



SEASON 4

EPISODE 12

[INTRO]

[0:00:05.8] ANNOUNCER: Welcome back to Happy Porch Radio, the digital agency podcast for progressive agency owners and web professionals.

Season Four is an exploration of diversity in our industry, especially gender diversity. This season your host, Barry O’Kane, is joined by some wonderful cohosts for conversations with agency leaders and diversity and inclusion experts.

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:32.3] BOK: Welcome to Happy Porch Radio. In this episode, the very wonderful Kate and I speak to Harry Gordon. Harry is a senior developer in an agency in Edinburgh and has recently started a group called Carers in Tech. In this conversation, Harry shares how suddenly becoming the sole carer for his younger brother impacted his view of work and eventually led to his desire to bring the conversation about the need for part-time and flexible working out of the shadows.

Now, I feel very passionately that focusing on the time we put into work, rather than the actual value and output of our work is bad for us individually, for our businesses, our industry, and for the whole world generally. So much so that my business doesn’t have an office. So I really, really enjoyed this discussion. Both Harry and Kate make some excellent points and use language that is much clearer and more powerful than I can. Listen out for Harry’s calls for all of us to make work and our society as a whole, a better place.

Let’s meet Harry.

[INTERVIEW]



[0:01:41.3] HG: Hi, I'm Harry, I'm a software engineer, I've been in the industry for about 10 years. Recently I became the sole guardian of my younger brother, Sam. At the moment I'm really learning to balance that with being an engineer. I was part-time for a little while, now I'm full-time and I'm learning to balance that and whether or not and how that – well, we'll get into that.

[0:02:04.4] BOK: Yeah, definitely. Exactly, that is the kind of really opens up the door to really interesting conversation, I want to talk about some of the initiative you started and some of the work you're doing there. We're also joined again by Kate. Hi, Kate.

[0:02:17.7] KV: Hi.

[0:02:18.8] BOK: Harry, let's just jump into it. Tell me a little bit more about what you started to say there about – you went part-time and you know, sort of your experience of that and now reflecting back on that a little while later, what that sort of started you, your journey if you like.

[0:02:34.1] HG: It was a shock and I think anybody can sympathize with this who is a parent and in the industry like the moment you have family involved, your priorities changed really drastically. In November of 2017, I became Sam's guardian and that was a lot, there's a lot happening around that.

At the time, I was really struggling to manage my workload. I was still full-time, you know, I took a little bit of time off to acclimate but really, I just went straight back into it, which in hindsight was probably a mistake. But there was a discussion with my employer at the time and they didn't feel they were really getting out of me, what they needed and I can – at the time, I really understood that.

I thought, "Well, you've hired me for the senior dev role, someone who is really involved and really present and all of a sudden I have this other concern and I've had to take quite a bit of time off." We sort of parted ways at – You know, we broke up for the Christmas holidays and we said, "Right, let's see how we feel in the new year. Maybe I can go part-time, see how that works." So what happened was, I came back from Christmas break, I got into it and realized, yeah, full-time is really difficult to manage while I'm trying to construct this new family in a way.



You know, we're trying to find ways of living together, he's getting used to school in Edinburgh and it's a lot of change really.

So what I said, what sort of agreed to was I would go part-time, I'd go down to three days a week and we'd see how that went. Barry, if you need to bridge this at some point, do that. Because it's a long story and not all of it is relevant but basically what happened was, we went part-time and for a couple of months, we tried that. At the end of that period, they said, "Yeah, this works really well for us, we really like it, we feel like we get good value out of you as a senior engineer for three days when we could go and get a graduate developer for the same money for five days. But actually, we really like having you around," and that was great for me.

Because I was – I understood they were in a difficult position and I would have, I think I would have happily left at the time if they'd said, "No, we don't like this. This isn't working for us." But I was happy that it was working for everybody. So basically what happened was, about seven months down the line, I – well, about seven months down the line, I'd been working part-time and then they sort of decided that part-time wasn't working for them. So eventually, we ended up parting ways. Yeah, it was really interesting experience.

[0:05:03.3] BOK: Yeah, thank you so much for sharing that and I think that is really relevant. I think it's really interesting to try and some of the things, some of the – I sometimes struggle in the podcast to be talking about things off making it real.

Kate, I know that you shared – you've got your parent, you've got caring responsibilities as well. I'm interested in your sort of initial thoughts there from what Harry was describing.

[0:05:24.3] KV: I think it's an unusual situation for you Harry in terms of not everybody becomes a parent to a brother or sister, but a lot of people experience becoming parents themselves or looking after their elderly relatives as their parents get older and as people are living longer. It shouldn't be something that comes as a surprise or something that we don't talk about nearly as much.

I think I can absolutely resonate with everything you're saying, Harry. It's not easy and I work full-time and my husband works full-time but we couldn't do that without the ability that we have



to flex our hours and the support of other family members nearby in terms of that thing about taking a village to raise a child, I think that's definitely true.

I think it is really crap of your employers to not offer you a bit more flexibility because I'm sure you're not the only person that's asked to kind of flex their time and to go down to part-time hours. I'm sorry that you couldn't have found a way of working with that employer. What happened next, where did you go next?

[0:06:24.6] HG: What happened next was basically, I went, well, I've been a parent for a little while then. I was sort of getting to grips with it so I actually – what I started to do was I was looking for positions, other positions. It was actually really difficult to find part-time work and also, there's this pressure, even though I'm sort of establishing my career, there was definitely this pressure to get back into a full-time position and maybe build up like a better portfolio for maybe going freelance.

Because what I'm start – now, I'm starting to talk to more carers and parents in the industry and I'm realizing that what a lot of us do is we do go freelance, which is fine if you're quite well established and you have the skills and sort of like the financial security to do that but a lot of people can't. That's sort of where Carers in Tech has come from. We can talk about that now. So Carers in Tech is, basically I realized that we don't talk about this issue as much as we should probably because there are so many parents in the industry and we have such a deficit of women in the industry. I honestly think it's not a stretch to connect that to a lack of accessibility to parents and carers.

[0:07:45.2] BOK: I was kind of interested that you went from this journey that we just talked about and you sort of learning how to do that and going through and moving to part-time and moving on to the job. Basically, how that personal journey has transformed for you into, "I'm going to try and set up a little, at the moment just to meet up but potentially, you know, try and get more involvement." Why the extra step?

[0:08:06.2] HG: It's been a difficult time but I've come through this quite well. You know, I am established in my career and I'm confident that I can get another position and I'm actually really happy where I am now. But what I keep thinking is, it is an unusual position that I'm in but it's also a fairly easy one. So I've taken on guardianship of a young man who is 14 or 15 and he's,



you know, he can mostly look after himself. The demands of me as a parent are not huge. But what I keep thinking is how is anybody else able to manage like if you're a parent to a young family, how are you meant to get by? And that's really why I've started doing this because I sort of think, there's a conversation that needs to happen and there's more we can do to support young families.

You know, I don't want to put words in people's mouths. My experience is very unique so I really want to start making meeting more parents and carers in tech and hear what their experiences have been and sort off start to get a feeling for what it's like. Some of the stories I've heard so far, well, so that's why I've chosen to start a meetup rather than anything else. Some of the stories I've heard so far have been really positive so it turns out there are some employers in Edinburgh, especially that are really great full carers and parents and offer great flexibility in part-time roles and that's been amazing to hear.

[0:09:29.4] KV: As an employer myself, it's something that we've been looking out with our team in a slightly more formalized way recently after speaking to them about it. Myself and my husband run the agency and we take as much flex as we need around childcare and school commitments and those kinds of things. But that's split pretty evenly between the two of those in terms of it's not me as the kind of mother taking on the majority of it, which I know is the kind of traditional view.

But one of the things that I found really interesting when looking at the take up of either formal or informal flexi time within the team, is it's not just those who are parents, who maybe caring for relatives and those kind of things that are requiring that flex. It's actually, people who have got lives, you know, stuff to go and do and dentists appointment to go to and those kind of things as well. It's not exclusively parents and carers that are requiring it.

So in that sense, it's everybody. It's actually 100% of the workforce that could benefit from flexible working and I think it's one of the things, as our lives are so connected to our phones and our technology, why do we need to be in the office from nine to five? It really doesn't make any sense anymore. I think we should be rethinking this, not just in tech, not just in SME land but, you know, across the board and globally as well.



[0:10:50.3] HG: Kate, I totally agree. A big part of this Carers in Tech thing for me has been, it's a culmination of a lot of factors. I just think you're right, the way we work doesn't make sense, the way our society centers work in our lives doesn't really make sense. So it's not just parents and carers like, one thing that's tricked this is what you know, we're an industry, we're very lucky, a lot of us could afford to work less and how the question then is how do we spend that time and a lot of us do have families and we could spend that time with them.

That has an amazing value to society. But then everybody else, maybe they can spend the time more valuably, you know, within the community volunteering or working on the project. So really, I sort of see it as an in, Carers in Tech. Carers in Tech is in a way, it's a way to start a conversation about why don't we work less and why is that such a crazy idea in tech.

[0:11:52.1] KV: Absolutely. Is there anything about tech in particular that you think is unique to the tech environment?

[0:11:57.7] HG: I think, part of it for me is the – there's a culture of over work. You know, we keep talking about that and I think — yeah, exactly. We're having conversations about that now about how hustle is not awesome, it's just not okay. The more you dig in to that, the more you realize it's really deeply problematic. The other reason tech – it's part because there's so much money here. If anybody can afford to treat people well, it's us.

Generally, we are quite forward thinking, we're quite forward looking and we do care about society, hopefully. All the people I meet do. So my hope is that if we start introducing this idea more then we'll get some traction. The other reason is, tech, I think as tech employees, we have quite a good bargaining position. So there's not really enough, it's really hard to find good devs and good designers and good project managers. Maybe if we all – if it starts to become the norm that we expect part-time working, that we expect flexibility then maybe we'll get it.

[0:13:03.8] KV: Yeah, that's a really good point.

[0:13:04.8] HG: It's a good place to start in society and I think as tech employs more and more people, any difference we make here has a large impact generally?

[0:13:12.8] KV: So how long is the meetup been running?



[0:13:15.7] HG: So it's really new. I actually, basically, this sort of all came to fruition at the end of last year and we haven't actually had our first meetup yet. But we have a lot of interest. Yeah, it's really fresh but I have started, we've started talking to a lot of people and I'm hearing the same stories and there's obviously interest. So it feels like a conversation that needs to happen.

[0:13:38.0] KV: What are those common themes that are coming out of it?

[0:13:40.1] HG: A lot of the common themes are people find it really difficult to balance without flexible and part-time. Another one is that it's actually a lot easier to be in a position, so say you're in a company for two or three years and then you want to go part-time or flexible. Then that's a lot easier than finding a new part-time or flexible position and I wonder how much of that is because it's seen as a reward for good behavior and when really it's not, is it? It's more – it's something that we shall have access to.

I've forgotten the other thing. I had a really good meeting last week with someone who is in a much different position to me, she's early 50's and has a nine year old and is – she recently started getting back into the industry and she's found it really tricky and she's working freelance because that's the only way she can make that work for herself.

[0:14:39.8] KV: There certainly are a lot of benefits, I think, to being your own boss. The longer I spend being my own boss, the less employable by anybody else I get, I think.

[0:14:48.8] HG: That is definitely a thing, yeah. But she talks a lot about how, you know, this is a thing that I think all women in the industry go through, you have a child and then there's an expectation that you won't return and that to me seems, you know, I can't believe that we're nearly 2020 and that still how things are.

[0:15:07.8] KV: Absolutely. I was saying to Barry before we started recording around shared paternity leave, which every couple regardless of gender is able to take. But the uptake on actually going on paternity leave for more than your allocated two weeks is so low.

I read that it was between one and 3% Where as in other countries, you know, it's either mandatory or there's significantly higher take up. That benefits everybody. That not only



benefits the mother in most situations going back to work and returning to her career if that's what she wants but also for the other parent and their child bonding, and just to create a more equal society overall I think.

[0:15:51.5] HG: I agree so much. It's really interesting when you look at countries like Sweden. So I have a family in Sweden and it's amazing to see men being made to take a month off when their child's born. You automatically have such a much better relationship with that child and you're much happier person and I think you can, I don't know, I just think — so there's a lot of wrong with the way our society puts people in boxes.

The way we treat, we still think of women as caregivers and we still think of men as the providers. That's crazy. I know it sounds, that's an obvious thing to say but that's crazy and I think if we sort of – if we talk to men and say, “Actually, maybe you want to step back and spend more time with your family because that's – your value is not just whatever work you do, it's the same as anybody else.”

[0:16:45.8] BOK: I really like the way you praised at her there. No, because quite often, people, when describing that sort of thing, they say that it's somehow, I don't mean this as strong as I'm saying it but somehow undervalues the caring part. Where as you're saying, the phrasing around that is like you as in that example the male partnership that you are more than just turning into the office.

[0:17:08.5] HG: Yeah, absolutely. I think there is so many little situations where you see people value men as their work but they do and that seems really awful and I don't see – as long as we keep putting people in those boxes there is no way that any of us are going to get out and there's no way we'll start to share parenting more equally.

This is a bit of a tangent but have you ever seen those really like father's rights organizations?

[0:17:33.1] KV: Yeah.

[0:17:34.1] HG: So some of those, there's some really great dad's organizations but a lot of them are quite angry and they're really angry because I think a lot of the time they're in conflict with the other parent and they are trying to see their kids. But I honestly think – I mean that



situation is really fueled by men not being involved in parenting. So you are attacking it much too late aren't you and everybody's furious. But really, if we just shared parenting more equally at the start then everybody would be so much happier.

Sorry, that sounds like a massive simplification but that's what gets me about a lot of this that it is really – I think some of it is really straight forward.

[0:18:13.7] BOK: Yeah, so I was going to pick up on that as well. So there's two interesting things on what we were just talking about there. There is this sort of the individuals who my lifestyle like their responsibilities and this sort of completeness of me. I am really fascinated to hear you both talk about that sort of broader impact on society, the changing of roles and so on.

What we haven't yet touched on is from the employer's point of view or from the very traditional company entity point of view. How is that practical? So, Kate, when you said you started this journey of introducing more or making a more formalized flexible, as an employer from the company point of view did you have any fears or challenges about doing that?

[0:18:54.2] KV: No, it was something that myself and my husband and the other business director did and it was something that we had assumed that everybody else knew that they could do. But towards the end of last year, we made it a lot more obvious. We're like, "I don't care. I don't care what hours you work. I don't care if you want to work an extra half an hour every day and clock off on lunch time on Friday or whatever it is. As long as the work gets done and as long as we can allocate your workload accordingly so that we know not to book you in for half a days with the work on a Friday afternoon if you are not going to be there, then it doesn't make any difference to us where you are or what you do."

There was no fear from my perspective because we got a small team of nine and they're super talented. They are super engaged and they have our trust forever and ever and ever amen. So it didn't matter to us whether they're working from home, which only works actually for a small number of the team. It is easier to do 3D animation when you're on your, you know, your designated workspace rather than on a laptop at home. But for other members of the team that is a much more of a possibility and although it's still in it's infancy, it's getting really, really great feedback from the team and a happier team does great work and that makes it means that we win too. So just thumbs up here, thumbs up all around.

[0:20:13.3] BOK: And that has been my experience as well. So it is really interesting, Harry, when you talk about it seem to be like a clear win both ways and I have always thought that as well it seems — but there is still very much a fear or risk associated with. I can't just that somehow doing more than lip service to flexible working will somehow lead to chaos or reduce in quality of work or reduce in the output or the results that us as a team or us as a company are getting.

One thing you said there, Kate, that really stand out for me and Harry I know you and I have talked about this in the past as well is that so long as the work gets done and you don't care of the hours. That to me is really interesting because I think so much within companies and within teams we are measuring time. We are clocking rather than talking about what is the actual work we're doing, what is the value of my — what's the work, what's the goal, what are the things I am trying to achieve for this here? Rather than it just be at the office nine to five. You know I can be at the office nine to five and achieve nothing but that's a win or is it?

[0:21:12.9] KV: I know what you mean and it is a really difficult one in what we do and what a lot of agencies do, which is charge for your time. So how do you simultaneously charge for your time and have a flexibility around what is delivered in that time and if you deliver it in half the time what does that mean for the amount that you charge, you know? There is no clear cut answer there.

[0:21:33.3] BOK: No there really isn't and that's a really tough — I mean, talking like to agency owners or with the agency owners, I think that's a real genuine challenge. There are conversations we can have about those pricing structures but it is still very often just comes down to our time and the skills we have and the impact that we are trying to have for the clients we work with.

[0:21:52.5] KV: I have seen a move especially amongst more consultative roles where they've done away completely with day rates and hourly rates and those kinds of things and it is a value based proposition entirely and that would mean that the amount that they would charge to a large organization with deep pockets based on the impacts of that consultant deems that they would have would be greater than if they're working with an SME for instance. And I think there



is the potential for agencies to take a look at that and to adopt a more value based approach to their pricing. But I think they're probably a little way off that at the moment.

[0:22:28.4] BOK: Yeah I think that's something within agencies that's really hard. But I mean the argument for that is really powerful because it is more than just a win for the agency. One of the challenges I have with that pricing model is when I am – the risk is that it motivates the agency for the wrong things. So I should – I am ending up for the lawyer type mentality where I am trying to clock and bill hours rather than help the client to help improve their business or do a marketing campaign or do the outcome.

So it is one of the real benefits to potentially thinking about this whole gambit of this. Like this idea of flexibility and working with freedom within teams, building strong diverse happy teams and trying to join that chasm to their expect— to the commercial expectations and the output and the value of the work that we do.

[0:23:15.0] HG: It is interesting that the main – I think the main place results only falls down is when you do try to bill to the client. So in some ways it is better. It is interesting to look at work environments where that's not the case. So if you look at the third sector they're really, really amazingly flexible, often. So that is like a female dominated work environment. So it has to cater to that flexibility that you need to be a carer since we live in a society where women do the majority of the caring.

Kate, I am really — your work, the way you are working flexible working sounds amazing. It is I think the major thing at the moment. It is really difficult to create an environment where you'll feel comfortable flexibly working and this comes back to what you're saying, Barry, about only paying lip service to flexibility where people still don't really feel like it is something that they are allowed unless they absolutely need it.

[0:24:13.0] BOK: The environments where maybe it says flexible working on the job ad, but when you get in the office, there is a kind of – you know it's frowned upon or reduces your opportunities to grow within the team or within the company.

[0:24:24.4] KV: I can definitely see that that becomes more problematic in larger companies where there are kind of more turning parts and also where statistically you might be more open



to some people taking the mick of the system and pushing flexible a bit too far and those things but certainly that seems to be one of the benefits of being a small team is that you do have the flexibility to make your own rules.

There is a theme coming out of this that I am hearing in that it is predominantly women that fall into those caring roles, stereotypically, which means that it is more likely to be women who are asking for part-time more flexible job roles, which from a diversity perspective means that in industries like tech where part-time working is possible but you have to earn your stripes first, you end up in a scenario where your team and your company potentially is less diverse than it could be and this season has been talking about how inclusion and diversity within teams and within your organization is nothing but a good thing and having different types of people with different perspectives working together on the same problems can help enormously.

So there is a big problem here in that with that lack of flexibility, we are reducing the pool of talent and the pool of expertise that we can bring to the table here in these teams.

[0:25:54.1] HG: Yeah, absolutely. I think the more you look at it the more it is a real thing that hurts real diversity. So my partner, she is with that sector. She has a couple of health issues that basically mean that it is really incredibly difficult for her to work full-time. So she is able to work part-time in her sector. But really, by making full-time a requirement of most tech jobs at least as a gatekeeping thing, you are really excluding a lot of people.

You're excluding anybody with a disability, anybody who with health or with physical or mental health problems and you're really hurting diversity, aren't you? And then you wonder why tech is dominated by young men and it's still alarming to me that where a lot of it still sat around scratching our head wondering why tech isn't very diverse?

[0:26:49.9] BOK: I mean, it is just an amazing conversation. But what I wonder as we sort of have a few minutes left and to caveat everything that we maybe do say next with this is just a conversation, but if we were to start to try and think about practical things people listening could be exploring with or talking about or potentially doing and starting first of all, Harry, with people who are going through or are experiencing some of the things similar to what you described.



Or even just those looking in people with a family about to start and struggling with that diversity, you know, “How do I speak to colleagues and to my employers to have these sorts of conversations?” I don’t want to put you on the spot but is there anything that you think you would say to those people?

[0:27:39.1] HG: What I would say is if you start asking – if you are having a really hard time with your employer you should probably know that there are a lot of people in the industry with your problem and there are some great employers out there. So I have started talking more about this in public because it does seem like a topic that you keep under wraps, doesn’t it? It’s sort of like a lot of people don’t want to talk about part-time working, lest their boss think they don’t want a job, which is wild.

But if you start talking to employers I think that you will find that there is a lot of great ones out there. A name that crops up a lot, I am not trying to advertise them, but apparently Sky Scanner in Edinburgh is really great for families and I have chatted to a lot of people, a lot of employers like yourself, Kate, who are really friendly to families and I think that there needs to be some way to recognize those companies, maybe some kind of a badge that you get to say, “You guys are actually great and you care about families.”

My other advice, this might sound wild but I actually think we’re this industry where a lot of us are quite valuable in our roles and we could work less I think maybe it will be amazing if a lot more engineers and designers, especially ones who are really established and maybe have a family or just have loads of hobbies or want to volunteer at a local charity, maybe you guys can just start going part-time.

Go down to four days, go down to three days and I think if you’re – what you’re going to do there is you’re going to do two things. You are going to help to normalize part-time working, which really will help a lot of people and you’re also actually weirdly creating a job they can see. I don’t know if that sounds like fantasy, but I think it is more of a start to go part-time or go flexible and it will really help the people who are new there.

[0:29:25.7] KV: Yeah, absolutely. I think that whole being the change you want to see thing is would be really powerful. So if starting from new babies, take your paternity leave. That child goes to school, be there for the school pickup regardless of if you’re, you know if you’re male or



female or whatever and yeah, flex your time because there's apparently there is more to life than work and so I think absolutely.

I think everybody's got busy lives and everything that people want to spend their time doing is valuable. Whether that's parenting, whether it is caring for older relatives, whether it's arts and crafts or volunteering or choir or anything else like that. So I think you're definitely right. I think that it would do a lot to support the industry burnout levels and mental health issues if we all took ourselves a little bit less seriously and get a little bit more around the balance in our lives.

[0:30:23.8] BOK: Just really quickly to flip that question earlier around to you Kate, as an employer or speaking to people who are running teams or running small agencies who maybe haven't formalized or done exactly what you just described, is there again not trying to put you on the spot, but what advice or thoughts would you share with them?

[0:30:43.0] KV: Well, I think in my experience and especially in the last year, I have realized that this job doesn't come with a rulebook and sometimes that's the worst thing in the world because there is nobody to turn to, to find out what you should be doing. But it is also a really, really great opportunity to define the rules that you want to live your life by and that the rules that you want to run your company by, and you can do whatever works for you and works for you team.

So I think just challenge that. Just try something with your team. Make it clear that it is a trial, see what the feedback from the team goes. See how it works with your workload and your output and if it works then great, you can cherry pick the bits that work best for you guys. But you don't have to inherit the same rules as big business and there are a lot of flexibility and there are a lot of options for being a small team.

[0:31:36.0] HG: I think that's great advice. I think you're obviously right, none of us have to inherit these big business rules and that's what's hurting us really isn't it and I think my other advice to employers would be that you can actually, by giving people the flexibility they need to live balanced lives and to look after their families or look after themselves just their own health, you are actually creating a better society in a really small way and hopefully, the industry will start to reflect that, the more that's the norm.



[0:31:36.0] BOK: Outstanding, a very call to action. I think, Harry, we can finish on that feeling. Thank you both for that. It was really fascinating, for me that's an extra dimension almost to the diversity and inclusion conversation, which I love doing. One of the reasons I love doing this podcast is having conversations like this with people like you who are teaching me and hopefully, we're having some fun trying to slowly expand the conversation.

[0:32:33.1] HG: Thanks Barry.

[0:32:33.7] BOK: Harry, we will share in the show notes at Happy Porch Radio Carers in Tech especially anybody in Edinburgh or anybody who is interested in the same concept so they can get touch.

[0:32:42.7] HG: That would be really great. Thanks, Barry. Thanks, Kate.

[0:32:44.9] KV: Lovely to speak to you and best of luck with Carers in Tech.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:32:53.3] BOK: You can get all the links and notes from this episode on happyporchradio.com where you can also find out how to send us questions, feedback, and get involved in the conversation about this series.

If you enjoyed the show, please share with anyone else who might enjoy it too. Thanks for listening.

[END]