

InTransition Episode 112 - Liz Jakubowski part 2

David Pembroke: Now you're bringing together these vast experience and skill in government and the public sector, this passion for education and connexion with people and really ... Your purpose really in the way that you've gone about your career is all about enriching community and getting better outcomes, not only for the individuals who work for you but for the people who you're trying to deliver on behalf of. Now you are applying that at a time of just such rapid change, rapid transformation, cloud technology, ubiquitous connectivity, virtual reality, augmented reality, machine learning, deep learning, everything is moving at warp speed, massive changes, the impact of modelling in terms of predictive analytics and understanding of what may or may not work into the future. What are you working on at the moment? What are you trying to achieve with your project there at RIBIT?

Liz Jakubowski: Sure. Just to recap, RIBIT's basically, it's a free online match-making platform that connects students who have digital and STEM skills to businesses who need these skills. Traditionally they're businesses who are trying to transform themselves in a digital context or to grow, and a match is ... If I can, just talk a little bit about why I set up RIBIT?

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Liz Jakubowski: I, originally ... Right, thanks. I originally looked at the whole problem between industry connecting with researchers and my former CEO Hugh Durrant-Whyte who has been head of NICTA said, "Look that way and see if we can build a platform." I did, and I was lucky enough to go to MIT to sort of shop around the idea and look at all the different things that were happening worldwide. Over that period of time I was there a number of them looked at my idea and said, "Look, this is great but really you should be focusing on the future talent pipeline which are students rather than researchers." Because getting researchers on to a platform is too time-consuming because there's all these issues around different cultures between business and researchers, there's issues around IP, there's issues around the fact that they can't speak the same language as businesses, that all of these is a problem not just in Australia but everywhere.

However, they said, particularly in the world of, as you just outlined machine learning, AI, everything changing, the world being disrupted and jobs disappearing, what increasingly is going to be of more importance to businesses and economies is how the future talent pipeline gets developed and is connected into a new world. They all advised me to go away and to focus on connecting students to businesses rather than researchers, and as part of that the idea is to do ... is to create I guess a talent pipeline so that not only the do students who connect to the businesses get value, but quite often, and we're already finding this, the supervisors might get involved in this. Before you know

it the pipeline that I originally tried to establish with RIBIT, which is to connect researchers to business is happening almost in a de facto way.

Could I just tell you why it's called RIBIT?

David Pembroke: You can tell me, yeah.

Liz Jakubowski: All right.

David Pembroke: Go if you must.

Liz Jakubowski: Great. Basically because of the whole idea of connecting initially researchers into business I had a working title for the project, the name of it and the acronym you'll see is RIBIT, was Researchers In Business IT platform. With that acronym of RIBIT, when I went out and I started talking to students about it the first thing they said to me was, "Oh, RIBIT, what a great name." I was like, "No, don't worry about that, you know that's just a working title." Ironically the best thing, the best response from the students was about the actual name itself. We kept the name RIBIT even though it had actually very little relevance to what the platform was because of the great response from the students.

David Pembroke: What's your vision for RIBIT?

Liz Jakubowski: My vision is to have a platform that is effectively connecting students right across universities and TAFEs to startups, small businesses, and government agencies really quickly, easily, and simply.

David Pembroke: Right.

Liz Jakubowski: We've been around for almost 15 months now since we launched in Beta and we've got ... we've been growing organically. We haven't been doing any marketing because we've got a very small team and a small budget, and over that time we've grown to a community of now over 10,000 students and around a 1,000 businesses. The main markets are still Sydney, Canberra, and Melbourne, and we're starting to roll out into Brisbane and South Australia shortly.

David Pembroke: In five years' time what is your hope that you will be able to build that community to?

Liz Jakubowski: I would like to increase that tenfold. There's different use around what the size of the market, potential marketplace is in Australia, but we know that roughly there's about 2 million businesses that are SMEs with under 200 employees in Australia. There's probably ... Well, a lot of them are single owner, operators, a lot of them, of the SMEs are between about 5 to 200 employees. That's the market that we're really focusing on because that's where we see there's a big great market value. There are quite a lot of job platforms out there and many

often are looking at working directly with corporates and doing specialised recruitment around internships, but not many people, in fact no one as far as I know when we started last year, was actually in this space doing what we're doing.

I think there are a few others that are looking at specialised parts of the market now, which may be addressing similar paths in the market, but we thought we'd do this because it's really critical that startups and small businesses get the support they need from being able to access university students really easily, and yet most of them just don't have the resources or the time that large corporates do to go into the universities and make ... build relationships with the career centres, sponsor events, spend time building up that rapport so that they get a regular pipeline of students.

What we're hoping to do with RIBIT is to just sit alongside those people that work in university centres and give them an opportunity where the students and the businesses can connect directly, and to make that an effortless thing for businesses to be able to do, rather than going through individual universities they can connect with ... they can post a job and they can get applications from students from say in Cameron, BIOU, there'd be CIT, Canberra University, ADFA, whatever the particular skills requirement it is that they have, and to do that all through one platform.

David Pembroke: Is it limited to STEM students?

Liz Jakubowski: It's not limited to STEM students, however our focus is on students who've got skills that are addressing the current skill shortages that businesses have. Just a little bit of rolling back here, if I may, in 2016 Accenture did this landmark study in Australia which found that roughly 87% of Australian businesses were expecting to be disrupted by digital changes over the next three years, but only 7% at that time had a plan and that was early 2016. I think a similar study was repeated by Deloitte towards the end of last year and the figures aren't that much different. I think there's more awareness now, but people are still trying to work out what to do in how they address skill shortages.

We know that there's a global skill shortage around areas like computer science, software engineering and various things around digital media, social media, web development, and we thought if we could basically get together a cohort of students from right across all the universities and TAFEs who have these skills, and they're able then to connect or we're able to connect them easily through this platform to the businesses that need these skills, then what we're addressing is a real problem in the marketplace that we can help solve.

David Pembroke: 10,000 students, sorry ... 10,000 students, 1,000 businesses, what has surprised you the most about the whole matching system? What has happened that you have thought to yourself, "Oh, I actually didn't think that would be the problem or that's something I didn't anticipate?"

Liz Jakubowski: Good question. I think we've been surprised that a number of the large corporates have come to us and expressed interest in using the platform.

David Pembroke: But it's not for them, they can go away, they've got their own money.

Liz Jakubowski: Exactly, that's been a surprise to us because ...

David Pembroke: Are they welcome? Are they welcome?

Liz Jakubowski: Here is the interesting thing, we're focusing on small businesses and startups on the business side, on the student side we're focusing on giving them any help we can that is going to help them get a job. We wanted to make the platform as useful to them as possible. While we're driving the traffic predominantly to startups and small businesses, if a corporate comes along and says, "Look, we've got these businesses here. It's a free platform can we post on your platform?" We're not going to say no, because if that means that one of the students on the platform ends up getting a job then that's got to be a good thing.

We did consider that and we tried to make sure that, "Are we being true to our values in terms of addressing what we're really about doing?" At the end of the day we really are about trying to give these students the best possible opportunities. While we're not targeting corporates we're not ruling them out, and if they come to us and want to use the platform, that's fantastic, we feel, because it just means that there's more opportunities for the students there.

David Pembroke: Now you mentioned computer science, software engineering, data analytics, digital media, social media, what is the biggest area of demand from small businesses and startup businesses for skills?

Liz Jakubowski: One of the great things with RIBIT is because we've got a data algorithm that underpins the whole platform in terms of matching we're actually able to get aggregate data and to look at where the skill shortages are. We did a recent analysis around this. We published some stuff in the Fin Review last year from our early data, but predominantly the skills that employers are looking for very much come down to things like, "Can we set up a new web system or a web platform? Or can we get some new way of connecting with customers? Or can we do some redesign?" There are also things around business modelling and data analytics that are coming out as key things that employers are increasingly interested in.

There's a lot of demand for market research and there's constant on-going demand for just good marketing and communication skills. It's interesting that whatever happens and however the world changes there's still this really fundamental demand from people to have people working for them that can communicate clearly and get whatever message it is they want across. There are some standards that you would expect in terms of skills, but all of them are increasingly being contextualised into this digital context.

If I can just recap and say what we're finding is it really doesn't matter what degree a student is doing. We find by and larger from a lot of the jobs, the applications, the successful applicants we see that students might have a Math Degree, an Applied Math Degree or an Accounting Degree or Physics or Biology or Biomedical, and it doesn't matter whether they're that or software engineers or business analysts, it's really about whether they have the right sort of cultural fit for that company, and whether they can learn those skills quickly enough.

Obviously it's an advantage if you're a software engineer, you can probably do Python and you can do R or any number of programming languages. That's very helpful if that's for a specific role, but what we're also finding is that particularly in smaller businesses and the startups they're hiring, not quite all-rounders but they're hiring people that can be developed into other roles as well. If you've got good communication skills, if you are a good person that works in a team, you know how to initiate things yourself, you're a self-starter, you're reliable, you're 80% of the way there. If you're smart employers generally think, "Well, he can probably learn a lot of the skills that we need and if you're the right culture fit we're happy to invest in you." That's the way ... that's their preferred approach.

David Pembroke: How good a job are the universities and the institutes of technology doing in preparing students for these jobs that businesses need filled?

Liz Jakubowski: Look, I think it's patchy.

David Pembroke: Come on, don't give me the political answer.

Liz Jakubowski: No, look it's interesting, isn't?

David Pembroke: She says that she thinks, "What am I going to say to you?"

Liz Jakubowski: No, what I was thinking about was actually just this morning I was talking to Matt Cilia from South Australia from Flinders University, who runs a new ventures institute, and this is exactly the area that he is addressing. We're actually talking about, "What are the skills? How do we make these students employable?" He's got some fantastic ideas there. I guess just to put that in context more broadly, I think increasingly universities are getting on top of this, I think some are faster than others. I know that there's a great cohort of people in Canberra and I am sounding political now, but it is true.

When you look at some of the outstanding work that's going on across the Canberra University and the connexion with the Canberra Innovation Network, the CollabITs, and the GRYPHON Accelerator, you can see that there's already this amazing ecosystem that is starting to really change all that. When they're working in partnership with the universities, and because again, Canberra's got such a clever cohort of people I think that's happening really well. When I look

more broadly there's still some places that aren't quite on top of it, but I think everyone's aware that this is changing quickly and they've got to get on to it.

David Pembroke: How important is geographic factors? Because it's probably easier for Canberra because it's only a small city and everyone knows each other and you can sort of just walk over there or catch a bus and be connected, whereas if you're working in a bigger city there's that overlay of traffic, of time, of other commitment, of everything that sort of just really makes these connexions much, much harder to create.

Liz Jakubowski: Yes, Canberra's great because of exactly what you said, everyone knows everyone else. I think there's a shared interest around getting the right outcomes for the local economy and that's why I think Canberra is in fact already being very, very successful in this area. I think it's harder in big cities, but the other advantage that bigger cities like Sydney and Melbourne have got is they've got critical mass. You can have different pods, if you like, of communities working ... and they still got to be successful because you've got large investment there.

Look, ideally it would be good to have better connexions across all of them, and I think there's a great community of people which I would definitely include yourself David, that are trying to make those links across those communities. No, seriously, this is the critical thing. I was talking to Aaron Birkby from Startup Catalyst the other day and this is something that he is trying to do too, where he's got this great idea about sending a mission of young people to innovation hotspots all around the world. It doesn't matter whether they've gone to uni or not, they just have to be wanting to be an entrepreneurs and wanting to build new businesses and being really motivated, and how we in Australia can support this community of young people, and not only young people. There's plenty of people who have been really successful working all their lives in a job and they've either been displaced because of disruption or they've retired but they're still relatively young and healthy. How do we get those people re-engaged and doing new things?

Increasingly you've got people like yourself who are looking at the whole content equation and how ... As I was saying before, it gets back to communication, how do you communicate an idea? How do you get people behind it, supporting it and executing it, and getting this community of people working together alongside each other for the same objective? It sounds like we're all one big kumbaya sort of holding hands, but really that's working, that's already starting to work and I'm seeing examples of it every day. It's pretty inspiring.

David Pembroke: In terms of that, in the changing nature of work given the impact of technology that we were discussing before, what sort of attitudes are the young people taking when they're coming out of the university degree? Is there an optimism or it's this sense that wages growth is flat, that the Golden Age particularly in

this country or in most Western democracies perhaps is past? The baby boomers have sucked up all the wealth and they're holding onto it, that technology's going to take out the bottom end of the marketplace and therefore ... particularly in those starting jobs it will soon be done by an algorithm. What sort of attitudes are you seeing across the board in terms of people coming into the workforce for the first time?

Liz Jakubowski:

I think that's a great question actually, and it's something I think about all the time. I believe that it can be very daunting for students if they feel that things are ... I mean they already feel quite nervous about the future, and because things are changing so quickly a lot of them are daunting, "Have I done the right course? Am I going to get work? What else should I be doing?" There's a lot of anxiety around that age anyway in the late teens and early 20's, and it's a really important time for people in their lives because that's a time when they're really sort of developing a sense of identity about who they are and what are they going to do, "Are we going to live up to our parent's expectations? Are we going to do something completely different or rebel? Have I even got time and can I afford to rebel? Do I need to get a job and try and get scaled up more quickly?"

There's all that going on in their head, and at the same time you've got policy leaders, politicians, people in the community, influences saying, "Oh, you know, it's the end of the world as we know it and 50% of jobs are going to disappear," and yet not necessarily really providing anyone with a real compass of what to do. I think sort of coming back from all of that, is one thing we do know is that humans have been pretty good at surviving, at outlasting, outliving other species so far, and I am optimistic that they are going to continue to be able to work these things out.

I think that there is a lot of reason for optimism, there's a lot of really thoughtful books and things that have been written about this right now, but I think the main thing that we can do for those of us who are really engaged in the community and in the workforce enable to influence in some way, is to give them the opportunities to really help them make their own way. By that I mean connecting them into opportunities with businesses, with good communities of people who are also smart, who are supportive, who are going to enable them to grow their own skills, their own creativity.

As much as possible to create a bit of a safety net for this community of people coming up in their early years, because that's going to be ultimately the thing that is going to benefit them most of all. Even if they don't have the same job or they don't end up doing the same thing they expected to do now in 5 or 10 years' time. It doesn't really matter because whatever skills they are building with every new experience and with every encounter with clever, smart, supportive, creative people I think they're just going to develop themselves further. That's sort of my pulse on it.

David Pembroke: It's interesting you say that because I do quite a bit of talking to student groups in the universities through it here in Australia and also overseas as well, and it's interesting I often start any talk that I give by telling the students how envious I am that they're sitting where they are and I am standing where I am thinking, "Oh, I would love to be their age knowing what I know now," but also knowing how dramatically the context has changed in which the way that you can do work and what you can accomplish now, compared to how it was when I was their age and how the system was. It is really about trying to fill them up with that optimism to say, "Well, actually it can potentially be so much better," but again I think that point that you get to it really is about opportunity, creating opportunity. Even going back to your leadership guidance that you gave us their early, is to trust that they will learn quickly because they're whip-smart, they're so bright.

They're so smarter than we were at this age, as a collective the younger people they're so impressive, confident, they've got the skills. I think the general noise that washes around and what goes through the media these days could be a bit debilitating, whereas I think if they get underneath all of that and really focus in on where can they create the value, and they can get that opportunity. As you say, these are the responsibility of me and others like me to give them that opportunity. I see it here in my business all the time, we see these bright young people come in and they just take off, they're just so smart.

Liz Jakubowski: Well, again it's about you giving them that environment where they can develop and that optimism is absolutely critical to human nature, to everything. I think we ... Similarly, we have to approach all of these with ... We're being sensible and realistic, but we have to be optimistic about what's possible. I also think that doing this and your business has been great at doing this, David, but just if every business could sort of or lots and lots of businesses in Australia could think about, "What can I do? What can I do that's sort of bigger than what I'm already doing that's going to make a difference?" If they brought in a young person on and gave them a chance and really help them develop skills and in return hopefully they're getting the value for their particular business out of it as well.

If we see all that as a collective approach like Germany for example, thus Germany who as we know is one of the most successful economies in the world. Their whole approach about engaging with young people and the contract between the business community and students is just so strong and so natural. In Australia we haven't got that yet, what I really would love to see would be that actually happening en masse. You asked me before what's our vision for RIBIT, and my vision is if I can in some way help contribute to bringing this about, and to make this part of the cultural change, that we as an Australian business community develop over the next five years, then I'll be really proud of having achieved my goal.

David Pembroke: Is this the last one for Liz Jakubowski, the last rodeo or is there something else to do after this?

Liz Jakubowski: No, ...

David Pembroke: You'll find another problem. I think you'll be going at a 100 miles an hour until they turn the lights off.

Liz Jakubowski: Look, I'll put it this way. I won't be one of these people that says when they're about to die, "Gee, I wish I had spent less time at work," because I'm one of the very, very lucky people in the world who pretty much every day I'm of my life I have been thrilled to go to work and I've just enjoyed so much what I'm doing. To me, work, the work I've had the chance to do has been so satisfying and I won't ever stop and I will die with no regrets.

David Pembroke: With your boots on.

Liz Jakubowski: That's it, ...

David Pembroke: Well, Liz Jakubowski from RIBIT, where can people access this? We do have quite a substantial global audience for In Transition because we're communicating to such a narrow audience we have listeners all over the world, people who are interested in this challenge of government and public sector communications. Where could people find out a little bit more about RIBIT? If they're overseas at this state obviously they can't access the platform, but do you want to go overseas at some point?

Liz Jakubowski: Yeah, actually we're doing a pilot.

David Pembroke: There you go.

Liz Jakubowski: Actually at the end of this year with San Francisco, there's a bunch of buzzy startups over there who are interested in using it. We just, last week kicked off a project with China, whilst we're still very early stage and obviously we want to be able to deliver to expectations. There is interest already in using the platform globally, that is part of our roadmap. RIBIT is part of, it's a project within Data61 which is in the CSIRO, Australia's leading scientific organisation. If anyone wants to find us we're ribit.net, but if you Google CSIRO, C-SIRO and RIBIT you can find us that way, otherwise just go straight to RIBIT, R-I-B-I-T.net and you can find us there.

David Pembroke: Fantastic, Liz, well, listen, thank you very much for giving up some of your time to be with us this afternoon. This is the end of Part Two, it was such an interesting conversation I thought I would keep the tape rolling. We don't have tape anymore, obviously, but I thought we'd keep it rolling because it was such a great chat. As we come to the end of Part two I know that the audience would have certainly enjoyed your wisdom and insights, and to understand those

earlier tips about how do we get things done at the political level. Your insights around leadership, but then this challenge, this optimistic challenge that I think we all as employers, and public sector employers as well, let's give the young people the opportunities that they deserve. Let's give them the guidance, the direction, and the confidence that they can get things done.

I think that let's hope that we can keep those unemployment numbers as low as we possibly can, so people can have the dignity of a job. I think it's a great mission that you've got there, long may that continue, and we will certainly be supporting it every day of the week here at content group. Thank you very much, Liz Jakubowski and thank you, the audience, for tuning in once more to In Transition, and we'll be back at the same time next week with another fantastic guest in the world of content communication, but for the moment it's bye for now.