EPISODE 480

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:00.3] JM: The values system of a company guides the actions of the engineers who work at that company. Some companies value open communication and a flat organization where anybody can talk to anyone else. Other companies encourage hierarchy and secrecy, so that employers are only focused on their specific section of the company. Some companies take themselves seriously and they have a work environment that is as stoic as the military.

Other companies pride themselves on having good beer and a friendly laid-back atmosphere. When company values are properly defined, the values can be used as reference points when making decisions. At Amazon, one of the core company values is bias for action. As an engineer, you're often in the situation where you can wait for more information, or you can start a project immediately with an incomplete picture of how you're going to finish. The bias for action lets you know that at Amazon, you should usually start the project despite having an incomplete picture.

Another use of a company's value system is for hiring. When a company publishes their values, prospective employees can use those stated values as a way to know if they would be a good cultural fit. For example, move fast and break things was a value that allowed Facebook to ship new products faster than any other company before it. But the speed of movement is not for every engineer. Some engineers like to have their code unit tested and free of all bugs before shipping to production.

Every company has values that define that company. Every engineer has values that define how that engineer wants to work. Lynne Tye started her company Key Values as a platform to index companies by their value systems. This allows engineers to find companies that are in good cultural fit for their value system. Lynne joins the show today to explain how engineers and companies define their own value systems and how that affects the outcomes of engineering organizations. Lynne also talks about her time at Homejoy, which is one of the first companies in the gig economy. Homejoy was an on-demand house cleaning service that grew extremely fast, but ultimately went under due to lawsuits.

The challenges of Homejoy were a predictor of the challenges that were later faced by Uber and Airbnb. It was fascinating to hear Lynne reflect on her time spent managing operations at Homejoy, which was about as operationally intensive a company as you can possibly imagine.

Thanks to Courtland Allen for the intro to Lynne. If you haven't checked out Courtland's podcast, the Indie Hackers Podcast, you should subscribe to it. Indie Hackers breaks down the engineering and the business models behind small software companies. It's one of my favorite shows and I really encourage you to check it out, because there is probably significant overlap between the audiences that Indie Hackers would appeal to and Software Engineering Daily.

Thanks for listening and let's get on with the show.

[SPONSOR MESSAGE]

[0:03:20.6] JM: Women 2.0 is a company with a vision of gender equality in the tech world. Women 2.0 is a community, a media company and a jobs platform that connects top female talent with engineering jobs around the world.

At the new Women 2.0 jobs platform, find vetted jobs for women engineers, data scientists and product managers. To find a job that is right for you, go to women2.com/sedaily. If you're an engineering company, you can connect with top female talent on Women 2.0.

Companies like Twitter, MongoDB and Craigslist use Women 2.0 to find new hires. Go to women2.com/sedaily to find out how to post your company's jobs to Women 2.0.

Thanks to Women 2.0 for being a new sponsor of Software Engineering Daily. Check it out at women2.com/sedaily.

Thanks for listening and let's get back to the show.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:04:29.0] JM: Lynne Tye is the founder of Key Values. Lynne, welcome to Software Engineering Daily.

[0:04:33.7] LT: Hi. Thanks for having me.

[0:04:35.0] JM: Yeah, it's great to have you. We're talking today about company values and how that pertains to an engineering team. You have built a platform called Key Values. We'll get into what the platform does. But first of all, how do you define values as they pertain to engineering teams?

[0:04:55.2] LT: That's a good question. Unlike company values, core values which are a little bit different, the way that I've defined values for my website is these are things that engineers like you or me care about and prioritize when we're evaluating different job opportunities. If you want to join a team that really is late on meetings, because you really don't like having meetings, that is an important value to you, as an example.

[0:05:21.3] JM: There is an important distinction between the value system of a company and the value system that is implemented by the engineering teams within that company?

[0:05:31.2] LT: Yeah. Many cases, I think core company values are – they're really helpful for keeping the company unified and cohesive, but sometimes it's really unclear how that actually translates to the day-to-day operations, or practices or behaviors on the engineering team. Any engineer can probably say this if they worked at a larger company, sometimes those core company values really manifest themselves differently for the sales team versus the engineering team. Key Values really gets at the values for the engineering team specifically. Yeah, it just helps them look for teams based on those values.

[0:06:08.8] JM: The values of the individual teams, those do tend to be downstream values from the company values from my point of view. Would you agree with that?

[0:06:21.6] LT: Yes. I would say – I mean, actually I wouldn't say that's always yes. It really depends on the size of the company. In some ways there is sub-cultures within an engineering department. For structure team behaves in a different way. The day-to-day looks different than a

team that works more closely with designers and has a lot of product managers and – or the marketing team, for instance.

I think it really does vary. Ultimately, it's nothing about whether or not core company values are true, or good, or anything like that. It's really just going almost like bottom-up in terms of what do you want in your day-to-day work life.

[0:07:02.9] JM: I see. Do engineers know what their own values are? Because if we've got these different engineering teams across the landscape of different companies, ideally if I'm an engineer I should know what my values are so that I can match to – some engineering team that would fit with that value set that I have. Do most engineers know their own set of values?

[0:07:30.7] LT: I'm laughing a little, because I want to say that it's mixed. I would say since working on Key Values, I didn't really realize how many people don't know what's important to them. To be fair, I think it takes a lot of experience figuring out what matters to you. I mean, just like anything else in life, you don't really know if you like or dislike something until you've had a lot of experiences.

I would say that in some ways, my goal with Key Values is to help engineers identify what those values are and paint a better picture of what they're looking for, because now I don't think everyone is able to articulate what they're looking for.

No, it's a tricky question. I think that it takes a lot of introspection and evaluation and reevaluation. Because let's be honest, I think values change and they evolve. Even for me, my values have definitely shifted and matured over the last few years. It's something that takes a lot of continuous reflection. I don't think many people are diligent about doing that type of reevaluation.

[0:08:38.7] JM: If I'm an engineer, how should I go about defining those values? Was there an exercise I can go through to figure out who I am as a value set holding engineer?

[0:08:52.1] LT: Yeah. I mean, I think there is a few ways. Kind of how I actually started doing this long before I started doing Key Values. Actually, a good friend of mine – I was really

confused about what I wanted to do with my career. I had actually just dropped out of grad school and was super lost. A friend of mine said I should just sit down and make a list of my top 10 personal values, just like what are the most important things to me in life and things I wouldn't trade up for – trade anything else for and rank them.

That exercise I was like, "Yeah, I'll do that in an hour and then let's talk." It took me several days to really think about what matters to me most. I think it's sometimes – it's easy to look at a long list and be like, "Yup, these are great. I love this. Humor, health, family, these are all great." I checked them all.

It's another thing to really say which ones you would choose over another and then rank them. When you're given a limited list that really forces you to prioritize, and I think that's a really good start. Then of course, how that translates to work. Some of those values hopefully – I mean, this is different for each person, but sometimes those values should translate to how you behave at work.

Maybe you want to work with people who share your personal values. Actually those examples I gave, family and health are really important to you, then it's probably a good idea to align those with your work culture and your co-workers.

I think that's one way. Of course, the harder, slower way is just – if you work with lots of different teams, you will very quickly figure out what you prefer. I don't think there is right or wrong answers at all. It's really just comes down to preference and also what's appropriate for that time of your life, you know those things change.

[0:10:36.0] JM: Sure. Yeah. It gets to the reevaluation thing. I certainly am not the same engineer today as I was five years ago, or even two years ago. I have different values. Those values have morphed.

Your company, Key Values indexes the different value systems of different companies. What are some of the values that you have looked at that a company may or may not exhibit? Or I guess I should say, the engineering team at that company.

[0:11:09.4] LT: Wait, sorry. Can you explain what you mean by that? You're saying like –

[0:11:13.5] JM: You've got these list of values, like customer comes first, or uses agile, or eats lunch together. Basically I can click on these different values on your website and I can find the engineering teams that are going to align with that value. What are some of these values and these categories that you managed to break the different engineering teams into?

[0:11:39.8] LT: I mean, so each engineering team on Key Values, there is a list of 44 values. Engineering teams are limited to six – Or sorry, eight of those values. They have to also, like what I mentioned before or rank these.

If you choose on any given value, there are many teams that have not selected that value and therefore, they won't be filtered through. Really what I mentioned earlier in terms of that personal exercise I did a few years ago is what I'm asking each engineering team to do themselves.

I give them a list of preset values and they have to – they work together to identify the ones that best describe their engineering culture and their practices and their operations. Then they qualify each of those in their profile. When you go to Key Values and you click on one of those, you're really seeing which teams also chose that in their top eight.

[0:12:32.8] JM: I think values are related to culture. There is some relationship there. Maybe the culture is an abstraction of all the different values blended together. When I've talked to people about company culture, some people say culture is what we are. We are X. We get omelets for breakfast as a team every day. These are the things that we do.

Other people say that their culture is that we are not X. We do not ever put cheese on our omelets as an engineering team. I just had eggs for breakfast and you can't tell. What are the most devisive values? What are the things that I can look at and some companies are going to say, "We are not this." Other people will proudly say, "We are this."

[0:13:24.7] LT: That's a really good question. Before I even answer that with actual examples, there are a lot of companies, when I talk to them that say certain things, but they still aren't quite

comfortable sharing that publicly. I think that's my goal also with Key Values is making sure people feel proud standing by who they are, even if it's not what they think is – I'm doing air quotes here. What they think is the right thing to say.

Once that people feel comfortable about usually have to do with their strategy. A great example is fast-paced environment. Some teams are like, "This is exactly who we are. This describes everything about each of the individuals that make up our team." Then other companies are like, "We have nothing to do with that fast-paced environment culture. We're very thoughtful, we're cautious."

I think fast-paced environment touches broadly and can relate to other departments in a company. When it comes to coding, there is another value risk taking over stability. I think this also touches on when it comes to pushing code, are you going to prioritize being fast, or are you going to prioritize being perfect? I don't care what anyone says, you really cannot be both.

Of course, there is times where you can prioritize one over the other. In which case, the whole goal is for someone to explain those – like those situations, but really you can't be both of those things. There is some teams who is really leaning towards philosophy and they're all about breaking things.

One of the teams that I profiled Amplitude, they would definitely lean towards releasing and reverting, versus spending a lot of time perfecting code. Of course, there are other companies who spend a lot of time making sure that things have been thoroughly tested, there is multiple reviewers before they even merge that code. I think those are really good examples and are very divisive.

Of course, there is the other one is has good beer. That's probably been the most controversial value on the list. I think just given the current climate in Silicon Valley, alcohol, the workplace is just very controversial. I've been getting more teams that aren't based in the bay. Like companies in Germany are like, "Yeah, has good beer. That's a huge part of who we are and how we socialize." It's a different scenario, I suppose. Things are a little sensitive in the bay. Yeah, that's another very divisive value.

[0:16:01.9] JM: You are programming a new service for your users, or you are hacking on a side project. Whatever you're building, you need to send e-mail. For sending e-mail, developers use SendGrid. SendGrid is the API for e-mail trusted by developers.

Send transactional e-mails through the SendGrid API. Build marketing campaigns with a beautiful interface for crafting the perfect e-mail. SendGrid is trusted by Uber, Airbnb and Spotify. But anyone can start for free and send 40,000 e-mails in their first month. After the first month, you can send 100 e-mails per day for free.

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[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:17:15.7] JM: When I click on creative and innovative, then I get a list of companies that have identified with that specific value. They've said, "We are creative and innovative. We want to be categorized with having that value." This is on your website. I click into one of the companies. I can click into Pocket Gems, which is listed as one of the creative and innovative companies. Then it tells me more about how they work, who they are, what goes on at Pocket Gems.

If I am looking for a job, I'm looking for a company to work at, I can use this as a platform to learn more about companies. Once I have that information, what should I do with it? Am I just looking at this information in order to find out, "Does this company fit with my gestalt?"

[0:18:13.7] LT: Man, if you find a team that you love and speaks to you and you feel excited about, apply. I think a lot of people come to Key Values, whether they're actively or passively looking for a new job. I think it's really educational just to see what's out there. That's a whole another thing I can talk about. I really feel like people lack exposure to other teams.

Yeah, actually I want to dive into this because I've been thinking about this a lot is that a lot of –
I compare looking for a job to dating. I always say there is all these parallels, but one way that
they're extremely different is that when you're in a relationship, you're constantly exposed to
other examples of relationships and partners.

Even if you're single or in a relationship, you meet other singles or couples and you hear about
other couples and you see how other couples interact with one another. You might go to a
barbecue and this couple you just meet, they're talking about how every year they both take a
week off from work and then they spend – there is just like an example of things they do. You're
like, "Hey, I like that. We should do that too," to whoever your significant other is.

When you're working on a team at a company, it's rare that you are exposed to seeing how
other teams work and interact with each other. For me, I don't think I ever did when I was
working fulltime at a company. I mean, maybe there is conferences you meet other people. Or
even if you go to happy hours, like you can see how they interact with each other in that type of
setting. It's really rare to just see how other – how other groups of people collaborate, or how
they communicate, or how they make really important decisions where there are major
tradeoffs. I think there is just not a lot of exposure there.

Anyways, that's my long thing of how I think people should read profiles anyway, just because
they're really educational. I've learned so much doing this. But to answer your question about if
you click a value and then find a team that matches and read it, I mean it really is a self-filtering
tool. Sometimes teams define something and it just doesn't speak to you, and that's okay.

My hope is that it saves you the time of applying, doing the technical thumb screen, doing the
take home challenge, doing white-boarding challenges and visiting the company for an onsite
interview. You usually have to do all those things first before you actually get to meet the team
and have them describe, like tell me how you're creative and innovative. Really, it's just saving
people time to learn a little bit more about the team before they go through all the trouble.

Of course, if you read Pocket Gems is a great example. I didn't know what they meant by
creative and innovative until I worked with them. Their team is extremely creative. It means like
visual artist, they have a lot of designers. They're all about storytelling. Pocket Gems makes

mobile games. A lot of their team members used to work on movie production, or they've written – they've been writers for TV shows that many of us have watched. It's that type of creativity. If that is exciting to someone, they should absolutely by all means learn more and apply.

[0:21:34.8] JM: Yeah. You make some really good points. I've worked at probably five or six different companies throughout internships and jobs that I left quickly, jobs that I stayed at for a longer period of time. Each of the cultures was radically divergent.

I am thinking back now and there was not any two companies that were extremely similar. This may be surprising to people who have not worked at many companies, or people who have not worked at any company. There is just radically different cultures within the company. I think there is a lot of within the company, whatever culture the company has, it does bleed down into the engineering teams.

The way that you get the information about these companies, the different categories that they fall into the, the different – they each choose 10 values that make up their key values. I think it's 10.

[0:22:29.6] LT: Eight.

[0:22:31.2] JM: Eight. Okay.

[0:22:31.4] LT: I misspoke earlier too. It's okay.

[0:22:33.3] JM: Okay. All right, so eight values. Are you interviewing each of these companies to find out what their values are?

[0:22:41.7] LT: Yeah. In the very beginning, I would – usually I have the team spend some time choosing their eight values. But then when I interview, I would really ask deep dive questions, things that if I was a candidate applying for a job on your team, I would really want to know more about.

If a company says that they have work-life balance, I would ask – I'd probably have five or 10 questions lined up, just asking what they mean by that. I would do these interviews, record them, and then of course work with them to put it into writing.

There were times where if a company struggled to really talk about a given value, I would suggest that maybe they think of another value. Because if you can't – if you choose a value and you can't talk about it at length, it's probably not accurate. It's probably something that sounds nice, but isn't something that actually describes who you are and how your team operates together.

Yeah. Every team chooses their own values and they have complete control over the content in their profiles. I am just really there as like a coach, or a cheerleader in some cases to help them put it into words.

[0:23:54.2] JM: You have a standardized set of questions, or do you have ways where you provoke them into talking about the things that they may not know how to express?

[0:24:03.4] LT: Yeah. I've gotten a lot better at this. In the beginning, I was learning the process too. Since I've launched, I actually don't do in-person or video interviews anymore. I do have a list of prompts and things that help people get unstuck if they get stuck writing. These really help teams figure out what type of content they should be curating for each of their value selections. Yeah definitely, some teams need a lot more help than others and it's been really interesting to just see how it varies.

[0:24:39.2] JM: When you talk – I don't think these companies are indexed on Key Values, but when you talk to the engineering teams, or people who work at engineering teams at places like Google or Facebook or Apple, how did they look at values, the values of their engineering team? Or have you talked to people like that?

[0:24:59.7] LT: Yeah. I mean, it's hard not to know tons of – companies living in San Francisco. I live with several Google employees, or I've had lived with several Google employees. It's interesting. I mean, I think why I started this is because it's good to know what the company

culture is like at large, but it's rare for a company that's large like Google for the culture to be super consistent across every team.

Again, it just depends on what product is it, or how many people are on that team. If you are working with four people, let's just say a small team, and there are teams that are that size, bigger companies. Like maybe the four of your agree that you can start your day at 11 AM, and that happens.

I think it's like small things like that that really aren't captured with big company goals, or company values. But generally, I'd say that people think values do hold some truth to, like the company values to their own individual teams. But there is a lot more information that a job seeker would want to know before applying or accepting an offer to that team.

What I'm really trying to get at is exposing that lower level, granular information early on. Because it's great to know that a company – like we all – We prioritize integrity. I think that's great. I'm not a nay-sayer, but if you're working day-to-day, you want to know how that actually affects your – like what time you show up, who you work with, are you sitting with people that are also engineers, or are you sitting alongside sales people? It's just little things like that that don't really get touched on.

Actually, earlier you mentioned eats lunch together. That's usually not a company core value, like we eat lunch together. But that's something that's important and it happens every single day and people want to know what that time is like. Am I going to eat lunch at my desk alone, or am I going to eat with everybody?

Or maybe lots of companies do this, which I've learned is they combine lunch time with talks, or lunch and learns, or demos, or something that's both in-line with their company's goals, but also its social and collaborative. I think those things are important to touch on.

[0:27:26.4] JM: Right. One thing I'm a little bit confused about. Key Values is not about the company values itself. It's about the values of the engineering teams, but there are different engineering teams within a given company. Is this just for companies that are small enough, where the culture of the engineering team is pretty unified?

[0:27:49.9] LT: That's a great question. Originally yes, I wanted to just focus on small engineering teams. Some companies, like so for example Udacity and Postmates, these have many engineering teams, but the profile is for a specific one.

I'm really trying to look at the team level and capture some of the differences that I mentioned before. There is variants between the sub-cultures of engineering teams at a bigger org. That's definitely something that I'm trying to get at. Also, there are teams that have multiple pods, or teams or groups, or how they organize themselves. But because people transfer from teams so often, it is actually very consistent. They choose to create a profile that talks about their entire engineering department.

[0:28:39.9] JM: Going back to those big companies, I don't know if you've read about this much, or talked to many people about this that like when I was in Amazon, the company values were so ingrained in the culture that they seem to come up in every meeting and they seem to be a framework for how people made decisions.

They were so impactful that they definitely affected the decision-making structure of the individual engineering teams that were under the umbrella of Amazon. It really made me think about how those huge companies get the values to permeate the larger organizations. You were just talking about the engineering team. My cat is in the background meowing really loudly. You're probably hearing that.

[0:29:29.1] LT: Maybe she wants to be fed.

[0:29:31.7] JM: No, he doesn't want to be fed. He's got this thing where anytime he sees light against the wall, he freaks out. Light that is coming in from the windows is against the wall. It's because I played with a laser pointer with him when he was really young.

[0:29:49.2] LT: Yeah, I'm going to ask.

[0:29:50.3] JM: It actually traumatized him. This is totally divergent, but people should – for some cats, laser pointers are terrible, because they constantly are trying to catch the light and they never catch it, because they just –

[0:30:03.7] LT: No, it's horrible.

[0:30:04.2] JM: It is horrible. It's torture.

[0:30:07.6] LT: Yeah. It's because they never get –

[0:30:08.7] JM: It's completely traumatizing, so now any time a type of light he sees, he chases. Anyway, the question I was just going to ask was like – this is actually relevant for small companies too, because the companies they want the culture that they establish to permeate the broader organization. So at Facebook, they do this with the propaganda posters on the walls. I'm sorry, not propaganda posters, but things like move fast and break things. You'll see these throughout the place.

They get the culture to really scale and to adopt the different values within that organization. Have you seen that be important to the companies that you talk to, like ways that they do get the values to permeate the different areas of the organization?

[0:30:47.4] LT: Oh, man. Absolutely. I mean, it's actually funny. I was just talking to someone from the AWS team and they mentioned like just casually in the first e-mail some of the company's core values. It's funny that you just said that.

I think that's a great example. That's what companies should aspire to do. You shouldn't create values that you just – this is like what everyone says, "Don't create values that you just put on the wall and look nice." It's really how do you make sure this is integrated with the day-to-day, and how people make decisions and how people organizations, and really how do people hire and retain their employees? I think that's exactly the goal.

The way that you do this is really by first choosing the values that are easy to – or it's natural for people at the companies to exhibit, and it really starts with leadership. My guess, just thinking

about this and working with companies of different sizes is it's starting early and establishing a set of core values that everyone at the company can look to. It's like their North Star.

Then just again, evaluating constantly within your company. I'm sure Amazon has evolved their values since their inception. Then also it really is one of the purposes for having these values is it keeps people – it gives people guidance in terms of who they should hire. It's like what I'm getting at with Key Values, is you should really hire people that are culturally aligned.

I'm guessing most engineers want to join companies that they feel culturally aligned with. Ultimately, the way that it permeates across the company is just for the leaders to lead by example. I mean, you can look at all of the horror stories of companies who say one thing and do the complete opposite. I think this has to do with senior leadership not walking the walk. They say one thing and do the opposite.

I mean, you know when you go to a company and they give like, "Here is our handbook or onboarding papers," you can read what the company says they are, but really you're going to just follow suite based on how the people around you are behaving. If everyone is doing something, or the person next to you is getting promoted or rewarded for some type of behavior, then that's what you think the culture is. It doesn't matter what it says on the wall, or in the handbook. Culture is what people do and how they behave. Yeah, I think it's just walking the walk instead of just talking the talk.

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[0:33:27.5] JM: For years when I started building a new app, I would use MongoDB. Now I use MongoDB Atlas. MongoDb Atlas is the easiest way to use MongoDB in the cloud. It's never been easier to hit the ground running.

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[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:35:27.7] JM: Yeah, this was like – it reminds me of how Enron's values were communication and respect and integrity. At Enron, you had a management team that was hiding everything from the lower level employees, so the communication was terrible.

Respect. I think there was animosity between the different teams at Enron. They were competing with each other. Of course, integrity – there was certainly no integrity at Enron. Anybody who has not heard the Enron story should check out the documentary, or read about it. But people were parroting each other. People were mirroring each other. It didn't matter what the value system at the top was.

[0:36:16.2] LT: Yeah. I mean, that's just a classic example of how leadership didn't behave in-line with their values, but their stated values. I'm sure there was even lower level, people seeing – like when you see someone get rewarded, or promoted, or celebrated, or they get a shout out at a company all-hands for doing something that is really not in-line with those values, you throw

those out the door. That is what the culture is. Actions speak louder than words is really what it comes down to.

Yeah, Enron is a really good example of how that did not – Yeah, you hear the horror stories more than the other way. It's funny. I feel like just talking about Key Values with people. A lot of people are scarred, or like they just remember the horse race. It's funny, because I'm working with engineering teams and the stereotypes are – engineers are introverted. They're great at coding, terrible at selling or talking about themselves.

It's true. I see, almost quite the opposite. I meet these teams, who it takes me days working with them to really uncover their best qualities. I fall in love with them days after. At first I'm like, "Oh, yeah. Seems like dry." This is horrible for me to admit, but there are lots of teams where I'm like not that excited about learning and learning about and working with.

Then I realize, they are so fascinating and they have all these practices in place that are really unique and they have such an opinion and strong personality. They just aren't good at broadcasting them. In some ways, I feel like I'm – it's like the opposite. These people have really strong values. They just aren't good at talking about them. It's been really interesting for sure.

[0:38:02.6] JM: Key values was, I think the first major project that you started building/the first company that you started building. You started to code a few years ago. You started freelancing in order to improve yourself at coding, then you started Key Values. What's been the process for building it and what has been challenging? What has been surprising? Tell me about that story.

[0:38:28.7] LT: Oh, man. Well, learning to code was its own journey. It's not easy. It's really frustrating and hard, but I'm so glad that I decided to make that career change. My parents were a little nervous, I'll tell you that.

Then freelancing taught me a lot. I've heard this from people that say freelancing is the gateway to entrepreneurship, because you get a taste of that freedom and being able to set your own schedule, and then one thing leads to the next.

I started Key Values actually just like – I was freelancing and I was looking for potentially a fulltime employee job. It was just so frustrating. It was just not fun at all trying to learn about teams. I can't even tell you how many career pages and job descriptions I read. My eyes glazed over. They all look exactly the same. I couldn't even tell the team I was reading about at some point.

Then yeah, when I started working at Key Values, it was really just to solve a problem that I had. My boyfriend is a startup founder and I constantly hear him talk about how hard it is to hire engineers, so solving a problem for him as well.

I think I had a lot of impostor syndrome trying to build something myself. I still see it as a learning opportunity in terms of the engineering aspect. The most surprising thing, I wouldn't say it has to do so much with the tech.

Actually, sadly I haven't really been coding that much. Working on Key Values has really been about the content. I sadly don't make many commits these days.

[0:40:07.2] JM: I could relate.

[0:40:09.2] LT: Yeah. I miss it a little bit. I just think it is really just getting over each hurdle and thinking that it was going to take me forever. The real story is that I learned to code at – I was like 26-years-old. I didn't know anything about coding. I didn't even know if I had to download a terminal onto my computer. I knew nothing.

I think it just – sometimes it's feeling like you're really behind and you'll never get there. I just felt like everyone just had a huge head start for me. I think the hardest part is just pushing through that, but also the thing that I've learned the most is that if you just work a little bit every day, you'll get there without even – You just have to just make them chunkable sizes, and then you'll get there. I don't even know if I just answered your question.

[0:40:57.2] JM: No, no. You did. You did. You did. I can definitely relate to the content side of things, because this is – I mean, Software Engineering Daily is probably even less of a software

company and even more of a content business than Key Values. What's your perspective on that? I know you're good friends with Courtland; Courtland Allen, he helped you –

[0:41:22.4] LT: He helped me a lot. Yeah.

[0:41:24.1] JM: I mean, he has basically a content business. It's like Indie Hackers started as a content – maybe a content-leaning software platform. Now it seems to be leaning a little more towards the software and the community side of things, which you could see Key Values going in that direction as well potentially.

What's your thought on the content business of – the business around software engineering content? It seems like there is more and more people that are coming in to software engineering. There is more and more people that are wanting to read content about it. You think there's room for more businesses around content?

[0:42:04.9] LT: Absolutely. I mean, there's more and more people learning. Everyone has a different learning style. I don't ever think there is just one – there'll never just be one way that people want to digest information. A lot of people prefer reading over listening. Podcast obviously are super popular, because some people don't feel like reading and they want to be able to multi-task.

Even within podcast, I think people really love host in a way that they – they appreciate their opinions and the way they conduct interviews. I don't think there is ever going to be too much. I'm like thinking about if that's what I really feel, but I definitely feel like there is room for people to continue creating content.

There is all sorts of audiences and segments of those audiences that want something different. Yeah, it's definitely challenging to make – if you're a software engineer and you're creating one of these sites, it's really up to the person to see how they balance their focus between still coding and creating the content.

Courtland is a really good example in terms of he loves coding. He misses it in a way that people would get homesick. I think he just finds ways to give himself challenges sometimes, just so he can flex the coding muscle of his.

[0:43:27.2] JM: In the other side of things is he obviously went through YC. At YC, and this is just a immutable fact of engineering companies, the economics you get from having a software company that works are so much better than the economics of having a content business that works, because the content business people are purchasing their content, which you have to put a lot of work into every new piece of content. In the software business, you write the software once and you sell it to people and you get money for the same piece of software that is free to copy every single time.

[0:44:02.7] LT: It's funny, because this circles back to values. It really just depends on what your goals are and what you want.

[0:44:07.9] JM: True.

[0:44:08.9] LT: Ultimately for me, I think – I mean, I'm not against making money, but obviously I would definitely take a pay cut to do something that I'm really excited about, I'm constantly learning. I love meeting new people and learning about their experiences. For me, those things are invaluable.

I mean, of course there is all these tradeoffs. I think it really just depends on the business and the people behind it. If you want to make money and that's your primary goal, I'm not sure that making a content say is the fastest route there. Obviously, I'm not hating on either of us. I think there is reasons why we're doing what we're doing. Yeah, I think it's just - you have to figure out what works for you and what your values are.

[0:44:52.5] JM: Totally. Yeah, I can completely – it resonates with me. You worked at Homejoy before you got into coding. Homejoy is a really interesting story. It was one of the first gig economy companies. It was really taking off and getting a lot of momentum. I remember seeing some charts around its growth. Homejoy was an on-demand cleaning company. I could order a

cleaner to come to my house and clean my apartment. What was it like being at Homejoy as that rocket ship was taking off?

[0:45:31.2] LT: Oh, man. It's hard to compare to anything else I've ever done. Homejoy was my first real job ever. It was pretty funny, just because I thought that was like what working was. I just dropped out of grad school and I joined Homejoy – or maybe six months later. For my first job ever, it was quite the experience.

It was really exciting. I'm smiling right now just thinking about it. It was just a really special time. Everyone there was so passionate. The energy was just unparalleled. I don't think I've ever worked somewhere quite like that with so many people all on the same page working towards this mission. It was just really exciting, and it definitely – I'm still –

I mean, obviously so people who don't know, Homejoy folded. While it skyrocketed up, it also had – ended up folding. The experience of it, especially early on was just – there was definitely some magic there, I would say. I know, it sounds so corny man.

[0:46:30.0] JM: No, no. I mean, you were telling me about it when we chatted last about some of the grind, because there were so much volume on both sides of the marketplace, both supply and demand. There were a whole lot of people who wanted to be cleaners, a whole lot of people who wanted their houses cleaned and you were managing operations of those two sides at the marketplace. It sounded intense. Can you maybe relay a couple anecdotes about the intensity?

[0:47:03.0] LT: Yeah. I mean, first thing is actually just talking about core values. I was actually just curious what Homejoy's were. I was looking them up the other day. One of them was something like, "No one is above any job." That was actually one of my favorite. I didn't help come up with these. I've really resonated with that one.

One of the stories was we had VIP clients at one point and we were closed for the holidays. It was like a Thanksgiving Day. There were some glitch, I'm not sure, but one of our VIP clients actually booked a cleaning on Thanksgiving Day. We were scrappy. Homejoy was a scrappy team. Instead of canceling, they're like telling the client that we were actually closed that day.

Adora the CEO and I actually went – we went and clean that apartment ourselves. We'll always remember cleaning a house, or cleaning an apartment on Thanksgiving Day with Adora, on her hands and knees. It was intense and scrappy and everyone was definitely – we lived and breathe it for sure.

[0:48:03.5] JM: Did you interact much with the cleaners at Homejoy? What was the –

[0:48:07.3] LT: Yeah. I was going to say. I was the operations manager for the Bay area and I was also played the role of the city manager. I onboarded up until – maybe for the first year, year and a few months, I onboarded almost every cleaner that came on to the platform from the Bay area.

Then of course, I had – Pete was my right-hand man and he ended up taking over the onboarding process. I interacted with cleaners very closely in the very beginning, like this is how scrappy we were, this is when there was less than 20 employees. A lot of the cleaners actually had my personal cellphone number and would contact me that way. I got to know the cleaning staff really firsthand. I actually keep in touch with some of them still to this day.

[0:48:56.2] JM: Incredible.

[0:48:57.4] LT: I formed some serious – Yeah, some close relationships for sure.

[0:49:02.3] JM: This was one of the companies that was on the ground floor of the gig economy. Were you starting to feel like there was something new going on there? I mean, this gig economy is shifting how the entire – I mean, well certainly in the Bay Area you see this up close and personal, and slowly it's propagating to the rest of the world. What do you think of the gig economy and how was your opinion of the gig economy being shaped when you were at Homejoy?

[0:49:31.2] LT: Good question. I think it can't be stopped. It's growing and growing. It's different when I think of the gig economy now just as a whole, versus how it applied to Homejoy, I think home services in general is – it's a huge market. It gets a lot of attention from entrepreneurs and investors, but it's definitely a tough space.

It's been a few years, or it's been many years since people really started paying attention to it. I still feel like there is a lot of challenges. It's because everyone compares on-demand services with Uber, that's why you always feel like it's the Uber for blank. Home cleaning is just really different than having someone drive you from A to B. Having someone come inside your home, sometimes unattended, giving someone the keys to your secret place is like a very – it's just like a very different – it requires a lot of trust – a lot more trust than someone driving you.

I think that is just a – the gig economy in that space is particularly complex. A lot of the right people from Homejoy, from the engineering team actually went on to Google to help tackle home services at Google. I think they're making – I actually don't know the details, but I know that they've been working hard at it still.

It's just not something as straightforward as I would say like transportation. Generally, gig economy is something – it's a force to be reckoned with. I think more and more people will move towards that. There is a lot of speculation just looking at millennials who change jobs super often. Millennials probably – I think it's like – I don't know the exact stats, but millennials change jobs almost twice as more frequently than previous generations. I think it ties into that. It's like having short gigs that are easy and flexible and are – it's appealing. I'm curious to see what it will be like in a couple of decades.

[0:51:27.0] JM: Same here. The downfall of Homejoy was largely due to the classification of the workers as 1099, rather than W2 if I recall. This did not bring down Uber, or at least hasn't brought down the Uber-like services yet. Do you know anything about what creates a classification of a worker as a contract worker, or a fulltime worker and why that was an important distinction, it's so important that it crippled the company?

[0:52:02.9] LT: Yeah. I don't know the details exactly, so you might need to fact check me a little bit. At least, I can to some of the problems that I faced and solved while I was at Homejoy. So you know, I actually wasn't – I actually left Homejoy before they were closing, so I missed some of this firsthand.

Certainly, when you're a 1099 contractor, there is just some boundaries there. For example – up at this. If you're a W2, you're an employee, you can be trained. You can go through training programs and you can be asked to wear a uniform, and that's something that you can't actually do for a 1099 contractor.

When it comes to whole – this actually touches into what I was saying before. You're okay getting into Uber and the driver can be weighing whatever, and they can be playing whatever type of music and have – you definitely get some of the personality of the driver. When it comes to home cleaning, I think there is a stronger desire for consistency in terms of people wanting to get their homes cleaned.

I think there was some struggle there in terms of making sure that the cleans were consistent, without actually training anyone. I think, to be honest, what it comes down to is the lawsuits are expensive and Uber has a bigger bank.

I mean, people know this too. You can Google it. Uber's definitely had some – has had their fair share of those problems as well.

[0:53:34.3] JM: Yeah. When you map your history, your experience at Homejoy to your current situation working on Key Values, how did the experience there impact who you've become as an engineer?

[0:53:51.0] LT: Oh, man. Yeah, so when I was at Homejoy I was not an engineer. Really what it came down to was there would be bug fixes. Let's just say there was a bug and it was affecting all the cleaners. Of course, that there was a problem with the cleaners they would contact me. I would get a 100 people e-mails, text, calls in some facility. They're telling me that there was a problem, but I couldn't fix it.

I think, the way that I would type it back is Homejoy is really the place that made me realize that I wanted to learn how to code myself. I don't want to rely on someone else to fix the problem. I think there was this turning point, I actually remember I was managing lots of people and my day was just meetings. There would be a full three days where every single half hour was a meeting. Sometimes they are one-on-ones.

I just noticed that a line of code can have just as much impact. If not more, then having a 100 one-on-one meetings. I think it was really – it really planted the seed, or just really showed me how powerful coding can be. I remember just standing behind some of the – curious being like, "Can someone please fix this, please? It's really easy. I know it's easy for you guys. Can you please do it?" I just felt so powerless. I think it was just me realizing how – it was just me figuring out that that was the next career move I wanted to make.

[0:55:14.9] JM: Cool. Now that's changed for you. You don't have that feeling of powerlessness anymore.

[0:55:20.6] LT: Definitely not. I mean, I am not going to pretend like I know everything. I certainly do not, but I feel empowered to – I feel confident that I can figure it out based on just knowing where to find the resources, or who to ask, or what type of question to even ask. It might take me a long time, but I feel confident that I could figure things out now.

I remember the first time at Homejoy actually, someone showed me the inspector tool on like, I don't know, it was like on Chrome. I genuinely thought they were a wizard. I think I called them wizard from then on out. Actually, I was just like, "What is this thing? You just changed the words on this page? How did you do that?"

Yeah, there is definitely some small things like for anyone who's even a little bit interested, there are some really low-level – there is some really basic things you can learn that will really make you feel so much more powerful, really is the right word.

[0:56:12.2] JM: Yeah, agreed. Just to wrap-up, if there is a company out there that's interested in getting listed on Key Values, what should they do?

[0:56:21.2] LT: Reach out. They should just reach out. I have a page on Key Values, it's keyvalues/submit. It gives you some of the first steps, and really all that is just figuring out what your eight values are, and then we'll get started in terms of writing and qualifying each of those value selections. I'm very hands-on, so if you need help, I'm there. Definitely if any company is interested, please reach out.

[0:56:46.6] JM: Awesome. All right, well keyvalues.io. I'm sure people will go check it out.

[0:56:51.7] LT: Hope so.

[0:56:52.4] JM: Lynne, thanks for coming on Software Engineering Daily. It's been great talking to you.

[0:56:55.6] LT: Thank you so much. It's been fun.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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