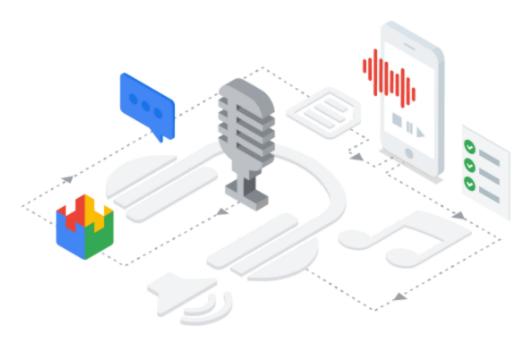# Life of An SRE with Jessica Theodat

MP: Hello, and welcome to episode four of season two of the Google SRE Podcast, or as we affectionately refer to it, the "Prodcast." I'm your host, MP, and here with me for the last time this season is my co-host, Pam.

PAM: Hi, everyone. Thank you for having me again. I'm very excited and sad that this will be my final episode. So, I can't wait, because this will be a good one.

MP: I hope that we get the opportunity to have you back with us in future seasons.

PAM: I hope so, too. I would love to do this again.

MP: Here with us today is an SRE at Google that is neither on a product team or an infrastructure team. So a very unique experience. A senior SRE here at Google. Let's go ahead and let her introduce herself.

JESSICA: Hi, everyone. My name is Jessica. I've been at Google for 10 years now, and an SRE for about five. And in those last five years, I've been the Security and Privacy Tech Lead within

my SRE team for the last three years. So it's been very exciting.

PAM: Well, that's awesome, Jessica. Welcome to the "Prodcast." How did you get your start into Google 10 years ago?

JESSICA: So, my journey began in 2011 when a Google recruiter reached out to me over LinkedIn. Of course, at the time, I didn't believe she was a Google recruiter, because back then, sourcing on LinkedIn wasn't really a thing. So naturally, I assumed that, oh, this is just next generation social engineering, which is basically the art of hacking humans.

And while that all sounds far-fetched and crazy, it isn't really that far-fetched, considering Operation Aurora had actually taken place a few years back. So just a little context. At the time that the Google recruiter reached out, I was actually working on my senior thesis paper, and it was around the subject of social engineering. So this is very relevant, just to give you some context into my mind space.

Anyways, long story short, I made the recruiter jump through quite a bit of identity verification hoops before I bought the idea that this was legit. I apologized to my recruiter. We're still friends today, so it worked out. So, yeah, so that's my journey, that's how I started.

And then my career at Google kicked off as part of the ITRP program, which is basically the Internal Technical Residency Program. And that's a fancy way of saying that we are IT generalists. We get our hands into a little bit of everything. And then further along in our career, we start to specialize in a niche. And my niche just happened to be in the security space.

MP: Yeah, and I just want to take a moment to remind folks from episode two of this season, that the goal of the IT Career Program, formerly known as the IT Residency Program, is to provide equitable, sustainable, and well-supported paths from operations to other in-demand tech plus Google roles.

PAM: That's pretty cool. And that's a great program to be a part of. You spent the first five years not in SRE. How did you come to find SRE?

JESSICA: Oh, another fun story. So I'll give you the short version, as well. So, at my second month as an ITR, I got the opportunity to represent Google at the Grace Hopper Conference. And it was at the booth that I learned what SRE was through introduction. And in that moment, I thought to myself, wow. I'm seriously in the wrong line of work. SRE is where I want to be.

And so from there, I basically spent the next few years of my career transitioning into SRE. And now I'm in SRE, and I've been here for the last five years. And I have to say, that the journey wouldn't have been as smooth without the support of my then manager, my SRE mentors, and my amazing recruiter. So, thank you all again.

PAM: You mentioned amazing mentors. Do you want to share any stories about finding mentors within SRE, or if you've had your own personal experience of being a mentor?

JESSICA: So, as far as mentors, during my first few months of working as SRE, I wasn't actually an SRE yet. So what I did was, I enlisted for a three-month SRE rotation just to kind of get my feet wet and really decide like, is SRE actually for me, right. The idea of SRE and what it stands for was very attractive, but it was nice to be able to like sample that, right.

And I don't think there's too many spaces in the industry where you get to try out a job before you actually commit to it. In preparation, I actually ended up reaching out to a lot of my peers, folks that I worked with. We have a really great community of SREs. We do a lot of social events, so I met people there. We have a lot of Google groups, or like mailing lists, and so I would basically spam the list and say like, hey, I'm getting ready to prep for interviews, who wants to put me through the ringer.

And so, yeah, we took it from there. And in the process of doing all of this, I developed a lot of great SRE mentors. But it also gave me the chance when I went through the process myself, to then pay it forward and also do the same for others.

MP: I'm really curious what at least in your perspective at the time, what drew you to SRE. And I'm curious if that perspective has changed at all over the years.

JESSICA: So, what attracted me to SRE, was the fact that it's the end all, be all, right? In my role as an ITR, you identify problems and you escalate them, and you may end up helping diagnose and troubleshoot them, but you don't actually dig into the root cause, right. It's usually a lot of surfacing of issues.

Whereas the SREs are the people who are responsible for finding root causes. And you can think about it this way. SREs literally have the weight of Google services and infrastructure running on their shoulders, right. We are the people that keep all of the Google services up and running. So when you are doing things like checking to see if your internet connection is OK, is it me, or is it something else, the first thing that people naturally do is, they type in google.com.

And that experience that you're having when you're doing that, the idea that you think Google is so reliable that you can then check your internet status against google.com, that's all empowered by SREs. And so I was very fascinated by that. And I decided that is where I want to be. I want to be the person who gets to the root of issues, but also, I like the idea of knowing that I literally have the power of internet in my hands.

MP: Has that view evolved at all? Or do you feel that that framing has held?

JESSICA: I feel like for the most part, that framing has held. I will say that in some ways, it has evolved, because obviously, the industry evolves. SRE is a set of principles, right. And so as I

think I've gone through my career and have matured a bit, my view on reliability and what it means has changed a bit.

And I also realized that the responsibility doesn't just end with ensuring reliability or building large scale systems. There are other aspects that come into play. And one of those aspects for me, was security. I'm not just building infrastructure, I'm building secure infrastructure. I'm building infrastructure that is secure by default, and not the exception.

I think one of the things that I was guilty of, and I'm sure others will agree, as well, is that a lot of times when we're building products or features or infrastructure, we think of security as an afterthought. Or there's tension between security and DevOps or security and SRE. And that's not the case at all.

When we're building these products or services, one of the things that we want to keep in mind as we're building these things is, how do I make my service or infrastructure or product resilient. And one of the ways of doing that is adding the aspect of security behind it.

PAM: So security is a very big part of your career. You mentioned that was sort of your niche, even when you got started. How did the security SRE role become your thing when you entered SRE?

JESSICA: I think like all other things that have happened in my career, I think it came as an opportunity. At the time, we were working on locking down a lot of things and essentially shifting the security posture of a lot of various services and infrastructure and product. And in that process of this company-wide initiative, I started identifying very dark corners of what is known as CorpEng.

So, CorpEng is basically Google's Enterprise. And so what I noticed as being an SRE who works in the CorpEng space, there's a lot of nuances or edge cases that we go through, but don't necessarily pay much attention to or try to dedicate effort towards it.

That's not to say that they're less important. It's just that when you're trying to launch features or trying to launch infrastructure services, a lot of times those things kind of fall by the wayside, or you make up for them in some way by throwing humans at the problem and just making it a manual operation.

And so what I found going through all these things, was that this was one, a pattern. And it wasn't a pattern that my team was suffering, it was a pattern that every team within CorpEng was suffering. And so you start to chat with other people and you figure out what the nuances are. And I found that all of these neglected corners were things that were pretty scary things that needed to be addressed.

And naturally, being an SRE and wanting to get to the root of everything, I started to look at

these problems and dissect them, and started working on solutions for these things. And then it was a rabbit hole from there. And I think I'm still going down that rabbit hole. And I can't say that I am ready to jump out. I'm enjoying the ride.

PAM: So, Jessica, besides your niche in security, you are also the security tech lead for your team. How has being a tech lead been different from the earlier parts of your career in SRE?

JESSICA: Oh, man, I think one of the biggest differences between being a senior tech lead, or being a tech lead versus being a little more junior in your career, is that you are joining an amorphous and ambiguous space. Whereas earlier on in your career, you usually get a well-defined set of problems that you have to work towards.

Whereas, as a tech lead, it is your responsibility to set technical direction and be able to be in a space where there are no defined problems. You have to look for the problem. You don't actually know what the problem set is yet. So you're looking across the space that you're in and you're identifying what are the problems-- are there things that are worth investing in right now. What's higher priority versus other things? What's worth the investment?

And essentially, when you're committing to technical direction, you're also influencing your peers and you're influencing your leadership to buy into this idea that this is the direction that we should be headed in. And I think that that for me, has definitely been a stretch opportunity and a growth space for me. I think that knowing how to identify the right problems is not something that necessarily comes easy. But when you do end up doing it and you get into the practice of doing it, it's very rewarding.

PAM: That sounds like so much responsibility. How have you been keeping your work responsibilities and that chaos with the weight of Google on your shoulders separate from your home life and responsibilities? And what I'm trying to say here, very poorly, is, how have you managed work, life balance?

JESSICA: Oh, man. When I have it completely figured out, I will let you know. I think that it's a balance. There are some days where I'm really knee deep into a problem and I'm really into it, and sometimes I can lose track of time. And then there are other times where I say to myself, nope, these are the three things that I'm accomplishing today. And I set a time bound to it.

Like when 4:00, hard stop. What I finished is what I finished that day. And then I carry over those tasks into the next day. So it really depends on what's happening. But what I try to do, is at least implement that framework of, what are the three things that I want to accomplish today. Or I'm only going to work these set of hours.

I think the other thing that makes it possible, is being able to lean on my coworkers and colleagues. I'm not doing this alone. One of the reasons why Google is successful is because we have spaces where we can collaborate and communicate with each other, but also lean on

each other in that sense.

One of the most beautiful aspects I like about my job, is when we come up with different ideas of how to approach a problem, it's a very collaborative approach in the sense that I might write a design document for the problem that it is that I want to solve, and then my coworkers and colleagues, whether within my organization or across the organization, will chime in and give feedback to me. Have you tried thinking about this? Or this is a very interesting way to solve the problem.

Long story short, I maintain work, life balance through some structure, but also being able to lean on my coworkers and knowing that there are people here to support me in that process. It also helps to have friends who will pull you out. I'm also friends with a lot of my coworkers, as well. So sometimes when it becomes towards the end of the day, we usually go to happy hour or tea time or dinner. And there's usually someone chiming in, talking about food, so that always helps. Food is life.

MP: So I think we would be a little remiss to not touch on a little bit of a more difficult topic while we have you here. Could you tell us a little bit about how being a Black woman in tech has influenced your career?

JESSICA: I guess it's interesting in a couple of ways. On one hand, it kind of sets you apart in the sense that because you may be one of few or one of only, it makes it easier for folks to remember you. Because you are different. And usually, things or people that are different, usually stand out.

And so in that case, it has really worked to my favor, because I can introduce myself to someone or have a conversation and generally they'll remember a conversation that we had or they'll remember my saying my name or something. So in that aspect, it's actually worked to my favor. And I would encourage others to run with that, as well.

The other thing that I would say, is as far as career progression, obviously, and this is not something that's unique to Google, this is a real life problem, there are, for the lack of better terms, systems or invisible systems or biases that play into our experiences every day. And unfortunately, sometimes those things work to our detriment.

As being a Black woman, I'm sure I've faced many of those obstacles. One of the things that I think I'm grateful for that I've seen Google do, is have things like unconscious bias training. I remember when I started at Google 10 years ago, it wasn't a thing. And as I've progressed through my career, I want to say pretty fairly early on in my career, so probably by my third year at Google, we started doing unconscious biases.

And it's not something that is required of one particular person. It's something that we all participate in. And I was pretty grateful for the opportunity, because it even revealed to me that I

had my own unconscious biases, as well, with respect to other ideas, other cultures, that sort of thing. And it kind of helped check my perspective.

I think that we all carry things with us that are formed from our upbringing and our environments and that sort of thing, and the content that we consume. It's easy to lose sight of what's important, but also, not be aware of the idea that there is an underlying framework that is formulating your ideas and approach to how you view the world and your perspective.

As a Black woman SRE, one of the other things that I want to say that I'm pretty grateful for, is opportunities like this to kind of share the experience and voice and let people know that we are here. I think that you don't know what you don't know. And I feel like for me, growing up, I didn't know what an SRE was. These were not things that I was exposed to.

And I feel like having platforms like these to be able to discuss these ideas, but also just showing that I'm here, showing that we do exist, it kind of inspires folks to kind of dream bigger and see what is out there. I want to kind of share an anecdote. So a friend of mine, who is a former Googler now, but she had this massive wall behind her. And I never really paid attention to the details, but I knew it was a wall of faces. But I never actually took the time to really look into what was behind her.

And I remember sharing a story with her about how I had found out that I was the first Black woman SRE at Google. And I told her that that wasn't something that I went around necessarily sharing, because on one hand, it feels like quite the accomplishment. But on the other hand, it felt a little shameful, because it took this long in history for us to get here. And so it wasn't something that I necessarily wanted to share.

And she said something very interesting to me that essentially changed my perspective. And she said, Jess, you want to tell people these things. And the reason why, is this wall behind me, it's basically a wall of firsts. She said, every person's photo on this wall is the first of many. And she said, your face belongs on this wall. And she said the reason why I have this wall, is so that my daughter can look at this wall and realize that these opportunities are possible.

It's the first woman engineer or first doctor, first person to invent peanut butter, the first person to invent the traffic light. A lot of these inventions are the first of something also included people of color. And so hearing that kind of really gave me the chills. And I feel like ever since I heard that story, I have changed my perspective and I have started to share the story.

And I even went as far as to go on LinkedIn and shout this to make this known, like yes, I am the first Black woman SRE. As hard as that was to come to terms with, it was also a very beautiful thing. Because it is something that I can share with others and talk to folks about my experience, but also, theirs as well. So that has been my experience.

PAM: Yeah, that was awesome.

MP: That story is amazing.

JESSICA: Oh, thanks.

MP: I didn't even know that. I learned that on the spot just now.

PAM: That's so cool and inspiring. I think you should share it. You should shout it from the mountaintops, because it's really true. Representation matters. You're here and saying that you are a Black woman and you are an SRE, and now the generation after you can look to you as a role model.

JESSICA: Right.

PAM: And that opens so many more doors for all the young people out there who didn't know this was a path before.

JESSICA: Right.

PAM: So, thank you.

JESSICA: Yeah, thank you for giving me the opportunity to share this.

MP: In the context of all of that, how do you think your feelings of psychological safety have evolved over the years?

JESSICA: They have evolved quite a bit, actually. I remember first joining Google. It was quite the shift for me. Because I grew up in Boston on the East coast, where it's a pretty diverse population. People of all walks of life, culture, ideas, principles, values. And leaving all of that behind to move to someplace new, specifically the West Coast, where you don't know anybody, and the population looks very different from you and you don't really know what to expect, I was pretty nervous.

Going into the fact that at the time, there weren't that many people that looked like me in tech. Specifically, also in Silicon Valley. When you think about Silicon Valley and tech companies, you think of bro culture. And so I was pretty nervous about that. I think once joining Google, it was very much a different experience than the experiences that I've had at previous companies.

I feel like Google certainly made it their mission to not just focus on diversity, which everyone usually thinks of, but also, inclusivity. There's a saying that goes something like, diversity is having different people at a party, and inclusivity is asking them all to dance. I feel like that's certainly what the environment was like for me.

Just the idea that people come together, and at the end of the day, we all recognize that we are humans. And when we're solving problems, we're not solving just tech problems, we're solving people problems. That's ultimately what any problem boils down to. And so in looking at that, a lot of the things that I would say that those around me looked at was, making sure that all voices were heard and that we were creating safe spaces for these voices to be heard.

A lot of the conversations are difficult conversations to have, especially with things like-- and you know, the past few years around like Black Lives Matter movements or LGBTQ movements, and that sort of thing. Like, they're very difficult spaces or conversations to have for some folks, because not everyone's ideas or beliefs or values are the same. And I think that's the beauty in all of it, is the fact that we are all unique individuals. We also take the time to make sure that the other person is heard, and go out of our way to create those safe spaces.

The other thing that I want to add as far as psychological safety goes, is my management team in particular, has been extremely supportive around these efforts. I remember going through conferences and stuff or thinking about wanting to get involved, and my skip-level manager would pull me along and say, hey, these things are, these efforts are coming up and stuff. This is something that's also very passionate to myself, as well.

And we would have conversations about what they meant, what the impact was. And if the efforts that we are participating in actually had the right impact. Because I feel like a lot of times, or sometimes, we may do things that are well-meaning, but unless you check in with the people on the other end to see how they're doing or to have conversations about the impact that they have on the people around you, then you don't actually necessarily know. And so, what better way to understand, than to hear from the community or the folks themselves.

The other thing that I wanted to add to psychological safety, was the idea that Google embraces the idea of blameless culture. We don't look at who did this and why did they do this. We look at what systems or rules or policies or things, what dynamics do we have in play that allowed for these sorts of things to take place.

And so we look at the root of the problem, or look at issues from that perspective, as opposed to who are we looking to blame. And I think by having a blameless culture, it allows a space for people to feel more comfortable and establish some sense of trust.

Because you can't establish trust between individuals if you don't feel safe enough to make mistakes or take risks or have honest conversations about your opinions or your beliefs or things that you think become a factor. Again, a lot of these things can sometimes be sensitive topics. But it's nice to know that we have done a pretty good job at building a blameless culture. And I hope we continue to embrace that.

PAM: Thank you, Jessica, for that perspective. Do you have anything else you'd like to share with us today?

JESSICA: Oh, I don't think I do. I feel like I should, though.

[LAUGHS]

PAM: That's OK. This has been a great episode already. There's so much good content here. I can't wait for our listeners to hear it.

MP: It really has been a pleasure.

JESSICA: Thank you, I appreciate that.

MP: And again, thank you so much, Pam, for joining me for these past four episodes. You will be dearly missed.

PAM: Well, I hope you invite me back sometime. This is a lot of fun. So, thank you for having me, MP.

MP: And thank you again, Jessica. Maybe we will get to have you back, as well in the future.

JESSICA: Yeah, looking forward to it. Don't be a stranger.

[THEME MUSIC]

VOICEOVER: "Prodcast," the Google SRE production podcast is hosted by MP English and Pamela Vong, and produced and edited by Salim Virji. Engineering by Paul Guglielmo and Jordan Greenberg. Javi Beltran composed the musical theme. Special thanks to Steve McGhee.

[THEME MUSIC]