

Interview Transcript

Abby Durbridge 0:16

Lauren, thank you for having this interview with me today. Firstly, can I ask you to introduce yourself? Where do you work? And what's your position?

Lauren Grimes 0:27

My name is Lauren. I am the head of engineering for a section of our products that we have at Xplor Education. I oversee the parent engagement software, which is our playground, home, and space products.

Abby Durbridge 0:47

And how long have you been at Xplor?

Lauren Grimes 0:54

Just over three years. I came on as a senior software engineer. For the last two and a half years I've been working as a technical lead for our mobile teams, then last month, I have taken on the role of the Head of Engineering.

Abby Durbridge 1:13

So, before you started at Xplor, were you also working in the childcare industry?

Lauren Grimes 1:18

No, this is the first time I've ever worked in childcare at all. I have jumped around industries a lot. I've worked at big four (accounting firms). I was at PwC for a while. I was in the med tech sector for a while. Agencies, like advertising - I did that. And at just another digital agency too. So I jumped around a lot.

Abby Durbridge 1:50

In comparison to working at one of the Big Four companies versus Xplor Technologies, where does that sit with you and your preference and experience with that?

Lauren Grimes 2:05

It aligns a lot better to how I like to work and the people I like to be around. One thing I really love is having a responsibility and ownership over what I'm making and what I'm involved in. And you typically get that very much in start-up culture. If something bad happens, you have to take ownership that. Something good happens, same way as well. They end up building a much better relationship with the product you're building. Xplor very much fits within what I'm looking for in a place to work, and the culture helps emphasise that as well.

Abby Durbridge 2:09

You've said there but you have to feel more ownership over what you do. Can you give an example of what that looks like on a day to day basis?

Lauren Grimes 3:09

One thing that Xplor does very well is getting not just the engineering team, but broader teams involved - from developing the concept of a feature that you're working on, right through to delivering. The months after is when it gets into the customers hands. So, you're involved in all these different stages and processes and you really feel deeply connected to what you're building. One good thing is you've released this new feature, then you get to hear all the feedback about how people are using that, how it's changed, how they do their day-to-days. Having ownership over what you're building involves understanding what's building and why you're doing it. That ownership is a core part of my career as well - it helps you become connected which making.

Abby Durbridge 4:24

You've outlined you get to have that ownership, but also connection to the product. You feel a lot more responsible. What would you say is the biggest challenge of your role?

Lauren Grimes 4:42

This one crops up quite a lot. It's less a specific Xplor kind of problem but more so a startup one, where a lot of time you're building products that you're really engaged with and you really connect to, but at the same time you've also actually got to deliver. You can't spend weeks and weeks and weeks working on something until it's perfect. This is something I've really had to personally adapt to: being okay with releasing code and a product which isn't 100% - it might be 85 or 90. But knowing that, getting it out there getting people using it, and then working on those issues that do crop up, then they can be done. It's a mindset

shift, because no one wants to release things that they're not 100% proud of. Right? I do have a slight perfectionist streak. It's something I've had to work with over the last few years. That's definitely a big part of it. We all have timelines and deadlines to release things by and if you go down this rabbit hole of trying to make the perfect product, then it never gets out.

Abby Durbridge 6:06

As a people leader, how do you help? I guess your team adopt that mentality as well.

Lauren Grimes 6:15

One of the big things that I try and communicate - and this is one thing I don't think you could overcommunicate - is explain the reason why we're building something. If the team have understanding of why we're building it, where we want to get to, maintaining that bigger picture, aspect, it helps them during their day-to-day when they're building a small section of this, they can stop and go, Okay, before I spend another two days on this, is this going to contribute to that bigger picture of where I want to go? If the answer is no, then it's okay and it's easier to understand them to say, We're okay to put this on the back burner and focus on those more important sub parts of that feature. If you can explain the why, it's also easy to make those decisions themselves. Just make sure they've got the big picture and keep referring back to that, so they don't go down these rabbit holes.

Abby Durbridge 7:21

What's something you implement now, or would like to implement to further help your team, the people that you work with to work across the company?

Lauren Grimes 7:37

One thing that I've adopted in the last couple of years is this idea of Extreme Ownership. It's really promoted heavily by this guy, Jocko Willink, who is an ex-Navy Seal. Amazing. It's the idea of any problem you have - in your life, in your career, that you're facing day to day - you just need to take ownership of it. Because whatever the problem, there's a solution that you can work towards for that. It can help a lot with getting exposure for teams on how to lead and taking ownership of smallest parts of a feature. For instance, we're releasing something: 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. I usually am pretty hands off as a leader and let the team step up; get them exposure to what it's like to lead, which is always handy.

Abby Durbridge 8:59

Moving away from your team onto a bit more about you. So now that you're here, can you tell me about what steps and decisions you made to end up where you are now, career wise?

Lauren Grimes 9:17

Interesting. When I look back on it, I don't know if I made any conscious decisions. In terms of the career to end up where I am now, it's always been a bit of a gut feel. There have definitely been times where (I think everyone has this) you get towards that point where you've been at a company for a while and you're searching for that something extra - that extra challenge. Typically, I've followed my gut and said, Okay, it's probably now time for me to go and find that next step. At Xplor, it was quite lucky to come in at a time where it was really starting to ramp up the very early stages. I had found a company where I was always challenged, there were no two days that were the same, and it was a really fast paced environment. So that feeling I usually had previously, I hadn't had, forever. And the way Xplor works, you get experience in all these different parts of the business. It's very much that collaborative vibe. Part of it is being at the right place, at the right time.

One thing I'm definitely starting to be more comfortable with, especially as a woman, is putting yourself in the positions where the opportunities that sound really scary and that you don't think you're qualified for, just apply for them anyway. Because a lot of time you read those requirements or criteria for a job, well, I don't have half of that. But just taking a shot. One key thing that I've always tried to do previously, whatever role you're in, is building that relationship with your manager or senior - whoever's in that role - so that you have trust that goes both ways. So when these opportunities come up they actually want to pull you up into them. And they'll help you get there. I don't know if there's conscious decisions, it's more right place, right time, and giving it a go.

Abby Durbridge 11:50

You said they weren't conscious decisions, what is something that you've developed on for the past couple of years that help you take advantage of those opportunities?

Lauren Grimes 12:07

Looking back at the places I've worked, I've been the only one who has done mobile developments (my background), so I have been the only one within a team that's done that.

So I've had to work by myself a fair bit and take on other roles - the project management side of things, figuring out what I need to work on and the finer details, doing the testing myself, feeding all the timelines and how we're progressing, back up to whoever needs to do that. When you don't have a team of people to rely on, you end up doing it yourself. That experience had a really good hand in playing into (when I was ready or felt ready) stepping up into a people-leading role. I already had experience of how teams work. And I had worked with other people, so it's not like I was siloed completely. (I had experienced) leading a team and doing all the background things that people don't really like doing. The thing I could never prepare myself was for leading people - helping them with their careers, helping them solve their problems - because that never really came naturally to me as someone who's quite introverted. So, I've always felt a bit weird. But coming back to not having anyone else to rely on to get the work done, I had to just do it myself. Learning on the job is always a big part of that. Now, if you encounter challenge, it's just something else to figure out.

Abby Durbridge 13:55

Yeah, definitely. It ties in with the whole ownership aspect that you're talking about earlier - just do it, integrities, get it done. I really love that. Now that you are in this role, that you are managing people, I would assume you're speaking to other people within the business, potentially internally or externally. Can you describe any of those new interactions you've had recently?

Lauren Grimes 14:24

Yeah, and it's definitely changed a lot. Previously, you talk to your manager and those interactions are very comfortable. The interactions I have now are more dealing with people who are very separate from the work you're doing. Particularly at Xplor, we operate fairly siloed but we have our Xplor Technologies parent company who we need to feed back communications and updates to. That interaction and relationships is something I am still getting used to - explaining things at a higher level than the technical level I'm used to, and having to solve problems and tasks which are unknown, that I don't really know how to do. So those dynamics are definitely something I'm still figuring out. Down the other way, moving up into this position, I am now managing people who used to be my peers. That adds an additional layer of complexity as well, that relationship changes too.

Abby Durbridge 15:50

Are there any tough challenges in that part, or has it been pretty seamless?

Lauren Grimes 15:55

For me, it's been pretty seamless, mainly because the people I work around are really nice and really cool and supportive. So that has not been at the forefront of my mind, which is good. It's also making sure that the team members I was leading before, that they're supported throughout everything and they have that easy transition to their new people-leader. It's just shifting things around a lot. Luckily, I'm pretty good with ambiguity, so working through a lot of that. 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. So that is very handy.

Abby Durbridge 16:48

Like when you're teaching me tech?

Lauren Grimes 16:51

Teaching anyone tech. I speak very differently to my mum as to my Brother, to the other engineers in the team.

Abby Durbridge 17:00

I think that's a skill set in itself, to be honest. You've spoken on both; when you started into the company, when things were ramping up when everyday was dynamic, as well as now that you have a new role, where does work-life balance play in the mix?

Lauren Grimes 17:32

I'd say actually now, I have a lot better work life balance. Last year, we were all forced to address it, mainly because it's not a balance anymore - it's not work, and then life, it's the blend - because we're working at home, and you can't just separate. So, in the last year, year and a half, it's been a lot easier. Previously, when we were in the office I'd be at work until 6:30pm, maybe later, and then get home around 8 after the gym. It was a lot more draining. And then on top of that, the pace that a relatively early stage startup does work, we were saying that we had all these features, we hadn't built them yet. So, we had to go back and deliver them and there was always that push for delivering. That was an added stress. Few late nights. But you also felt supported at the same time. Definitely work-life balance is one and especially moving into a people leading role (I mentioned being introverted) I need time away to recover some of my energy when I talk to people a lot. I found how I do that outside of work does shift so I end up hanging out with animals, or just taking time by myself a little bit more than I was previously.

Abby Durbridge 19:17

How would you also encourage your team to have that work-life balance? Is this something that you've put in place? Or is it just something that you live as an example?

Lauren Grimes 19:36

It's a little bit of a few different things. Firstly, it is just having flexibility and having it so if you need to go and take an hour and a half walk because you need to clear your head you just go do that. You don't have to constantly check-in and update. There's trust that's already built. We're all adults, you can manage your own time. Having flexibility, especially when you're working from home, definitely helps a lot. Another thing is we've got a very broad, diversified team. A lot of the time, some people want to party to help balance out, some people don't. But there's never expectation it's completely required. That's more the social side of things. In terms of work, it's just constant communication - if something's not delivered on time, big deal, just let us know, we work through it. There are no repercussions for it, it is what it is, we just move forward. And that trust goes both ways. All the employees have to trust in us that we're not going to overwork them to the core. That side of things is really important too.

Abby Durbridge 21:11

That covers all of those questions in relation to you, your team, and your work style. One thing that I would like to probe on my own about is this interview is for university and tertiary education, so if you could give three pointers, three hot tips to budding software engineers and IT professionals, what would those be?

Lauren Grimes 21:54

One of the first things would be, be prepared it's not going to be easy to start with. Especially that transition of being three, four years into uni, you've gotten used to the routine, and you're getting towards the end of what you need to learn and know. Going into the workplace, you will be almost pushed towards the lower ends of knowledge (I don't really know how to word this). But you'll be surrounded by people who you constantly feel are intellectually superior, they seem to know everything. At the end of the day, trusting that when you do get a job, they've hired you because they trust that you're going to do the job and they believe you can. When working through those times where you feel it's too hard, you don't know things, continue the good habits you built throughout uni with learning and absorbing information. Because that's really key, specifically in tech - you're

going to be constantly learning everything, all the time. You never go Okay, I know it all, we're done. Every day learn something new. Just be open and prepared for that.

The second one; this is assuming you've already got that Graduate Job, anytime little things or tasks come up, try saying yes to them. It might be something that's completely out of your field, or your area you want to work in, but that's how you gain exposure and experience to other things. You might find you say yes to working on something that should be in a sales area, and you might find that going down that track, you really like sales. So, keep an open mind of not pigeon-holing yourself and saying, This is what I've learned at uni, so this is what I have to do in my career. There can be many different branches that come off that and being open to those. Saying yes to things will open those doors for you, too. I'm crushing things that I wish I knew.

There is one thing that doesn't get talked about a whole lot, but this is more for in a couple of years. There will be a point in time where you've been coding for a while and you're getting pretty comfortable with the levels you're at, you can solve some problems pretty quickly. But there will be a time where you may overestimate some of your skills. And then you will fall down a bit of a path again, or thinking, Am I qualified for this? Do I know everything? You might meet one person that does that, or you get assigned a project that you have no idea where to start. Know that that's going to come up as well. But as I mentioned, if you've got that mindset of always being open to learn, to that growth mindset, anything that crops up like that, it's just going to be another challenge to overcome.

But at the same time, don't be too eager to progress up the ladders, if you will, the career ladder. Check where you are, learn as much as you can where you are. Because you've got 40, 50 years to progress through those, the last thing you really want to do is to jump into another position that you're not comfortable with and sort of flounder around for a bit. At the same time, know where you want to go roughly, and work through that solid career plan.

Abby Durbridge 27:22

Fill your boots before you start walking in them before you try to go into some other boots?

Lauren Grimes 27:29

Yeah. I'd probably focus on looking for experiences and knowledge that you're interested in, rather than positions or titles. For me, I'm really interested in AI and machine learning. If an opportunity came up, where I could learn more about that - it might not come with a pay

rise or promotion - I'd probably take that because it'll fill you up a lot more than a promotion would. But at the end of the day, we all love extra pay, so it's a balance. Look for those things you get really excited about and keep you at work, if you would.

One other thing, if you are sort of into programming side of things - don't feel like you have to code outside of hours to get ahead in the tech career. I don't touch my laptop once I finish work. Some people are like Oh, I've got this side hustle, they're working on this programming project. I literally do not do any of that. So, don't feel like you're forced to, because it's a weird industry thing where it's assumed that programmers program outside of hours.

Abby Durbridge 28:55

Outside of work. It's definitely a stereotype, something I had in my mind. Coders, or programmers are programming every waking minute. They have side hustles, they've got this job, they've got that job, they freelance over here.

Lauren Grimes 29:14

Tiring. That would wear me out.

Abby Durbridge 29:17

I know.

Lauren Grimes 29:19

I don't know if they're very good points, because it's been a little while since I was at uni. One thing I find is half the stuff I learned at uni is now completely outdated. I have no use for it anymore. But on the opposite side, the theoretical stuff you learn weirdly crops up. Like oh yeah, I remember this. I can now talk about that in interviews. Okay, cool. It's a weird one to be in. Tech has this particular issue a fair bit.

Abby Durbridge 30:08

I have noticed things get fast developing, and it's only getting faster, and more and more things are getting developed. I bet you feel that sense of urgency - I need to learn it, I need to know this.

Lauren Grimes 30:26

When I graduated in 2013, 2014, AWS and cloud computing didn't really exist then. One of my subjects I did was Microsoft servers. Actual physical machines. No need anymore. On that side of things, it's really weird to look back. But at the time it was challenging, and you can take bits and pieces from it.

Abby Durbridge 31:00

That wraps us up for today. We got a very good insight into your journey and would definitely love to hear more. Thank you for coming today, Lauren. I really appreciate that.

Lauren Grimes 31:34

Thank you. Great opportunity.

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