

When it Mattered

Episode 51: Madeline Mann

Chitra Ragavan:

Madeline Mann began her first job as a market research analyst as she was wrapping up her master's degree. But the super driven academic had a disastrous six months on the job. Humbled by the experience, Madeline went into her second job searching for what truly motivated her to perform and to succeed in the workplace. Hello everyone, I'm Chitra Ragavan, and this is When It Mattered. This episode is brought to you by Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups find their narrative.

Chitra Ragavan:

Joining me now is Madeline Mann, a human resources leader and career strategist. Madeline is known for her rapid fire career advice videos on her channel, Self Made Millennial, which has amassed hundreds of thousands of followers across all the major social media platforms. Madeline transformed her own experience as an HR and recruiting leader into advice on how to empower ambitious professionals to fast track their careers. Madeline's work has been featured on Business Insider, Newsweek, Thrive Global and more. She was named a Top 50 person to follow on LinkedIn and a Top 10 YouTube channel for job seekers. Madeline currently also serves as talent development manager at Inspire in Los Angeles. Madeline, welcome to the podcast.

Madeline Mann:

I am so glad to be here, Chitra. Thank you.

Chitra Ragavan:

It's interesting that your whole career revolves around inspiring others to interview better for jobs and to perform better at jobs, but your own career got off to what I would say was an incredibly shaky start. Tell us about your first job and what happened.

Madeline Mann:

Yes. So my first major corporate job, I was in a market research role because I had a background in psychology and I thought that would be an interesting path to try out. And I did my job every day. I came in, I had my cubicle and I was in charge of really looking through all the data and making sure everything, all the I's were dotted, all the T's were crossed. A lot of very detailed-oriented work. And I would come to the meetings that the team had and I would sit there and have no idea what anyone was talking about, but I tried my best and I would... But by the time it would hit 5:00 PM at that job, I was exhausted, essentially because the job just didn't play to my strengths at all. And so when you're not playing to your strengths, you just get tired.

Madeline Mann:

And so I got to my three month performance review and my boss, she pulls out the scores that I got for different aspects, right? Maybe my communication skills, my work product, whatever

those key metrics were. And she walks through my scores. And at this point I had never really gotten a B before in my life. I'd always gotten all A's. I always found school as this fun challenge to try to always maximize my score and I was always in competition with myself. And she shows me my scores and out of five, out of a span of five points, I consistently got threes and twos across everything, which was completely mind blowing to me. And it was this moment of me being like, "What? What did I do wrong? I hit all of the things that they asked me to do." And I remember talking to my boyfriend at the time, who is now my husband Henry. I said, "I am so nice and I do everything they tell me to do. Why am I getting these mediocre and even below mediocre scores?"

Madeline Mann:

And he said, "You know, Madeline, if I ran my own company, I wouldn't want someone who was just doing the bare minimum and was just simply nice. I would want someone who was passionate about their job, who found ways to contribute, who went above and beyond." And that's when it clicked for me that life and the working world is not like school. There's not a rubric where you simply check off things and then you call it a day. And that was a huge wake-up call to me.

Chitra Ragavan:

I mean, we worked together at Gem for a couple of years and I know what an incredibly high achiever you are. That must have been quite a moment for you when you saw those performance grades.

Madeline Mann:

Absolutely. It really was. It was this moment and I felt a little bit betrayed of, "What else do you want from me?" And it really was a moment of me realizing, "Wait, I do need to work harder. I do need to find more ways to contribute. I wasn't in those meetings jotting down a bunch of notes of, how am I going to look up these terms later and ask a bunch of questions." I was just kind of clueless and aimless. And the other thing I discovered is that I'm not actually motivated to do a lot better in this job, which was also something weird. You knowing me and knowing that I am a very motivated person, but I'm motivated for certain types of jobs. And that was a wake-up moment to say, "This is not the career for me."

Chitra Ragavan:

I guess it was also a lesson. I've also been a manager. A lesson that people are watching you always and measuring your performance, even when you think they're not, and especially these days, right, you just have to go above and beyond.

Madeline Mann:

Right. And I also think of that quote of, "If you're gardening, sometimes it's not necessarily about fixing the flower, but fixing the soil and the environment," right? So someone might be really bad at one job, but if you can fix the conditions for them, maybe put them in a different job, they can flourish. And so while that was definitely a hit to my morale and my self-identity, it was really empowering to see that, "Okay, I can, I can move on. I can find something that fits me better."

Chitra Ragavan:

It wasn't the first time you learned a hard lesson about actions having consequences, was it?

Madeline Mann:

Oh, no, no, it wasn't.

Chitra Ragavan:

Tell me.

Madeline Mann:

So one of the really defining moments was I, as a child, I was very... I was just, anything you told me to do, that didn't really matter what you told me to do or what the rules were, I would just go for it. You know, "Madeline, don't go over there." "Well, I feel like going over there, I'm doing it." "Madeline, it's time to be quiet." "Well, I have something to say, so I'm going to say it." I wasn't a mean child, but I just saw no boundaries. And my parents all year long when I was a four-year-old said, "You know, Madeline, Santa's watching. He's watching you. He's watching your every move." And I said, "Yeah, yeah, sure." And so it gets to Christmas, and I have an older brother, he's a year older. And we run out and see all the gifts. And at this point he's five, I'm four, so we don't really read. So there's stars and hearts on our gifts to determine... He was a star and I was a heart. So that's how we knew whose gift was whose.

Madeline Mann:

And it was just a pile of, "Okay, I found another star gift to hand it to him. Okay, here's another star gift." And it was just star gift after star gift and there was no hearts anywhere, except for a letter that was from Santa Claus and my dad helped me read it. And it said that, "Santa's been watching and you're not going to get any gifts this year." And I sat and I listened patiently. I was like, "Okay, yep. That makes sense. I was warned about this." And I just walked back out into the living room and just cheered on my brother as he opened the rest of his gifts. And my parents were weirded out. They were like, "What is happening? She is such a firecracker and in this moment she's completely serene." And my parents said that forever I was changed by that moment of, "Oh, wow. Okay, there are rules. There is a way to act. There are consequences." And apparently, I was a pretty obedient kid after that.

Chitra Ragavan:

That's a very sad story, by the way. I admire your parents. I have been completely unable in my life to follow through on threats like that with my kids. So I think that's pretty interesting.

Madeline Mann:

Yes. I think it was a very interesting psychology experiment and they had no idea how it was going to go. But yeah, I mean, looking back in that Christmas, it's strange because I don't see heartbreak there. I just see, "Oh, okay. Yep. Yep. I was told, and this is what happens."

Chitra Ragavan:

Actions and consequences, right?

Madeline Mann:

Yeah.

Chitra Ragavan:

So going back to that first job, how did that change you and your approach to work and career in your second job?

Madeline Mann:

So what it taught me was that, yeah to really focus my strengths and values. So my strengths of, what are the things that really make it so that I am putting in that extra effort and wanting to learn more? And human resources is truly the space where I really found myself wanting to dive in deeper to the psychology of it, wanting to build different programs and measure the results. And so that really made me go head first into that profession and really not look back.

Chitra Ragavan:

What did you like about it so much, do you think?

Madeline Mann:

I would say that I really love... I've always read business books and I love the element of really behavior change. And there's lots of different ways to go about business. You can talk about how you're going to implement a strategy or implement a technology, but the underlying aspect there that is the most difficult part is the people, right? So you can come up with the best strategy and the best technology in the world, but if you don't get the right motivation for people and the right actions and the right people in the room, even, it's going to flop. And so I find that problem extremely fascinating. And so human resources has been a way for me to feel like I'm really flexing my muscles of working on a team and being collaborative, while also really taking my love for psychology and understanding human behavior and being a bit of a scientist of experimenting with different ways of helping people to be motivated, helping people to create behavior change if there's something that needs to change in an organization. It's just a really dynamic career path.

Chitra Ragavan:

So your next job was at Gem where we worked together, which was awesome, and where you had your next sort of layers of insight into the whole recruiting and feedback process. Tell me what you were doing and what gave you those insights.

Madeline Mann:

Yes. So at Gem, I was so fortunate to really have my hands in every aspect of HR. And that was exactly on the front lines of interviewing people, reading all the resumes, and then in the back room of understanding, "Okay, what are the things that are valued in order to give someone a promotion?" And all of those conversations. And I realized that if only professionals had this context and had this empathy for what it's like to be on the other side, they would make much different decisions in their career. And not only would it be better for their career, but both sides would understand each other better and it would lead to a lot more. So that's where, Gem is really where I dug my heels in and really got to know all these different aspects and I started helping people one on one.

Madeline Mann:

So I would start responding to applications of people applied saying the reason why we didn't choose them. And I thought I was going to be everyone's hero. Everyone always says, "Oh, we never get any feedback in the interview process." And I was like, "I am going to change the game. I'm going to really improve the employer brand." Well, it ended up being a disaster.

People, it turns out, which I know this very well now, do not like unsolicited feedback. So the responses I got were really negative and just like, "You don't know what you're talking about." And there were some people who absolutely did appreciate the feedback, but it ended up spiraling into more time commitment. So they'd say, "Okay, well, I'm going to reapply, and can you look at my resumé again? And can we hop on the phone and discuss this for 45 minutes?" And it got to the point where I thought there has to be a better way to help people. And that's when I started my journey of content creation and my whole business of Self Made Millennial.

Chitra Ragavan:

Tell us a little bit about Self Made Millennial and how it evolved and caught fire.

Madeline Mann:

Yes. So I, the day when I was like, "All right, I'm done with this one-on-one unsolicited feedback thing." So I went into my room and I just started typing away on a Google Doc of all the thoughts and all the things I wanted to share with professionals. And I went into this massive flow state of just like, I emerged with like 20 pages of content just instantly, and I thought, "Okay, I'm definitely onto something." And so I started off with a YouTube channel where I was giving a lot of career, job search, interview, resumé tips, and it was really resonating with people. And I got a reputation for giving very actual advice, giving it quickly, not really messing around, and also being specific. So giving people the actual email templates to send, giving them the exact script of what to say. And that ended up really flourishing into being featured by different outlets, like you mentioned earlier, growing my LinkedIn presence to thousands and thousands of people and having influence there and being a keynote speaker for different organizations and then building online courses and a coaching practice as well.

Chitra Ragavan:

It's incredible. I mean, I watched all of this evolve and I think what really also resonates with your viewers and your followers is that you don't take yourself too seriously. These are pretty, some of them are pretty goofy videos. I mean, you're singing in some, you're acting. I mean, you love acting and singing obviously. And you're just doing a lot of performance art and acting silly, but conveying some very serious messages.

Madeline Mann:

Yeah. That is another thing that I noticed with a lot of these career videos I was seeing is that they would always, not always, but many of them would give just enough information to where you kind of understood the concept, but you didn't know the next step to take. And they were all very serious and I am just not a serious person most of the time. And so, yeah, I think that I have really brought just that goofiness, that trying to adding lots of puns into what I'm talking about. If dancing is called for in the video, I will absolutely show up for that. And it's really... People have called it like edutainment, which I hope I'm at least making the process of job searching a little less draining because it is so emotionally exhausting. So at least I can help a little bit there.

Chitra Ragavan:

It paid off that you also had plans initially to be like the next Taylor Swift. Right? So you can sing and you can dance and you can act, and all of this is now coming into play in these videos.

Madeline Mann:

Yeah. And I actually think that that's something... I never totally went down the road of being a full on singer or an actress or anything like that. But I do think that it's interesting and a message out to all of us is that you should notice those things about yourself, and even if you aren't going to pursue that exact path, there are ways that you can still bring out those hobbies and those talents. So that has been fun for me to kind of tap into that and bring those things to life.

Chitra Ragavan:

You've also become one of the top 50 LinkedIn thought leaders. How did you go about that process? And what is it that's resonating on that channel, do you think?

Madeline Mann:

LinkedIn is such a powerful place to build thought leadership and it's often undervalued and it's incredible. I mean, the last stat I checked is that only about three million LinkedIn users post on LinkedIn a week, which is, there's over 690 million users and only 3 million are posting a week. Compare that to Instagram where there's 300 million new photos a day. So it's crazy. The saturation is so much less. And so the virality that you can reach, the organic reach that you can have is incredible. And so what I've done is I've brought over a lot of the tips that were resonating on YouTube to LinkedIn. And the powerful thing about LinkedIn is that it's very relationship oriented.

Madeline Mann:

So I show up on LinkedIn and I'm posting, I'm giving really actual content and people then start to feel like they know me, and then it makes it so that I never cold messaging or cold emailing anyone on LinkedIn because they see me pop up frequently. And so it makes for such an easy way to start a conversation. And so when people talk about keeping your network warm, just showing up on LinkedIn, being an active participant, then you are keeping up with your network in a way that is scalable, instead of you just like... People haven't heard from you in a few years and you pop up into their inbox.

Chitra Ragavan:

Interestingly, you've also had tremendous success on TikTok, which one wouldn't think would be a channel for career advice and job advice.

Madeline Mann:

That is just as much of a surprise to me as it is to you. That was a grand experiment. And yeah, I think at time of recording, I'm about 300,000 followers on there, which has been really fun to grow with that and help people with their careers through videos that are under a minute.

Chitra Ragavan:

That's incredible. I mean, when you saw those numbers go up, I bet you were pretty shocked.

Madeline Mann:

I was, yeah. In such a short amount of time. And the platform is constantly evolving, but yeah, that's actually a place I don't dance. I actually don't dance on TikTok, despite the reputation.

Chitra Ragavan:

The one place where people would expect you to dance.

Madeline Mann:

Right, right. I've never danced on there.

Chitra Ragavan:

I guess there's an element of surprise. So, you know, in life, timing is everything. And it seems as if in a way, everything that you have worked so hard for over the past three years or more has weirdly come to fruition now, because you're looking at this post-COVID landscape, well, COVID is not yet gone, but you're looking at this landscape of unemployment, right? Massive unemployment, people who have lost jobs, people who have lost income, people have lost their career trajectories because of this absolutely devastating impact of the pandemic. Tell me what you are seeing and what do you make of the whole thing and where you think it's going.

Madeline Mann:

Yes. So this is something that I've been very hot on the pulse of. And what I've noticed from the job seeker side is the number one question I'm asked is, "Is there even a point in applying right now?" Or, "When should I start pursuing opportunities?" And those questions break my heart because the answer is yesterday, right? You should still be pursuing opportunities. But the thing is, is that a lot of people, it's a different landscape, things are shaken up, they don't know if the company had layoffs or not. They don't know if they're still hiring. They're posting job descriptions, but does that mean, was that just automatic? And, "Oh, I had an interview, but then I haven't heard back. But is it okay to even follow up with anyone during these conditions?"

Madeline Mann:

And one thing, a metaphor I use is that if you've heard of this team exercise where it's about building a tower out of spaghetti, hard spaghetti and string and tape, and you're supposed to build the highest tower you can that can hold up one of those jumbo marshmallows, and you only have 15 minutes to build it. And they found, after doing this team building exercise across all different kinds of groups, really interesting results about who is really good at this activity and who isn't.

Madeline Mann:

They found that MBA students are the absolute worst at this activity. The reason being is, okay, the 15 minutes start and they start planning and conceptualizing and delegating and sketching, and they're constantly in the planning stage and it gets to the 12 minute mark and they're going, "Hold on, hold on, wait, wait, we still haven't started building yet. Wait, we need more time." And they're begging for more time. And by the time the time runs out, they put something together quickly and it all looks like the Eiffel Tower. And whoever's stands up the tallest wins.

Madeline Mann:

But the group that actually does the best with this are actually kindergartners. And the reason why kindergartners are so good at this task is because as soon as the stopwatch starts, they just start building. They're like, "All right, let's put some stuff together. Okay, oops, first tower fell down. It's all right, we still have nine more minutes. Okay, let's build our next one." And by the end of the 15 minutes, everyone's tower looks different. All of them have a marshmallow at the top. And yeah, the solutions are very creative. And the reason why I tell this story is because I really want job seekers to be like kindergartners right now. I want you to move from a planning mindset to an experimentation mindset. Just try things, keep moving during this time, don't

freeze, don't be in this constant getting ready stage, because while you're doing that, other people are getting these jobs.

Madeline Mann:

And so don't be afraid to make that first move, to make that first reach out, because this is an unprecedented time, and the people who are getting jobs, and I have gotten literal hundreds of emails and calls from people who have said that I have helped them get jobs during COVID. It's happening, but you have to keep building, you have to keep experimenting.

Chitra Ragavan:

That's really interesting. In my first job at the television station in Chicago, we had a saying, you know, "Better than good, it's done," right. Sometimes you just got to get to that finish line and not try to just constantly finesse to a point where you've missed that timing, which as I said before, timing is everything.

Madeline Mann:

Exactly, yeah. And so one of my best tools that I've helped people with is I wrote emails to follow up during COVID. So I tell everyone, persistence gets jobs. You need to be following up, but people say, "How do I follow up without being inconsiderate?" And so I wrote these email templates where it really allows you as a person following up as a candidate to respect that person's timing, to respect that they have other things going on, that things aren't certain, but still be persistent and positive. I think if you go to my website, madelinemann.com, it's the first pop-up that that happens that people can grab that download. But that has been a really big breakthrough for so many people. So many people email me saying, "Wow, just thank you for giving me that tool to actually move forward and follow up," because again, a lot of people are so frozen right now.

Chitra Ragavan:

What do you think is going to happen to the technology workplace and hiring and managing, and any workplace, for that matter, as a result of COVID? And what changes are likely to be short term and what are likely to be long term?

Madeline Mann:

One of the things that I'm noticing a lot is safety is obviously a big part of coming back into the workplace. Are people going to... How are we going to utilize kitchen spaces? How are we going to spread out desks? And so those are the shorter term things. I think longer term, it has been an interesting challenge to show that remote work is possible for a lot of roles. I think that there's still a lot to be said for being in person, but this has been a really interesting challenge to the idea that you need to be in person. So I am thinking that there's going to be a lot more roles, a lot more distributed teams, and even a lot of companies may be getting rid of their offices or downsizing and having just shared desks in their space where people don't necessarily have a desk anymore. It's just, if you're coming into the office, take an open desk and possibly fewer days in the office.

Chitra Ragavan:

If there's any other piece of advice that you are giving your followers on how to survive this dark period and how they can bounce back, what is that?

Madeline Mann:

I think that it's probably two things. So I think really, you need to look at what's in demand right now. I think the idea of "follow your passion" is a misdirection of energy. I think that there's people often that just want to go after a certain job that maybe isn't in demand, and COVID has caused certain jobs to be really high demand and others not. So I would say get a bit creative, right? Look at your skills and look at your strengths and your values and see what could be new for you. Such as I have been coaching a lot of event planners, because that has been a really tough job to get these days. And I have helped them to get jobs as like a webinar moderator. I have one person who is just raking in the money of just them branding themselves as a webinar moderator and helping all these companies to make sure that that runs smoothly and that their questions are getting to the presenter.

Madeline Mann:

And I had another client who is now a COVID safety specialist for sets like in the entertainment industry. So there's a lot of different ways that you can rebrand your skills. And then I think the second half is focusing on personal branding. So just as I was talking about with, on LinkedIn, you... Familiarity breeds fondness. People want to hire people who they feel familiar with, and a great way to do that is to get active, build that personal brand and make it so that you are keeping your network warm because in a competitive landscape for the job market, you need to have that edge.

Chitra Ragavan:

Looking back at that masters graduate who entered the workplace and was stunned to learn that she was rated so poorly by her superiors. And the journey that you've been on these past few years to become one of the top influencers and career counselors in the country, what would you say to that young woman who got that terrible performance feedback and the journey that you've been on?

Madeline Mann:

I would say that there's not actually a real structure to the recipe for success in the working world. I think so many people, and obviously me in that situation as well, we get caught up of like, "What's the right thing to do. What's the right way to format my resumé. What's the right way to ask for a raise?" It's not during this particular cycle or, "What's the right way to have a career that's like a ladder instead of..." I can consider most careers these days to be jungle gyms instead of like... There's lots of different places to go versus just straight up in one path.

Madeline Mann:

And so I think that that's something, is that everything, or most of the things I've talked about today, like no one handed me, you know, "Hey, Madeline, you are now going to build this YouTube channel. You are now going to have this coaching practice. You're now going to have all these things." You just create it for yourself. And so that's something that I wish I would have known when I was in that first job is that it's not about just following the rules, it's about building your influence, and in contributing, and in finding ways to contribute, in not waiting for someone to grant you permission or tell you, "Here's the steps you take." Throw the playbook out the window, and really, I found that the best moments in my life have been times where I've zigged when everyone else zagged.

Chitra Ragavan:

Have you had any, what I call viral insights in the wake of COVID, that moment of clarity that's often brought upon by a crisis?

Madeline Mann:

A viral insight. I would say that it really is this aspect of this persistence. As I've been working with all of these different job seekers helping them to obtain jobs, the number of success stories I'm getting from all this content hasn't decreased. And it actually, I think it's gotten, for those people who have been even more committed, there's been tremendous victories in this time. And so I think really just these moments of, wow, if you can just be really persistent, there's just amazing things that can happen. Obviously that's not true for everyone. Like there's a lot of people who have really difficult situations that just a bit of elbow grease won't get them through it, but I think it's been largely pretty incredible of the ability for people to build relationships and lean on each other and reach their next career goals.

Chitra Ragavan:

Madeline, thank you so much for joining me today and for the great conversation and insights.

Madeline Mann:

It has been my pleasure, Chitra. Thank you so much for having me.

Chitra Ragavan:

Madeline Mann is a human resources leader and career strategist. She's known for her rapid fire career advice videos on her channel, Self Made Millennial, which has amassed hundreds of thousands of followers across platforms. Madeline transformed her experience as an HR and recruiting leader into advice on how to empower ambitious professionals to fast track their careers. Madeline's work has been featured on Business Insider, Newsweek, Thrive Global, and more. She was named a top 50 person to follow on LinkedIn and a top 10 YouTube channel for job seekers. Madeline currently also serves as talent development manager at Inspire in Los Angeles. This is When It Mattered. I'm Chitra Ragavan.

Chitra Ragavan:

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