Beyond the Spreadsheet with Robyn D. Jefferson

Gretchen (00:01.663)

According to a 2022 study on CNBC.com, accounting is perceived as the second most boring job in the world, right below data entry. I think most listeners would agree that accounting can be dynamic and creative. And today's guest believes our quote unquote "bad reputation" is in dire need of a makeover.

I'm Gretchen Lehman. And today we're talking about the importance of authenticity with a woman who built a successful firm on the basis of her personality, plus the significance of financial literacy, how to be selective about your client base and a potential solution to the staffing crisis. Welcome to Beyond the Spreadsheet.

But before we introduce our guest, there's another important person in the studio with me. It's our own Jacob Wood. Welcome, Jacob.

Jacob (00:45.939)

Thank you Gretchen. So good to be here, especially with my good friend Robyn. Now I've known Robyn for a couple of years. We actually got introduced virtually by mutual friends and we started working on a few projects together. And so I've known her for a couple of years and she always has a smile on her face and a laugh in her heart. And that's why she's so fun to hang out with. So when we were putting this podcast together, I was really excited to recommend her and really happy that she's here and has made the time for us in her busy, busy schedule.

She's an amazing and thoughtful and proactive CPA and firm owner. And I would say she really takes a personable approach with clients and is a real strategizer, which is kind of what I would consider myself as well, which is I think partly why we hit it off so much. She is actually also on the Texas CPA Young Professionals Committee, is on the CPAs Helping Schools Committee and also teaches the underserved about financial literacy. And so everything from kind of wealth planning to building a business to the accounting side, she brings a lot more than just being a CPA, even though that in and of itself is an achievement. And from everybody that I've had the pleasure of introducing to her, they have all had rave feedback because she's so genuine and not afraid to let her personality shine through.

Now, I had not seen on her website, she actually has that noted she would like to be challenged to a Mexican food eating contest. I invited her to lunch and we had Mexican food and she definitely ate the chips and ordered me under the table. I was totally stuffed by the end and she was still going. I didn't challenge her to a spicy food eating contest but I think I'd probably lose at that too.

So Robyn, tell us a little bit about yourself. So how did you end up in accounting?

Robyn Jefferson (02:52.504)

So first off, Jacob, thanks for having me on the podcast. I really appreciate it. I am honored to be a part of it. So I'm very excited. How did I end up in accounting? So, funny story. I actually never knew what accounting was in the beginning. And I was actually at Virginia College because I started off at Junior College. And it was time for me to transfer. So I get a call from an advisor and she's asking, *well, it's time to transfer, what do you want to do?* And I'm like, *yeah, I don't know*. And she's like, *okay, what do you like? What's your favorite subject?* Math. So I could have done so many different things. I could have went the engineering math route. I could have done math. I could have done anything. And she suggested accounting.

Jacob (03:47.367)

You actually said math? was... Wow. That's incredible.

Robyn Jefferson (03:50.222)

That was my favorite subject. But I did not know what I wanted to do after I left the junior college. So I'm like, *okay, she suggested accounting* and I'm like, *okay, yeah, let's do it* as if she was gonna do it along with me. So I ended up going down the accounting route. I did my first internship at a small firm and I kinda just fell in love with it from there.

So I started off at a small firm. I've worked with small firms and, you know, I guess I say mid-size firms and I've worked with a lot of high net worth individuals and small to mid-size companies throughout my career. And I just started enjoying working with different clients with different personalities in different industries.

When I went into public though, I went into public thinking I had a goal and the goal was to learn as much as I could and eventually start my own practice. So I did that. I ended up starting my own practice. I got a really big client and that client just started sending me more and more clients. So that worked out and, in the meantime, I was actually working contract with another guy that I used to work with. And the goal was to basically purchase his practice. So I ended up working with him contract while I was running my own firm on the side. And it was time for him to kind of step back a bit and kind of do part-time work. So I ended up purchasing his practice and I merged the two and here we are.

Jacob (05:42.845)

Now, I'm always interested when I meet somebody who can do a lot of things. Like you could succeed at a great many types of things. Like if I found you at Coca-Cola running the accounting department or something like that, I would think that that is totally reasonable. You have the skill set for that. So in this case, you were working for a friend on a contract basis and then you started your own business. So that's kind of a leap of faith. Was that nerve-wracking for you?

Robyn Jefferson (06:18.328)

Well, was definitely a leap of faith. But I'll tell you, I and I usually tell everyone, they ask, you know, *were you afraid?* Because so many people are afraid to just jump out there and get going on their own. And call me crazy, but I was not afraid at all. And keep in mind that I had an entire family. I had a mortgage. I had, you know, just...

Jacob (06:46.345)

Yeah. Well, and you also, could have been successful doing something like a little lower ceiling where you didn't have your stamp on it, you know, at a big company or something like that, right? So, it's not like you had no other option.

Robyn Jefferson (06:55.522)

Yes, I could have been, but I always... Right, I had other options, but I always knew I did not want to climb the corporate ladder. I knew that was not for me. So, I just kind of jumped out on faith, and I just did it. And, again, you know, I wasn't nervous at all. I kind of just... I believed in myself, and I knew what I had to offer.

And I had the experience, I had the confidence. So I kind of just went out and did it. And I think if a lot of times we go into a venture already having this defeated mindset, and I'll be the first to say if you happen to do that, then you're already going into a situation with a negative mentality. And that just doesn't work. So I decided to do the total opposite.

Jacob (07:55.909)

Absolutely. And it sounds like, I mean, so now your team is eight people. Is that what you said? Is that right? That's incredible. And are you still hiring for any of our listeners?

Robyn Jefferson (07:59.916)

Yes, yes, yes. So now, yes, now we have a team of eight people. Yeah.

I am actually hiring and I was just talking to a recruiter friend of mine and he always talks about how, you know, *I just stand out and I'm not like other firms* and I was telling him, *I feel like if I can just verbalize my job ad*, because if you think about it, every job ad looks the same. *We've got a work-life balance, we've got these benefits, we've this, that, and other*, which by the way, they probably don't have a work-life balance, but either way, I just feel like if I can verbalize my job ad, sit here and get in front of a video and put it out there, I think I'd have applicants outside the door. But unfortunately, yes, unfortunately, every job ad looks the same.

Jacob (08:50.385)

Yeah, people have realized that if they say the same things, you know, we've got integrity and passion and all that kind of stuff, you know, but you have to actually live it. And I think by the fact that you have a team of eight and you're continuing to grow, that, that I think pretty much proves that point. And it sounds like you, you really have always wanted to call your own shots and be an entrepreneur. Is that right?

Robyn Jefferson (09:13.004)

Definitely. I've always been very passionate about entrepreneurship. I mean, you know, the kids are taught in such a linear way. We're taught to go to school, go to college, get a job, work for someone and retire. But there's another route that school doesn't teach us about, it doesn't teach us about entrepreneurship. We don't, so I think it's very important to, even the next generation, just start teaching the next generation about entrepreneurship and what that looks like and that there is another route besides the linear way that we're taught.

Jacob (09:52.775)

Yeah, definitely. it sounds like, that part of, you know, I think anecdotally, like I really, I'll talk to people about personal finance and that kind of thing, but I've never like, you know, started a side hustle or a business doing that. And it sounds like you've kind of taken a few extra steps with that passion where you actually go out and, you know, I've seen you on LinkedIn where you're like speaking in front of people. I think that's so important. And so tell me a little bit about that part of the, part of your story of like what you do there.

Robyn Jefferson (10:21.74)

Yeah, so I am very passionate about financial literacy. And if we had two or three hours, I would probably go on and on and on about financial literacy and the importance of financial literacy. But back to me starting in accounting and going that path, I never knew why I was going down this path.

As I said, I've worked for some small firms and big firms, but I've always worked with high net worth individuals and I've been exposed to so much. And one day it just kind of like dawned on me, like, *this is why God sent you down this path*. So I've learned so much and I've been exposed to so much. And for me, it's like, *who am I not to share this information and spread this information and help?*

And I'm passionate about it – we need to educate and uplift the next generation because the problem is in underserved communities, we don't really know a lot about financial literacy. And that means investing, entrepreneurship, home ownership, anything about generational wealth, money and budgeting, interest, credit and how credit works.

We just don't know about it. And it's very important. And it's the small things that you need to know in order to get to the next level in life. So it really just dawned on me one day, this is why I went down this path. It's because, you know, eventually, there's a purpose. Like, eventually I need to start giving back and helping that next generation and underserved communities that are not exposed to this stuff. So yeah, in my spare time, teach financial literacy to underserved communities.

Jacob (12:14.619)

And is that like, what's that forum look like? Is that like at schools or are you doing like webinars or like what kind of, you know, settings are those?

Robyn Jefferson (12:22.082)

Well, in the past, what it's been is we have an after-school program here where I live and we did a four-week series for the after-school program. And this four-week series was about money and budgeting. You know, each week I come in, you know, I bring pizza, all this good stuff. And we even had money. So we had money and the kids were very engaged.

They, even at the end of the session, you know, they were quizzed, like, *what did you learn?* And they were able to give really good feedback. They learned so much and it was so rewarding. So I did that. And then I've also done the same thing in churches. And it was so funny. I actually did an event at a church and the person that was putting on the event, she told me afterwards, *I was very, I was extremely worried about you were going to capture the kids' attention.* So, I'm at this church, and every kid is sitting in the back, every last one of them. And so I reach in my pocket, because, before I get to the event, I went by the bank, and I only got maybe, I don't know, about $30 in $1 bills. So, I reach in my pocket, and I pull out the money. And every single kid ran from the back of the church all the way to the front of the church. So that worked out perfect. Even that session, mean, the kids, really enjoyed it. I mean, it was very conversational. I mean, they engaged and they learned a lot and they had such a good time. So it's always rewarding.

Jacob (14:14.717)

That's so excellent.

Robyn Jefferson (14:14.742)

And I hope to do more of that. I hadn't done too much more. I hadn't done as much as I want to do lately, but I hope to do more.

Jacob (14:25.673)

Sure. It's a big, it sounds like it's a big piece of kind of where you want to go. And I think, I think so much of that, for kids in particular is based on momentum. I mean like, the more you do the more you can do, so getting started at a young age is so important. I still remember the first, you know, zero-based budgeting book my parents gave me, which is I guess very a very nerdy thing to say. It was like a formative memory, but I had like a little envelope system. I was like 12 years old and it was like, you know, that's kind of what I did. But that then is a building block for the next step which is maybe, you know, opening a bank account.

Robyn Jefferson (14:57.763)

Yeah. Exactly.

Jacob (15:08.593)

So can we switch gears, talk more about your staffing. So I know, I mean, this is a nonstop challenge. So you've got kind of all these things you want to do. Being an entrepreneur sounds glamorous, when you read about it in Inc. Magazine or Entrepreneur Magazine, but there's a boots on the ground aspect of it, which is really it's people. And so, you know, I want to, I want you to speak a little bit about how you are attracting and retaining the next generation of CPAs, EAs, accountants, kind of as you're growing your business.

Robyn Jefferson (15:41.102)

Yeah, I think we've got to get rid of this misconception that, you know, a CPA is boring and they're just a number cruncher who works 24/7 and you're like a robot in a sweatshop type of vibe. I think we first have to get rid of that narrative. And I think once we get rid of that narrative, we can bring more people into this space and the next generation into this space.

I think in order to draw people into the industry, they should know all the cool stuff that we do. I mean, you're able to work with so many different businesses across so many different industries. You're able to really learn about entrepreneurship. I always, and you know, I sound biased when I say this, but I feel like accounting is the meat and potatoes of business.

This is the core of business, is what you have to know. So even at that next generation of kids, we know this next generation is very entrepreneurial driven. So to know this stuff and to learn this stuff and embrace it and be able to work with other entrepreneurs, I just think it can be a very rewarding career, but I feel like we have to be able to, I think representation matters.

So we have to really show the next generation that we're more than just number crunchers who work all the time. I mean, you can go out on your own and be independent if you want to be an entrepreneur. And I really think that we have to encourage young people and even bring in more diverse people.

But we also have to not be so uptight all the time. It's OK to show some personality and individuality. It's OK not to be a robot and it's OK to not be perfect. And I think the next generation needs to see that, because when you think of a CPA, you probably think of someone that's uptight, suit and tie or, you know, what have you. And, yeah, it's almost like a turnoff, especially to the next generation.

Jacob (17:53.245)

Monochrome suit, yep.

Jacob (17:59.879)

Yeah, and you bring up a fantastic point, which is the is the diversity of the of the people that need to be in the career. Because the CPAs are really kind of the glue, wouldn't you agree, of like of the business world? I mean, CPAs are connected to everybody. They're kind of in between all these different layers. And so I think it's I think it's more diverse functionally than we admit. Like there's not that there's one type of CPA. So there really need to be people from different backgrounds and races and creeds and such because the needs are already there, I think. I think what you're really doing is you're filling the needs that exist in the marketplace. But right now, I would agree it's somewhat monochromatic as far as the people in it, but the needs are not. So that's where there's that demand and an opportunity really.

Robyn Jefferson (18:52.866)

Yeah, there is. And I think, again, that's a representation. mean, I just think it matters. think if the next generation of kids, if they see someone that looks like them, they would be willing to maybe even hear us out and say, *hey, yeah, she's an accountant, or she's a CPA, or EA,* or whatever it may be.

And I think, you know, *it may be a cool job. I see her lifestyle and I'd love to do what she's doing or she or he.* But I think we've just got to do a better job of being more diverse and bringing more backgrounds into this industry. And again, I think in order to do that, we've got to have people that are willing to step up and be mentors and really represent for the profession.

Jacob (19:48.701)

Help make those connections, yeah, certainly. And I mean, that brings me back to thinking about you in terms of, you're anything but a robot and a boring number cruncher. I mean, I would say you make a fantastic impression. think we spoke the first year or so that we worked together just via phone or maybe a couple of Zoom calls. But I think your energy really kind of shines through, which is why, first of all, I think you're technically very good, but you're also very memorable and very warm. Right? And so that comes across with your firm.

So how have you managed to kind of take your personality and your drive traits and kind of imprint that on your team, including kind of like work-life balance and also the personalities and kind of how you do business? Like how have you managed to do that?

Robyn Jefferson (20:39.842)

Yeah, so as far as my team and work-life balance and building a culture within the firm, I am really big on family. So I was a young mother. I was a mother at 20. And my family has always been my priority, always. So I'm really big on family. I'm really big on self-care. And I think that those are two really important factors when we start thinking about building the team, building the culture and work-life balance.

As far as my team, we have an environment of transparency, of employee autonomy. I treat my team like adults. You know, I value them. They know that I value them. And they don't feel like they're just another number, just an employee. They are part of a team. We are all a team. We're like a family.

I think when you approach your team in that way, you're able to have that employee autonomy and have that work-life balance and trust that your team is going to get the job done and at the end of the day take care of the client. I'm not a micromanager, so me not being a micromanager, you have to be selective of who you bring in.

Jacob (22:06.921)

You have to hire the right people.

Robyn Jefferson (22:07.822)

You have to hire the right people. And that's not always easy to do. I've been fortunate enough to bring in the right people, but it's not easy to do. Again, we value and embrace family, but at the end of the day, we still have to eat. We still have bills to pay, right? So we know that even though we've got you know, family event or whatever it may be, we've also got to get the work done and take care of business.

Jacob (22:44.271)

Mm-hmm. Yeah, it really is that that kind of balance that you mentioned. And I was just gonna ask, what are some little ways that you show that to people and you model that and then you kind of help them?

Robyn Jefferson (22:57.984)

Yeah, so actually I want to do more of that this upcoming year, but in the past, you know, I will just randomly send gift cards to my staff. Like just a couple of months ago, I sent some gift cards for a massage because we've all been through busy season and we know how stressful that is. We know how tough that can be. So I'm like, *look, we all need a massage. We all need some time off.*

Sometimes I'll email the team and I'm like, *it's Friday. Let's take the rest of the day off. Let's just enjoy. Like before the kids get home, let's enjoy ourselves*. Yes, yes.

Jacob (23:35.357)

Have a little you time. Well, I'll be looking for my massage gift card Robyn for the next. I probably actually send *you* one. That's what I really should do.

Robyn Jefferson (23:41.272)

Ay, ay. Yes, that would be nice, Jacob. That would definitely be nice.

Jacob (23:48.745)

What's your spot? What's your place? Where do you go for massage?

Robyn Jefferson (23:52.91)

I actually go to Massage Envy. So you can go right online and get that gift card. You have no excuses. You don't even have to walk into the spot.

Jacob (24:03.113)

I love it. Okay. That's nice and easy. You mentioned also hiring the right people, which is really important as well.

I mean, what makes the job difficult, I think, is when people are sending in documents like two days before the deadline. I mean, how do your people handle those sorts of things? Is that just personality fit? Like you hire somebody that's just gonna kind of by nature go above and beyond? Or how do you handle those stressful times?

Because it's fun to do gift cards and kind of talk about this, but at a certain point in the business, as you mentioned, everybody's gotta eat, you’ve got to get the work done. So what are your strategies for managing those kind of busy stressful seasons with your people?

Robyn Jefferson (24:54.53)

Yeah, so again, I'm really big on self-care and it's kind of like a marriage. If the husband is okay and the wife is okay, it just kind of like trickles down. So now the kids are okay. So we're good as a family, right? It's the same in business. If I'm okay, if you're okay, then it just trickles down and we're able to take care of the client. So I'm really big on self-care.

Now with that being said, we all have those clients who want to send their documents in on October 14th and expect to have their return completed by October 15th. I think that's where we have to start setting boundaries with our clients. So we're very proactive. We are sending out emails. So we've got an automated automation set up. We're sending out emails six to eight weeks before the deadline. Just reminding clients, we've got an upcoming deadline. We need you to start sending your documents in.

If we don't see your documents in by a certain date, you're not guaranteed to have your tax return done on time. So we are communicating with the client. We're setting those expectations. We're giving them due dates. And in return, we are hoping to get those documents in so *that we don't have to have a stressful working environment* and have to be at the office on October 15th at 11:59 pressing the button to get a tax return.

But again, I think it's really just kind of setting those expectations and communicating with the clients and *not being afraid to get rid of a client* because again, you know, we still have those clients who every single year they continue to do the same thing [laughter]. Well, that client may need to be fired. So you can't be afraid to get rid of a client because at the end of the day, you don't want to put your staff in a bind. I mean, it's already a stressful profession, but I think just those small things could help it be less stressful.

Jacob (27:03.049)

Absolutely. Yeah, I wish more clients knew that like being nice and being, you know, a little more punctual and kind of have follow through. It does. It does flow into their bills as well. I mean, like the rate you charge and the, you know, the time you spend on things when someone's on top of it, it's like who knew that, you know, being nice could save you money. Maybe that's should be the title of this podcast, *Being nice can save you money*. [laughter]

Jacob (27:32.553)

Well, you know, Robyn, thanks so much for spending the time with us. We know how busy you are and you know, you're in demand for a reason. But if you could leave the CPAs and other folks listening with one message, what would that be?

Robyn Jefferson (27:48.462)

Well, I think the message I would leave a CPA with is, I think there's two. It's okay to be you, to think outside the box. You don't have to be so serious and uptight all the time. It's okay to be approachable and relatable. I think we really, really need to focus on our mentorship skills and just being that mentor for the next generation and always willing to teach the next generation.

I always remember a quote from Maya Angelou and it says, *when you learn, teach and when you get, give*. And I think that's the attitude we need to have towards the next generation. Again, I think we have some very ambitious kids that are coming up and I think we can really encourage these kids to go the accounting route and bring them into this space. But I just think we've got to be a representation for the profession. And it doesn't always have to look so cut and dry.

Jacob (28:58.249)

Sure. Absolutely. Well, thanks so much again for the time and for the great message and just sharing a little bit behind the curtain at your firm and in your career. We absolutely wish you the best and I want to turn it back over to Gretchen.

Gretchen (29:15.017)

Thank you so much, Robyn, and thank you for your insightful interview with Jacob. You can learn more about Robyn at her website, rdjco.com. Listeners, if you liked what you heard, why not subscribe? We're on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, Podbean, or just visit capstan tax.com slash podcasts. I'm Gretchen Lehman. Thanks for joining us on Beyond the Spreadsheet. We'll see you next time.