

Special Edition: Celebrating Ada Lovelace Day with Chris Cooper-Bland and Suw Charman-Anderson – Part 2

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BRADLEY HOWARD (BH): Hello, I'm Bradley Howard and if this is part two of our Ada Lovelace day celebration. Joining me are Chris Cooper-Bland, Head of Architecture at Endava, and Suw Charman-Anderson, the founder of FindingAda.com. Starting with Suw, can you tell me a bit more about your career background?

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SUW CHARMAN-ANDERSON (SCA): My career is a bit of an odd one, and I like to use it as an example to show that you don't need to have a grand career plan. You don't have to have it all worked out before you get to university, or even after you graduate. You can improvise as you go along because I actually studied geology at Cardiff University and then really struggled to find a job because there was an industry-wide hiring freeze for five years, and I graduated right in the middle of it so they'll just no jobs in industry. And I ended up working in a science publishing for a few years. I ended up quitting that and via a slightly circuitous route became a music journalist. Because obviously, why would you not? I did that for a while and then my uncle in Australia told me to start learning XML and that the web was the way forward.

So in around 98, 99 I trained myself to become a web developer and that was my entrance into technology where I stayed until I left the U.K. in 2014. So I became a social media consultant, or a social technologist as I like to put it, in 2004. Spent 10 years working with clients around the world on social media projects. And then when I moved to America with my husband, I ended up working on Ada Lovelace Day full time in 2015, and I've done – you know, that's been my focus since.

So it's been an interesting career, I've heavily edited it, I've done a lot of slightly odd things that may be don't get put on linked in or on the CV, but I think that's a good thing. And I think it's really important these days that people understand that careers are not straight lines. You know, there isn't a career ladder so much anymore and it's okay to experiment and do different things.

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BH: That's really lovely. And who's been some of the real key influences, especially influential women in your career?

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SCA: I think that's a really interesting question. My inspiration has been people I don't know, they've been people like Ada Lovelace, or you know, women that don't even exist. So fictional characters, where I've kind of just drawn inspiration from seeing how these characters deal with situations in fiction.

The whole point of Ada Lovelace Day, is to talk about inspirational women in STEM, and there have come to be so many that it becomes hard to choose, but I'm obviously always going to go back to Ada Lovelace. And I think she's a figurehead for a lot of people for a good reason, and that is she does embody the challenges that women go through, because having done this ground-breaking work on publishing the first complete, elaborate computer program for Babbage's analytical engine, we know she's then had to deal with being side-lined, being told that she wasn't capable, she's not as good as men, pushed back, against her as a figurehead, really is based on a failure to understand what she did and how she did it, and a failure to look at primary documentation around her mathematical education and knowledge.

So I think from that point of view, for a lot of women, myself included, it's just like, yes you know she just might be – it's over 200 years since she was born but I really relate.

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BH: And something that intrigues me, and is, can you share some of the fictional characters that you are inspired by?

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SCA: I was a huge fan of Anne McCaffrey, who was a science fiction fantasy writer, and one of her characters, Lessa, who is a very strong but very intelligent, very thoughtful character, who is born into a situation of great adversity that she has to overcome. She's a favourite, and then also there's another character called Killashandra, who is in one of Anne McCaffrey's sci-fi books, who is essentially a crystal miner, and there's an awful lot in there again about having to overcome adversity and disappointment and I think I relate to her because her chosen career of opera singer is ripped away from her very suddenly and she's heartbroken about not being an opera singer.

And my first choice of career as geologist – I'm not going to say ripped away from me, but it was not accessible, there was no path for me into geology after I graduated, so I kind of related to that sense of not being able to pursue one's first choice and then having to find a different career. And I love both Lessa and Killashandra, they're both very strong women that I really drew a lot of inspiration from when I was a teen.

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BH: And what advice would you give to the next generation entering the workforce, in particular, young women interested in a career in STEM?

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SCA: My personal view on this is that there's an awful lot of careers advice about their about how to choose a job and how to, you know, whether you should go for something that you love or something that's practical and all the rest of that, and actually my most important piece of advice is just don't worry so much about having a grand plan. We live in such a challenging time at the moment, if you are looking for a job now or if you're stuck in a job that you don't like, these are really difficult times for everyone and you may feel as if your career plan is crumbling around you, but I promise you that there are opportunities that will be available that you can't imagine,

When I was at university, blogs didn't exist. The idea of being a blog consultant which is what I first called myself back in 2004, it was a ridiculous idea, I got told so many times that no one is going to pay you to tell them how to blog. It turned out businesses really wanted to know, and actually they would pay me to tell them how social media worked.

So the opportunities that are coming up overcoming years, we can't predict now but there's so much opportunity. So get yourself on the edges of disciplines that you're interested in, and look for the overlap, look for what is fascinating to you and the opportunity maybe there to create your own job like I did. So long as you nurture your passions and at your curiosity, there will be interesting things to do.

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BH: So we hadn't planned as part whatsoever, but this is very topical. I've got twin daughters who are both 17, so they're in the upper sixth form, they're just choosing which courses to look into at university before they take their exams. So what advice would you have for them to choose their university degree?

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SCA: University is an interesting time and it's a time of – it's like a really big dichotomy. And that is on the one hand, study is – you know, your degree is important, you have to choose something that you're passionate about that is going to – that you're still going to be interested in at 11.00 pm on a Thursday night when you're still doing your set reading. But at the same time, the university is also an amazing opportunity to expand your horizons, mean you people, try new things, you know, joining new clubs go on trips, all of those sorts of things.

So it's not a case of finding the one degree to rule them all. Pick something you're genuinely interested in, cause you're going to have to spend a lot of time studying it, and if you not interested in it, that's going to get tedious quickly. But at the same time, balance that out with new experiences and if you get to a point where you think, "Oops, I've kinda picked the wrong degree," make sure that you talk to people, talk to your careers unit, you know you're not trapped in a particular path, you can always change your mind.

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BH: Well thanks for the personal advice. And over to Chris, can you tell us more about your career background?

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CCB: Well, a bit like Suw really, I didn't have a grand plan, or certainly my plan didn't transpire, when I was at school, I was very keen on biology. I wanted to go to university and study biology and do research in biology. However, in the six former I had some personal issues, my dad died, my mum had a nervous breakdown, I didn't do quite as well on my A-levels as I should have done. So I got a job, an administrative job in an insurance office. After a year or two I was thinking this really isn't for me, I need to work out what to do and they decided they were going to get a computer. Oh my god, and the handwritten records all got transferred on to a PC basically, a very old and cumbersome PC but I was talking to the business analyst who was helping write the program to computerise the records, and realised this is really quite interesting, and she – strangely, her name was Sue. She was really encouraging and she was saying – well, as we were talking about the problems and how she was going to capture the requirements etc., she said well you've got a really analytical mind, you would be good at this.

So I actually applied to the civil service, because they had quite a good training scheme for IT and got into the civil service and was allocated to the Metropolitan Police Office where I started working as a mainframe programmer writing Cobol programs, and really progressed from there. The changes really have been tremendous. I mean at that point it was – we were working on a new version of the operating system. There were so many new things to work out and understand and of course, learning was very different. You went on a training course and then you had manuals. That was it. There was very little sharing of information.

There was no internet, no stack overflow, no online courses. You know, it was all down to trial and error really to try and make things work. So that's how I got into computing, and then I realised I was quite good at it and I liked it, I had still harboured an urge to actually, "Well I'll do this for a little while and then I'll go back to university and do biology." So I actually started an open university degree and then realised I was in computing as a career. So I switched all my modules over onto the computing track and actually got a degree in computing from the open university and then I did a master's as well in computing, an MBA in IT, so continued in that path.

Then I got various roles, moved on from the civil service to actually work for a short time for ICL, the mainframe producer themselves. That was a very challenging project. I was very fortunate, I realised

it was a challenged project and left and joined the company called BACS who do the direct debits and direct credits for the U.K., they've changed their name now, but they used to be called BACS when I was there, and I had the opportunity there to work on fantastic systems because they're a small organisation that provide very important systems, so the opportunity to solve difficult problems was very great and I had to actually making deliver something that was of significant importance. And I worked there for 14 years and there were very supportive. After that, I came to work for Endava and I've been with Endava for – again for 14 years, gosh, I hope that doesn't mean I've got to leave soon. And I moved up to be Group Head of Architecture.

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BH: And what does that role mean within Endava now?

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CCB: So what is the architecture discipline mean at Endava? Because we're spread across multiple geographies, we don't have a hierarchical organisation that focuses on how we do our practice of developing software. We have a matrix organisation that runs to make sure we can get communication across the regions, focusing on the practices that the people need to follow when they're developing large and important IT systems basically. Helping to grow people working on a sort of learning paths to make sure that people can get up to speed and understand the complexities involved.

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BH: And do either of you read business books, starting with Suw?

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SCA: Not really. I have a couple that I feel like I ought to sit down and read, but I don't know, for me, I get a lot of my inspiration and new ways of thinking about things by talking to people, people who are generally in very different areas to me. So I tend to feed my sort of my creative side through conversation more than anything. Just recently I've been doing quite a lot of academic reading of papers around gender equality, mentoring, that kind of stuff. I think business books can be interesting, I just don't seem to have the time to sit down and read them.

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BH: And Chris?

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CCB: Some business books I would say probably more IT books, and I'm involved with an architectural association called IASA who are a worldwide group of architects, representing the profession and I'm inputting into their IT architecture body of knowledge and actually, we have a Friday call at 5.00 pm which is it's supposed to be focused around what we actually working on, but actually has this wide ranging agenda and touches on many subjects in the architecture space. So I find that really stimulating. And then we're reviewing each other's work as well, so certainly at the moment that's occupying my time. That's not focused on proper work, should we say.

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BH: Wow, so you have a call every Friday at five o'clock to round the week off where you meet with your peers in other companies?

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CCB: Yes.



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BH: Wow. That's definitely devotion for you. Thank you both for taking the time to talk with me about the important subject of diversity in STEM and sharing your advice and your stories. I think you'll join us next time for another interesting discussion on the Tech Reimagined podcast. Please remember to like this podcast and hit the subscribe button.