

WEBVTT

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Kara Snyder: Hello! And welcome to the podcast a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm. Your host, Kara Snyder, and I serve as the assistant Dean of marketing communications and constituent relations for the college.

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Rachel Lockett: Each episode we're sitting down with an alum of the college, and today we have a chance to talk to Rachel Lockett. Rachel is an information technology alumna, and currently serves as chief information officer for poleed companies. Welcome and thank you so much for being here. Thank you. Carrots a pleasure to be here.

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Well, let's start at the beginning. Why did you choose? Isu?

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Rachel Lockett: Well, I have to be honest. I grew up there in blowing to normal. So it was kind of the easy solution. I did look at other schools, though, and was accepted to other universities, even outside of Illinois. But I decided. You know the hometown school had everything I needed.

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Oh, I love that. So how did you end up picking your Major?

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Rachel Lockett: And that's kind of around about story, too. I was actually originally accepted to the theater school I was. I was going to be an actress of all things, but as I got to the end of my senior year of high school, I decided that

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Rachel Lockett: as much as I loved acting, I I didn't really want to try and make a career of it. And so I looked back at what I was good at the other things that I that I was good at, and I realized

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Rachel Lockett: I kind of had an aptitude for computers. In fact, even though I would spend all of my time

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Rachel Lockett: in in in high school, I would spend all of my time down in the English and and drama wing of the of the school with those teachers,

they would actually have me come in and help them teach their students how to use the computers to write research papers, because my teachers at the time didn't really want anything to do with the computers.

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Rachel Lockett: and I was able to figure it out. And so when I looked at at what else I was good at besides acting, I said, You know, I think this computer thing might work out. And so, really, at the very last minute, I I kind of changed my mind and changed my major and changed the whole direction of my career and my life.

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Kara Snyder: Well, that's fascinating to me, because those are 2 seemingly such disparate. You know directions that you get are. Yeah, they're very different. But I have found that that that sort of passion for communication and

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Rachel Lockett: public speaking and interacting with people has really been a differentiator in my career. It's it's sort of set me apart from the typical it person, and and helped me really to to grow and excel and explore other areas of business as well.

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Kara Snyder: Oh, that makes total sense absolutely a tool in your toolbox, that's for sure.

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And so tell me a little bit about what it was like to be, You know, a self described county and pick as you. Because I think.

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Kara Snyder: what would you say to a student that's in Bloomington Normal now in high school that's trying to decide if I issue should be an option for them. Did it feel different to actually be a student on campus as opposed to just being a member of the community.

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Rachel Lockett: You know it. I mean. It felt different moving to college from high school, of course, but I was so familiar with the camps I mean I spent. I probably spent just as much time on the campus while I was in high school as I did while I was in college. It was. It was very

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Rachel Lockett: comfortable and familiar and close, but of course there is the a distinct difference between high school and college, so you know I I

appreciated that it felt. You know I had grown up. I've assured I've gotten to that level now. I didn't have to be accountable to bills and things like that. So but it was really it was a great place for me.

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Kara Snyder: So what do you miss most about your time on campus.

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Rachel Lockett: Well, I will say, because my family is from there I do get to go back fairly often, although it has been a little while now, because, Covid, we we didn't go back as much. But

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Rachel Lockett: probably what I miss most is Garcia's pizza.

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Kara Snyder: Okay, Yup.

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Rachel Lockett: is that fair?

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Kara Snyder: So tell us you have your degree now in information technology. What was that initial job search like for you?

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Rachel Lockett: So for me, I started my first job in it while I was still a student at Isu. So I had. I worked with someone who knew someone who actually his wife, worked for a company there in Bloomington and

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Rachel Lockett: have the opportunity to apply for a job as a programmer and a marketing company at Progressive Impressions International.

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Rachel Lockett: and got the job and actually had to adjust my my school schedule, because at first I thought I was just applying for a part time job. But this was the nineties, and they were kind of, you know, desperate for technology people. If you could

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Rachel Lockett: plug in a computer you could get a job in it. And so they actually offered me a full time job as a programmer.

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Rachel Lockett: so I had to adjust my school schedule to be nights and weekends, so that I could work a full time job while I was finishing my degree. So it was actually

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Rachel Lockett: pretty easy to get that first opportunity, and then I was very lucky that you know it just grew. From there my career expanded. From there I spent 14 years with that with the the broader group of companies that that pi I was a part of, and then, you know, moved on from there.

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Kara Snyder: Oh, my gosh! That's very impressive, and a Testament to your, you know. Ability to time manage, and definitely a a testament to your dedication as a student as well. I think that's commendable.

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Rachel Lockett: So tell me, then, now you are a chief information officer, and I know you said you spent 14 years with that initial company. Give us kind of the cliffs notes version of your your path to your current role. Sure. Well, I started out like I said as a programmer, and pretty quickly

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Rachel Lockett: was able to get involved in. You know, kind of the administrative duties of the department took on a role where I was. I was meeting directly with the customers, and then I would

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Rachel Lockett: pass requirements on to other programmers on the team, and then kind of overseeing their work, and and then communicating back to the customers.

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Rachel Lockett: and within the first year that turned into becoming a supervisor. And it was this kind of shocking to me. Here I was, you know, 20 years old, still still in college, technically, and supervising a team of programmers and developers. I was so.

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Rachel Lockett: We just

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Rachel Lockett: incredibly blessed and lucky and and grateful for the opportunities that I was given, and I was given a lot of leadership,

development opportunities as well, a lot of training. And you know, some cohort based leadership

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Rachel Lockett: classes

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Rachel Lockett: and the opportunity to progress and grow in my career, and from there. I I actually I stayed there in let me to normal for the first 5 years again, you know, programmer, and then supervisor manager over, I I started up a web Development department for that company.

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Rachel Lockett: and then I moved to Minnesota, and it was still within the broader group of companies, as the organization called Taylor Corporation, but I transferred to another one of their companies here in Minnesota.

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Rachel Lockett: and again continued to be the beneficiary of some really great opportunities, got to branch out. I was involved in the due diligence of an acquisition in Portland, Oregon, and as a result I went out there and spent a year, being in charge of human resources and accounting.

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Rachel Lockett: then also had the opportunity to be in charge of a quality assurance department, and led a business of about 500 people through Iso. 9,000 quality certification

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Rachel Lockett: started up a training department at that company just got the chance to become a little bit more well rounded in several other areas of business which really helped set me up for for the future. And then, when I left that organization and join the pull-AD organization in

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Rachel Lockett: 2,011. Of course I was able to bring this. You know very well rounded background is not just a technology leader, but a business leader with a technology background.

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Rachel Lockett: and I I started out as a vice president of it for a group of commercial real estate companies.

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Rachel Lockett: But then the parent company was looking for an assessment. This was another privately owned holding company with an even more diverse group of businesses in their portfolio, and they were looking for an assessment of what they had in terms of technology across their diverse portfolio of businesses.

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Rachel Lockett: And so I was on a small team that conducted that assessment, and we made the recommendation to them that they needed a a CIO at the parent company level.

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Rachel Lockett: and i'll tell you I actually thought that during this full process I thought we were writing the job description for one of the other people on the team, you know, and I was fully accepting of that, and in fact, in talking with him, I would, you know, I said to him one day, I said, You know I really enjoy working with you. I've learned a lot from you

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Rachel Lockett: when you take on this CIO role that we're proposing. Would you consider continuing to mentor me, and maybe groom me to take over that role when you retire, because you had already mentioned that he wanted to retire in 3 to 5 years.

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Rachel Lockett: Well, he laughed, and he said, Well, there's no guarantee that they're going to offer it to me, or that I would accept. But if that's what happens, he said. Yes, absolutely. I would I would love to do that.

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Rachel Lockett: And so I thought, oh, that's great. I know what my career path is going. I I have it all laid out. You know the timing will be perfect.

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Rachel Lockett: And so we finished our proposal. We we recommended this role, and then I just sat back and waited for the announcement that he had been hired.

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Rachel Lockett: and I waited, and the announcement never came. And then one day I got a phone call from

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Rachel Lockett: the Executive that was overseeing us on this project, and he said. You know that CIO role that you proposed, he said, we're going to be posting that next week, and i'm calling to let you know so that you can apply.

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Rachel Lockett: I said, Well, what about what about Ken? What happened to Ken?

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He said. You know we talked to Ken, and it just isn't going to work out. But

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Rachel Lockett: we asked Ken who we should put into the role, and who we should consider for the role, and he told us that you were the only person that was qualified.

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Rachel Lockett: So that's how I became the CIO of the pull out companies, and I've been doing this for 10 years now, and it's been it's been great. It's been wonderful. Absolutely love the people I work with, and the people I work for?

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Kara Snyder: Well, that is quite the story, and I mean the power of mentorship, you know, just in action, that is, that's wonderful to see, and the importance of speaking up and asking for what you want, even if even if it comes in a different time. Timeframe.

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Rachel Lockett: just putting you, you know, putting yourself out there and saying, hey, I would. I'd like to raise my hand for this. It's really important.

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Kara Snyder: absolutely absolutely. Well. Tell me I need you. You mentioned, you became a supervisor at 20, which is incredible, so I imagine that you had.

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Kara Snyder: You know you were learning leadership kind of on the fly as Well, as you said, you had some very tactical leadership development opportunities. So tell me, combine, combine your.

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Kara Snyder: you know, learning on the job with those leadership development opportunities. Do you have a leadership philosophy that you stick to?

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Rachel Lockett: Absolutely. Yes, I I was very lucky to learn and and and have all of those great opportunities early on.

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Rachel Lockett: and the thing I learned from that, and from my own experience, and even from you know, some mistakes is the importance of of trust and the importance of being a servant leader. So throughout

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Rachel Lockett: throughout all of my career all of the best opportunities came to me

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Rachel Lockett: when I was really focused just on figuring out how I could serve and how I could help, and

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Rachel Lockett: especially my own team. So

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Rachel Lockett: when you're when you're given responsibility to lead other people. I look at it as my responsibility to help them reach their potential. And that's how i'm going to achieve success. So I have this this mental

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Rachel Lockett: trophy case, if you will.

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Rachel Lockett: and each one of the trophies is a person that I was able to help in some way to reach their potential in their career most of the time. The the main thing I was doing was helping them to see the potential that they didn't even see themselves, because people did that for me.

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Rachel Lockett: And so, if I can just help them, see that potential, that might be the the main thing that they need, and then they're going to do all of the work. Sometimes it's helping connect them with the right opportunities or help them understand. You know. Here's



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Rachel Lockett: there's a training opportunity, or a. You know, a skill that you need to to add in to your toolkit in order to get to that next level.

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Rachel Lockett: But that's really how I look at leadership is to to serve the organization, to help achieve the organization's, goals and to serve people and help them reach their full potential. And through that I end up getting great opportunities myself sometimes. Again, you know, without even without even having to ask for them.

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Rachel Lockett: But yeah, having the courage to ask once in a while doesn't help or doesn't hurt.

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That's a great outlook.

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Kara Snyder: and we have listeners from all across the college and university. So how would you describe your job to somebody outside of the industry. What does a day to day for a CIO look like?

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Rachel Lockett: Well, especially being with a diverse group of companies. It's it's something different every day. But I will say a lot of my role is focused on information, security and digital transformation. So those are, you know kind of the 2

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Rachel Lockett: biggest themes or areas of focus within technology. But fortunately I get to spend most of my time coaching and developing and mentoring others, and that's the most rewarding part.

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Rachel Lockett: I had a a colleague up here recently, friend of mine. He was speaking, and at a a conference, and he said, You know, if I had to go back, and

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Rachel Lockett: and you know, start from scratch when you know when it comes to studying and learning and preparing for my career, he said. I

would absolutely study psychology because it is so much more important to understand people

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Rachel Lockett: mit

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Rachel Lockett: that we, you know that we think, are so important. Now, those things are absolutely important to create that foundation at the beginning of your career, but it has to be balanced with understanding people and caring about people and understanding how to achieve things through people

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Kara Snyder: right, and I imagine it's a lot easier to teach somebody those technical skills than it is to teach somebody how to care.

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Rachel Lockett: Yes, and that might not ring true for someone who is sitting in a computer lab at 2 am trying to

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Kara Snyder: crank out that that final assignment. But yes, it is true.

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Rachel Lockett: So I was so excited to talk to you today, Rachel, because I think that you are my first podcast guest. That is also an author. So tell us all about your book and about your experience writing it. Oh, sure, yeah. So after this, you know, Great 25 year

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Rachel Lockett: career, which certainly isn't over yet. But you know, looking back, I realized I had a lot of experiences and and stories to share, and I love. I love getting the opportunity to mentor and coach other people, and writing a book was kind of a way to do that at a broader scale.

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Rachel Lockett: And so the book I've written. It's called the Technology Doesn't Matter prioritizing the people in it business alignment. And it's written to the dual audience of business leaders and technology leaders with the goal of helping them understand how to better relate to one another

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Rachel Lockett: in order to achieve that it business alignment that we're all striving for. So I have shelves full of books written to it, people trying to teach them how to better understand the business and communicate with their business counterparts. But I really felt like

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Rachel Lockett: there needed to be a a 2 way conversation. We needed business leaders to have a better understanding of the technology

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Rachel Lockett: people and the technology processes, so that they could meet us halfway so that we could really be working arm and arm toward that that it business alignment or leveraging technology to benefit the business. So that's the book that I've written. And it's been a fun and exciting process. And it actually just launched a week ago. So it's available for order, you know Amazon, Barnes and noble etc.

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Rachel Lockett: But it's been a lot of fun.

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Rachel Lockett: Oh, so I didn't realize it was that new. It's literally hot off the press. It is. Yeah, I have a big a launch event I had one on Monday, and I have another one coming up tomorrow. Well congratulations that it must feel so good to be able to hold that final product in your hand. It was. It was really a heady experience.

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Kara Snyder: and I imagine we have a lot of students listening to this that might think you're a little bit crazy they might be thinking, hey, I have this writer's block on this paper. How in the world did she find time to write a whole book?

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Kara Snyder: What advice do you have for them? Did you ever hit Writer's Block

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Rachel Lockett: Absolutely. And I tell you what, if I had written the book even just a year later to the with the benefit of chat, gpt, and generative AI. It would have taken me a lot less time to write.

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Rachel Lockett: but back to the book. It did take me about 2 years, and that was varying levels of effort. I would say the the true effort, the time period where I was putting the maximum effort into it was probably

more like 6 months, but it took 2 years from start to finish. From the time I opened up that first blank page

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Rachel Lockett: and wrote the first lines to getting it done was was a solid 2 years, and I guess a couple of little secrets

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Rachel Lockett: one thing, and then this might not apply to a shorter research paper. But one thing that helped me with, you know, writing something the length of a book

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Rachel Lockett: was writing a little bit, maybe a chapter, or or you know, a 1,000 words or whatever, and then sharing it with someone and getting feedback, and that feedback was very motivating it. It gave me insight to help make either go back and correct and make that section better, or to make the next section that I was about to write better.

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Rachel Lockett: But it also just gave me that that little encouragement and push, you know, especially when the when the feedback was very positive. It made me excited to write the next the next section.

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Rachel Lockett: and then the other thing is finding dedicated time. So we we actually we purchased a vacation home up north. It was about. It's about 4 h away from our home, and my husband loves to drive, and so I would spend that 4 h

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Rachel Lockett: up and back. So 8 h total about every 2 or 3 weekends just in the car writing, and it was dedicated focus time there wasn't anything else I could be doing. I was just sitting in a car. I would put the phone in the back seat so that wouldn't be a distraction. So that's my other recommendation is to allocate that dedicated time for yourself

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to get it done, and to remove all of the other distractions.

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Kara Snyder: Okay, because that was going to be. My next question is, while you're writing this book you have a full time job you mentioned. You have a family. It had to be hard to fit that in.

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Rachel Lockett: Yeah, yeah, it wouldn't. I don't know if I would have even been able to do it, if not for just you know that ability to set aside that time because it is, it is challenging. You have to really get yourself into the right mindset, but it's very rewarding. It's worth it.

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Kara Snyder: That's fantastic.

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Rachel Lockett: Well, you mentioned your favorite part of your job is, you know, mentoring others and lifting them up. Tell us what is the most challenging thing about your job?

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Rachel Lockett: That's a tough one. because I love everything about my job. I I guess I would say when when i'm not able to

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Rachel Lockett: to solve a problem, or when

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Rachel Lockett: you know I just don't when when the the resources aren't there, or the the business isn't able to dedicate the resources to achieve what I know is possible. I don't like, you know. I don't like being stopped in my tracks on something.

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Rachel Lockett: but that happens so rarely anymore. We're really able to, You know. I'm usually able to figure out a way to accomplish what needs to be done to solve the business problems.

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Rachel Lockett: So

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Rachel Lockett: I I I feel bad. I'm hunting on this one. But there's really nothing that

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Rachel Lockett: that is discouraging in, you know, in a challenging way. It's all a challenge, but it's a great positive challenge. It's all fun and exciting and and solving problems is, I love that challenge, and that's what drives me forward. There's nothing that's a discouraging challenge.

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Kara Snyder: Oh, that's great! That's great. Well, we will finish with a speed round, just to get to know you a little bit better. So go with your first instinct on these questions.

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Rachel Lockett: Are you a morning person or a night owl, morning person.

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Kara Snyder: texting or talking?

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And if You're a morning person. I have to know coffee or tea.

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Rachel Lockett: you know. I like my caffeine, bright, yellow, and cold. I'm a mountain do addict. Okay, as a true technology person at heart, right? I was gonna say, I bet you have some friends over an old Union right now.

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Rachel Lockett: Favorite season. Hmm. Used to be fall, but then we got a pool. So now i'm going to say summer

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Kara Snyder: fair enough. What's your favorite thing to cook for dinner.

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Rachel Lockett: pasta, or r Soto some kind of Italian.

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Kara Snyder: Oh, nice!

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Rachel Lockett: And what is the best trip you've ever taken you mentioned? You have a vacation home. Is is that your favorite, or is there another destination? Well, I do. I mean that's the cabin up north, and I do love it there. But I've been to Paris 4 times now, and i'll go back as often as you'll let me.

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Kara Snyder: It's fair enough.

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Rachel Lockett: and then I know you're a garcia's pizza fan, so I don't know how you feel about this question but avanti scandola, or pub cheese balls definitely of aunties. But also can I get the pizza burger instead of the gondola?

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I like the way you think.

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Rachel Lockett: All right. One last question for you. If you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

132

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Rachel Lockett: I would say, going back to to sort of my origin story. If you will don't assume that you have to pursue that thing that you've always been about. You can let your passion be your differentiating factor. I actually pursued the career. That was kind of my my second interest.

133

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Rachel Lockett: But I've let that first interest of you know theater and acting and public speaking. I've let that be my differentiate differentiating factor, and that's made a huge difference. I still love what I do.

134

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Rachel Lockett: and I and I get to do what I love every day. But I get to do it a little differently because of that of that passion. So Don't believe that you absolutely have to pursue that one thing that you're best at. You can do the thing that your second best at, and let that thing that your best at be your differentiating factor.

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Kara Snyder: That's fantastic advice. Thank you so much for that, and thanks again for being here.

136

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That was Rachel Lockett, Chief Information Officer for Poland Companies join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our cast alumni.