



Falling off the Ladder – Season 4 – Episode 5 - Helen Hill – The WorkJoy Jam

Beth Stallwood: Hello, and welcome to the WORKJoy Jam podcast. I'm your host, Beth Stallwood, and in this episode, I am joined by the wonderful Helen Hill of UnlikelyGenius, and also of the new book, Falling Off The Ladder. Helen has an incredibly tough story actually, one of work gloom at the worst end of it, and she talks to me about how she managed to transition from being in that place to being a thriving, freelance, independent designer, content designer, author, and how that journey can really be challenging, but also helping people find their joy. So, amazing story, one that is difficult actually in places, and I'm really grateful to Helen for being really open and honest about some of the tough stuff, rather than just seeing the outcomes and the great things. That's a real theme of her book is how to transition, so I really liked talking to Helen, such an interesting conversation. I hope you enjoy it too. Welcome to the WORKjoy Jam. I'm very excited to welcome my guest, Helen Hill, to the podcast this week. I am really keen to have this conversation, but before I introduce Helen, I'm going to get Helen to introduce herself, because you know way more about you than I do, and we would love to hear a bit about you, Helen, your background, your story, and kind of, how you got to where you are today, so over to you.

Helen Hill: Yes, I will. Thank you for having me on. Yes, it probably is wise I introduce myself because I struggle to explain my journey, never mind other people, and I regularly get people going, 'What is it you do?' Yes, so I worked as a graphic designer. That was what I was trained in from university, graphic design and advertising, and I took a very squiggly career from that point. I went into lecturing graphic design, and then as a teaching assistant in a primary, and then I went to the other end, and did secondary. Where it was, like, literacy intervention and developing e-learning in the school with iPads that didn't really work very well. From there, I ended up getting asked if I would consider a job in an e-learning company as a designer. So, while we were there, I realised-, well, we realised that I was good at the writing and I understood learning and things, so I ended up doing the full end-to-end process of the writing, the design, and then the book-build, and the coding, and all that side of things. During all this time, I didn't have a great experience working for others, partly I think I'm just not the personality for it, but also I was diagnosed with two chronic health conditions, and was then discriminated against. There was very little understanding of it because it was one of these invisible illnesses, so my mental health took a massive slide. I ended up with anxiety, depression, having panic attacks daily in the toilets and getting told I was unprofessional for it. So, eventually handed in my notice and turned what was my little side business, just doing a few logos here and there, into UnlikelyGenius, which is not full-time self-employment for me.

So, I've been doing that for just over three years, since September 2018, and to be honest, my feet hit the ground running and I haven't stopped since. So, yes, it's been a real journey, but in the space of just, sort of, well, less than two years, I had totally turned my life around from, like I say, these health conditions and my mental health being absolutely rock bottom, to thriving in my own business, getting really visible, getting lots of work in. I've even now put a book together about this journey, to help others do the same, so I've just released that this year which was, like, a lifetime ambition for me, to have a book.

Beth Stallwood: Amazing. I mean, it's a lot in three minutes that was. There was a lot to go through but there's some bits I'm going to pick out and talk about, because what a career journey. I think it's really interesting hearing, you know, when people come on the podcast, their career journeys because so many people think that careers are linear and it's like, you go from this to this, to this, but you know, going from graphic design to teaching, to e-learning, to now running your own business, and being employed and then not employed. It's such a fascinating journey that actually a lot of people have these squiggly interesting careers, because different things happen over time. So, what I'd be really interested in, if I can pick out a few and then we'll move on from it, because I want to talk about the book and I want to talk about all the other stuff as well, is how do you go from, like, graphic design to teaching? That's an interesting move, isn't it? It's not necessarily the standard path.

Helen Hill: Yes, I think right from the off, I've felt really odd in that industry. I wasn't one of these arrogant types that was all about, you know, look at me and stuff, and I felt really out of place. So, I just ended up in, like, a little job in a printers, and I just never quite felt right, so when someone approached me about doing a PGCE, which I became a lecturer in graphic design, so I, kind of, saw that as still in the industry a bit but taking a bit of a sideways step. I loved my first couple of years in that, but then went to a college which was not so great, very cliquy. I was definitely the outcast there, and I was there when I got diagnosed with the MS, and that was where a lot of the problems started, because the initial reaction was, 'Well, you can't teach anymore then.' It was a really ignorant response, you know, so yes, it was a bit of a-, I think I was trying to see it as a bit of an escape route, and my mum warned me because my mum had been a teacher all of her life, you know. I should have listened to her. It was not going to be the fix.

Beth Stallwood: How many things in our lives do we think, 'I probably should have listened to my parents on that one'?

Helen Hill: Yes, definitely.

Beth Stallwood: You only ever see it in reverse thought, not going forwards, do you?

Helen Hill: No, definitely not. No. Yes, so they all seem to make sense, and I think the thing is that I've always just kept myself open to opportunities and got very excited about things that have come up, but then, yes, it's not necessarily worked out. It's not fixed what were the underlying problems, so yes, I ended up where I am, which to be fair, it brought all of those random skills together. It was really odd how, you know, I'd been a designer, I'd been a writer, I'd worked in developing technology and literacy, and all of these things, and then suddenly it was like, yes, they do fit together in a way that I never imagined.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, and that's interesting, isn't it, as well, actually pulling all of the pieces of the jigsaw together and suddenly you go, 'Oh, actually this could be something.' It's not-, I always think, you don't have to look at it as separate things. They are part of the same. You just haven't, kind of, worked out the connections yet.

Helen Hill: Yes, the thing that's worked really well for me and why I got so much work is because I do the massive mixture of skills, because most people will do the writing or the build, or the design. Once a customer realised that they can have one person to do it all instead of three freelancers, you know, that's a win-win, isn't it? It speeds up the process and all the rest of it, so it's worked really well for me.

Beth Stallwood: Brilliant, I'm so glad to hear that you've got into the driving zone, because you know, I talk about work joy but the opposite of work joy, I call work gloom. It sounds like you were in a terrible position with discrimination and with not feeling like you're welcomed or valued, or fitting in. I always think there are def levels of work gloom. There's, like, work gloom which is, 'I'm a bit miserable today but I'll snap out of it when something good happens, because actually this is just real life.' You know, there's always some good and some bad in everything. There's never complete joy. It just isn't possible, yet what you're talking about there is the more acute and chronic thing of, actually, this workplace is not for me. It's not valuing me. It doesn't understand me. It's not working for me. I always talk about the fact that if you're in that zone, you've got to do something about that, because as you've experienced there horribly, and I'm so sorry you had to go through this, like, the impact on your health and mental health is awful.

Helen Hill: Yes, it's phenomenal. I mean, when I look back to three years ago, well, three and a bit years ago, and think how I had to-, well, to start off with, I'd sit on the edge of the bed crying every morning because I didn't want to go in. Then, I had an hour's drive where I was falling asleep at the wheel, I was that exhausted from dealing with it all. I'd get to work and it would take me 20 minutes to get myself through that door because I knew I was going to be facing, whatever battle it was that would be thrown at me that day, whatever snarky comment, you know, and yes, it did become-, it was not a way to live. It made my health worse which meant I was off more which then I was being dragged into meetings because I was on this Bradford Factor, even though I should not have been because I had a disability. Yes, it's a massive cycle. The incredible thing has been that at that point, I must have had a hospital appointment every week, either because of my back, because of the MS, because of anxiety, (TC 00:10:00) whatever it was. That was such a drain, and I always made the time up, more than in fact, but now, three years on, I go to the hospital once every six to twelve months, and that's the difference it has made of being able to work at home, control my work hours and my work day, and you know, just have that flexibility to look after myself. I don't do that very well now, but you know, self-care goes out of the window sometimes, but yes, I mean, what a change that is to go from weekly hospital visits to every six months, if that.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, and that just shows really, doesn't it, the impact that it can have in both directions, so being in a workplace that is not good for you, versus being-, well, even if you were in a workplace that was good for you, or working for yourself, I don't think it-, I mean, obviously the working for yourself works for you. For other people, getting out of that situation and moving into a workplace that has respect for you, that understands things like disability, that is able to be inclusive in that way. I think it's a really-, I'm going to dive into this one for a little bit and then we're going to head off into some other bits, but this question about the inclusion of people with disabilities at work is a big one, and it's a challenging one. Unfortunately, it's one that organisations often get wrong, as in your case.

Helen Hill: Yes, and I think the problem is now that, like, I don't think I will ever go back because I've seen that in more than one workplace as well. So, I mean, teaching was very unforgiving anyway because obviously, if you're taking an appointment out in the middle of the day, that's your lesson time and they have a real issue with that, so I was told I couldn't take appointments during term. I had to do it during half-term and things like that, and that doesn't allow you the flexibility. I couldn't just make sure that I got an appointment in that week's half-term, you know. That wasn't how it worked. When you've waited eighteen months for an appointment, you don't want to put it back another eight weeks either. So, yes, I mean, I think the workplace is generally, there's a lot of room to be made now and a lot of progress that needs to be made for people with any kind of health condition, and not just health, just for people that have families. You know, you see all of

these women that have to quite their jobs and go and freelance, because they can't have the flexibility for picking their kids up and things like that. I do think that's one good thing that's come out of the pandemic, that there's more flexibility now and more realisation that people can work from home and things, but yes. My bugbear is the companies that say they support, you know, diversity, disability, inclusion, all of these things, but it's lip service, and they are absolutely not.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, it's not the same as, like, the nice thing on the website, the experience within the organisation.

Helen Hill: No.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, so obviously, in a terrible place work-wise, health-wise, emotion-wise. I just sit here and, like, want to give the person sitting on the edge of the bed a big hug and say, 'Right, let's sort this out.' Obviously, you found a way through it and I know it's a big theme of yours with the book, as to how you can, kind of, get yourself through these challenging situations. Can we dive in here for a little bit? Can you talk to me about-, because of people have hit, like, I call it rock bottom gloom, this is the, 'I know I cannot stay here. It is not good for me. It's not good for my health,' and we are just getting into this cycle of gloom. How did you at that place, when you are not feeling well, when you're struggling so much, how did you get yourself out of it and into this positive, wonderful world you are in now?

Helen Hill: Yes, it was a funny one because it wasn't planned, and people had said to me for a long time, 'Why don't you work for yourself?' But, like I say, my business was just this little thing that was earning me the odd £50 on the side, and I thought, well, 'I can't make a living out of that.' But it got to the point where I basically had a meltdown in the office and got myself signed off sick for a couple of weeks. While I was off, I got a letter from the company that I really don't think I should have got. They should have been leaving me along while I was off sick, and it was the last straw for me, so I just handed my notice in with no idea where I was going, what I was going to do. Although I was at rock bottom, as soon as I handed that notice in, I sat on the settee in the kitchen just in tears of relief that I was just out of that place, and, you know, it was a real journey. I luckily was contacted two days later about a contracting role and I'd never even thought of doing that. You know, I'd done bits of freelance but I'd never thought of doing a big contract role, and I didn't really know anything about it. So, this guy talked me through the whole process, and anyway I got the job on the spot. So then, you know, I had the rest of my sick leave as my notice period, and then literally as that was up, started on this contract the next day. It was a really good stepping stone. It was difficult because I was in a room with people that were getting paid up to £1,000 a day who were the experts in their field. They were confident men.

It was a very male-dominated environment. I came in feeling rock bottom, really wobbly, feeling like an absolute imposter, got on this great rate in a contract that I never imagined myself doing, and it was a bit of a whirlwind, but because it was one where I had to go into the premises but I worked for myself, it was that good stepping stone to then working for myself full-time at home. I mean, don't get me wrong, I had my difficulties there. There was one person in particular that seemed to sense my vulnerability and probe quite a lot when I was not strong enough to deal with that. She could tell something was wrong and would ask me very personal questions and things. You know, the walls would come down and I would get upset, so after ten months, I left there, went on holiday to Norway and it just happened that a recruiter I was connected to put out a call saying, 'Is anyone free for a contract starting in two weeks?' I put my hand up. I had an interview the next day, while on the Norwegian fjords with Elton John playing a concert at the castle in the background.

Beth Stallwood: You can't make this stuff up.

Helen Hill: I know, and my fella is sat on the balcony with a beer, pretending he wasn't listening into this interview, and yes, I got offered the job on the spot while I was in Norway, so I came back and started the next day. So, it was all very, like, wham bam bam, but at the same time, I had worked on my visibility leading up to that because I was obviously in a bad place and knew I wanted out, didn't know what I was going to do but I had started, you know, to really trying to get my visibility up on LinkedIn and connect to people, and think about what I could do, connect to recruits. So, it just managed to align, and you know, I had a portfolio ready and all of that kind of thing, so although I wasn't planned in what I was going to do, a lot of the legwork was in place for me to just go, 'I'm off, I'm out of here.' Yes.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, so you had some of the foundations ready to happen. It's really interesting, because a lot of people think that when people start their own businesses, it's been in the plans for years and you've been secretly, every weekend, working on it, and sometimes it happens almost, as you're saying, it wasn't completely accidental. You, kind of, had the thoughts, but it happened because of the situation, and the situation actually has led you to where you are today with everything. The question I had in my mind as you were talking through this is, where you are, and I often work with people when I'm coaching them around this, is when you have been in a situation like you were in where there was a horrible working environment, where there was discrimination, where things happened that should not have happened. Often people struggle with a real lack of confidence after that, and really struggle with actually understanding your value. I'd love to explore with you, how did you build yourself back up through the, kind of, following years to be able to, you know, as you sit here today, really confident in your business, you know what you're doing, you know you're adding value, from a place of being under the, kind of, I'm not feeling confident about it?

Helen Hill: Yes, it was something that-, I think a lot of it was, sort of, almost subconscious that I worked on because I really love all the stuff to do with the mind and mindfulness, and neural pathways, and things like that, so I'm really intrigued in that. I'd done quite a bit on mindfulness in the past, and I'd had CBT sessions where it had really highlighted to me that I was a very black and white thinker, and a catastrophiser. That had been in the past, but it suddenly dawned on me that it was me, but I would say one of the biggest things for me was being allowed to be myself. So, in this work environment, I'd been told, 'You will never succeed being you and being as you are, and being yourself.' You know, that's just a sloth and bunny loving plonker you runs around, and a clumsy sod, and all these things that, it just wasn't appreciated. It was not robotic enough and it was not corporate enough. When I went solo, a huge dawning realisation was that I could now be myself, and the pressure that took off me of not having to put this act on, and I'd been told to get myself in the mindset of someone that was, like, the company (TC 00:20:00) darling, and I had to do that everyday and try and get in. It was like acting for eight hours a day.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, and that's just exhausting at the very least. I mean, it's a horrible thing to have to do, but even just the physical exhaustion of having to pretend all the time is awful.

Helen Hill: Yes, and second guess very move, and every conversation you have, and every sentence you say. That's not a way to live, and like I say, that was a huge thing for me and it is something I talk about a lot in the book, but I think I just really had to take that time while I was in that first contract to really look at what had happened, and really sit with it, and think why had that happened. Was it just my personality? Am I a bad person? Am I not? And talk to other people, and I started to realise that a lot of people had similar experiences,

so it wasn't just me, and you know, there were other people in the company having the same experiences at the time and I did know that. This is why I've structured the book in the way I have, that the first section is all about dealing with where you were and the emotions that came with it, and what you were told and led to believe about the corporate world. How you had to behave, and who you had to be, because we're told to sit at a desk 9:00 to 5:00 and eat your lunch at this time, and do this, and do that, and dress this way and that. That's not a good environment for me. I think I got to the point where I was standing up for myself quite a lot which was definitely not appreciated, and I needed the flexibility but they wouldn't give it me. I think you've got to really sit and look at the problem, and realise that it's not you. Sometimes, there's just a misalignment with that world and you. It doesn't mean you're broken and that was a huge point for me of realising, actually, there is a place for me.

That just wasn't it. You know, once I'd started to realise that I could start to look at my thinking patterns and dealing with the emotions, and start looking at my triggers, start recognising those early signs that I was getting in a bit of a hole again. You know, all of those things that come, like I say, with things like therapy, and I was having therapy at the time as well, so that helped. Yes, it's a long journey, and people say to me now, like, 'Oh, you're everywhere and you're doing so well,' and it's like, yes, but it's been a heck of a journey. It's not just these three years. It's been the twelve, fourteen years in employment before that as well.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, and that is a really interesting point. I'm going to go into the book again in a minute, because I'm not finished, but I think yes, that is an interesting point is that people see the outcome of your journey, not the journey and the struggle. So, what they're seeing is in the last three years, that you've build a business, you've written a book, you're doing amazing things, you're working with great clients. You've, kind of, found your niche. You've found your tribe. You're in a great place. They haven't seen the fifteen years of struggle before that and the stuff that went wrong, and they didn't see you sat on the edge of your bed crying about it, and they didn't see you, like, trying to go into work and really finding it hard. They don't see that, and that's one of the reasons also for, like, the podcast that we do here is, actually there's real life behind these things and nothing happens in an easy way. You have, like, worked really blooming hard at it, through some really, really challenging situations, so I think it's worth us all, every time we see people, and it's the, kind of, Instagram version of life, isn't it? We see the nice, the shiny, the filtered version of reality, and we think that's people full reality, and that is just-

Helen Hill: 1%, if that. It's 1% of their life, yes.

Beth Stallwood: If that, you know, it's 1% and it's only the good bits, and it's very filtered, and it's not the real thing of what happened. So, we're all for sharing stories about the real life stuff and the things that don't bring us joy, in that understanding that by actually sharing some of these things, we might help, right. Today, say Helen, you sharing your story about going through this and having a disability and a health condition, and not being supported, might help somebody who listens to this, who's in a similar situation speak up or do something about it sooner. It might help a leader who's got someone on their team to be more flexible, so that's the reason, is to help people to find it, so I totally love that you're sharing it. It's amazing that you are, it's amazing that you are. It also must be quite hard to share some of this stuff, right?

Helen Hill: Yes, I think particularly at first, it was very difficult. I kind of felt it would come back at me or that people would just think I was winging, because that was what I was told for a while, so you believe this

stuff. But I just find the more I shared in the communities where I felt safe to talk about it, the reaction was that everyone has something going on, like you say. People kept saying, 'I'm really glad you've said this, because I've experienced this, this and this.' Or, 'I'm struggling with this.' People start opening up to you and I really don't agree with this whole robotic front that corporate world insists you put on and that people really struggle to shake off. This was part of my reason for writing the book, that I can still see so many freelancers struggling with that. That they thought they had to be at their desk nine to five, they had to be professional at all times. As in, sat in a suit and, I don't know. All the little things that get expected and putting your makeup on. I've sat here literally in two weeks, because I've not been very well, in my sloth pyjamas, with just a t-shirt and jumper on. I've not been ashamed to say to my customers, I'm here but I'm in my sloth pyjamas. And they've been like, 'Full credit to you, that's fine.'

Beth Stallwood: They're probably like, 'Oh, I really wish I was in my sloth pyjamas.'

Helen Hill: Yes, exactly.

Beth Stallwood: I always say to people on the podcast, we're not doing it on video so that you can come with no make up and in your pyjamas if you really want to. I'm very, very happy for that to be the case. Are you happy for me to dive in a little bit more to the book? So, first of all, we've had this conversation, we haven't even told anyone what the books called. So, tell us a bit about the book.

Helen Hill: So, it's called *Falling Off the Ladder*, and it's about helping people move from being employed by others or the corporate world to now work for themselves and to thrive and make that mind set shift. I keep nearly swearing every time I say that. Make that shift to, like I've just been saying, from the expectations of working for others and what we're told about how work should look and how it should be and how you should behave. To how you can actually, like I say, embrace yourself and be you and put it out there and actually the response to it is phenomenal. So, it's to help people go on that journey, written from my experience. I've created a framework of how I did it, but there's also nine other peoples' stories in the book as well. Their full stories are on the website that's associated with the book. Because it was really important to get different perspectives, not just mine in there. There are similar themes to us all, even though we all had vastly different problems. From eating disorders to post natal depression, all different manner of things.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, and I love the title, because I think it's brilliant. It's so appropriate for what you're talking about. And there are people I know, who listen to the podcast because I love hearing the stories of what people are telling me, who are either on that journey towards becoming self employed, to doing freelancing, because that's where they've found where their joy is. It's a difficult transition and I've done it myself. I was employed and I am no longer employed, and I think I am probably now completely unemployable.

Helen Hill: Yes, me too.

Beth Stallwood: I delight in that. It's like, 'No, you definitely wouldn't want me to work for you.' It is an interesting transition because I think a lot of people end up doing when they end up doing, ten, fifteen, twenty years, in either the corporate world or being employed by the people, or whichever world that it is that you've been working in. Is it almost, there's kind of like an institutionalisation thing, isn't there?

Helen Hill: Yes.

Beth Stallwood: Where you do become a little bit like, 'As long as I'm at my desk by this time, everything will be fine. I take my lunch then and this is what I do every day and there's a very much, kind of a routine to work, and I know it took me, I reckon it took me two years, after becoming self employed to realise that-,

Helen Hill: Me too, yes.

Beth Stallwood: I don't have to do it like that anymore. You know when you have the realisation, you're like, 'Why has it taken me so long?' The reason now clearly is I hadn't read your book.

Helen Hill: Well, I don't know if it's that, yes. But it wasn't around then.

Beth Stallwood: It wasn't.

Helen Hill: I'll let you off. I was the same and I think even when you have that realisation, there's still those moments when you think you should be. To be honest, some clients, you have to manage their expectations. Like, I've got one at the moment that expects me to be available nine until six for them, even though they took me on on full time work and are actually only giving me part time, and paying me for part time, but they still expect me to be available at all these times that they're in the office. I'm like, 'It doesn't work that way, you're hiring a freelancer.' If you want that, you need to hire a member of staff.'

Beth Stallwood: Yes, yes, for sure.

Helen Hill: I think as long as you explain to your customers the benefit for them of you working at the times that are good for you, then you can build a bit of an understanding. I will work in the morning, I tend to trail off, sometimes I will go to the gym in the late afternoon. Then I will work in the evening, because I get a sudden flurry again at six o'clock, maybe even nine o'clock at night. And I'm a total insomniac, so sometimes I'll be working at two or three in the morning. But that works for me and if they make me sit at a desk from nine until five, they're not going to get much productivity out of me. So, you know, you've got to explain that (TC 00:30:00) benefit to them, that this is why you work freelance and if they're hiring a freelancer, they've got to be flexible with you as you are with them.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, and it's about that setting boundaries and expectations isn't it? Actually, I suppose one of the big differences here is when you're a freelancer, it's a, 'These are my terms, this is what I'm offering you.' And if that's not what you need then, cool, then maybe I'm not the right person for you. So, yes, I totally, totally get that.

Helen Hill: I think you've got to get that first couple of years under your belt until you're comfortable saying no, haven't you? I've only started saying no in the last year, because otherwise-, at first you take on anything and everything, because you think, 'Oh.' And then a pandemic hits and then you take on anything and everything again. Yes, but I'm now at the point where I'm getting fussy and I'm going to niche next year, because I've realised that certain topics just don't interest me. I'm going to focus on the ones that do.

Beth Stallwood: To be able to funnel it down to the things that really, really work for you.

Helen Hill: Yes.

Beth Stallwood: I just want to come back to one of the points you make about this thing about it doesn't mean you're broken because the work you take wasn't right for you. I circled that twelve times and highlighted it when you were saying it. Because I think a lot of people when they've been through a challenging situation at work, feel that it is their fault and it is because they're broken. Actually, what you've discovered through your-, I hate saying again, the journey you've been on. In the adventure you've been on, it sounds a bit more exciting, is that it's not you that's broken, it's that you're in the wrong place. When you can be yourself and are valued for being yourself and I always say, there is a little bit of being yourself but with a filter, like a professional filter applied. Because people are like, 'No, you should bring your full self to work.' I'm like, 'Hmm, I'm not sure you want some of the bits, the personal life Beth bits in the workplace.' I'm not sure you want them, I'm not sure I want to bring them. I think there's some stuff I want to leave at home, that's just for home place and different people. So, I do think there's a professional filter, but that's very different from having to change who you are and how you are. There's something for me about helping workplaces to value that individuality. I agree with you, I think maybe the pandemic will help us, maybe.

Long-term, the big question, will it help with more flexible working? Will it help with understanding that different people work differently. I mean, the whole idea of a nine to five, is so archaic anyway. It's not based on any kind of real world, real life anymore.

Helen Hill: As is the thing of staying in a career for life, that's not a thing anymore, that was our parents generation. There are so many more jobs available now and opportunities to retrain. A job for life is not the case anymore and I think I was in that mindset for a while as well, that because I've done something at university, I have to stay in it.

Beth Stallwood: Yes.

Helen Hill: Actually, no, I really don't. I mean, I've got three degrees now and I'm still going back to do a slight deviation next year now, of doing another qualification. I only signed up for it last night.

Beth Stallwood: Hello, because I'm like a total nerd, I love a bit of learning and what have you signed up for? Are you allowed to say, or is it secret squirrel?

Helen Hill: Well, I can, I've been starting to tell people, so I've signed up for a coaching qualification to start in February. Because obviously it aligns with the stuff that I've been writing about for the book and I've been helping other people transition. So, I want to formalise and actually make sure I've got the qualification and the skills to help people do it.

Beth Stallwood: Amazing, well, you know that I have trained as a coach, so if you ever need any help with any of your assignments and things you're doing, just give me a shout.

Helen Hill: Thank you.

Beth Stallwood: Coaching is a great, great, great thing to be able to do. Brilliant. How exciting. So, the book, you've talked about what it is, who it's for, we've talked a little bit about the fact that it has got some other people's perspectives on it. I'm loving this because we all have our own adventure that we've been on, which is great. But when you then link it to other people's, tell me a little bit about that

experience of gathering those stories of others and how that really influenced the models and things that you created.

Helen Hill: Yes, it was-, I went backwards and forwards with how to include them in the book, I really did. Because initially I had them all as separate little features throughout and then I thought, 'No, I actually want to embed them into the themes of the book and pull out-', because each of the stories had a different theme in it and different highs and lows, and one person, it would be that they really needed to expand their boundaries. Another one it was to do with the general environment and dealing, like I say, with things like eating disorders and stuff. So, I went through their stories and really pulled out the bits that related to the chapters of the book, to sort of explain and just show that, you know, it's not just you. If you are experiencing this issue or you need to work on this topic, all of us had had to as well. But I mean, I was absolutely thrilled that the people that are involved in the book, and also all the interviews I've been doing on the website, Fallingofftheladder.com. I've got feature leapers on there, they're all people that are just in my community that I've just said, 'Do you want to be involved?' And every single person has said, 'Yes. Yes, I want to share my story. Yes, I want to help others.' That's the nature of the freelance community, they're amazing.

Yes, it has been really humbling to be honest. All those people that have been involved, all the ones that got involved in the launch day, they all said, 'Yes,' outright as well. It has been a phenomenal year, because all these people have also been there for me in what has been a very difficult year. I lost my dad and my grandma earlier this year and it was a really difficult time, but it was the freelancers in my network that sent me cards and sent me little gifts and cake. A massive box of cake and things like that that kept me and my mum going for months. That's the world you're entering, where actually you'd think these people are your competition and they're not. They are colleagues, they're friends and I love that those people who featured in the book, they were already people I connected with, but now I've got a whole different level of connection with them.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, and in WORKJoy we talk about it as finding your squad and whether that's through a freelance community, through a network, through people that you work with. Family, friends, etc, is having that squad and it was-, I have to say when I went freelance and imagine you're probably the same and a lot of people are. One of the things I really worried about was being lonely and I am a proper hardcore people person extrovert. And the idea of sitting on my own for my entire working day was, it was the one thing I was petrified about. I was like, 'I don't know if this is going to work.' I, like you, found such amazing people within the community of people that I work with. So, trainers and facilitators and coaches, people who are development people, who although we do very similar things, we're not in competition of each other, we're in support of each other. That has been one of the best things. It's almost like, 'Why did I worry about this?' But I was genuinely worried about it.

Helen Hill: I know people who've been freelancing for ten years who are not part of these communities. Like, my book designer was like, 'What are these communities you mention?' And she has now joined them and she's like, 'I didn't even know these existed.' I think it takes-, some of us take it for granted once we're in them and we find them early on. But there are people out there feeling lonely that haven't discovered these communities. It's our job, I think, to keep spreading the word about them and get more people in and help others that are feeling lonely. But it's like the whole thing we were talking about before, of making sure you share both sides of the story, isn't it? If people are feeling lonely, then invite them in. I mean, I was the same in that I thought I would go mental working from home. I seriously thought, in fact my fella's first response was, 'Oh gosh, this isn't going to be good.' Because I'd always got really bad cabin fever, I couldn't be in the house for more than 24 hours. But what we'd realised is that was the old house and we moved this new one a

year before I went solo. Actually, this house is much bigger, it means I've got an office, in the old house I would've had to have worked in the kitchen or the front room or something. This house gives me the space to at least spread out. I have my work a little bit separate although I'm not very good at that still. But yes, the old house used to give me terrible cabin fever, if by the end of the weekend we hadn't been out anywhere, I'd be rocking in the corner and I'd make him take me out.

Beth Stallwood: That's so funny, because I had exactly the same thing and even, you know, lockdown pandemic side of things, most of my work was in people's offices. So, I'd go out and be with them, so I didn't freelance from home. I went out and was with them. Then obviously lockdown happened and I was doing everything from home and I was like, 'This is going-,' At the end of a few weeks of working from home, my other half turned around to me and he went, 'I'm quite impressed with you actually.' I was like, 'I'm actually doing alright, because I'm still connecting with people.' We had moved out of London and into the countryside, just before lockdown and I think being able to get outside and do things. Like, I didn't feel I needed it as much and because I had the communities already developed. It just helps, have people around you I think is the big message, isn't it? Find your squad, find the people who you can work with, support, value you, you value them. It's an amazing, amazing thing to have. I am going to move us on, because we've been chatting for ages. Honestly, we can talk for another four or five hours, I think.

Helen Hill: We could, we could.

Beth Stallwood: I would love it, I'm not sure anyone would want to listen for another four or five hours of this, so we've got to keep them (TC 00:40:00) in mind while we're on here. Are you okay if we move onto some quick fire questions?

Helen Hill: Yes, of course, yes.

Beth Stallwood: Fab, I'm going to add an extra one in to start with and I know it's a bit cheeky because I haven't asked you to think about this one. But I am writing the WORKJoy book at the moment and I'm going to add the question in which is, what is your top tip for writing a book?

Helen Hill: I keep changing my mind every time someone asks me this.

Beth Stallwood: That's alright, I don't mind.

Helen Hill: I would say, get an editor and beta readers involved early on, because they really helped me frame what the book should be. And see the things that I couldn't see.

Beth Stallwood: Great, I love that. I might be calling you to be one of my beta readers.

Helen Hill: Yes, for sure, do it, do it, I love reading.

Beth Stallwood: Excellent, you can be in my squad, you can be my beta reader, I love it.

Helen Hill: Definitely.

Beth Stallwood: Okay, onto the proper questions versus me asking you favours at a time where you kind of have to say, yes, because you're on the podcast.

Falling off the Ladder – Season 4 – Episode 5 - Helen Hill – The WorkJoy Jam

Helen Hill: No, any excuse.

Beth Stallwood: What is always guaranteed to bring you some work joy?

Helen Hill: I think other than being able to go and mither my bunnies at any hour of the day and now I work from home. I think it's when you see the penny drop in someone. So, whatever you're working on with them, whether it is that you're mentoring someone, or even just a client that I'm helping totally reframe their whole training systems and things. It's that moment when a penny drops and you think, 'Oh yeah, this is really good.' And they understand and they can see the benefit of something, I just really like that. I always used to like that with the students I worked with as well.

Beth Stallwood: Yes, that's a very trainer/coach/teacher thing isn't it? It's like, 'Ah, I've helped someone understand something. Yes.'

Helen Hill: Yes.

Beth Stallwood: This is an interesting one, because obviously you've written the book. But what book are you currently reading?

Helen Hill: Well, according to my good reads, I've got about twelve on the go. But one of the main ones at the moment is Copywriting Is, by Andrew Bolton. I'm surrounded by copywriters in my network and to the point where everyone seems to think I am one. Yes, it's really an interesting book for me to absorb a bit more of the writing knowledge.

Beth Stallwood: I haven't heard of it so I'll have to give that one-,

Helen Hill: It's a new one, it was out around the same time as mine, but yes, really good, Andrew Bolton.

Beth Stallwood: What's the best or most useful bit of advice that someone has given you in your life, that you always find yourself coming back to?

Helen Hill: I don't know whether it's advice as such, but people constantly say to me, 'Why don't you work for yourself?' Like I say, I batted it off for so long and even my dad kept saying it for a while. Funnily enough, it was the advice I should've listened to and then I went, 'Yes, actually you're right.'

Beth Stallwood: You were all right, but it just wasn't the right time and now it is.

Helen Hill: Yes.

Beth Stallwood: I love that. Maybe there's something there about, how do we notice what people notice in us? That whole they have seen the potential in it and maybe didn't explain it in the right way to get you excited about it, but people could see that this could be your journey for you. Love it. What is one, and maybe this is something for the book for this, but maybe not. What is your one super practical bit of advice to our listeners that's something that they could go and do now, tomorrow, the next day, that would bring them a bit more work joy and why?

Helen Hill: Well, this is to do with communities, so don't just be in them, don't just loiter, engage in them. Have conversations, make conversations, answer other people's questions, just get yourself active in them. There are too many people that loiter on the edges and then say that they don't get anything from communities, but you've got to be active. Your support network is there once you do that.

Beth Stallwood: Amazing, and I know from the communities that I'm in and obviously the club WORKJoy community that we have, that the more you put into it, the more you'll get out of it. You are not going to get the return on your investment if you just sit on the sidelines. It is a participation game, you've got to get in it.

Helen Hill: Yes, definitely.

Beth Stallwood: Amazing, so Helen, thank you. Where can people find out more about you, your work, your book, everything Helen related?

Helen Hill: So, if you want to know about the book go to Fallingofftheladder.com and there are all the links to my social media and my media account and all sorts on there. You can also buy the book and courses and merchandise and all sorts on there as well. It's the only place-

Beth Stallwood: Love a bit of merch.

Helen Hill: Yes, it's the only place the colour versions of the book are available, and there are only about 30 something left. Yes, get in quick if you want one of those. If you want to know more about the learning content design, head to unlikelygenius.com and again, that has got all my links to Instagram and Twitter and all sorts on there.

Beth Stallwood: Amazing, we will put those links into the show notes and everything on our website and on our socials so that people can link on straight through, buy the book, look at the book, look at all of your amazing work. Helen-

Helen Hill: It's a very pretty book.

Beth Stallwood: It is beautiful, I love it. Thank you so much for being a guest on the WORKJoy Jam. It has been wonderful listening to you and I think a really great story of moving from some really serious work gloom, to finding a world that really works for you and brings you the joy.

Helen Hill: Yes, definitely. Thank you for having me.

Beth Stallwood: Amazing, thank you.

Helen Hill: Thank you.

Beth Stallwood: Well, a huge thank you to Helen Hill for being my guest on this episode of the WORKJoy Jam, for me there are so many lessons and things that we could take away from here, but I wanted to pick out a couple that I'm reflecting on. The first one is, if you are in the position where it has gone beyond the usual work gloom that real life brings, the moments, the things that annoy us, the things that we find frustrating. To where you're actually in a position where you are being discriminated against, or where you're finding it so challenging that it's affecting your health and affecting your

Falling off the Ladder – Season 4 – Episode 5 - Helen Hill – The WorkJoy Jam

mental health, then for me that's a reminder to us all. It's something that's really core in the WORKJoy principles, is that's the time to reach out, to get some help, to consider where you want to be, who you want to be working with. Because that's not good, it's not the right place to be. That's the worst end of work gloom, so I think there's something for us all to help ourselves or if we're seeing other people struggling in this way, as leaders. As people who want to help our friends, or our family or our colleagues. Let's help people move beyond that level of work gloom, it's not cool to be there. We don't want to be the people creating that. We don't want to encourage it. Some of the other points that are just really staying with me are around this idea that feeling that we're the ones who are broken.

That if something has gone wrong in that relationship of work and us. If we're not feeling we can be ourselves, the impact that has on our ability to be great at our jobs is absolutely enormous. So, my thing is always find a place where you are valued for being who you are. I do talk about it in that episode that we all have to have a professional filter at times, but there's a difference between filtering and completely changing who we are to fit a culture mode that isn't right for us. I also think, thanks to Helen, thinking about this, how do we move beyond it, and step beyond it, and listen to other people's stories and the real power of the community. It's one that I know so much-, obviously Helen's community, she's talking about the freelance community. But there are so many different things, professional, personal communities we can get involved in. As Helen says, you want to get involved in them and be in them. It's one of the reasons I set up the Club WORKJoy. Which you can find more about on our website, clubworkjoy.com and it's a community where we have events and networking and conversations, all around the subject of WORKJoy. If you are interested, we love to have new members. It's a great place to be, there are some really great conversation support from the squad and the clubbers involved there. So, thank you all for listening to the WORKJoy Jam.

Do go and have a listen to our other episodes, I hope you all have a great rest of your day, bye.