

Interviewee Name: Lauren Grimes
Company/Organisation: Xplor Education
Position: Head of Engineering

After three years as a Technical Lead and Senior Software Engineer at multinational company Xplor Education, in March 2021, Lauren Grimes was made Head of Engineering – overseeing Xplor Education’s Parent Engagement software with their range of ‘Playground’ (educator-focussed), ‘Home’ (parent-focussed) and ‘Space’ (childcare-focussed) products.

Established in 2016, Xplor Education develops education-analytics technologies connecting parents, guardians, educators, and childcare providers across a range of school-oriented features including tracking their child’s class attendance, learning progress, and incident and health monitoring (Childcare Management Software | Document learning | Engage Families, 2019). Lauren sat down with UMI to give the lowdown on her new role, what it involves, the challenges she faces, and the people she works with, as well as pointers for budding developers looking to enter the Information Technology industry.

On Work

As Head of Engineering at Xplor Education, Lauren primarily describes her role as a “people-leader”, overseeing the development of features and functionality across Xplor Education’s range of child-learning focussed platforms. Her work involves liaising between her department of IT developers and engineers, clientele, and parent company Xplor Technologies, to ensure deadlines and requirements for products are met. In previous workplaces, Lauren says she was often “the only one (with a) mobile developments (background),” resigning her to working by herself and take on other roles.

“The project management, figuring what I need to work on, the finer details, performing testing myself, feeding all the timelines,” she lists. “When you don’t have a team of people to rely on, you end up doing it yourself.”

At Xplor, Lauren had found a company where she “was always challenged, there were no two days that were the same, and it was a really fast paced environment.” “It was quite lucky to come in at a time,” she says, “where it was really starting to ramp up the very early stages. The way Xplor works, you get experience in all these different parts of the business. It’s very much that collaborative vibe.”

She says the experience played a significant role in preparing her for leading people. “(I had experienced) leading a team and doing all the background things that people don’t really like doing. Learning on the job is always a big part of that. Now, if you encounter a challenge, it’s just something else to figure out.”

She highlights the importance of “having a responsibility and ownership over what I’m making, what I’m involved in” as a “core part of my career.”

“If something bad happens,” she says, “you have to take ownership of that. Something good happens, same way as well. It helps you become connected to what you’re making.”

As a leader, Lauren describes “constant communication” and “explaining the reason why we’re building something” as a major part of her role to delivering product to deadlines.

“If the team (understands) why we’re building something, where we want to get to, maintaining the bigger picture, it helps them during their day-to-days.” However, she likes to be “hands off as a leader,” allowing her team to “step up” and take ownership of their work, exposing them to leadership roles themselves. “For instance, we’re releasing something,” she explains. “A team member can take ownership of upskilling support team members on that particular feature. Another one could take ownership on partnering with product.”

“Every time you take ownership of those little things, you get more experience around how different teams work and how they integrate.”

On People

As Head of Engineering, Lauren says she finds herself mostly communicating with people separate from her work, “explaining things at a higher level than the technical level I’m used to”. She adds solving unknown problems and tasks relating to clientele and senior staff as a further challenge. “We have our Xplor Technologies parent company who we need to feed back communications and updates to,” she says. “Those interactions and relationships are something I am still getting used to.” However, she acknowledges the importance of building relationships with management and seniority “so that you have trust that goes both ways.” She points out these relationships are influential when applying for future roles and promotions.

“When these opportunities come up, (management) actually want to pull you up into them, and they’ll help you get there.”

When leading her staff, Lauren suggests “constant communication” as a core tenant to maintaining project direction, managing workloads, and building trust. “If something’s not delivered on time, big deal, just let us know, we work through it,” she says. “There are no repercussions for it, it is what it is, we just move forward.” She explains the “developing the concept of a feature, right through to delivery” as an inclusive process involving “not just the engineering team, but broader teams. “You get to hear all the feedback about how people are using (this new feature), how it’s changed, how they do their day-to-days.”

Since moving into her current role, Lauren now manages many of her former peers, adding another layer of complexity to her interactions. However, she describes

these interactions as seamless and notes her former team members require support as well when transitioning to a new team leader. "One thing I've learned in the last couple of years is how to change your tone and language depending on the audience you're talking to, (which) is very handy."

On Challenges

Amongst many challenges in the role, Lauren says her largest lies in knowing when products are ready to be delivered. "Something I've had to personally adapt to is being okay with releasing code and a product with isn't 100 percent," she reveals. "It might be 85 or 90 (percent). You can't spend weeks and weeks and weeks working on something until it's perfect."

She describes this as a mindset shift, settling a "slight, perfectionist streak" to her work. "We all have timelines and deadlines to release things by. If you go down the rabbit hole or trying to make the perfect product, then it never gets out."

An additional challenge relates to her role as a leader – deliberating with management and clientele, and guiding team members through career and life problems. "As someone quite introverted, leading people never really came naturally to me."

"I need time away to recover some of my energy when I talk to people a lot," she says. "So, I end up hanging out with animals, or just taking time by myself a little bit more than I was previously."

She describes this as part of maintaining a healthier balance between work and life – an issue that needed addressing during 2020's pandemic lockdowns and shift to working from home. "Previously, when we were in the office, I'd be at the office until 6:30pm," she explains. "Then I would get home around 8:00pm after gym. It was a lot more draining."

On Career

For budding IT specialists looking to enter the Information Technology industry, Lauren advises the journey is long, and difficult at the beginning. "Be prepared it's not going to be easy to start with," she states. She says the good habits of learning and absorbing information during university is key to flourishing in the industry. "You're constantly learning everything, all the time. You never say Okay, I know it all, we're done. Every day, learn something new."

She adds challenges with projects and knowledge can be overcome with this growth mindset, and openness to learn. She suggests forgoing positions and titles in favour of "experiences and knowledge you're interested in."

"Look for those things you get really excited about and that keep you at work," she says. "It'll fill you up a lot more than a promotion would."

Searching for relevant and learning opportunities extends to "saying yes" to unfamiliar fields or areas of interest. "That's how you gain exposure and experience

to other things," she explains. "You might say yes to working on something that should be in a sales area, and you might find, going down that track, you really like sales.

"There can be many different branches that come off (from these experiences). Be open to them. Saying yes to things will open those doors for you, too."

Lauren's final piece of advice is a challenge to the stereotype of programmers "coding outside of hours" to get ahead in the tech-career. "Don't feel like you're forced to," she says. "I don't touch my laptop once I finish work."