



Seattle Metro Chamber – Under Construction with Amelia Ransom

Marilyn Strickland Welcome to Under Construction. I'm your host, Marilyn Strickland, CEO of the Seattle Metro Chamber. In each episode, we take you behind the scenes with the people and companies shaping our evolving region. Today, our guest is Amelia Ransom who serves as Senior Director of Engagement and Diversity at Avalara. Amelia, thank you so much for being here with us today.

Amelia Ransom Thank you for having me. It's great to be here.

Marilyn Strickland Great. So some of our listeners they may not even know about Avalara. So tell us about the company -- what you do, what line of business you're in, and then tell us a bit about what you do there.

Amelia Ransom So Avalara does transactional tax compliance. So I like to explain it this way. Businesses are automating a lot of their practices. So it seems odd that in 2019 that many businesses are doing their taxes manually.

Marilyn Strickland People still do their taxes manually.

Amelia Ransom People still do them manually. Companies still do them manually. And we are a company that allows businesses to focus on the thing that they love to do and we take care of all your transactional tax needs for you. So the simple way of thinking about it is if you bought something--you bought a shirt, you bought a cup of coffee, you bought something-- there's probably some tax on that depending on where you purchased it. And so we make sure that we can collect it. We know how much it is and then help you remit it every way that it needs to go. Got it. That's the easiest way to think about it at least for me.

Marilyn Strickland OK so tell us a bit about yourself and how you ended up at Avalara.

Amelia Ransom I ended up at Avalara, you know, I got a phone call, "Hey, we think there's a job you'd be interested in." And I went on the website and looked and thought transactional tax. Do these people not know I've been in retail for 26 years? I don't really know anything about this. And they were really looking to have an intentional focus on culture and engagement and diversity. Which is a lot in my background. And that sounded really interesting to me that a company would see the need, you know, frankly not having been in any "trouble," would see that need proactively and say we really want to focus on this because our mission and goal is to be part of every single tax transaction in the world. And how do we get there, we get there through people and the globe is very diverse.

Marilyn Strickland You know it's interesting because what they did was I mean your company made a business decision. They did. A strategic business decision and said that this is important if we're going to be successful as a business.

Amelia Ransom Absolutely. And that is really what attracted me to it. It wasn't about let's just do this because it's the right thing to do let's do it for reasons of optics.

Marilyn Strickland Because there's a crisis to manage.

Amelia Ransom Exactly. And so because it was tied to business initiatives I really wanted to be part of that.

Marilyn Strickland That's very, very exciting. So for our listeners who don't know last year was a significant year for Avalara you went public and you opened a new headquarters in Pioneer Square and I read that shares of Avalara actually spiked 50 percent from its IPO when the opening bell rang at the New York Stock Exchange which must have been very exciting. So can you just tell us what that was like internally as you saw that unfold.

Amelia Ransom OK. So on that day I was actually in Ghana. That particular day I had a preplanned vacation. So I wore orange that day in Ghana. Avalara loves orange, for those of your listeners who may not know that. But here's what's interesting about that.

Amelia Ransom I would say that's a point in time an IPO of course is a point in time. And it was interesting for all of us inside to see what other people thought of us. What does the Street think of you what do other businesses think of you. What are the shareholders now think of you. But for us inside our jobs all just got harder right because now it is about you know doing your day to day, but it's also about thinking about it through a new lens. Right.

Amelia Ransom Which are your shareholders. So you now think about it from an employee perspective from a from a customer in a partner perspective and now a shareholder perspective. So it just got why does like the aperture got wider. And we now think about it in a different way. But the day after the IPO you I'll come back to your desk and just get your job done.

Marilyn Strickland You have to. You still have to go to work every day.

Amelia Ransom You still have to get your job done.

Marilyn Strickland Exactly. So I want to switch a bit here because I know that you actually worked at Nordstrom for a while. And you know Nordstrom has been well known forever as customer service. But also, too you know, I think there's been a mantra for a long time that said the customer first, the customer first, but also now recognizing that well but you have employees have to be treated well. And so talk about what it was like to work at Nordstrom and then how that experience has really informed the way you work now at Avalara.

Amelia Ransom Sure. I owe so much to the way that I think about the customer experience to my time at Nordstrom. I really do. There is I don't know another better training ground to really think about things through someone else's land and the experience that the customer has than Nordstrom and I spent 26 years there you know I started as a child, just a mere child.

Marilyn Strickland Violating child labor laws.

Amelia Ransom Exactly. Exactly, exactly. And so we're bringing that into Avalara as well. How do our partners and customers think about the customer experience of doing it? Yes there's some compliance. Around transactional tax but you still want your customer to have a great experience because they didn't get into business to do transactional tax. They got into business because they sell jewelry or whatever they do. And we want to keep them focused on doing that, not thinking about how they need to pay their taxes.

Marilyn Strickland Sure. That makes total sense. So let's talk a bit about Avalara. How many employees do you have, how many of your employees actually work outside of the Seattle headquarters, and talk about the you know how you attract talent. Because again, in especially in this economy in this region, it's a it is a fight for talent is it about those things.

Amelia Ransom So we have about 1,700 employees around the world. Our headquarters is here. We were started on Bainbridge Island and our headquarters is now in Pioneer Square. We cannot wait to have you over for a tour.

Marilyn Strickland I can't wait to come over and see all that orange.

Amelia Ransom I'm saying that on the podcast, so she has to do it now. We'll take pictures and post them. But most of our employees are now outside the Seattle area because we've grown. We have a significant presence in India, in Brazil, in Europe. We have other offices in the United States. But you're asking about attracting people is really an important one I think because we are 15 years old but we're not, you know, we're not finished. And so what that means is there's an opportunity at a mid-sized company like ours to create things still right. And to think about things very differently. I've worked for a

large company. You're not coming into a machine that is well-run and you just need to sit down and kind of get your job done. This is about innovating and thinking about it differently and, and literally charting new territory. So that's how we attract talent. I think we attract people who want to be part of something really different and a company who's still scaling and growing but still but has some stability behind it as well.

Marilyn Strickland No, I think it's interesting because I think what you're saying is, you're a 15-year-old company but at the same time your identity isn't fully formed yet.

Amelia Ransom Correct.

Marilyn Strickland And so there's still opportunities to imagine what's possible, to try new things.

Amelia Ransom Absolutely.

Marilyn Strickland Which is a great place to be. And when you're looking for a job.

Amelia Ransom Just say it better than me Marilyn, why don't you! That's fine.

Marilyn Strickland So your position is Director of Engagement and Diversity. So tell us how long that position has existed at your company and you know, again, has it changed over time and how significant is that to your company's bottom line.

Amelia Ransom Yeah. So I'm the first person to have this role so it's been there a year and a month. So it hasn't changed a lot over time but I will tell you what's happened in the year is we've had both significant and important conversations about what the culture should be, how to do that intentionally rather than letting the culture, you know, just sort of take shape and form all by itself really setting the intention around who do we want to be. You know, I remember asking our CEO during my interview process, when they write the book on this company what do you want the chapter on inclusion and diversity and engagement to say? What would that look like to you? And that was really the first intentionality around engagement because we could imagine a place where people are deeply engaged and we are all we have a common goal and we're moving toward it together. And, and that was very important to both the executive team and then to me and wanting to do that work. But beyond the conversations, we've actually started to do things. We have a roadmap, we have a strategy around what does deeper engagement look like, we now have tools that we use to give us accurate data to help us sort of validate our own hypothesis about what they are. Right. So we had a lot of hypotheses about what would engage people and how we should become more diverse. But now we have the ability to really validate those and to move forward with the things that we think will work. So some of the things are very traditional. Employee resource groups and you know you've got to level-set common language and diversity and training and things like that but also the idea of, we've created this space I think for employees to tell us, because we've said we really want to know and we'll do something about it. And now, all sorts of things start to come up and we start to

engage in all sorts of conversations. We have a new example - we have a new series called Meet Our Neighbors, and we bring in local nonprofits into our local into our space. Interesting and meet them find out what they're doing how we can partner with them. And our employees are totally leaning into this and saying wow this is really important.

Amelia Ransom Now we do because we're new in the neighborhood right and now we are getting to meet our neighbors.

Marilyn Strickland So when you were speaker at the Chamber's Young Professionals Network and you talked about equity and inclusion being the responsibility of everyone in the company, not just one department or one person. And, there was a really great, great comment you made it said the company doing well in diversifying should be yours, which means it's everyone's responsibility. Can you give us some ideas or thoughts about you know how does an individual in an in an organization make a commitment to diversity and inclusion, and then how do you reach a next a new generation of people when it comes to this topic?

Amelia Ransom So the way that I like to think how people themselves can engage is in a few pillars. So one of them is, "Know where you stand. Know where you are." What do you know, what do you what are you curious about, and what is your intentionality around your curiosity, right? Because you want to know something different, or you want to tell someone how wrong their experience is. Well if it's the latter then you're not actually that curious. Right. But if you're really curious then there are many ways to figure that out.

Amelia Ransom There are things to read. There are documentaries to watch. There are groups you can join but the experience that your growth experience shouldn't be put on a person's shoulders. So if I want to know about your background, Marilyn, and I'm curious about you know an Asian background or an African-American background, literally tomes of books have been written on the topic. Pick one up. I need to know how interested you are as an individual. So, you can start there and then I like to say you can also go be a tourist. And I don't mean you literally have to get on a plane or train and go somewhere, but have the experience of being an only, which is a powerful experience that most if not all marginalized people understand. So go have that experience somewhere go to a different coffee shop, a different place of worship, a different neighborhood. It doesn't have to be expensive but those are ways and once you can have those things and you have access to that then other people will start to meet you. You know one of the things that I say is if you ask me if I call you, Marilyn, and ask you to come pick me up, what is your likely first question?

Marilyn Strickland Where are you?

Amelia Ransom Exactly. Where are you? And if I say, I'm in Istanbul you're likely to look at the phone and go, "I don't know why she thinks I'm coming to get her from Istanbul."

Marilyn Strickland I was like, "Do you need money for a plane ticket?"

Amelia Ransom Right. Right. Like, "How can I help you?" But coming to get you isn't the best way you can help that scenario. And I like to use that same that same example with diversity. If you're really far away on the topic, then please get closer to me so I can help you. But if you're so far away that you're just dipping your toe into the experiences of, for example, women. Well I can't help you with all that you need to know there. But once I see that you're serious I'm more than willing to lean in and help you. So you might be willing to pick me up from the airport right in SeaTac right. But maybe not in Istanbul.

Marilyn Strickland Well it's interesting. There was a young woman that I met at rally at a leadership group and she was describing what it was like to be a young Asian woman in a certain industry and she said, "What can I do to better fit in?" And I said, "Why is it your responsibility?" It's like maybe the organization itself should do a better job of making you feel welcome.

Amelia Ransom Exactly. And what the organization can do is create this space right. That those conversations are safe and good to have and that the organization has your back in trying to push it forward.

Marilyn Strickland You know it's interesting, you talked about safe because you know we know we all know people who want to broach a topic but they're afraid to ask a question or say something because they don't want to be called something. For those of us who think about being leaders like you know what can we do to not necessarily take responsibility for their issue, but how do we help draw people in so they do feel safe having these conversations?

Amelia Ransom I think they have to see us as leaders being uncomfortable. They have to see us being vulnerable and being uncomfortable and letting other people lead and teach us. So if you're the kind of leader that can't be taught and no one can tell you anything then no one's going to feel safe. But if you're a leader that leads with transparency and vulnerability, then people will start to follow you and feel safe enough to raise their hand or raise an issue and create and create that space and it's okay to say as a leader, "I don't know what your experience is like, Marilyn. I don't, but I want I want to validate your experience and I want to hear you, so I'm going to listen."

Marilyn Strickland You know, it's interesting. A lot of the articles I read lately whether it's Harvard Business Review or you know or whatever whenever we think about leaders. People tend to think of what I call very stereotypical traits of leadership and the one word that comes up a lot now is vulnerability. Allow yourself to be vulnerable and that's a risky proposition. But it definitely is a way to communicate emotional intelligence and to have a way for people to reach out to you and for them to feel comfortable.

Amelia Ransom It really is. You know one thing I learned as a people leader, one thing I shifted I should say, is I would lead conversations by saying, "I think." "I think this," or "I think that," and what I did when I when I did that was I shut people off from thinking

something different. So I started leading with I wonder. "I wonder if..." And that really invited people, just that small shift, invited people to tell me what they were wondering. And that it was safe to do that because they didn't have to disagree with my thought and even that small shift can go a big way in leading vulnerably.

Marilyn Strickland So I want to go back to the conversation about inclusion. And you know we talk a lot about organizations wanting to diversify their workforces and be inclusive. But let's talk about what leadership in an organization looks like especially with board leadership. So if you were going to give advice to an organization about, how do you diversify a board, what would you tell them to do?

Amelia Ransom I would come at that a couple of ways. One is what are the skills that you need on the board, irrespective of everything else?

Amelia Ransom What are the skills and traits that need you need to fill out your board right to take you where the company is going, versus starting with who do we know. Because a lot of those conversations start with, "Who do we know? I know a person that would be great on the board."

Amelia Ransom And we think about the personality type versus necessarily thinking about the skills and abilities that they bring to the organization, or board, or executive team-- anything. But I would start there and then go find probably a third party to help you do that rather than try to source it amongst yourself.

Marilyn Strickland Among the relationships that you have.

Amelia Ransom Among the relationships because that happens the way anything happens. If I said hey I really need someone to do a great podcast, well I'm going to call my friend Marilyn, who does a great podcast. Of course I would. That's natural. But I'm if I frame the question differently, about "What makes a great podcast?" Then you know, I'd probably still want it with Marilyn, because you're so fantastic but I might end up in a different space or with someone that I don't know with someone who brings a skill. But again that requires that vulnerability because you and I because we know each other might have a shorthand and writing wedge in and understanding but that isn't necessarily the best way to go about finding the rigour that you need on a board.

Marilyn Strickland Well you know it's interesting too and there are a lot of different types of boards, but I've seen in the past what people say well we need someone who is a banker, we need someone who's an attorney, and then we need a woman or person of color as though you can't be both. And so again it's coming back to the whole idea of let's find the skill set that we need first. And then from there yeah about you know how that can be filled.

Amelia Ransom Exactly. I want to clap. I want to dance. I want to clap. I want to do lots of things for that statement because you're right. We then we we end up filling the seat with

someone who fits a quite a personality quite a personality or a physical trait criteria here. But you didn't think about that when you were talking about the banker or the attorney. Yeah. Why is it a separate category.

Marilyn Strickland It shouldn't be. You can do both.

Marilyn Strickland So let's talk about the fact that you are a member of the board of the Seattle Metro Chamber. We're thrilled to have you here. And what made you decide to accept the offer to join the Seattle chamber board.

Amelia Ransom Oh my gosh. OK. So, good - these are good questions, all. This one I don't know if you're gonna keep this in here or not but I'm going to tell you the truth. So I was sent the invitation to join the board by Ken Colling when he was on the board. And Ken Colling was the president and CEO of Seattle Goodwill. The first time I joined that board. OK. And the reason that becomes an important story is when Ken asked me to join the Seattle Goodwill board, I asked him why he was asking me.

Marilyn Strickland Interesting.

Amelia Ransom And he said you know he gave me all these reasons I think you'll bring this. And I think he'll bring that in the sense of retail and all that kind of stuff he said. And last, but definitely not least, you're black, and I need that perspective in that boardroom because most of the people that we serve are people of color. And we do not have enough diverse voices on the board. Interesting. And I need that voice. And I said to him, "Do you want to want that voice or do you want that voice." And he said, "I want and need that voice". I still remember this conversation I was having this all the time. So I joined the board and he I walked into that room and it was not very diverse at that time. And he said, "Give me a year. It's going to look different". And it did. He was a man of his word. And so when he said I think you should join the Seattle Metro Chamber board, I said, "I have the same questions." And he said, "I have the same answers." And that was it. That was all I needed to know.

Marilyn Strickland That's great and we are delighted that you're on our board to be why does it the skill set that you bring and your background knowledge.

Amelia Ransom Thank you. All the things. You can do both as you earlier said.

Marilyn Strickland So let's talk about Seattle Goodwill for a minute. You know, when many of us think of goodwill we tend to think of their retail outlet and we think about making donations. But talk about the breadth and the depth of the work that they do and why it's so significant to a market like Seattle now.

Amelia Ransom I'm so glad you asked that question because lots of people think about the retail component of it and oh I'm Marie Kondo-ing my house and so I'm going to give everything to Seattle Goodwill. It's great. We want you to do that. We want your donations.

Amelia Ransom But Seattle Goodwill is a mission based organization that has a retail component. And the mission of Seattle Goodwill is to create job training and education for our community. And that is really the depth of what they do, is they serve our local community by giving skill sets and education to our neighbors. And they do that by taking your the stuff that you don't need anymore and repurposing it. And so that's great. And don't get me wrong. Like I love a Goodwill outing and shop. I'll be there next week volunteering with my Avalara team. But that that is I like to think about is more an outcome than a goal of Seattle Goodwill. But do both: shop, donate. But know that we are taking care of our neighbors here in the local Northwest area through job training and education.

Marilyn Strickland And I think people lose sight of that I was at a breakfast in to come a few years back and they had a young man speak and he works at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, and he has you know he has he has a he has a physical disability but he literally gets up gets on the bus every morning rides the bus goes to work and he was talking, his mother was talking, and she said I didn't imagine that my son would get up and go to work every day. Everyone was crying by the time they finished their story.

Amelia Ransom Wow. I'm going to start crying now.

Marilyn Strickland Yeah but but again like I don't know that people really understand the way you get into the job training and the education so that's incredibly important. So I want to get a little personal now. Sure. And you were featured in an Inc magazine post earlier this year about books that high achievers recommend.

Marilyn Strickland So number one, you are a high achiever because Inc said so, but I didn't have to read Inc to know that about you.

Amelia Ransom My father heard it here first. That's right.

Marilyn Strickland And you said that this book that you read actually changed your approach to leadership and life. So tell us about the book. Who's the author and what's so special about that book?

Amelia Ransom Yes. This was Shonda Rhimes this book which is called The Year of Yes and it's got a longer title but essentially it's called The Year of Yes. And the reason this book changed the way that I think about leadership... I'm not sure she wrote it to be a leadership book. I'm not entirely sure. I may not have been her intent may not have been her intent but she talks about a year in really which she started to say yes and the book starts out with her. She and her sister are having a conversation while preparing a holiday meal. And she's telling her sister all these great things she's being invited to do because now she's like popular and getting success and that kind of thing. And her sister says, in the way that only a sibling can, I don't know why it matters you're just going to say no anyway.

Amelia Ransom And that moment really reshaping and reframing how she thought about her life. Right. And I realized I was doing that. I was saying no before I ever really gave myself a chance to think about the idea of a possibility.

Marilyn Strickland Oh, no was kind of your default.

Amelia Ransom It was my default. No, I'm not going to do that. No no I can't. I can't, blah blah blah. And so I challenged myself to think about that differently and to think about what I was saying no to and why, and also what I was saying yes to and why. And in doing that you have to stop your default. You have to stop the knee-jerk reaction that you have and know why you're saying no or yes to something. And that really did lead me to change a lot of things. I changed jobs, I bought a condo I did. I did a lot of things differently after reading that book that I thought I now understand my Yes and I understand my No.

Marilyn Strickland And for those of our listeners who don't know who Shonda Rhimes is - Shonda Rhimes is executive producer and creator of TV shows that we know Grey's Anatomy, Scandal, How to Get Away With Murder. She is just smart, thoughtful and unapologetic about casting people in roles that have been considered nontraditional back in the day but are very, very traditional now. So we love Shonda. So again Shonda Rhimes and it was the Year of Yes. So pick up a copy because it's been recommended by our guest.

Marilyn Strickland Okay we're gonna move on to the lightning round now. This is more of the fun stuff about who you are. So I ask you something this is interesting, so what would you tell your 20 year old self if looking back on who you were then versus what you know now. What would you tell your 20 year old self?

Amelia Ransom Ok I read this question and I thought okay I'm okay. I will give you two answers one that might make it in and one that my okay. That's all right. One is I would tell my 20 year old self. You are beautiful. I look at pictures of myself and think I had no idea. I had absolutely no idea that I was like beautiful.

Marilyn Strickland And you still are.

Amelia Ransom Oh well, thanks. I mean, thanks. But I honestly did. And I think we all have that moment where we look back at pictures when we thought we were so awkward or overweight or whatever it pick anything right. And I think, "I actually had it going on at 20 years old." I did not know it.

Amelia Ransom Right. So I would tell by myself. But I would also tell myself it's kind of get so much better. It's good now. Enjoy but it's gonna get so much better. I'll be 50 years old this year and it is just getting going.

Marilyn Strickland It's just starting.

Amelia Ransom It's really just starting. I feel great. I'm so excited to be turning 50. I have zero regrets. Like send me my AARP card today.

Marilyn Strickland Well they haven't sent you one already you will get one. Yeah.

Amelia Ransom They... apparently you get on a list.

Marilyn Strickland You turn forty nine and counting. You're gonna get that thing in the mail. I know.

Marilyn Strickland So what is something people be surprised to know about you?

Amelia Ransom I'm an introvert.

Marilyn Strickland So that's really funny you say that, so am I. And people think, you've been a public official you do all these things as a leader it's like no it's like I'm actually an introvert.

Amelia Ransom I'm a hard introvert. Yeah.

Marilyn Strickland And what is a thing that we like to do the most like we're up when we're up and then we just need downtime.

Amelia Ransom I need down alone time I need to not talk to people. I need to be in my own space. I need to be reading, I need to be contemplative, I need to do all of those things and then I'll be ready for people again. Yeah but hard introvert.

Marilyn Strickland So what is your comfort food?

Amelia Ransom French fries. I love any sort of potato. I've never met a potato I didn't like. Please and thank you, with French fries.

Marilyn Strickland What is on your playlist right now. We all listen to music different moods different days. But what are you listening to right now.

Amelia Ransom I am listening to a lot of things I just made a playlist for some friends that celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary.

Marilyn Strickland That's amazing.

Amelia Ransom And in making that playlist. I realized how varied my own playlist is and so with everything from Earth Wind and Fire to her to Cardi B to. I don't know how I had Rachmaninoff in there but there was a little Rachmaninoff in there and I thought, "Is this

too diverse? Like, where have I gone with this?" But I would say on my playlist today was the little I had a little Mary J Blige going on my playlist today.

Marilyn Strickland No more drama.

Amelia Ransom That was the one.

Marilyn Strickland You know it was.

Amelia Ransom I literally had no more drama going in the background in my office and I was bobbing my head and the door was closed and people were walking about, like, "What is she doing?"

Marilyn Strickland So this was the last question here here's to be a combination of personal and also professional so you know you told us about all Avalara, you talked about the work that you do there and when you think about this company and this brand and you I think you said that on your interview when you were trying that when you're interviewing for the job what do you want people to say about this company and the work that you did 10 years from now?

Amelia Ransom I want people to say that their workplace is an extension of their best self. That they have an opportunity to do things they do well that they have an opportunity to, to lean into the things that they're good at and to help the company be better on the other side of that. But that nothing about themselves and their person was ever sacrificed in the making of Avalara. That's really what I want people to say. If it was a it was a BHAG, it would be everyone who works here loves it.

Marilyn Strickland That's great. Well I think we will end on that note. So thank you so much, Amelia Ransom for joining us today. It was a great interview. It was a lot of fun. And we wish you well in the future. And you are a star to watch.

Amelia Ransom Thank you so much for having me. You are a star to behold. Thank you for having me. We can't wait to have you at Avalara.

Marilyn Strickland Thank you.