

AWS_S1E04Nick_V2

Speakers: Constance Souchet & Nick Ihm

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Constance: Hi, I'm Constance. Amazon Web Services has 13 affinity groups, also known as employee resource groups. These are communities that bring people together across businesses and borders.

They exist to help grow a more connected, more compassionate AWS. Some examples include the Black Employee Network (BEN), Amazon Women in Engineering (AWE), and Indigenous at Amazon.

Today, I'm getting to the heart of why affinity groups offer such a positive support system for employees and colleagues. What do they do? Why do we need them, and how are they making this company better?

Welcome to Here at AWS.

Nick: I've always been interested in technology. I had my first personal computer when I was nine, and I was hooked.

Constance: This is Nick.

Nick: So, my role at AWS is I'm Senior Solutions Architect and I work with software and digital native businesses. So, those are software as a service or SaaS companies that you know and love.

Previous role, I was at a large software company in healthcare sector and delivering everything from regional, state or national level health systems in North America, across APJ and EMEA, improving health outcomes for people.

And it was extremely rewarding. But then I started moving into more of a leadership role, and I really wanted to kind of go back to technology and focus on it, enabling other types of businesses. And that's when I joined AWS.

So, that was about three and a half years ago and loving it ever since.

Constance: So, that's Nick's job at AWS. He's an incredibly talented switched-on solutions architect, but Nick is also involved in the New Zealand chapter of one of our oldest affinity groups.

Nick: So, Glamazon is one of 13 official Amazon affinity groups, and Glamazon focus on LGBTQI+ community, but it is open to anyone at Amazon.

So, how it got started was internal email list at Amazon to really promote happy hours back in '99, and it's run by volunteers and championing LGBTQI+ initiatives, and now, there are over 80 global chapters and ANZ chapter is one of them.

So, I got involved with Glamazon actually in first weeks of joining AWS from a recommendation from one of the leaders at the time that I should look into this. And I joined as New Zealand champion.

And in 2021, I started as a chapter co-lead. So, leading our chapter with another colleague in Australia.

Constance: That's so amazing to hear.

On top of his role as solutions architect, Nick is an incredibly devoted volunteer. With Glamazon, he works tirelessly to voice the needs and values of the LGBTQIA community. So, what amazing work has Nick been doing?

Nick: Earlier this year in February and March, we celebrated Sydney World Pride, and it attracted more than 1 million just for the parade day alone.

Glamazon has run over 50 events, 20 plus countries participated. Everything from Amazon Music, PROUD Playlist, Alexa phrases, Pride stores on the retail store, Pride video series, featuring our Amazonians and committee members talking about what Pride means to them.

It still makes me emotional. I think Pride is very personal, but we have this collective emotional response and experience and I think a lot of stories.

Constance: It sounds really positive being involved so heavily in an affinity group like Glamazon New Zealand. It means Nick gets to highlight the voice of his community in a vital way.

But is it possible that Glamazon New Zealand helped him grow in a professional sense as well, as it had an impact on his day-to-day job?

Nick: It's been really rewarding, great learning experience for me personally, and also, professionally. And I think connecting with other people in professional setting, that's something I actually haven't had before AWS because Glamazon is Amazon-wide.

So, it's an opportunity for me to connect with the people who are outside AWS and who are not in technology roles. It's been great for growing my professional network and also connecting with senior leaders, our executive sponsors, and really learning from them how to ask better questions.

That's always super important skill to have, and really thinking about processes and how we can make things easier for everyone so we can scale better. We are lucky in Australia, in New Zealand that we have a lot of legal rights for LGBTQI people.

So, that's around anti-discrimination, workplace harassments, marriage equality, adoption rights. But I think when we look at research and a lot of self ID results, nearly half of LGBTQI employees are not out at work.

And this statistic's kind of across all industries and all organisation sizes, and there's many different reasons why people may not be out at work. Even if they are outside work, it takes mental toll. It impacts your productivity, it impacts entire organisation.

What I will say is that this really can be leveraged to be your superpower because a lot of us, and I have been there in the past — you are constantly scanning the room and space to understand really the question of safety.

So, this skill actually develops a lot of empathy. And empathy does make you a better leader. And people are so used to doing this all the time, they don't even realise the superpower they have that's going to make them a better leader.

Constance: Helping to build and shape Glamazon New Zealand, Nick strives for a more safe, supportive community. And that's the key to things here at AWS; people feeling safe and supported at work. Because when you feel safe and supported, wonderful things can happen.

Nick: So, I announced this on my first days at AWS. So, it was monthly, all hands first one that I attended at AWS. So, there was intro and usual Amazon question on your favourite movies.

But I've also announced that my husband and I on a parenthood journey via surrogacy, and that's when I actually received a lot of support and a lot of people sharing fertility journey and wishing us luck and their support and genuine care, and welcome was really, really, really appreciated.

Interestingly, in Glamazon ANZ chapter, one of our ex-committee member still working at AWS, they've recently had a baby through surrogacy, and it's been really great to connect with people who are going through similar experiences and fertility journeys are different for so many people.

And I'm so glad to see earlier this week Amazon has announced that access to virtual support for IVF adoption and other family building benefits across 50 countries to all employees including hourly employees. So, it's really amazing.

And with benefits that I had available on parental leave, birth, and adoption leaves, meant that I could plan for my coverage plans during my absence for my customers. And I could be a hundred percent there for my family through birth, surgeries, recovery, and first months at home, as I get to adjust to new rhythm.

And I've always been a data person. So, I collect a lot of data about our baby, everything from feeding, nappy changes, health symptoms, medications, really in order to make data-driven decisions every day. And this allows all caregivers to be on the same page and really a reminder on how important access to data is to all of us every day.

Constance: Taking a step back, I wonder what changes has Nick seen for the LGBTQIA community in AWS.

Nick: 19 years ago, even 10 years ago, there were very few leaders in technology who were out, but that goes for a lot of different industries, but having those leaders who are in public eyes being themselves is really great to see.

And other thing is commitments and really actions by tech organisations, and that includes Amazon, not only celebrating Pride events, having floats and other sponsorships, but really creating that inclusive and equitable workplace for LGBTQI+ employees.

Constance: So, how do you see things developing in the future? For example, are younger generation bringing with them different sensibilities and beliefs?

Nick: What I've learned is that there's still so much I do not know. As a gay man, I know very little about other letters of LGBTQI people's experience, and I know that transgender people definitely still experience much more barriers with their career growth.

And younger generations, they had been educated from school. This really wasn't taught at school. Everything was binary and there was only one form of sexuality and like nothing was ever talked about.

Just even coming with the awareness and what a pronoun is as an example makes a big difference. We've run number of LGBTQI foundation training courses, and you see from different generations kind of the response and the background knowledge.

But one thing is that anyone who has kind of school age children, they're already being taught this at school. One thing we are learning is that there's a lot of intersectionality. So, out of other 13 affinity groups, there's Asians @, there's woman @, there's Latinos @, there's different backgrounds.

So, it's really combining our forces, scaling our impacts to create equitable and inclusive space for every Amazonian. Its long-term goal really is to truly create the safe space. Not only do we celebrate Pride events, but really create safe space for everyone.

Constance: One of many affinity groups, Glamazon New Zealand is a space where people like Nick can connect and feel seen. And as we continue to grow an AWS that is compassionate, diverse, and inclusive, affinity groups are massively important. Above all, they make this company a project you want to be part of.

Nick: Many marginalised groups, whether it's based on gender, sexual orientation, race, or their disability status, is that it's not obvious and it may not be visible to everyone.

And if you assume that everyone had the same experience as you, and assume and create events or opportunities based on your own experience only, that's going to unintentionally create barriers for some people.

I think biggest thing I've learned throughout my career is that really the importance of culture that grows and celebrates everyone's skills, experience, and background, it is fundamental to delivering results. And it's all about mechanisms.

So, good intentions don't work, mechanisms do, Jeff Bezos said that. And we have a lot of different mechanisms and leadership principle is definitely one of them. And I think the best ideas come from seeking diverse perspectives and try to disprove beliefs because I think when you have that group thinking, we're getting into day two culture.

So, to keep it day one, I think it is critical that everyone has a voice, and we have many mechanisms. All of these mechanisms really creates advantage for our customers and for our team to deliver. And that can only happen with all of diverse experiences and voices.

Constance: So, if you are wondering whether there's a space for you to feel validated and heard at AWS, there is. Regardless of sexuality, gender, race, disability, or religion, everyone can make it here.

Nick: 5 to 10% of people identify as LGBTQI+. That means our membership base also represents that. And we host a lot of different types of events. It could be a morning tea, it could be a casual check-in, or it could be an event that's offsite, it could be a movie experience shared, but not so much networking.

So, regardless of your comfort in social interactions or meeting new people, come and join us. You can join us on our mailing list.

Constance: Thanks so much to Nick for a fascinating discussion, and thanks to you for listening. It's always so fun to chat with new people from this AWS family.

Geetha: Exactly. No one here is just an email address. Everyone is building something and they all have a story to tell.

Constance: That's it for now, so don't forget to subscribe.

Geetha: And hey, if working up here in the cloud sounds like fun, why not check out our website in the bio. You may just be the person we're looking for.

Constance: We'll see you next time on Here at AWS.