

The Job Hunting Podcast

Transcript 23A. Bonus Episode covid-19 and VUCA extended chat with Janet Sernack

Renata: The last episode was an interview with Janet Sernack on living and adapting to VUCA – Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. It was recorded just before the covid-19 outbreak, and I'm so glad Janet and I decided to record our chat, as understanding VUCA today is more important than ever. But I wanted to spend more time with Janet and share my conversation with my community in real time. So last week I called Janet during my weekly live Facebook session. And this Bonus episode is a recording of that chat.

Renata: If you haven't listened yet to the previous episode number 23, I highly recommend you do so, but that won't be necessary for you to follow the conversation in this Bonus Episode. My goal is for you to be as informed and prepared as you can possibly be to live and work during a time of unprecedented VUCA. Quick recap, Janet Sernack is a consultant and coach who helps other coaches like me, leaders and organizations adapt and grow through disruption. Her expertise is in helping society understand what it means to BE innovative and adaptive to change. She helps embed innovation in organizations that are experiencing the shockwaves of disruptive change in our VUCA world. Normally that would mean market disruption, new technologies, new ways of working, and so on. Janet helps businesses and leaders to be open to new and creative ways and new commercial possibilities. What I also like about Janet is that her expertise is delivered by an amazingly calm energy. This is how I want people to explain VUCA to me! I need her tone of voice, her positive warmth at this moment.

Renata: Let's listen to that Phone Chat, the one I had with Janet last week, where we talk about VUCA and also about Black Swan events in this context of the Covid-19 outbreak. She gives some great examples, great explanations as well as coping mechanisms we can all adopt.

Renata: Now, Janet, how are you coping with this, lockdown situation that we find ourselves in?

Janet: Oh, it's a really good question. Well, look as I mentioned earlier in the Podcast, I am a serial entrepreneur, so I have been working pretty much in a home environment or coffee shop environment now for nearly 30 years and I'm doing most of my work virtually online. So I'm actually enjoying a bit of breathing space, from the face to face world.

Renata: Yes. That's how we met. We met at a coffee shop and our first few meetings were at coffee shops, right?

Janet: Yup.

Renata: Yup. There you go. And, we were not going to repeat the conversation from the podcast. I've already told everybody on this live that I've interviewed you for the podcast, but I want you to just briefly, for those who haven't yet had the chance to listen to the podcast, tell us about your expertise and explain to us what VUCA is.

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Janet: Okay. So, VUCA was a term that originated in the early eighties from the U S military. So, you know, some of you may be aware of that or not. And as having lived in Israel now for a number of years and being in an environment that was heavily influenced by the military, it came about as a result of the war, the Gulf war in the early eighties, when the whole scenario or way of doing war changed in that, there was no longer a formal or conventional way of strategizing a war because there was so much volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. So volatility just really means that, there are a number of surprising random and unexpected events you might have heard of the term black swan events?

Renata: Yes.

Janet: So, you know, we don't know what's coming around the corner next. So, you know, these random, like a tsunami, it's like covid virus, it's created a really volatile environment that's impacting on us at every level of our existence.

Renata: Yes. So I've been thinking a lot of about military strategies because I used to work for an organisation called the John Monash foundation. And John Monash was an excellent strategist and implementer of battles and, you know, planning really well and being quite innovative in the way that he led during First World War, which was very innovative and saved a lot of lives. So he, was quite, I mean, I've read a lot of about him. I read a lot of his diaries and his letters and all of that. And I feel like I want to go back into that. But one of the things I was thinking about this VUCA environment that we have, it's that this time it seems like it's all encompassing. Like it's not just in one region. It's not like in just in Europe, just in the middle east, just in, you know, it's absolutely everywhere, isn't it? It's a test to all of us.

Janet: It's a test in one way, but it's also an opportunity from what I've been reading, for deep reflection, you know, for time out of getting out of the pity pace as someone once called it and reflecting on what's important for you. And also, reflecting on what's working from a community or a civic perspective and what isn't. And to look at opportunities for effecting change. So I was just reading somebody posted something by Bill Gates saying, you know, this is a moment in time when we can actually make a global shift. Just to explain what the other letters mean, we talk about volatility, it's the speed of change. So technology, mustn't forget the role of technology in accelerating change. You know, one day it's this and the next day it's that. The U stands for uncertainty, and I think that's, what covid-19 has created more than anything is that it was an unpredictable event.

Janet: And I'm just working on my strategy for 2020 and whilst I'm doing that, I can't actually predict or forecast anything. And organisations can't do that either. So things like cash flow, we can't predict income. We certainly can't predict because the whole playing field has shifted. So we're, we're being constantly surprised and it's hard to make sense of a, a virus that originated, you know, in a wildlife market, a

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wild animal market in China come to have such a global impact and how unprepared we were for it.

Renata: Yes.

Janet: So, we've got uncertainty. Complexity is like the multiplex of forces. You know, we, there's all these issues going on, so all the here in Australia, we just had the Bush fires and you know, so we still haven't solved that as a, as a wicked problem. You know, you've got water scarcity in the Middle East, you've got fracking, you've got a, here in Australia, you've got the whole coal issue.

Janet: So we have a lot of conflict, you know, a lot of complex problems to solve that can't be solved anymore through conventional thinking. And Ambiguity is just about, what we say is the haziness of reality. So no one really knows. So here in Australia we've had a lot of media and negative press about the lack of clear communication by the government on what we are meant to be doing and what we're not meant to be doing in terms of self-isolation or proximity. So, you know, you can misread what's going on and you can have mixed meanings. In the old days, you know, of cause and effect something would happen and you would have an effect. And that's sort of not so clear anymore. So it's really about a lack of clarity. So that again, it's only been used in corporate since the early two thousands. Yeah.

Renata: Right. And you've been using it for a while. Haven't you, Janet, I think you introduced me to, to the definition.

Janet: Oh good. Thank you.

Renata: Yes you have. Yeah. So, how have you been able, so far to monitor how Australian businesses are reacting to this? And have you been able to find good examples of leadership in this VUCA space at the moment? Or is it too early for you to identify those? Because I have been, I sent a newsletter today and I mentioned John Dewar vice chancellor at La Trobe I just, I'm very impressed with his leadership during this time. And I think it's, you know, we can just watch and learn and observe how leaders are, leading and providing, some respite and some guidance for what for him is about 40,000 people between students and staff. Right. So he's doing it so well. I'm very impressed with his leadership style. Have you been able to look into that as well?

Janet: I haven't heard of any. It's a really good question. I haven't noticed any organisation standing out yet. And, here's the thing, it's because it is a situation that's never happened before. And even though we've seen a lot of movies about it, you know, contagion and all these, these catastrophic movies, I think especially here in Australia is that we have been rolling along so nicely, we've become quite complacent. So we actually don't have the strategic thinking, the critical thinking and the creative thinking skills or even the mindset, the ability, the elastic sort of mindsets to, approach it differently. So, what you're seeing, and from a neurological

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perspective, what's happened is, is that we, we're conflicted between what we believe is true and what is really going on. And that's what we call cognitive dissonance.

Janet: So I think we're still very much globally, most people and organisations still feeling psychologically uncomfortable, anxious, confused and conflicted. So overwhelmed. I think the anxiety's probably gone through, through the roof and this is our normal human behaviour. So if you're feeling like that, it's completely normal. That's how we're wired we're neurologically wired. However, I think what we can learn from this is how do we self-regulate, you know, how do we pay attention to our unconscious reactive responses and then how do we self-regulate them? And of course, that's always in, in mindset, you know, in doing. But we will call emotional agility and, and mindset change work.

Renata: Yes. Who do you think have as, groups or, people or, individuals may have already developed those skills so that they are able to, I mean, and you are a coach and a mentor and somebody who can teach others do that. Do you see that in others as well? Do you, do you have like a community that can be quickly activated to help others?

Janet: Oh yeah, that's really important. So, what I learned when I relocated to the middle East, now it's nearly, um, gosh, 10 years ago was being in a VUCA environment. The first thing that was really critical to do is define my tribe. So to find people, and I had to do it, online and LinkedIn was amazing for that. And an incredible resource was to find people who, were like minded and were actually very generous and collaborative as opposed to coming from a scarcity mindset and being competitive. So I think finding your tribe is the first thing because that means that you're not alone and you are not the only person suffering or thinking differently. So, I think that's really important. The second thing is, to, I guess it sounds really difficult, but to find out the facts that what's really going on, you know, like everybody's terrified of this virus, but the percentage, you know, when you read the data. You know, the data is, is very, realistic. So what, what I've done, oh, and then the third thing is, entrepreneurs are the people that sort of seem to be agile and nimble and kind of flow with, with VUCA. Because when you, when you're on an entrepreneurial journey, you know, VUCA becomes very much a way of life because you do go through what they call the, the peaks of triumphs and the valleys of desolation, you know, when you, when you do fail and things don't work.

Renata: Yes, yes. And we will probably all go through that. If not, you know, if you're not there already, I mean, many people have lost their income either by losing their jobs or having people like you and I, you know, with clients having jobs that are on hold or postponed, for the time being. So, coming back to whatever new normal is on the other side of this will be interesting as well. Because things may, if they are melted now, they may crystallise differently in the future. Do you, are you thinking about that already? How will society is going to structure itself again?

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Janet: Yeah. Somebody said to me the other day, there will be no new normal. Things will just be different. So, I think what's really important is whatever you feeling is whatever you feeling and accept the, stages or the phases of disappointment, anxiety, whatever desperation, you know, whatever it is that that's going on for you at an emotional level, just allow it. My word is just allow it to be. In our latest blog, on the Imagination website, we talk about the Seven States. Or human reactive responses that people are going through right now. So whatever response it is that you're going through right now, you know, is, completely normal. And it's a transition. Someone else I was talking to is saying, you know, we were transitioning from an old world to a new world. So you, it is important to spend some time in the wilderness, and it's not very comfortable and it's not a happy place. But if we don't let go of old ways, old ideas and old ways of working and acting, then we can't create the space for the new. So I do agree, with Renata that you know, we are going to see systemic change at a whole lot of levels that we don't know yet.

Renata: At the very micro level as somebody who understands these things and, is preparing. So, so well it seems for this, how are you organising your routine day to day Janet? And how are you planning for the rest of 2020, if there is any plan at all or are you just living it day by day or do you think it's possible for us to develop some sort of, you know, decision making tree? Is that something that you would recommend people to do?

Janet: Good question. So I think the first thing is, is to be willing to be adaptive, you know, is you can't resist what's happening because if you resist, you know more, it will feel worse. So how, you know, take some time to retreat and reflect about, how might you embrace this change, and adapt to it a bit. A bit like the borg on star Trek, I will seven of nine, I will adapt. So take a seven of nine attitude and look at ways how you can adapt and be resourceful. I think when I was talking to my husband about this, you know, we are both incredibly resourceful. So really look at what resources you do have to deal with this. And from every great adversity is the state of opportunity. So I think, you know, those three points are really important. So what I do, and I'm really, I am so disciplined and a lot of people think entrepreneurs aren't disciplined. But let me tell you, successful entrepreneurs are really just self-disciplined. I have really good self-mastery.

Renata: Yes agree 100%.

Janet: So that's, if you're going to work from home, you have to have really good discipline. So, you know, my day starts with, actually not so much these days, but it used to start with a cold shower to wake up probably. These days, I lean to a hot one. And then what I do is I actually meditate for 35 to 40 minutes every morning and the meditation calms my autonomic nervous system and my neurology. So, and sometimes it's a deep meditation and sometimes it's just my to do list. So whatever

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happens is whatever happens. And then I go for a dog walk to 30 to 40 minutes. And I don't use the headset. I'm usually the only person walking around where I live in beautiful Bayside, Melbourne without a headset. And I just use that time to be present to nature, to the antics of my two, really funny small dogs and just, tune in and then I have breakfast. And I actually go out every morning, not at the moment, for coffee with my husband so that I maintain a personal connection that is away from my work.

Renata: Yes, yes.

Janet: Any normal times, you know, I do, I go to class two or three mornings a week and, I do yoga on Sundays and all of those things. So I think, you know, by then it's probably 10 o'clock by the time I start work. But what happens is that, my work is very productive and I have, you know, how do you stay on track? Is that, I've had a personal mission for many, many years around enabling people to be the best they can be so that they can adapt and grow and innovate through disruption. So I don't do anything anymore that doesn't contribute to the achievement of that personal purpose or personal passionate purpose. So, you know, the whole thing about working from home is to sustain your focus on what's really important to you, you know, sort of cognitively, emotionally, and also in intuitively.

Janet: So, and then of course, there's the daily, sounds so obvious that there's the daily to do list. And when you get through it is to give yourself some congratulations, you know, some acknowledgement that you got through what it was that you needed to do. And as long as you're passionately purposeful, like I'm finally, it's March and I'm only just doing my strategy now, but I'm only doing it in streams. Because if you're a start-up entrepreneur, what holds you is that passionate purpose. And what you're constantly doing is adjusting your strategy to deliver whatever minimal viable product you're delivering. So you can't set a strategy or a plan in cement, but if you know your purposeful outcome, then you can sort of adjust and iterate and pivot to get there. So I finished, or tonight I won't finish till nine o'clock, because I've got evening sessions. But I just try to balance it out so that I don't fall into my workaholic tendencies.

Renata: Yes. And it's easy to do from home as well to just keep going. So you have to have that, discipline to stop, right?

Janet: Yes. To start and to stop. And you know, we have a hungry cat that comes in at five o'clock in the afternoons for a cuddle and to remind you to give him dinner. So, you know, connecting with the pets and with your kids and with your partners. Also really important because everybody's, everybody's reacting differently to what's going on.

Renata: True, true. And, the routine that you just, described as one that can be adapted to people's, you know, rhythms and, and preferences and you know, if they're working from home or if they're job seekers, like many of my, audience is in between jobs

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and you know, trying to find their next gig there. It's the same, it's the same kind of concept, right? It's you just change it to fit your, sector or your industry or the type of work that you do and also take breaks I think, you know, Andre and I are thinking about taking a 10 day break as well Janet, I don't know about you guys, but we are very keen to unplug, completely. Go to a friend's farm and just unplug. Absolutely. For 10 days. We've never done this, but why not now?

Janet: I think that's a really great point is to unplug. So what we did last year, I'm not sure what we're going to do this year is we unplugged by packing our car, our two dogs. And we drove from Melbourne along the coast all the way up to the sunshine coast in Queensland and spent a week, at a place called Peregian beach. And that was so great, as an opportunity to unplug. This year we had planned, we had planned a trip to go to do the same kind of road trip, but to South Australia.

Renata: Yeah, we were going to go to WA on a road trip, but no more. We might just have to do, you know, just stay a staycation as they say.

Janet: But I think your point Renata on unplugging is really key. So, you know, I am plugged through a few other modalities. One is I like, detective novels.

Renata: Oh, okay.

Janet: So I'm a real fan of, I'm a real fan of, Daniel Silver's novels cause he has, he has a famous hero, I think about 15 books in a really good fun to read. I unplug on Netflix. I'm a real Poldark fan. I love British series, I think they're amazing. I unplug by going down to the beach, with the two dogs being by the sea. But I think whatever works for you, I think it's really important is to have the unplugging because it does relax your autonomic nervous system and you will be less anxious.

Renata: Yes. It's good to have that scientific explanation. It's not just, it's not just a good thing to do. It's really necessary for your body and your brain to rest, isn't it?

Janet: Yes.

Renata: Absolutely. Janet, I think we've gone over time here. It's been so wonderful to talk to you. Are there any last sort of words of wisdom that you would like to say before we finish off this chat today?

Janet: I really think that the only thing I want to say is just really, look for your tribe and look to people you can collaborate with, and create collaborative ventures. You know, I just think like Renata and I are collaborating now, you know, you don't have to do this on your own. And we are, shifting hopefully into a new era of global collaboration. I think the virus is forcing that. So how you can play that out at an individual level is going to really, help you create the ripple that's needed within your circle of influence. You know, the ripple in the pond that will help contribute to

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making the world a fairer, more equitable, inclusive place, through collaboration.
And that's it from me.

Renata: Thank you for joining Janet and I. I hope you enjoyed this bonus episode and that you have signed up to be a member of my community. There is a link for it on the episode show notes, you can go to my website and find it, and you can go to my Facebook page and find it. I'm getting ready for us to do a lot together over the course of the next few months. You will find a link to join everywhere.
Be safe and all the best for now. Bye.