

Explorable | Season One, Episode 9: Transcript of interview with Srin Madipalli

Josh Loebner:

Hey, everybody. Welcome to the latest edition of the Explorable podcast. It has been an amazing and wild ride. Before we get started, Toby it's a little belated, you know sometimes I'm not sure about the timeline of when the podcast airs, but I say International Day Of Persons With Disabilities could be every day so I just want to give a shout out to that celebration. How are you doing Toby?

Toby Willis:

Yeah, thanks Josh. I'm doing really well and happy Disability Day to you as well and excited about today's episode. Looking forward to hearing from our friend Srin.

Josh Loebner:

Well, that's terrific. Let's just dive in and Toby gave it away. Our guest, if you have not heard of him, you soon will hear some amazing stories. Srin Madipalli. He's an entrepreneur, he's a business founder, investor, disability advocate and most importantly, for this podcast, he is a world traveler.

Josh Loebner:

Srin originally studied to be a research scientist focusing on genetics before retraining as a corporate lawyer. He discovered though he didn't want to be one and we'll hear a little bit more about that in just a few minutes. He graduated with an MBA from Oxford and did some amazing things when it came to teaching himself programming and coding. To really dive into what were some challenges at one time and potentially still today in some places and that's how people with disabilities can connect online to make sure that their travel experience is as phenomenal as possible. Srin, welcome to the podcast.

Srin Madipalli:

Thank you very much, Josh. Yeah, great to be here.

Josh Loebner:

Tell us a little bit about your disability story.

Srin Madipalli:

Sure, so I have a disability called spinal muscular atrophy. So it's a neuromuscular condition that I was born with. So since my earliest memories, I've had very little movement of my arms and my legs and for most of my life, I have used a powered wheelchair to get around and these days... Since a young teenager was requiring the assistance of PCA's around the clock to help me with all my day-to-day life needs and yeah, I think from very early on I have been incredibly dependent is the wrong word. I've been very incredibly empowered by technology to allow me to live life in the way that I want to.

Toby Willis:

That's amazing. Thanks for sharing that story and I know for the listeners who know you, we're all so excited to hear more about your entrepreneurship. As Josh mentioned in the intro, you started Accomable which was acquired by Airbnb and that is quite an accomplishment and I'm really proud of you and of your success in that space. So please do tell us more about that experience of starting Accomable and just take us through the acquisition and how you grew that through the Airbnb channels.

Srin Madipalli:

Sure thing. I think like with most of the best things in life, it all started somewhat serendipitously. As Josh alluded to, I was doing an MBA and I was in Oxford at the time and I was learning to code and I was just sort of really kind of loving what you could do with technology and building things and after I graduated, I was doing a handful of freelance assignments to try and improve my skills and was looking for interesting projects where I could A) improve my coding skills, but B), and more importantly, do things that I felt were valuable and impactful for our community and travel had always been something in the back of my mind where I'd been thinking a lot about we really could do so much better.

Srin Madipalli:

So, in 2011 I took about six months off to go traveling. So, I was a corporate lawyer at the time and a very, what's the right phrase here? I was a somewhat bored corporate lawyer. As much as I learned tons from the experience, it wasn't really quite the career for me. So, I took some time off to go traveling and while I had the most wonderful time and got to learn to scuba dive in Bali at an adapted diving center and went to a specialist camping safari in Southern Africa and traveled all around Europe and the U.S. and while I had an extraordinary time, I was constantly coming up against inaccessible accommodation of every kind and it was just such a frustration to me.

Srin Madipalli:

Even then, with technology, we still were not cracking this problem. So, back in sort of 2014, 2015, I was freelancing as a developer and learning to code and teamed up with my friend Martin and we were looking for ideas and we thought what could we build that is cool and good for our community and solves a problem? And I put together a prototype of Accomable in a month or so in spring, early summer of 2015, and then shared it out on social media and our friends, and it just, all of a sudden, started getting a lot of super positive feedback on it and Toby, you were mentioning about this was a business, but actually it didn't even start off as a business. We just started off doing this because we thought this was an important project and just we took it from there.

Toby Willis:

Yeah, that's awesome and that's how a lot of these labors of love start, where it's... I've started a couple of businesses myself and you just do it because you love it and you see the opportunity to affect change and that leads, as it did in your case, into a business that was acquired by a major player in the travel industry. So tell us what that felt like.

Srin Madipalli:

I mean, as you mentioned, we started the company in 2015. We then raised a load of funding from private investors and venture capital type folks in London and the company was going really fast and we had lots of demand from guests wanting accessible accommodation, but we did not have the capital to take the platform to the next level and we'd started a fundraising round, I guess what we call in tech a Series A funding round and so it started that road shows process of speaking to investors in London and Silicon Valley and one of my existing investors at the time said, "Hey Srin, have you considered seeing whether an existing travel platform that already has the infrastructure and the distribution channels, whether they could be either an investor or a partner to help you scale?" And so, we were very open to the idea and was incredibly fortunate that somebody in our investor base had some connections to some people at Airbnb and brokered that introduction and then, yeah, I went out to California.

Srin Madipalli:

I probably should have added, so I'm from, and I'm based, in London and yeah, so we went out to California to do this presentation and very quickly the conversation moved from this is not one of investment for Airbnb, we would actually, the real interest for us would be to be able to buy Accomable and have your team and have all of the expertise shared within the entire Airbnb platform and so that started off in the summer of 2017 and then we closed the deal end of 2017.

Srin Madipalli:

Yeah, look it was a huge roller coaster of a journey and part of the deal was that I would be moving out from London to San Francisco to build out this new team and division at Airbnb. So, I moved back to London earlier this year, just before the pandemic. So I was in America for 2018 and 2019. But going back to your question about the deal process. Yeah, look, it was a roller coaster. It involved a huge number of big life changes for me and also it was very important not for me to agree to the acquisition. I've got to feel comfortable that this is in the best interests for our community, our team, and all the other people that are part of what we do.

Toby Willis:

Yeah. So, is that the case? Is that what came to fruition at Airbnb after the acquisition? Do you feel like you were able to achieve those goals?

Srin Madipalli:

A lot of them. I don't think we achieved all of them. I think, in hindsight, and I say this as a former employee, so I left a short while ago to move on, to take a bit of a break from things and so I think... Look, I think we did a lot and I think we got a lot of the changes we wanted to do. I think I probably underestimated that just changes take a lot longer when you are in a larger organization that has a global footprint. It's not like a startup where you can come up with an idea on a Monday and build it on a Tuesday and a Wednesday and then ship it on a Thursday and then decide what to do on a Friday.

Srin Madipalli:

Whereas in a large corporation and that has a global presence, things just take longer and for good reason. There are more considerations around, I don't know, are you building something with all the right security principles in place? Or, are you making sure you're coordinating with customer service teams and other teams and other geographies and working with your politics? There's just so many more stakeholders that are part of the process so by and large, I think we got a lot of the things, a lot of the underlying values that were within Accomable have been embedded within Airbnb, but, I'm a kind of guy where naturally I always wish more could be done. You always want to be perfect and have everything in the perfect way, but as you guys know, solid progress is just as important.

Josh Loebner:

Srin, if we could maybe kind of peel from the current story to right when you started to come up with Accomable, what were some of the major challenges that you saw that weren't really being bridged for the disability community when it came to travel and tourism in the digital space?

Srin Madipalli:

So, great question. So, I think it was a number of different things that were not being catered for our community. One, I think up until then everybody simply thought accessibility meant a check box on a listing. No thought put into is this information correct? Is there enough information? How do we build trust? I think people [inaudible 00:12:16] disability related issues as a tick box, rather than seeing it how do we tailor our product for this audience and category of customers who are ready, willing, and able to spend their money on travel and I think that was the big bridge for us. It was not seeing disability as a compliance thing, it was seeing accessibility and disability as a valued, but underserved, audience.

Toby Willis:

Right, it's an opportunity. It's a market expansion opportunity.

Srin Madipalli:

Yep and by tailoring that experience so that audience you can build a viable, growing, scalable business.

Toby Willis:

So as you mentioned, Srin, you're transitioning I believe and so I'm wondering what gaps are still out there? For those of us working in the travel industry, where should we be putting our effort?

Srin Madipalli:

So, I think a number of areas. As you said, I'm sort of taking a step back and taking a bit of a break for a while just to sort of recuperate a little bit. It's nice to just have a bit of a breather and just, yeah, sit back and reflect on a few things and actually part of that is just thinking about what next and what are the opportunities and I think the great thing is that I don't think... Oh, it's actually, it's a great and a sad thing, unfortunately that there are lots of opportunities out there. I still think there's so much more that can be done to build more trust for those that provide accommodation and those that need accessible accommodation.

Srin Madipalli:

Like how can we get better photography? How can we get more granular information about a hotel or a rental or an apartment or whatever? So that's one area about accommodation and building better tooling and better ways of collecting information. You've then got, I guess, maybe more of a second area where how do we even just increase core supply? As you know, hotels may have to have a minimum percentage of

their rooms as accessibility compliant in whichever jurisdiction they're in, fine but then actually that's still a relatively small number in the grand scheme of things. Or, in the world of rentals and private homes, unfortunately again, there is still a low, critical mass of fundamental accessible supply. So I think the secondary I think a lot about is how do you increase the fundamental source of accommodation that has been built with accessibility in mind?

Srin Madipalli:

And I don't know whether that may be less of a business thing. Just as much as a policy thing and not... Our local planning officials, and those in the construction industry, need to think more about it. And the third area, I think, where there's a huge amount of opportunity is in ancillary services that are maybe not accommodation, but related to accommodation and travel. So, if you do travel somewhere, you're not just going to stay in a room and sleep for two weeks, you want to go out and enjoy your local area. You want to be able to move around more easily. You want to be having a good time. You may want to meet people and how do we better facilitate all the things that enrich a travel experience? How do we make those more accessible?

Josh Loebner:

Yeah, Srin, I want to circle back to something you said earlier about compliance versus value and that is such a powerful statement. I feel like there's an misconception about disability and that if you simply allow people with disabilities to have some type of accessibility, that that's all that needs to be done when it comes to travel and tourism, but there's so much more and so what do you feel like there are still potentially some misconceptions out there when it comes to disability travel?

Srin Madipalli:

I think there's a number of misconceptions and I think that there is like a scale, some are misconceptions, but in sort of very much a good faith. Some might be misconceptions, but may be more just out of plain ignorance and I think it spans the entire spectrum from people woefully underestimating the opportunity and assuming that disabled people don't travel to those who aren't aware of what the needs of travelers with accessibility are, or actually may have slightly more old-fashioned views on what a traveler with a disability wants on an experience. So, there is a real spectrum.

Toby Willis:

Srin, I'm wondering if Airbnb did any targeted marketing to the disabled community? Like featuring people with disabilities in ads or anything like that?

Srin Madipalli:

Sure, so some of that had started, I wouldn't say targeted in terms of like did we do a disability-focused campaign? No. I think what we tried to do was bake disability representation into just regular marketing materials as is and I think that was quite an important... Just given the status and platform of Airbnb, a marketing outreach campaign can reach so many different people and so actually we thought the more impactful thing in those situations was actually how do we make sure campaigns are diverse and inclusive and how do we include disability within those general campaigns.

Toby Willis:

That's a good paradigm because inclusion is just that. We want to be a part of all these aspects of a company's business and I think it's important for companies to understand this market and represent us in a way that draws us to the product.

Srin Madipalli:

Yeah and at the end of the day, 15% of the world's population has a disability of some kind at least. So, at least that numbers, so it's making sure that we are getting that representation within our public facing materials. Did we get quite there? No, but the process had been started.

Josh Loebner:

And I'll just ask a follow-up to that Srin, why do you feel like disability seems, to an extent, be the last minority group to be recognized when it comes to travel and tourism or corporate representation, or even in advertising campaigns?

Srin Madipalli:

It may take like two to three hours to go through all the different reasons, but I would think it's a real mixture of aspects. I feel some of the fundamental institutional barriers for disabled people were in place a lot longer compared to other minority groups which meant that there were just so many more obstacles for people who are disabled to get that foot in the door in employment, work their way up the corporate ladder and be in positions where that change could be made. I think it has started, but unfortunately, it just started a lot later compared to other to other groups.

Srin Madipalli:

I think, secondly, as well, just today I think a lot of the inclusion narrative has just simply just not included disability. It's often been overlooked and hence that advocacy work has... Again, it started off slightly from behind. I think a lot of people are doing great things at the moment and huge leaps are being made but I think this has started a much later time compared to other inclusion campaigns.

Toby Willis:

I'm wondering about, in regards to the business case, were you able through your work at Accomable and Airbnb to really demonstrate that market value of this community?

Srin Madipalli:

I feel so. I think Airbnb would not have acquired Accomable unless there was a viable business case. I think the next challenge now is not the business case, but how do we prioritize the disability and accessibility business case above other business cases.

Toby Willis:

Right.

Srin Madipalli:

So, I think we did a really good job validating that there is a business case. I think now the question that I think a lot about is how do we elevate this? Let's say a company, I don't know, can prioritize five things in a given year or 10 things in a given year, how do we get disability into that top 10?

Toby Willis:

Yeah, I think for our listeners who work in the travel industry and they're facing that challenge. When they are inspired by the podcast and they go to their leadership and say, "We got to do this," I think that's the question, is how do they get that work prioritized? How do they get the resources that's needed? And I feel like having that business case well-proven is a key to that.

Srin Madipalli:

I think that's the start and hopefully-

Toby Willis:

It's the start, right.

Srin Madipalli:

... we'll start seeing, "Hey, look, here's this work that Toby's doing, here's the work that Srin's doing, the Airbnb, Expedia, whoever. These are the investments and look at the public, look at the work that you can see publicly about all this stuff that's happening. If they're doing it, why aren't we doing it?"

Toby Willis:

Right and it's just the right thing to do. So I think once you get through the door with the business case, you get people's attention, and they realize the social justice issue and then I think that motivates people to really lean into the work and I think, just using the business case to get the meeting, for example, and then telling the story about the disabled travel experience really begins to move people's mind toward a more inclusive paradigm.

Srin Madipalli:

Yeah and I think just to add to that, another thing that really worked well for us. So, the business case yes is sort of table stakes, but then a lot of our work was also about empathy building, so people aren't seeing inclusion and disability just about like, "Oh, we need to do this because there's a business reason," but actually understanding the problems and empathizing with those problems. So we did a lot of lunch and learns where we would invite disability community groups to do panel discussions with lots of different teams and teams that may have had nothing to do with accessibility but were just curious to learn what it is like to travel with a disability.

Srin Madipalli:

So, we would bring in folks local to the office who had a disability to do a talk about their travel experiences, allow members of the company to ask questions and it'd be a little bit of a safe space to sort of ask whatever and actually... Like for me, the goal was if somebody is considering this, you want them to really think about and remember these experiences of what they've been told and put a bit of a human face behind some of the things that they're doing.

Toby Willis:

Yeah, absolutely. People don't remember stats, but they remember stories-

Srin Madipalli:

Exactly, right and that's human nature.

Toby Willis:

That's right and you can't just throw it over the accessibility wall, it has to be in the DNA of the company. So I'm glad you brought that up.

Srin Madipalli:

Yeah, and it's like, "I'm going to make these changes not just because Srin has put this business case. I'm making these changes because ah do you know what? My mate, John, was doing a talk last week and wow..." I think you've got to humanize it as well.

Josh Loebner:

I couldn't agree more Srin and I really appreciate you bringing up empathy. Too often, when it comes to programmers, developers, designers in my world of advertising, disability and accessibility is something potentially that is now just being taught. But more so, I would argue from a skills standpoint to be able to have the skills and knowledge to, for example, make a website that has color contrast appropriate for people who are color blind, but there isn't oftentimes the empathy that's woven into those students who are learning that or for those professionals that are just now understanding about accessibility. So, to hear you share the empathy portion, at least from my world, is very powerful and that means a lot and that is a layer that, for sure, shouldn't be forgotten. It circles back to that compliance versus commitment. So, thank you for bringing that up and with that Srin, thanks so much for being our guest and I do want to ask one more question. Where can people connect with you?

Srin Madipalli:

Probably the best way is LinkedIn. If you just Google LinkedIn, Srin Madipalli, I'm sure my LinkedIn profile comes on there somewhere.

Toby Willis:

That's awesome. Srin, I'm so happy that Josh and I were able to get you on the show. Thank you.

Srin Madipalli:

Likewise and great to be here and thank you so much for inviting me and thank you for doing this podcast.

Toby Willis:

Yeah, for sure. We wish you all the best in your future and endeavors and come back on the show again next year.

Srin Madipalli:

I eagerly await the invite.

Toby Willis:

All right. It's in the mail.

Srin Madipalli:

Oh, that old excuse.

Josh Loebner:

Well Srin, Toby, thanks so much. This has been another episode of Explorable. We'll see you next time.

Toby Willis:

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You can connect with Josh Loebner or myself, Toby Willis, on LinkedIn.