

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 306: JENNIFER SMITH

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the S Curve in your professional and personal life. Disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. You know, saying work smarter, not harder. Well, according to Jennifer Smith, CEO and co-founder of Scribe, we can do both. We can work smarter, harder, and ultimately faster through a more efficient allocation of our time, energy, and talents. And that's what Jennifer Smith has done throughout her life, whether she's tackling public speaking at the age of 12, working as a management consultant, or figuring out how to raise money from VCs. Jennifer identifies a problem and then aggressively runs at it. In this episode, you'll not only learn about Jennifer, you'll learn about what Scribd does, which basically it's a tool to help knowledge workers share their know-how. You'll also hear how she started, scribe, and hint she kept saying; someone ought to do this. Turns out that someone was her. Enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: So, Jennifer, will you share with us a formative experience, something ideally that happened in your childhood that helps us understand you a little bit better?

Jennifer Smith: You know, I've reflected on this a lot recently over the last couple of years. Maybe it's aging, but you sort of start looking back in your life and saying, what were some of those big waypoints along the way that got me to where I am now? How did I get here? And there are several of them, I guess, since you said childhood, maybe I'll pick one of the earlier ones. So, people who know me now might be kind of surprised to hear that I was quite shy as a child. I was painfully, painfully shy. And I remember in the third grade, we had a lawyer come speak to our class, and he talked about what he did. And I thought that was the coolest thing ever. And so, again, I was in third grade, and so I decided I'm going to be a lawyer. And I ran around and told everyone that I was going to be a lawyer. And you can imagine the kinds of reactions I got from adults who maybe had different opinions on the legal profession. And I said, Well, gosh, if I want to go argue in a trial, I've got to figure out how to stop being a shy person. And so, I went and tried to find a whole bunch of different public speaking opportunities as a kid. So, even if that was small, things like in school trying to like, you know, volunteer for presentations all the way up to doing a mock trial and a number of kind of like debate public speaking things where I would really try to push myself, and I would join as the

youngest kid there and usually the only woman. And I would be sweating and incredibly nervous and shaking, and I would force myself to get up there, and I would black out while I did it.

Jennifer Smith: And I would come out afterward, and it would be the biggest high for me because I felt like I had done something that was really hard for me. And it felt, like, so incredibly empowering to get up and be able to do. And it's something I actually learned to really enjoy over time. And so, one thing that I've always tried to weave in is more kind of public speaking, especially as I was growing up, many more stories that probably more directly lead to where I am today. But I think that's one I kind of come back to and sort of say like one of the things I think that has been like a common thread in my personality is finding things that I don't like about myself, or I feel like I'm holding myself back. And then I say, How do I run as aggressively as possible at that and try to put myself in a position where I got to figure it out?

Whitney Johnson: Hmm. All right. So, I just want to pause for a moment. How old were you? Did you say we're eight years old?

Jennifer Smith: Well, when I decided I wanted to be a lawyer, I started to do my first debate, I think, in, like, seventh grade.

Whitney Johnson: That is so impressive that you had the presence of mind to say, Here's what I want to do. You're getting all this feedback from your stakeholders, which are your friends and family, and parents. They're like, Are you sure? And then you just made this decision. I love what you said. You aggressively ran toward it. Well, I'm going to connect the dots. You thought about this idea of process. I want to get from A to B, How do I get from A to B? I'm going to get really good at being comfortable in front of people. And so, your brain analyzed how to do that. Am I making stuff up, or does that track?

Jennifer Smith: Yeah, I think that tracks. I think it's; you know, I think there's kind of a common pattern for me, and it's something that I've kind of purposely cultivated because I don't think I was born with it necessarily of when I see something I feel like is not working, I try to run at it and fix it. So, whether that's something about myself or about skills I don't have that, I think I'm going to need for what I want to do or with the company that I started a problem that I saw in the world. And, you know, I have been watching it for over ten years, probably 15 years, and sort of saying like, this feels really obvious. Someone will surely fix this someday. Right. And kind of going on my merry way in life and then eventually saying, well, gosh, it's been 15 years, no one has fixed this. The technology exists; maybe I should be the person to go do this.

Whitney Johnson: So, you didn't become a lawyer after all? Can you just talk to us and give us a quick drive-by of how you got from seventh grade wanting to be a lawyer, what you did, and what got you to this Aha. That you had to start the company that you started?

Jennifer Smith: Yeah. It's not a linear path.

Whitney Johnson: Is it ever?

Jennifer Smith: It is not. Well, for some people, it is right, and I really admire them, but I think that's a rare instance. So, I did mock trial and loved the sort of debate aspect of it. Did not like the fact that I felt the outcome was influenced by just the quality of the lawyers and not the merits of the case. And I became pretty disillusioned with that and said, I don't feel like I can be part of a justice system where I feel like it's more about the process than it is the actual facts of what happened. I got really interested in economics. I became obsessed with the Fed for some reason as a 10th grader. I used to literally skip class when jobs reports would come out, and inflation reports would come out. Because I thought it was so interesting. Thankfully, I had teachers who were supportive of that, so thought I wanted to be an economist, went to college, studied economics, wrote a hundred-page economics thesis as a senior, and hated it. Realized they did not want to be sitting at a computer by myself doing analysis most of the time.

Jennifer Smith: And so, the folks who came and recruited on campus were the investment bankers and the management consultants. And from a small town in upstate New York, immigrant family, had never heard of these

things. But these are the friendly people who show up and recruit you. At least the college I went to. So, I did a summer at Lehman Brothers. I'm dating myself, and at least the team I was on, I was like, Oh, these people are smart, but I don't feel like they're deeply curious about the world and how things work. I feel like they just want to make money, and I feel like I need to be with people who want to understand, who seek to understand. And so the management consultants McKinsey came and recruited, and I met people who I thought were just really curious about how markets work, about how organizations work, about how people work, and how people can be better within organizations. And so I went and joined there and spent a bunch of my time there working in organization and operations practices, which you could start as the thread that got me interested in what I'm doing today.

Whitney Johnson: All right. I have two slightly open loops that I would love to close. So, what town in upstate New York are you from?

Jennifer Smith: I'm from a small town outside Rochester.

Whitney Johnson: So, I have ancestors who are from Rome, New York. So, I had to ask on the off chance. And then you said,

Jennifer Smith: We could have been distantly related, but probably not, unfortunately.

Whitney Johnson: And then you said you have immigrants from what countries?

Jennifer Smith: Yeah, my mom and my grandparents who helped raise me. I was very close to them. I would describe them as another very formative influence in my life. Came from Romania back when it was communist. And so, they came to the U.S. with \$50 in their pockets, not speaking any English, and just an amazing life for themselves and for me and my brother.

Whitney Johnson: Wow. I was in Romania this summer. That's very fun.

Jennifer Smith: Really?

Whitney Johnson: Yes. It was a lovely country. So, probably very different from when your parents and grandparents left. But anyway, that's fun too and I guess, surprising because your last name is Smith, and it probably isn't the last.

Jennifer Smith: Name of my dad's side, but it was Schmidt back in the day.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. All right. So, I had that open loop. I needed to close it. So, you go into management consulting, and from what I read as I was learning about you preparing for this interview, you did hundreds and hundreds of interviews in this operations practice. Tell us what that protocol was like and what you discovered.

Jennifer Smith: So, anyone who's worked with a consultant kind of coming into their business won't be surprised by this. Our mission was usually to come into a business and figure out how do we make it better; how do we make it more efficient. And so, I joined the firm when I was 20 years old, stayed there for seven years, and spent a lot of that time in the air flying around. So, picture the scene, sort of going to Salt Lake City and Oklahoma and Florida and all these places that had various call centers of my clients, each rotating day of the week. And you go in, and your job is to figure out what's happening in this big operation center and how do we make it better. We need more coming out the other side, usually for less. Right? And anyone who's done that kind of work knows the name of the game is you figure out who the best people are in that operation center, and you befriend them, and you sit next to them, and you just ask them, What are you doing differently compared to everyone else? It's not rocket science. And they'll often tell you, right? They'll say like, oh, well, I was trained to do all of these things, and I'm dating myself now. They pull out a very thick binder, and they'd thumb it on the desk. Right? And they say, Here's all the stuff I had to memorize about how to do my job. But, you know, I've been doing this for a few months now or a few years, whatever.

Jennifer Smith: And I found some shortcuts, right? There's 30 things I just do differently than everyone else. This is way better. I don't read that binder anymore, and my team would always write that down in PowerPoint, and we'd sell that back to our clients. And I always thought, well, gosh, if those people had had a way to share what they had figured out to do, they could have had a really big impact on that op center. Right. And maybe they did. Maybe they'd share with the person sitting next to them or someone who would ask them. But if there had been a more scalable way, they didn't. They didn't need some version of like 25-year-old Jennifer with our Lenovo ThinkPad running around and doing that work for them. And so, I kind of filed that away in my head as well. That seems pretty obvious. Like, someday, someone will disrupt this, right? Like, surely, we'll figure out a better way. And then you fast forward ten years later, and I'm working in venture capital in Silicon Valley, where I live now, and I talked to over 1,200 buyers of enterprise technology to try to understand, like, what are you buying? What are you wishing existed? Where are you seeing gaps in the market? What are the challenges you're trying to solve? And this issue kept coming up, and I said, like, by golly, a long time has passed. We've done some pretty incredible things with technology. This is a pretty fundamental problem, and no one has solved this yet. Well, okay, maybe this is something I should go do.

Whitney Johnson: So, the name of your company is?

Jennifer Smith: Scribe.

Whitney Johnson: How did you get the name, and what do you do exactly?

Jennifer Smith: So, the idea behind Scribe is its technology that will watch you do work and automatically create a step-by-step written guide with screenshots on how to do that process. So, let's say you've got a show, a client or a colleague, or someone you just hired; how to generate a quarterly report in your CRM, right? You would hit the record button in Scribe and then just generate the quarterly report like you normally would. And when you're done, you click stop record. And Scribe will auto-generate a step-by-step written guide with screenshots that will say, step one, navigate to www.salesforce.com. Step two, click on the add a new contact icon. Step three etc. etc. etc. You get the picture, and you can use that to share with anyone. You have to teach how to do that process. And we've built a bunch of things in product to make that also discoverable to your teammates now. So next time they go into Salesforce, and they're trying to figure out how to generate a quarterly report, that guide that you had automatically created for them. So, very helpfully, out of the goodness of your heart is automatically going to appear on their screen. They can find it within the extension, and they can open it up while they're in that process.

Jennifer Smith: And so, now they're not asking you for help. You're not getting that quick shoulder tap. Hey, can you, Whitney, can you just show me quickly how to do this thing again? Can we hop on a quick zoom? Do you mind just showing me? Right. We're all familiar with that. And that person now has access to the best of what you know how to do. And so, the whole idea behind Scribe was, what if you could automatically pull out, and transcribe what's in someone's head? All of this knowledge and know-how that people have, that's what runs your company, by the way. You know, probably less than 1% of the knowledge of what's in people's heads is actually ever written down on paper. So, you've got all of this tribal know-how that's mostly in people's heads, and that's what powers the company every day. And so, we said, Well, what if we could automatically scribe all of that really valuable information in a way that didn't take any additional time from those experts and meant that the best of what everyone knew how to do was available to everyone else.

Whitney Johnson: So, for example, this podcast interview that we're having right now, we could, if we had your software, it would take screenshots, and we could turn this into a playbook that people would then know how to do it and not have to explain.

Jennifer Smith: It, right, the digital process, aspects of it. So, before this call, you were telling me how to adjust some of my settings, right? And you were saying, click here, then click here, then do this. Now it's pretty straightforward, but you also could have sent me a scribe over it, right? And then I would have been able to see exactly what I needed to do.

Whitney Johnson: So good. All right. So, can you give us one or two examples of case studies of your clients where they have implemented this and what has happened as a consequence that you get really excited about?

Jennifer Smith: Yeah, this is one of my favorite questions. We've got, Scribe is used by over 200,000 organizations in nearly every country on the planet. So, that means we've got everything from really small startups or small professional firms all the way up to folks in Fortune 50 companies and teams that are just trying to do better. And they all center around a moment where you have to explain to someone how to do something, something that's pretty familiar to all of us, right? And so, I love seeing, for some of the smaller businesses, folks who have to teach their clients how to do something. I'm an accountant, for example, and my clients, anyone who's an accountant listening, will know this intimately. I hear this all the time. You know, they're constantly asking you, Wait, how do I do this in QuickBooks? Can you quickly show me what am I supposed to be doing here? And you spend a lot of your time doing that. And especially for folks who are in small businesses like time is money. And so, you're spending a lot of time teaching your clients, and so scribes a way that you could send someone what feels like a very bespoke, high touch white glove beautiful guide to your clients that answers their questions before they even ask you. So, they're happy they're not having to call you and get on the phone with you. They feel like you've spent a lot of time doing it. The average scribe takes 56 seconds to create, so you didn't actually spend that much time.

Jennifer Smith: But it's a win-win, right, where you're delivering superior client service, and you're saving yourself time and money so you can do more all the way up to folks who are in really big companies. So, one of our customers is a very large financial services firm and they very interestingly track how their people spend time. They did this before we showed up, literally down to like seven-minute increments. It's almost like a lawyer billing. Right. And they really wanted to understand where are people spending their time. And one of the interesting analyzes they had coming out of that was people spent anywhere between 9% and 16% of their week just asking and answering questions on how to do their job. And this actually triangulates. McKinsey has done some studies that say the average knowledge worker spends about 20% of their week. That's a day a week trying to figure out how to do their job and get information right. And so, they said, well, gosh, if we could, that's not time anyone enjoys. No one. No one shows up to work feeling empowered, saying, you know, Oh, I don't know how to do my job. I've got to go find someone and ask them and bother them to show me. Or I'm in the middle of doing work, and I got to take some time away because my colleague is pinging me and needs some help right now. Right. That's not a that's a disempowering feeling. And so, they said, well, can we reduce that time with Scribe? And so, the behavior on those teams now is anytime someone does a process that they think someone would benefit from knowing later, they just hit the record button, and now you have a Scribe for it.

Jennifer Smith: And now, any time someone has a question on how to do something, they'll go check to see if there's a Scribe first before they go ask someone else. And if there isn't, by the way, then when they learn the answer, they'll create the Scribe. So, next time someone else doesn't have that question. And so, what they found, as a result, is they were able to reduce that time by 67%, which is just like a huge time savings for those people. And what's rewarding to me about that is obviously that's worth hundreds of thousands of dollars to the organization overall, but it's also just a better experience for those employees showing up every day. I mean, what was interesting for us and seeing kind of the user interviews with some of the folks there is they were like, look, I know you're tracking how we spend time, and it's great. I've saved all of this time, but also my KPIs have improved. Like now, I just do the process, and I know I'm doing it right the first time. I'm not guessing. I'm doing important financial transactions. I need to make sure it's done right, and I can just get it done, and I can move on with my day and not worry about it. Right. And, like, it just feels better and easier.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. So, one of the things that, as I'm listening to you, so, in our work, we use what we call the S Curve as a way to help people think about what growth looks like. And when you start in a new role, you're at the launch point of the curve. Then you want to get into the sweet spot as quickly as possible, then go into mastering. As I'm listening to you talk, I'm having two observations. Number one is that the people who are on the launch point, you said they spend 9 to 16% of their time asking how to do their jobs. It reduces it by 67%. What that means is you're going to be able to move off the launch point more quickly. So, those feelings of discomfort and awkwardness, and frustration, those are going to dissipate more quickly. But it also means that people who are in mastery are spending less time explaining to people how to do things. And so, there's a productivity gain on that side as well, if I'm understanding correctly.

Jennifer Smith: Yeah. I mean, interestingly, the 9% to 13% was actually a blend across people in all of those stages. So, it actually would be much higher for the people who are just in the launch point. Right. So, this was even people

who've been doing their job for five years who said, I only do this thing once a quarter, and it's really important I get it right. And so, I don't always remember, and I got to spend time and think about it. And certainly, the people who are in mastery also having to explain to others. So, I would think about this as a prompt of almost how do you bend that S Curve? How do you make it so that the slope is steeper? Right. And that sort of initial getting up to speed, that that ramp time is much shorter, that's worth a lot to an organization. They spend a lot of time and money on onboarding, and it's worth a lot to that individual person, right? Even from an employee experience perspective, if you think about it as a company, there's a lot of really interesting psychological research that says that most people form their opinion of their job in the first month, really? Which is like, how well were you onboarded? And there were a bunch of really great polls during the pandemic. Gallup, I think, did one pretty famously. And, you know, something like 80% of companies said onboarding is a big priority for us. And something like 70% of employees said my onboarding experience was not very good. And so, there's just a big disconnect, right? So, there's a lot of money and a lot of time. The stakes are really high, and yet most people are saying we don't do it well. And there's a number of reasons for that.

Jennifer Smith: But I think one really important one is when you think about onboarding, you think about all of the practice stuff you need to learn, right? It's how do we get you access to your 401K? How do we get you set up in the different technology systems if you're you know, how do we teach you about our company values and some of the kind of implicit knowledge we have here? All of that is great and wonderful. But then I'm pretty I'm sure pretty much everyone had this experience. Then all the training goes away, and it's maybe day six, and you just sit down to your computer, and you just got to start working. And you open up all the different systems you've been onboarded into, and you say, Well, how do I actually use any of these things? Right? And the way we've learned that traditionally has just been through apprenticeship. It's been I pop my head over the proverbial cubicle. I sit next to someone, and they teach me how to do it. I sort of learn by osmosis being in my team. That's a big cost, first of all. But I think now that we work more remotely and more hybrid than ever before, the cost is becoming more obvious because now I'm not just watching someone's screen next to me, I'm like requiring them to get on zoom with me or I'm sitting there just trying to figure it out on my own because I'm too afraid to ask anyone. You know, I don't want to be that new person who's asking a ton of questions, but I have a ton of questions because I don't know. I'm new. I don't know how we do our actual day-to-day work here.

Whitney Johnson: This might sound like a very simple question to you. You made a comment earlier of like, this isn't rocket science, which is usually what someone says when it happens to be one of their superpowers. So, I'm going to pose this question nonetheless, which is for someone who wants to get better at being process oriented. I mean, you were trained in this, You consulted on this. Do you have any suggestions for people for whom this is not a superpower other than using Scribe? Any thoughts on how to become more process-oriented?

Jennifer Smith: Yeah. I mean, it's funny you say the thing about superpower. I had a professor in business school who said, Find the thing you're always apologizing for about yourself and find a way to get paid for it. And for me, it's that I'm pretty process-oriented and especially, like, I'm quite efficiency-oriented. I care, for whatever reason, like, quite deeply about doing things efficiently and having everyone else around me be able to do things efficiently. And having everyone in the world sort of having the paradox, optimal allocation of time for the output of society and people's sort of happiness that perhaps comes back to the Economist in me. There's just something about the sort of like the allocation effect of allocation of people's time and talent that matters a lot to me and scratches kind of the right itches. So, it's something that I kind of like naturally default to quite a bit. The thing that's most helpful when you're trying to do anything, whether it's being process driven or any other change you're trying to make, is to connect it to your why. So, why am I process driven? I don't think I like innately love or care about processes. Some people do. I'm not. I'm not that. I really care about the efficient allocation of people's time, energy, and talents. And so, for that to happen, you have to have some level of process.

Jennifer Smith: And having kind of that end in mind is what motivates me. So, when I think about building software that is all about process documentation, I don't like love an S.O.P. in and of itself, right? It's not like a work of literature that I just like, deeply appreciate for its own value. I appreciate it because I say this is going to make someone more efficient. This is going to make it so that someone who's an expert and has some special skill and has figured out how to do something can communicate that almost automatically in 53 seconds to someone else who needs to learn that thing. And that's going to be a really great experience for that expert who doesn't have to take time away from doing the thing that is their special sauce to explain it to someone else. And that's going to be a great

experience trying to learn it on the other side because now they don't have to go and kind of try to figure out who to ask. And it's just a very disempowering feeling. And so, I feel like always connecting things to like the why of why is this important to you? Why are you trying to be that way? Like helps with any kind of behavior change you're doing.

Whitney Johnson: So, I'm going to say this, and I'm if I didn't capture it correctly. You, the why for you is you want an efficient allocation of time and talents so that people can live their best lives. And if you can codify and document the process, that makes it possible.

Jennifer Smith: Yeah, that's it's a nerdy way of saying it, but that's the sentiment. Yes.

Whitney Johnson: Well, and what is what I'm enjoying as I'm listening to you speak is. Is that you wanted to be a lawyer, and that meant that you needed to be able to be very articulate and to formulate your thoughts. And when you are building a business and running a business, you need to be able to articulate your position. And so, that impulse of wanting to be a lawyer, even though you never did it, has held you in good stead as I'm listening to you speak.

Jennifer Smith: I think so, especially since it was something that I said I like, know I need to work on about myself because I was so, so shy beforehand, and so throwing myself in the deep end really helped. And then I discovered something that I actually really love doing and get a lot of energy from, which was quite a big surprise. Yeah, to me and probably to anyone who knew me as a child too.

Whitney Johnson: Our listeners are always very inspired by hearing about faceplants or major constraints. As you've been building this business, what has been something that was just, whoa, this is a huge setback or something that did not work at all, where you just had to pick yourself up. And then what did you learn as a consequence? What good thing happened as a consequence of that failure?

Jennifer Smith: When we first started the company, I was very clear about the problem I was trying to solve, which is like, gosh, I've seen all of these knowledge workers, and everyone is sitting there, and they're all repeating the same tasks every day, and they're doing it sort of off the top of their head. And it's not being done in the best practice way possible. And there's sort of all this massive reinventing the wheel, and there's a lot of frustration and a lot of lost costs of that. And I was like, okay, I think I know the way to solve this. And right when I started the company, I went and talked to a bunch of founders that I respect, who are many stages ahead of where we were at the time. And I told them about what I was building and wanted to ask them about what their experiences were like in the early days. And I remember one of them said to me, he said, Well, that's great that you're so certain of the problem you're solving and what your product is. He was like; we spent four years lost in the woods, wandering around, building different things before we got to what we're doing. And our experience is actually pretty common. So, bless you if you think you're going to be different. It was sort of his message, right? And at the time, I was like, no, I'm pretty clear on the problem that I'm solving.

Jennifer Smith: Well, that problem is still the problem we're solving. The way we're solving it is different than how we set out. And so, we originally built something that was quite more complicated than Scribe. Scribe was part of what Scribe, as it is today, was part of that. But then we added on all these kinds of extra things. And what we realized over time was that people weren't using all those fancy whiz-bang-end things. The part that was most valuable to them was just, Can you help me capture what I know how to do and communicate that easily, simply effectively to someone else? And so, the sort of like face plant for us wasn't any one major moment. It was probably a series of moments of as we're pivoting along the way and really adjusting and saying, okay, well, why are people using this part but not that part of that product? Why? Why does it look like this and not that? And I remember the time when we made the call and said, okay, we're going to make what is now Scribe today. We're going to drop all of this other stuff, and we're just focusing on this.

Jennifer Smith: And I had friends and investors who called me who said, You're making a complete mistake. You know, you're throwing away like the most interesting part. That's the really complicated and like and you're not going to have a business. And I said, you know, this is a moment where there's an extreme information asymmetry between you and I. I've been talking to users and looking at user behavior and studying this. I've been doing that for many, many months now. And I've been studying this problem sort of indirectly for over a decade. And you have a

lot of really great pattern matching because you've seen many different companies. And I respect that information asymmetry, But you don't know my business, and you don't know my users, and this is the right call for me. And that was another piece of advice I got when I talked to a bunch of founders when we started out on this journey. And they said a lot of very well-intentioned people are going to give you a lot of advice. Ignore most of it. I remember one founder of a quite successful company now said to me, If I had listened to what my investors told me to do, I would not have the company I have today. It's because I trusted my gut and my instincts.

Jennifer Smith: And so, I think one of the big learnings for me is the times of when should you just trust your gut and instinct and go against what everyone might be saying to you? And I think the way I distill it down is where are there moments where that's information asymmetry. Where I know I get what you're saying, but I know something that you don't know. I have some data points that you don't have. I have some experience that you don't have. And so, that's what's led us to Scribe today. And I kind of chuckle. You made the comment about simplicity earlier when I demo the product to folks now, they've never seen it before. They're sort of like, get out of town. Really? See, they don't believe it. They're like, this doesn't really exist, right? Can it really do that? And then their next question is always almost mistrusting. Like, Well, this seems really obvious. Like, why has no one shown this to me before? And I always laugh, and I'm like, Well, it feels obvious now. But it took us a while of being in the market and iterating and pivoting to get to this. And I often think the right answers seem really obvious in retrospect, but they aren't, as you're going along the journey.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, it's funny because I had this happen just a couple of weeks ago where I was giving a keynote presentation, and afterward, I got some feedback from a couple of people, a small minority, but nonetheless, a couple of them were like, Well, this is so obvious. I'm like, Yes, Which is what makes it useful of you know, launch point, sweet spot, mastery. And it sounds like there's probably something similar with your work there. Like this is so simple, and you're like, Yes, that is what makes it useful. Allows people to do something with it. All right. So, I want to come back to. How many years you said you had to iterate a number of years before you figured out what the product was. Was it 18 months? Was it two years? Was it three years? How long did you iterate?

Jennifer Smith: We probably iterating for about I mean, we're continuing to iterate today, right? So, it's like it's a spectrum, it keeps going. But the product as it looks like it is today, you know, probably took us about a year of iterating to get to it.

Whitney Johnson: All right. And so, another thing that I heard you say was that you it was really important that you did the research. You were the one who had the pulse on the market. You had you knew what people were saying. And yet it took a lot of courage because you were stepping back from fancy to go to simple. A lot of really smart people were telling you not to do it, and you had to do it anyway. So, it took a lot of courage on your part to make this decision. And then you knew you were going to need to own this decision because you had made that decision.

Jennifer Smith: Yeah. And I mean, it sounds like a really big, hard decision as we're describing it at the time. It felt very simple. It felt monumental, but pretty straightforward where I was like, look, this is going to be hard, and maybe not everyone's going to be with me or back me in it. But I just, I believe I just know that this is what to do. And I'm not even going to spend time trying to convince naysayers. I'm going to sort of say thank you for your opinion. But no thanks. Like I'm going to do this anyways and I'll let you know how it goes.

Whitney Johnson: So, Jennifer, when things don't go as you expect, which happens all the time, what's your biggest go-to hack to get your sort of when your mind gets thrown off its game? You thought it was going to go one way, it goes another way. What do you do? How do you adjust?

Jennifer Smith: I think the thing that's that I focus on a lot is how to manage energy. And there's an emotional component to that I think you're referring to when you expect things to go one way and they don't. And then you sort of like throw yourself back, and you're like, Wait, do I? Does this mean I question everything? And so, you got to first put it in context and say, No, I'm not going to expand this. Like the fact that this didn't go this particular way doesn't call into question everything else, right? There isn't scope creep. This kind of is what it is. But then I.

Whitney Johnson: Go back to, I just love what you just said. I got to double-click on that. So, when something doesn't go the way you expect, you said don't expand it, don't have scope creep around the expectation not happening. Is that what you just said?

Jennifer Smith: Yeah, because this is such human nature, right? Where you might say, Oh, I expected this to happen, and it didn't. And then you start going on, and you say, Oh gosh, I'm always wrong. Oh, I'm really bad at predicting things. Oh, I must, I must be really stupid. Oh, I must be terrible at my job. Right. Your head goes through like these different parallels, and you've got to recognize if it's going to start to happen and say, okay, well, I was wrong about this thing. And one thing we do as a company that we found to be really helpful is any time we are doing something exploratory where we're not going to know the answer, which is all the time, by the way, we're a fast-growing startup. Every day, we're doing something we haven't done before. We designed it as an experiment, and we write down our hypothesis at the moment we started, which was. Okay. Our hypothesis is that users have this problem. We think the best way to solve it is through this feature. Our hypothesis is if we deliver feature X, Y, and Z, users will get more value through our product and we will see usage increases of blank, blank, blank, whatever it is. And then we will write down, like what was the data we had at the time that led us to that? What are sort of the areas of uncertainty we're not sure about that we want to explore and what are the metrics or observations that we're going to track when we launch this experiment at what times? And we're wrong all the time.

Jennifer Smith: And that's actually great. Because it means we learned. And so, we try to celebrate whenever experiments go well or don't go well. There is a positive outcome on either side. I always say it's a great outcome regardless of the results unless we didn't design the experiment well. The worst, worst outcome is if we did something and then at the end, we got a negative result or even a positive result, and we say, Well, we don't know if that's actually true. Because we didn't do it correctly, we didn't execute it correctly. And I find that writing down what you thought at the moment you went to go do something is so helpful because it's so easy to also apply hindsight bias and say, Yeah, well, and to say like, Oh gosh, we really should have known, right? Like, of course, it was going to turn out that way. How could we not have known? And then you look back in the document, and you're like, Oh wait, we've learned a lot of things in the last three months that we didn't know three months ago about our market or our users or product, whatever it is.

Jennifer Smith: And we made the best call we could at the time. And now look at all these amazing things we've learned in the last three months. And so, we also try to write down what are the things that we've learned. And that's a fun exercise we're doing as a company now at the end of the year is everyone's kind of going through and for the stuff they work on, we're just reflecting on what did we learn this year? We learned a heck of a lot. We grew a ton as a company and we've just gotten a lot more data and we've gotten a lot better at the things that we're doing, and it's really interesting and cool to reflect on everything that you've learned because you don't notice it. If you're getting 1% better every single day, you don't really notice it, right? You look back over a period of time, 1% compounds really, really well and you get step change differences in what you know. But you might not have noticed it day by day. And I think that's both really important so that you sort of codify what you've learned, and you really internalize it. It's also incredibly motivating because you realize just how much you've grown.

Whitney Johnson: What's one thing that you do at Scribe that makes it so people want to work there?

Jennifer Smith: Well, we make it a very explicit goal. So, whenever we recruit, I spend a lot of my time recruiting. But when we bring people in, I sort of say like, Look, I've got two goals. One of them's the headline goal, which is I'm here to build a really big company by solving a really important problem for our users. But two, it's really important to me that everyone at the end of their time at Scribe and I hope it's a long one, says That was the most rewarding experience of my career. And so, I want to understand what does success look like for you personally? It's the end of your time here. And you know, you're your heart's wildest dreams have been fulfilled more than you could possibly imagine what has happened. And then I pattern match that with the path we're on as a company. And I say, like, do we have the ability to provide that? And that's a constant, ongoing conversation. And one of our main values as a company is to be the place where great people come to do the best work of their careers. And so, there's two parts to that. One is great people. We spend a lot of time thinking about how do we attract great people and how do we design a process? So, we get a sense of that fit. But the second part of that is how do you build an environment where people can show up and do work that they feel really proud of? And so, we spend a lot of time

thinking about how to build a place that's really respected, respectful and collaborative, and very transparent, but also where there's a really strong growth mindset.

Jennifer Smith: That's something we hire for quite explicitly and cultivate even when people who are in the door. And so, everyone is constantly pushing each other and saying, first of all, great work. I recognize your contributions, you know, and we're going to really lift each other up. Here are three ways I think we can be even better together next time. What does that look like? And if you match those two things of people who want that kind of environment, that's about finding that fit on both sides, and then you actually deliver on it like magic happens. That's also not rocket science, right? Like, figure out what people want. Design a system that gives them what they want and then bring in people who sort of match with that. Right. And it continues to be a reinforcing loop. And one of the really kind of satisfying parts of me in this journey and building this company has been many people on the team have told me unsolicited like, this is the best job I've ever had and that's great. That means a lot to me. And that builds upon itself. It's self-perpetuating. It's contagious.

Whitney Johnson: So, what's the question you ask to figure out if they have a growth mindset? How do you figure that out?

Jennifer Smith: I ask very open-ended questions. So, we've got a pretty lengthy recruiting process where people will meet many different people on the team. And so, we sort of assess different things based on who they're talking to. And it really designed to be like a two-way fit. When folks come to me, they've sort of gone through the whole process. And so, I sort of have the luxury of being able to ask very open-ended questions, and I will ask things like what I just said, Hey, it's several years from now. This has been the best experience of your career. What has happened? And I listen for what they say. Right. And if they sort of say like, oh, I did some fun stuff, or like, they don't really have an answer, then you're sort of like, okay, maybe this is not the right fit. People who say, like, Oh, I really want to get great at this, or, you know, I've never been able to do this thing before. And I think that could be really interesting. Or I hear I was just doing engineering interviews this morning, so this is quite topical. The engineer said, I'd love to be like much closer to our end users. I've always worked in places where it was really diverse. I want to see the impact of my work and I want to see what it does for users, and I want to share what I'm working on and have them give me feedback and figure out how I can make it better for them. Those are all examples of growth mindsets. So, it's not people saying, Hey, I have a.

Whitney Johnson: Growth mindset.

Jennifer Smith: Right, I seek continuous improvement in my professional life. It's not saying that it's different for different people, but it's folks who are looking towards the future. And I think you have a deep curiosity about how far they can push themselves and push their work products.

Whitney Johnson: Two final questions. What has been useful for you in this conversation?

Jennifer Smith: I loved how you've asked sort of this sequence of questions. And for me personally, just kind of connecting the dots of some things that have happened in my life and sort of gotten me to where I'm that as I said at the beginning, I'm kind of at the phase of my life now where I'm starting to think a little bit more self reflectively about my journey and how I got here and why I do the things I do and like why this is so important to me and what were kind of the defining moments along the way. I recently had a baby, my first child. I say Scribe's my first child. This is my first human baby. And so, I'm now starting to think a lot about what were some of the formative things in my childhood and growing up, and that my family did for me and things I might want to pass on to him. And so, you've just got me thinking more in that vein. I'm pretty sure after this conversation I'm still going to sit and think, Well, what were some other formative things in my childhood and what might I want to be doing for my son as he gets older?

Whitney Johnson: Congratulations on being a new mother. That's wonderful. Any final thoughts?

Jennifer Smith: So, I know you talk a lot about Disrupt Yourself. I like to talk about scale yourself. And maybe this comes back to my sort of whole efficiency schtick, right? But this idea of, like, what is special about you and what you know how to do and sort of where you're going and how do you scale yourself in doing that. And in particular, I

try to think about for myself and the people I work with, like, what? What's your special sauce? What are the reasons you show up and do the work that you do every day and how do you make it, so you spend most of your time doing that thing? If you actually look at your calendar of how you spend your time versus the things that motivate you. My bet is there's quite a big disconnect of it. And so, finding what are those kinds of leverage points for you and how you spend your time? And, you know, I think about Scribe as a part of that, right, which is you have all of this really special knowledge on how to do things. How do you make it so it's really easy for you to get that out of your head and get that into the hands of other people? You scale what you know how to do, and you put it in the hands of other people, and now you're getting this force multiplier effect, right? Whether that's your colleagues or a virtual assistant you hired or clients that you're trying to up level, whatever it might be. I feel like there are so many moments, especially as technology is evolving, where you can find other opportunities like that. This is around sort of process knowledge, but there are many others. And so, I think having this framing of how do you wake up every day and think, how do I scale myself today? Like, how do I get more out of who I am and what I'm able to do today with the same amount of input?

Whitney Johnson: Jennifer, thank you.

Jennifer Smith: Thanks so much for having me.

A delightful conversation. Two major takeaways. Number one, onboarding. Given that we decide if we like where we work within the first month, we need to get onboarding the launch point of the S Curve, right. And given that we are spending 9% to 16% of time across the org figuring out how to do the job, that means launch pointers are spending a lot more time. And who is helping them? Your people in the sweet spot and mastery. The cost is high. In our S Curve Insight tool, one of the dimensions we measure in order to assess if you've got an ecosystem that allows people to grow is conducive. Do people have the tools they need to do their job? Do they have the knowledge that they need to do their work? We need to transfer that knowledge, transfer the tribal knowledge as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Number two and building on that. When you start something new, when you launch onto a new S Curve, Jennifer says, document the hypothesis. What do we think is going to happen? We think that doing X will solve Y problem or lead to Z customers. Put it in writing. As Jennifer said, we're wrong all the time, but by documenting our hypothesis, we learn a lot, including we learn about how we make decisions.

If you want to do more listening and learning, I recommend my conversation with project management guru Antonio Nieto Rodrigues, [Episode 116](#). As well as [Episode 186](#) with entrepreneur Kara Goldin, founder of Hint Water. By the way, we love curating lists of podcast episodes. So, if you'd like to explore our doing this for your team, email me at wj@whitneyjohnson.com. Thank you again to Jennifer Smith for being our guest. Thank you to you for listening. And if you enjoyed this episode, hit that subscribe button. Thank you to our producer, Justin LeVrier, audio engineer, Whitney Jobe, production assistant, Stephanie Brummel, and production Coordinator, Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.