

Episode 296: How Remote Internships Can Bridge the Disability Employment Gap



Intro: [00:00:00.36] Welcome to the Workology Podcast, a podcast for the disruptive workplace leader. Join host Jessica Miller-Merrell, founder of Workology.com, as she sits down and gets to the bottom of trends, tools and case studies for the business leader, HR and recruiting professional who is tired of the status quo. Now, here's Jessica with this episode of Workology.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:00:25.89] This episode is part of the Workology Podcast and is part of our Future of Work series, powered by PEAT, the Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology. PEAT works to start conversations around how emerging workplace technology trends are impacting people with disabilities. The Workology Podcast, which is what you're listening to, is sponsored by Upskill HR and ACE The HR Exam. Today I'm joined by Ahva Sadeghi and Paula Mora with Symba, a venture backed and all female founded tech startup focused on the future of work. Ahva is the co-founder and CEO of Symba. She is an economist and researcher focused on remote work and workforce development. Prior to launching Symba, Ahva worked at the U.S. Department of State and the Human Rights Bureau and completed a civil rights fellowship with Congressman John Lewis in Atlanta. She was recently named Forbes 30 Under 30 and a global entrepreneur scholar by the U.S. Department of State. Paula is a founding member of Symba and prior to joining Symba, Paula worked at the World Bank and International Finance Corporation. Paula completed her graduate studies at IE Business School in Spain and holds a B.A. in International Relations from Florida International University. Paula is passionate about professional development for at-risk youth, immigrants and people of color. Ahva and Paula, welcome to the Workology Podcast.

Ahva Sadeghi: [00:01:51.78] Thank you so much for having us, Jessica. We are very excited to be here.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:01:56.67] I'm excited to start getting into the podcast interview. I want to start first with a little bit, I gave a little bit of background information about you guys individually, but how did, tell us more, and then how did Symba come together?

Ahva Sadeghi: [00:02:14.19] Absolutely. We're so excited to share more about our backgrounds and Symba and our journey building our start-up. As you shared, my background is in economics and the future of work. I was a remote intern with the State Department almost a decade ago, so I became very, very passionate about remote work, access and economic empowerment. And I'm excited to also pass it over to Paula to introduce herself.

Paula Mora: [00:02:40.29] Thank you so much, Ahva. Thank you, Jessica, for having us. We're really excited to be sharing our journey and our story with you. I am Paula Mora. I am a Colombian immigrant who, as a first generation college student, I had really great opportunities to explore my career journey. I had five internship opportunities during college, and I really became passionate about the positive effects the career development programs have on individuals and their long term career success. So after joining the World Bank and meeting Ahva, I really was just so passionate about this space and creating these opportunities. We actually met doing an awesome entrepreneur event in the World Bank and listening to the origin story, which she'll talk to us about now, it was just really an exciting opportunity for us to continue to create these opportunities and have a positive impact. So I'd love to pass it over to Ahva to share that origin story with us all.

Ahva Sadeghi: [00:03:45.24] Thank you, Paula. And as I mentioned, I was a student. My undergraduate studies was in Tucson, Arizona, and my passion was to focus on women's rights, international relations. My family's from Iran. So I had this strong passion and calling. However, all the internships and opportunities I wanted were not in Tucson, Arizona. They were in big cities like New York, D.C., London. And so I realized that access was really kind of the geography. Access was my challenge and I was fortunate to land a remote internship opportunity at State. This is almost a decade ago before remote internships were the norm and it was a game changer for me. I was now able to access opportunities in a whole new way, and that is our whole thesis and core mission of what we do at Symba. Our mission is to create accessibility to the workforce, and we do that by helping companies scale a remote internship programs and workforce initiatives.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:48.63] I love this and I think it's so timely because a lot of us are planning our re-entry into the office and making some decisions about in-person virtual or something in between. But maybe some of us haven't thought about our internship programs and what those are going to look like moving forward. One of the questions I wanted to make sure to ask was how does Symba work with companies and workforce development programs? Tell us more about that.

Paula Mora: [00:05:17.93] Of course, so when we first get started with Symba, we actually sat down with around two hundred and fifty HR teams to really understand their pain points and the opportunities that we could leverage with technology. So when we first sat down with these teams that were telling us that they were using eight to 11 different platforms and different tools to actually manage their their programs. So as you can imagine, the heavy lift on the management side and the admin side was definitely a pain point that needed to be solved. So that's where we saw the great opportunity to create a platform that really supports the management and the scaling of these programs. So our platform supports remote hybrid and in-person talent development programs. And we actually started off with internships. But we have scaled to support fellowships, bootcamps, accelerators, even apprenticeship programs and more. Also on our platform. Organizations can easily onboard. They can manage projects, assign, train, curriculum and really foster community amongst all of the program participants. So our platform also connects key success metrics that help organizations track really the long term impact that these workforce development programs are having. We've worked with great companies like Chewey and Robin Hood and also social impact startups and nonprofits like Inroads. So we're really excited about just creating these really accessible tools and allowing companies to really scale the work and the impact that they're having through these really impactful workforce development programs.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:59.96] I love that you guys make that kind of creating a culture among the interns and the program and help to bring them together and share information, because I think a lot of us maybe are just like, what am I going to do with my internship program? But we haven't even thought, you know, two, five, fifteen, twenty five steps ahead to think about the execution of that and what that looks like. And so you guys take care of all those things and have a successful program system and technology to help support organizations. I love that. As you mentioned, remote internship seem to do a lot to promote accessibility by removing geographic barriers. Can you tell us how digital accessibility of the technology fits into that?

Paula Mora: [00:07:48.76] Of course, thank you so much for bringing this question up, Jessica. You know, through remote internships, employers are not only able to access talent from other physical locations, but they're also able to tap into underrepresented talent like people with disabilities. So, for example, Accenture found that companies who hire people with disabilities earn 28 percent higher revenue, two times the net income and even 30 percent higher economic profit margins than their peers. So our top priority, while building our program management platform, was really creating a solution that allows organizations to attract this new talent. So the importance of Web accessibility was really key to the whole development process. So we first and foremost follow the web content accessibility guidelines that are guidelines that outline how to make sure that Web content is more accessible to people with disabilities. So the bottom line is that accessible technology really leverages the curb cut effect by providing the best user experience for all the users. So rather than us aiming for, you know, an average platform, we really want our tool to be flexible so that it can be used by the widest range of people possible. So as a startup, as you can imagine, it's really important for us to ensure that our technology is designed right from the beginning. So remediating accessibility after the fact can be really expensive. So by planning with inclusive design in mind from the get go, we're really future proofing our technology as we scale in the future.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:09:28.03] I love that you're focusing on building out your technology and your platform and really your business this way. And I really hope it's inspiration for other technology founder startups, just companies for them to think about setting things up, as you said, making it accessible for everyone. And for those who are interested, we will link in the resources section some information about the web content accessibility guidelines. So go to the show notes over at Workology. Can we also talk a little bit about how remote internships and apprenticeships help level the playing field for people with disabilities, especially those beginning their careers and looking for on the job experience?

Ahva Sadeghi: [00:10:16.85] Absolutely. This is really, truly core to our founding mission and reason why we began working on Symba. People with disabilities often struggle significantly when starting out in their careers. When students graduate, they typically lose the accommodation of support they've relied on. This may be one of the reasons that the labor force participation for people with disabilities is less than half than the rate for people without disabilities. So a remote internship can alleviate some of these burdens and challenges and really set these recent graduates up for success while connecting companies to more diverse talent and also, you know, in forming companies about why this is so critical to offer accommodations like this. Telework is an accommodation, an option that often helps many people with disabilities succeed. One benefit is that advocating for the accommodations that you need can be scary and anxiety induced, especially for short term positions. New graduates with disabilities may be very concerned

about navigating the process for the first time. If they already have a home set up that works really well for them, a remote option can be the best option, especially if they are in all digital cohort or all carers are on the same playing field. Our team at Symba actually recently collaborated with Clinically Capable to put together a resource guide for individuals on how to disclose their illnesses to employers. It is very important that employers are creating a safe environment for their employees to succeed, and that means meeting them where they're at, providing the resources that they need and enabling them to work from wherever they want. So that's why remote is a great option and a great accommodation for people with disabilities to foster diversity in the workforce.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:12:11.54] This is really important right now. In fact, I'm getting fired up because I just had a conversation with a very good friend of mine who is on the phone as we speak with an employment attorney because she has a disability and asked and requested a reasonable accommodation to be able to work remotely and was terminated in her job. So employers do need to think about remote work as a reasonable accommodation, and it absolutely is. Our employees have been working from home for the last 18 or more months.

Ahva Sadeghi: [00:12:49.14] Oh, I'm fired up, I can't believe that that happened and there has to be recourse. I mean, that is just unacceptable and employers do need to provide these environments and this does need to be top of mind in a conversation. So thank you for sharing that. And I hope that she's able to receive the right accommodations and and process for that. That is really unfortunate and should not be should not stand.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:13:14.53] Agreed. And that's why having you on the podcast is so important that we can have conversations and give employers options about the different technology, solutions and resources available and those companies that have had success like we've, we've talked about in our time today.

Break: [00:13:33.20] Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell, and you were listening to the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskil H.R. and ACE the HR Exam. Today we are talking with Ahva Sadeghi and Paula Mora of Symba about remote internships. This podcast is part of our Future of Work series with PEAT, The Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology.

Break: [00:13:55.30] The Workology Podcast Future of Work series is supported by PEAT, the Partnership on Employment and Accessible Technology. PEAT's initiative is to foster collaboration and action around accessible technology in the workplace. PEAT is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, ODEP. Learn more about PEAT at PEATWorks.org, that's PEATWorks.org.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:14:24.59] Can you talk a little bit about how remote internships and apprenticeships help level the playing field for people with disabilities, especially those beginning their

careers and looking for on the job experience, which I think can be a challenge remotely, but I want to hear directly from you guys as the experts on this virtual apprenticeship and internship platform that you have.

Ahva Sadeghi: [00:14:50.65] Yes, Jessica, well this is something that I think our team can talk all day about and something we're so passionate about because, you know, I shared a little bit about my own story being based in Tucson, Arizona, and I've actually done six unpaid internships. So this narrative is definitely changing. And we're very happy about the change in the growth here, about addressing the unpaid internship, but because they were unpaid, it was so expensive for me to relocate to New York and DC. So remote internships were an affordable option for me that allowed me to overcome my financial and geographical barriers. Some of the students who can't afford to move to New York, I mean, think about the entire population of the US and the world that are not based in these major pockets and hubs. So internships can create that new form of access. And many of our clients are telling us that this is kind of a silver lining because they could only go to the campuses, that they could have a booth hat. Now they're considering going to community colleges, reconsidering how they recruit, going to different states and really opening up the doors for more students to access these opportunities, and because it's remote, they don't have to pay for the interns desk, they don't have to pay for the interns relocation. So they can actually provide more opportunities for the students as well. So one other positive thing, too, about remote internships and apprenticeships is that they create a unique avenue for networking. And that's one of those powerful things about internship opportunities, is who you get to meet, who your mentors are that can support you throughout your career. And there's been a lot of reports that interns this past year have had more exposure to VPs and senior executives at organizations than ever before. So there are a lot of benefits around remote internships. I do always say that remote is different than in-person. They offer different things, but remote is a great opportunity to create more access and scalability that transcends geographic and financial barriers that students normally experience.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:16:55.51] I love that you're able to offer employers the opportunity to connect with different kinds of students from different schools. And I love the community college. I went to community college, got my associates from, from a school. And if you're looking at increasing your diversity programs or your diversity hiring initiatives, being able to make connections and build relationships with potential interns and hopefully candidates and hires in different places is extremely important. So I love the work that you guys are doing in that way, especially. How does Symba help employers scale their workforce development? Are you able to share a case study about a company you have been working with for a while? I'd love to hear it.

Paula Mora: [00:17:43.61] Yes, definitely. We have worked with employers across industries, so even from retail to government agencies to fintech and health care. For example, we've been working really closely with Robin Hood, a leading fintech company, to help them scale their remote internship program. So they've actually started off with twenty five interns when we first supported their internship program, and now they have scaled to over 100 hundred interns on our platform. Actually, about 82 percent of our clients are scaling on on Symba. Our customers are really easily able to scale their programs because our platform makes it really turnkey to manage these programs. And it really removes the heavy lifting of having to recreate their programs from scratch or using different multiple different platforms, as I mentioned in the beginning, you know, teams we're using anywhere from eight to 11 different tools. So once they're set up on Symba they can easily bring on new participants and really seamlessly scale their programs. So on Symba companies can also create multiple programs. So they're not only opening the doors to more participants, but they're also

scaling to provide apprenticeships, co-ops and even other talent development programs. So that really is how we track success as a team. You know, we are seeing that our partners are bringing on more diverse talent and that is really core to our mission at Symba of opening up the workforce.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:19:10.19] What a great case study. And I just saw that Robin Hood is working on an initial public offering or IPO. So the fact that you've been able to help support them and be able to scale and hopefully continue to do that by bringing them talent, using the simple platform, I think is really amazing. So hats off to you guys. Let's talk about training. How do you educate employers to show how possible it is to bring people with disabilities into their talent pool

Ahva Sadeghi: [00:19:42.95] As a startup, we have a very important role to play in creating education, thought leadership and supporting our employers that their entire journey of building these programs. So, we do, you know, thought leadership content. We create blogs, we create ebooks and training. We also host webinars that bring leaders together to share some of the best practices. And we have a very close relationship with a lot of our clients. We work really closely as they're designing their programs. So these are the hard questions and the important questions that we do ask them. You know, how are they thinking about diversity and inclusion from a much larger perspective and how are they creating inclusive environments for everyone to succeed? And even as a startup ourselves, we went through the process of making sure that we can create a platform that is inclusive for all and we are still continuing to improve Symba's platform to make sure of that. So partnerships for sure thought leadership content is so important that we have this knowledge sharing with our employers and that we continually improve their growth and how they're working with their programs.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:20:52.] Wonderful. I want to back up maybe bigger picture a little bit and talk about how you work with employers to meet diversity, equity and inclusion goals. We can include people with disabilities. I want to make sure they're not left out of the diversity conversation. But certainly organizations should be looking at a wide variety or a number of programs where they're focused on diversity.

Paula Mora: [00:21:20.] Thank you for asking this question, Jessica, because as Ahva just mentioned, inclusivity is truly at the center of why we do what we do. As we mentioned, our mission at Symba is really to open up the workforce and we build our platform with a vision in mind, and that is to provide employers with the necessary tools to reskill their workforce development programs so that they could have the capacity to really open up doors to diverse talent. And as you were mentioning, diverse talent not only includes, you know, people from different backgrounds, different beliefs, but also including people with disabilities in the conversation. So when we work with these organizations, we're not only providing our platform to help manage their programs, but we're also creating an ecosystem where we heavily rely on partnerships with diverse talent boards. So, for example, when organizations are ready to scale their programs, they can tap into diverse pools of talent. So one of our partners, Inroads, they have a fantastic talent pipeline of individuals from underserved communities. And another really strong partner that we have is Chronically Capable. And they actually have an amazing job board that is only specific and caters to people with disabilities. We not only connect our employers to our diversity partners, but we have also built in a dashboard on our platform that actually help organizations track their diversity metrics right there on their

platform. So we're really building a tool with a purpose, and that is to level the playing field and ensure that there is a more equitable future of work.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:22:57.] Paula and Ahva, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us. Before we end the podcast, I wanted to have you tell us where should folks go to be able to learn more about you and the work that you're doing with Symba.

Ahva Sadeghi: [00:23:13.] Thank you so much, Jessica, for having us today. We are excited to connect with the amazing community audience that you have. They can learn more about Symba at Symba.io. That is our site. Follow us on LinkedIn, @Symba, and we'd love to stay connected and share our startup journey with you. Thank you so much again for having us today. It's truly been a pleasure.

Closing: [00:23:40.] I really appreciate Ahva and Paula's insights on this special episode as part of our Future of Work series, which is powered by PEAT. Accessibility can be built into our work culture as part of hiring, onboarding, training and employee development. Technology can be a bridge between employers seeking candidates and job seekers with disabilities, especially when it comes to internships and remote work. The Workology Podcast is sponsored by Upskill HR and ACE The HR Exam.