: They were manufactured wrong and could not be used.
- Melinda Byerley: Oh, no.
- D. Straughan: They put them in a drive and nothing happened.
- Melinda Byerley: Oh, no.
- D. Straughan: Yeah. It was absolute nightmare for a book called, Publish Yourself on CD-ROM and we have fucked it up. We had this absolute nightmare situation going on. What saved us was that by then, we had created a CompuServe account for the company. I was somewhat active back on CompuServe and we had included in the preface to the book, "Hey, we are on CompuServe. We'd love to hear from you. Come find us." People did. There was, of course, complaints about the book which also came in other ways as well. Random House came up with a solution pretty quickly, so that anybody who contacted us would get a better CD that worked.
- Melinda Byerley: Thank goodness.
- D. Straughan: In a way, it turned out to be good because people contacted us who never would have.
- Melinda Byerley: That's growth hacking in the early days.
- D. Straughan: Yeah. That was when I learned that in some ways, when you're marketing something, it's better to screw it up and admit fault than to never have anything go wrong.
- Melinda Byerley: Right.



- D. Straughan: Initially, I was extremely stressed out about all this, but then it turned into a net positive.
- Melinda Byerley: It's fascinating that you say that in one of our earlier episodes. Our listeners remember that Larry Friedberg from eBay said that the data at eBay said that in the occasional cases where someone had a problem with the transaction, when it was resolved to their satisfaction, they were like 60 to 80% more likely to buy again than someone who did not have a problem.
- D. Straughan: Yeah. Exactly. This was when I began developing my theory that everything that touches the customer is marketing. Whether you think of it that way or not, every single touchpoint is your chance to make a happy customer or an unhappy one.
- Melinda Byerley: Now they call it customer journey, but you're thinking about it like a system years before it has that name.
- D. Straughan: Yeah. I kept applying that throughout my career. I'm still surprised of people who don't get this.
- Melinda Byerley: You've created this book with Random House, published yourself on CD-ROM, and you're still in Italy at this point.
- D. Straughan: Yeah. The book came out '93, I guess. Within that year, Fabrizio moved the company. He had a pretty big engineering team in Milan at that point. All highly skilled and talented Italian engineers. He took all the engineers and moved to Silicon Valley.
- Melinda Byerley: Wow. That's pretty forward-thinking.
- D. Straughan: Yeah.
- Melinda Byerley: In '93?
- D. Straughan: Yeah.
- Melinda Byerley: Wow. It's fascinating for people listening to this. We're so American-centric, right? Silicon Valley is an American invention, but here is an example of great minds coming from all over the world to bring their talent here.



D. Straughan: They were even then.

Melinda Byerley: Yeah.

D. Straughan: Fabrizio, he was an early example, but he was far from the only one even then. Yes, he was very far-sighted. He was very unusual for Italy, especially at the time. He brought all the engineers over here. He left what was then the marketing and sales and support and so forth in Milan. He hired an American marketing and support and everything else team. I started traveling back and forth because by then, he had hired me full-time and I was doing all the documentation. Of course, I worked closely with the engineers and I started coming back and forth four times a year. Ironically, the old office building where we were back in the day is way down in Campbell, which he chose because at the time, it was the only town in Silicon Valley where you were still allowed to smoke in the office. Even more ironically, this building is still there. It's next door to what used to be the old Netflix office.

Melinda Byerley: That's awesome.

D. Straughan: I've been by there. It's like "Oh man, remember this." He bought it in, I think it was December of '93. Also, Fabrizio was frugal --not to say cheap. Whenever people came from Italy, rather than put people in hotels and spend a lot of money on it, he rented a big house in South San Jose and just had everybody stay with him.

Melinda Byerley: Nice.

D. Straughan: Which, here today would not fly, but it was actually quite an advantage because it was a nice house with a swimming pool and Fabrizio was a very good cook.

Melinda Byerley: Yeah.

D. Straughan: I would just come over and stay with him. Although, side story, I realized years later that this contributed to the notion among the Americans in the office that I was the boss's mistress.

Melinda Byerley: Okay.



- D. Straughan: Fabulous, but I didn't know that until many years later. He brought the company over. Within about 18 months, he sold it for \$48 million to Adaptic.
- Melinda Byerley: Pretty damn impressive. Pretty damn impressive.
- D. Straughan: Yeah.
- Melinda Byerley: Who did he sell it to? I want to make sure we got that.
- D. Straughan: Adaptic.
- Melinda Byerley: Adaptic. Okay.
- D. Straughan: Yeah.
- Melinda Byerley: Did he have to stay with the company as a provision like they do now?
- D. Straughan: Yeah. He and the senior engineers had provisions. I can't remember. It was, maybe, 18 months or two years. Yeah. There's a lot of stories around that as well.
- Melinda Byerley: They were like key manned in and then did you go with that acquisition?
- D. Straughan: Yeah. I was in a funny position because I was still living in Italy. They would not hire me as an American employee because I lived in Italy. Initially, they kept the Milan office open. I was employed through there, but ... or no, I wasn't. They brought me on the American side but they paid me as a contractor. That went on for six years.
- Melinda Byerley: Wow.
- D. Straughan: Eventually, at some point, I actually had an interview with the Department of Labor as an investigation about this. I said, "No, no, that was what I wanted. It was fine." Yeah, I was quite well-paid at the time. I was traveling back and forth four times a year. During the summer, I would come out for about six weeks and bring my family and stay in an apartment and so on. My job changed over time. By this time, I was getting bored of doing documentation. I eventually handed that over to someone here, and then I was doing more and



more of the online stuff. I remember, because we were doing all this electronic publishing stuff, Fabrizio use to get the Siebel Report, which was this newsletter about electronic publishing. It initially started out about typesetting and so forth, and then more often to electronic publishing, desktop publishing and so on.

D. Straughan: I remember sitting in the back of a bus in Milan going to the office reading the Siebel Report and there was a little piece in there about this thing called the world-wide web. I remember thinking, "That's going to be important." Not very many years later, it became part of my job. I got to Adaptic and they had a website. Adaptic was a little backwards. They had, actually, only recently got an email because the executives had felt it would be a distraction.

Melinda Byerley: I remember having to print out my boss's email and one of my first jobs, so I could relate.

D. Straughan: Yeah. This would have been like '95.

Melinda Byerley: Of course, they weren't wrong.

D. Straughan: Yeah. This is true. One of the things I did for Adaptic early on was create the CD recording section of their website. Because Adaptic, originally, was making things like adapter cords, and SCSI cables. They were IO people, essentially. I don't know why they decided they wanted to get into software. They changed their minds fairly quickly. I was running part of the website and then in 2000, they decided they didn't want to be in software after all and so they were going to spin it out as Roxio. In the meantime, I had been doing the web stuff. I was running a forum on CompuServe and then I went from that to somebody on CompuServe said, "Hey, they're talking about your software on the Usenet. You should be out there." I didn't know what the Usenet was. I was like "Okay, let's go do that." I was dealing out on the Usenet.

D. Straughan: Again, I never had a handle. It was always me. As me. I was very open and above board about who I was and what I represented. There were trolls even then. In fact, after a while, people on the Usenet got tired of having to deal with the trolls, so they said, "Why don't you start an email discussion list."



- Melinda Byerley: Listserv.
- D. Straughan: Yeah.
- Melinda Byerley: Like a Listserv.
- D. Straughan: Yeah. I think I was using Majordomo.
- Melinda Byerley: Nice.
- D. Straughan: Yeah. That way, you have some control over the discussion and we don't have this troll who's constantly interrupting. We did that and the Listserv got very lively. Some people said, "Well, we can't handle all this discussion. Can you just give it to us in a newsletter format?" I did a newsletter as well. By the time I left, I had a Windows newsletter and a MAC newsletter. Between them, we had about 160,000 subscribers. The thing I learned early on from all of that was to have a very human personality in all of it.
- Melinda Byerley: Say more about that. What did that mean to you, to be human?
- D. Straughan: Well, I was always me and even in the newsletters there were articles written by other people. Of course, I gave them credit for that and put their names on it, but the newsletter was always signed from me and it always came from my personal email address.
- Melinda Byerley: Rather than the company.
- D. Straughan: Right. Furthermore, every time I sent out a newsletter, I responded to every single response.
- Melinda Byerley: You didn't delegate it to someone on your team. You did the responses.
- D. Straughan: Yeah. That could be 400 emails in a day.
- Melinda Byerley: Wow.
- D. Straughan: No matter what it was, kind on kind, rude, I responded. I was always honest. Sometimes, I guess, to the point of bluntness, but I never used excuses or marketing whistle words. Sometimes it was like "Yes, we should fix X, Y, Z. We're not going to get to it right now." Or whatever it

was. Customers appreciated that I was straightforward with them. They liked the human tone. The time I really discovered this was when one of the uses I had for the newsletter was that I would use it to tell customers there were patches available with fixes. One time, a colleague had told me "Hey, there's a patch ready." I had announced the newsletter and gave them a link where they could go download it. I immediately started getting emails saying, "Hey, this link doesn't work," and sure enough, my colleague had jumped the gun and the patch was not ready and it was not at that link. For once, I had not checked it.

D. Straughan: Immediately, I just felt terrible and was like "Why I wasted people's time with this." I immediately sent out another email saying, "Look, I'm really sorry." I made a joke about this is what I get for trying to do a newsletter when I had a flu which I did have. I thought people would be mad at me. I got recipes for chicken soup.

Melinda Byerley: Really?

D. Straughan: Some people explicitly called it out. They said, "I actually like knowing that there's a human being there." Again, it was another example of ... it's, maybe, better not to screw up, but if you are honest about it and make reparations as quickly as you can, it makes people actually like you better in some ways.

Melinda Byerley: This is a lesson some companies today could probably take a page from.

D. Straughan: Yeah. That's-

Melinda Byerley: I also found myself thinking about how even in your current role which I know was not the subject of this conversation, but how Jeff Bezos still maintains Jeff at Amazon.com. I've written notes to him and seen things happen in the marketplace that make me wonder like "Did I have a hand in that?" It's fascinating that even in the work that you have now that the company believes in that human touch still.

D. Straughan: It's a good way of dealing with people.

Melinda Byerley: It is. It's nice to see that. How we started out, we mentioned that you don't have a STEM degree and you don't have a science background. I

hope people, as they listen to your story, are hearing some things that I may summarize in the intro when I record it about grit and persistence and the things you hear people mention a lot about people in tech, but I'd love to ask you, Deirdré, did you ever feel that you lacked something as you went through? First of all, did anyone ever make you feel that way? How much of it came externally versus internally? Did you ever feel that? If so, how did you deal with it? How did you handle it?

D. Straughan: There was a point during the Adaptic years in which the group was growing quickly and we were advertising jobs. I realized that if I had had to apply for the job I was doing, it would've said, "MBA strongly preferred." I was getting the feeling for some of my colleagues that they felt like I was a spoiled housewife living in Italy and that this was just my hobby. Rightly or wrongly, I meant that may be unfair, but that was a feeling I was getting. I thought, "Well, okay, I'll prove to them that I'm serious about my career. I'll go get an MBA." I did it with the open university, which is this wonderful ... it's, I believe, the world's oldest remote learning institution out of the UK. I did an MBA with them. It ended up taking me five years instead of the three years they thought because of other things that happened. Yeah, and I learned some things and I now have an MBA in my titles. I don't know that it helps me now, but okay.

Melinda Byerley: Do you have advice for people? I certainly felt when I came in to technology when I graduate from business school in 2002, it was impossible to get a job in technology because that was the first bubble. If you didn't have an engineering degree, you couldn't even interview at these jobs. It always amazed me that my first job in technology is working for eBay like at the height, before there was Google. It amazes me, still, that I ended up there to start my career. I'd love to hear what advice you have for people. I think there's still opportunity in tech even if you don't have a STEM degree.

D. Straughan: Absolutely. In a lot of ways, the industry is hypocritical about this because we've seen VCs giving money and companies being successful with leaders who haven't finished college and in some cases, not even high school. It's like "Why are you turning around and insisting that women needs STEM degrees? That the only way to cure the lack of women and minorities in tech is to increase the STEM pipeline. Well, hang on, you seem to have a different set of rules for

some people." Yeah. I think the insistence on a STEM degree is quite hypocritical in many cases. I ended up in tech because I had developed skills elsewhere that applied. I think that can be true of anyone. The trick can be to explain that to people who companies do often have blinders on.

Melinda Byerley: Well, I think you also had a certain sense of like you do what needs to be done when they asked you if you could create a software guide. You said, "Yes." When he asked if you could write a book, you said, "Yes." You didn't say, "Oh no, I can't do that." You did it.

D. Straughan: Yeah. There probably have been occasions when I've said, "No, I don't think I'm qualified." I might have been wrong about that. I have suffered and still do somewhat from impostor syndrome. There was definitely a period in which I just assumed that anybody with a CS degree or anybody who was an engineer was, by definition, smarter and more important than I was. I don't think that way anymore.

Melinda Byerley: I'm fascinated. I think it was Dave McClure who was researching this, created this idea of the cockroach company versus the unicorn. I was thinking about like "I will survive." I feel it about myself. I would've described myself as a cockroach versus a unicorn like just scrapping around. I think there's just some great lessons about staying nimble that, I think, are true even when you have a CS degree. If you're hanging your whole hat on having a CS degree, you could still run into trouble in the future. If they are not as in demand as they are now. Because if you look at Deirdré's background, you can see the technology changing just in her lifetime. Even if she had gone to study computer science like Fortran, isn't that what you were studying? Like good luck. Nobody is writing in Fortran anymore.

D. Straughan: Yeah. In fact, basically, everything I've done in my career did not exist when I was in college.

Melinda Byerley: Isn't that amazing? I still can't believe it.

D. Straughan: Yeah. That's part of the reason I question. I guess there are basics in a good CS program. Things like understanding how operating systems work or something like that, but you can understand that stuff without taking a degree.



- Melinda Byerley: That's right. Engineers love to explain, has been my experience as a marker.
- D. Straughan: Yes. Also true. Yeah.
- Melinda Byerley: Like you said, you're honest, you're open, you're humble, you seek to understand. I've never had a problem with engineers willing to explain stuff to me.
- D. Straughan: Yeah. That is very true. That's one of the things I love about working with engineers is. I'm quite happy to be explained to and they're quite happy to explain.
- Melinda Byerley: It's fun, isn't it? It's fun to take that and then make it accessible to the world.
- D. Straughan: Yeah. That's a thing that I've always been good at and enjoy early on with a desktop publishing. It's like "Well, here are these concepts that seemed complicated at time." Like type pages and font sizes and I'm going to explain it to you. It can be done. It was something I also fought against when I was working with easy CDs consumer softwares. I would hear from people saying, "Oh, well, I'm a grandmother. I don't understand technology." That must be why I'm having trouble with this. I always, always said, "If you are having trouble with a software, it's our fault, not yours." It is. We always need to make it better. There's always room to make it better. When the customer blames themselves for being hard, no, that's wrong.
- Melinda Byerley: Just to wrap up this section, and then I have one more last question after this one, if you were talking to yourself either now coming out of college or to someone now coming out of college who doesn't have a STEM degree but is fascinated by technology and wants to be involved, what advice would you give your younger self or that young person today?
- D. Straughan: Tech is so big now and there are so many different kinds of jobs. I would hope that most companies are being more sensible about not requiring CS degrees especially for non-engineering jobs. All the work I've done has been very technical. Clearly, I have learned it along the way and about anybody else can too. I think there is room to get into tech without a CS degree or even without a tech background because

there were so many skills that the tech industry needs now. The smarter companies are realizing that. I would say, "Just go out and look." I know like a company like Amazon is growing very fast and has room for tons of different kinds of people.

Melinda Byerley: My last question for you is, what do you wish the technology industry would know or do differently about people like you and me?

D. Straughan: People without STEM degrees you mean?

Melinda Byerley: Yeah.

D. Straughan: There is, still, at the individual level a lot of blindness about this. I was at a dinner a few weeks ago with a bunch of very high-powered women in tech and they're all brilliant. I like them all, but at some point, I did call them out and said, "Well, hey, wait a minute. You're assuming that a CS degree is the only thing that's going to help a woman succeed in tech." I think we do need to change our attitudes at both the company and individual level. I would really like the industry to stop focusing so much on a damn pipeline or at least at the beginning bar of the pipeline. Yes, it's always good to increase the number of people who are getting all kinds of good education, but have a look at your damn pipes that are leaking. Why are women bleeding out of the tech industry? Even women with STEM degrees, why are they bleeding out of STEM academia and everywhere else? Something is clearly wrong here. Getting a STEM degree is clearly not enough.

D. Straughan: We really need to examine what is actually happening and not keep telling ourselves fairy tales about, "Oh, if we could just get back to 50% women doing CS degrees, everything would be fine."

Melinda Byerley: That is a great spot to end on. Where can people find you on the internet?

D. Straughan: I am loud and large on Twitter @DeirdreS and my website is BeginningwithI.com which stands for countries beginning with I because I have spent a lot of my life in Italy and India, especially. Those are two good places to start.



Melinda Byerley: Fantastic. Deirdré, I want to thank you so much for coming on the podcast. I always learn from our guest and you are no exception.

D. Straughan: Well, thank you so much. I've enjoyed it. I always learn from you too.

Melinda Byerley: Thanks.

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