

## **Clayton Cottle - PodCAST Transcript**

**KARA:**

Hello and welcome to the podcast, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host, Kara Snyder, and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum of the college, and today we have a chance to talk to Clayton Cottle. Clayton is a criminal justice sciences alum and currently serves as the Assistant Vice President of Operations and Strategic Initiatives at Sam Houston State University. Welcome and thank you for being here.

**CLAYTON:**

Thank you.

**KARA:**

This will be fun. So Clayton, let's start at the beginning. Why did you choose ISU?

**CLAYTON:**

Honestly, it wasn't anything strategic or intentional at the time. I do love strategy and executing plans, but I find, like the most things in life, that just didn't allow in that instance, I was focused really on just completing my studies. I was at a junior college, Parkland College, and the opportunity came up post graduation for me to decide whether I go to seek a job or continue off my studies, and I felt it was best for me to continue into the university for a bit longer. Illinois State was just far enough away from family, but close enough I could have that support and those visits so ISU stood out as the choice for me.

**KARA:**

And then, how did you choose your major? Was that something you were interested in while you were at Parkland, or was that an ISU trying to help you find that passion? Tell me about that process.

**CLAYTON:**

So my major being in criminal justice, I've always been interested in social sciences and just understanding human interactions and really society and how society functions at a higher level.

At the time, I was interested in a career, more in the federal government, something investigative or pursuing a PhD focusing on research topics. So I explored, when I first got to ICU, explored some social science courses that- ones that stood out to me were criminal justice related. I do remember taking a social psychology class that really piqued my interest, but for the most part, my interest lied in criminal justice.

KARA:

And what do you miss most about your time on campus?

CLAYTON:

With hindsight, the free time and freedom that you have as a student to explore new topics and expose yourself to new cultures and people. More practically, though, I missed the quad and all the activities on it, the quiet floor of the library. I spent a lot of time there, and I guess from my master's, my time I spent in the master's program, I do miss the cohort of students and went through the program with. They were great people, great scholars, and built lifelong friends.

KARA:

Yeah, free time, I think, is something you don't realize how much you have until it's gone, right?

CLAYTON:

Yeah, you never really, I guess I haven't yet at this age, but you never really have that period of time to really explore yourself the world, and I guess, in a chamber. And so you have less risk, because that is what everyone's there to do.

KARA:

So true. So true. Well, tell us so you get your criminal justice degree, what was that initial job search like for you? And then where did you end up? What was your entry level job?

CLAYTON:

I had a rough experience, really, and it's, it's something that I'm carrying that experience bored into my current role to we're currently standing up at Polytechnic College, and to really think through that experience for students, part of it definitely. On my end, I didn't really know what I wanted to do after my master's degree. I thought I was going to pursue a PhD, and I quickly decided against it. So it left me, you know, the final hour, not knowing what what I was to do. So

after some soul searching, I felt like my strengths and the skill set I had, I built, was somewhere in in research, and I had, it was a weird time. My wife, at the time was, it was just my girlfriend I met at ISU in my master's program. She was one year behind me and study. So I knew I graduated. I had one more year to hang around in Bloomington, normal until she graduated and she was going to get a PhD in Texas. She had already decided. So I knew we were moving, so I didn't know what to do initially. So my entry level job was manual labor. For a few months, I worked with Wright's tree service, I gained quickly a value for hard work, appreciation for the trades, but I realized that wasn't my calling, and so I decided to pivot while still in Bloomington Normal, and I applied to be a prospect research associate at ISU advancement office. And so I'd say that's really my entry level job, as I've been able to build from there. And I worked in that role for a little less than a year before we moved to Texas.

KARA:

And I appreciate you sharing that, because I think so often as a student, you're set up to see these alumni that have achieved wonderful things, and we think that they had their roadmap all planned out. And so I appreciate you sharing that that wasn't the case for you, and it kind of took. A turn, and now all of a sudden, I'm sitting here and I'm talking to an assistant vice president. So tell us about your career trajectory from there, certainly not something you anticipated as a student, but still very exciting nonetheless.

CLAYTON:

For sure, I joke a lot with my friends that my overall strategy in life is really just to be a stick in the river, just kind of floating along, focused on what's in front of me currently, and when opportunity presents, kind of just exploring that path. So my wife graduated from ISU with her master's, and we picked up and moved to Texas, and so I was applying to roles there. I ended up landing a role as a grant proposal developer. It's about as entry level as you could get at Sam Houston State University, where I work now, I was in that role. It was a first time role. They brought in three of us. We were able to change some things and really start to grow the research enterprise at Sam Houston State I elevated from there to a coordinator of research, and then I was able to build my own team. From there, I stepped up to be the Director of Research, where I assumed a few other teams, and my most recent promotion was to the assistant vice president of operations and strategic initiatives. And that role we still in our office. We run the research enterprise for Simpson state, but as of maybe six months ago, we are planning to develop a polytechnic college and accept our first cohort in August. So a lot of lot of new things to keep me

engaged and interested, but all just from being a stick in the river and focusing on being the best I could be at each of my positions, and when the opportunity came up, being willing to raise my hand to say, I'd like a try.

KARA:

Well, and what I think is interesting about your current role is that, with the exception of a few trips into the office, you're actually 100% remote. So tell us about the pros and cons of that lifestyle.

CLAYTON:

For sure, definitely a bit of a hot button topic recently, and I guess it has been. I'm not too sure why, but remote work is- I'm a huge fan. I've done my role both remote and in person. I could see for both sides, overall, a huge advocate. It really provides me more time to actually work and be productive as I'm not commuting or I'm not really stuck in those office conversations. That might not be the most productive. And I think it also forces teams to learn technology, to be proficient in that remote setting. And in my case, especially, and in my team's case, forcing us to be adept with technology in that remote setting gives us perspective on our end users experience the online services we offer. And the biggest one, from an organizational perspective, is it allows us to recruit Allen from anywhere, which is really great when you're a service provider. There are a few downsides, I guess the the biggest for me is I struggled a bit initially going from full time in person to full time remote with just a lack of social interaction, I'm naturally social, an outgoing person, and really stepping out of that immediately was a hit for me, so I had to build these social circles outside of work to fulfill that social battery of mine. But that's really the only downside that I've experienced.

KARA:

And if we had a student that's listening to this that's considering a remote role, what advice would you give to them, or maybe even, what question should they be asking in the interview process? How can they feel like they are part of a team when they're fully remote?

CLAYTON:

That's a good question. I really think someone's ability to be remote is less on the organization and more on the person. So I have close friends who just can't work remote. They know they can't work remote, they would have too many distractions. If they're sitting at home, they're

likely to go maybe do some laundry, watch a show. And so it's really on the individual. If you feel you can be productive and bring more value to your enterprise. Then pitch the remote work if it is for you. Some practical tips would be: dedicate somewhere at home where you do work so you can actually leave that space, that physical space, separate. Because when you're at home and you work from home, sometimes it really bleeds together, and you can't separate the two, I would say to your your other point, reach out to people in your organization, even if you're remote. That doesn't mean you don't have to build a network that people still aren't interested in connecting. It is our human nature to connect. So reach out even if you don't know the person or need anything, just introduce yourself. Just build your network.

KARA:

That's great advice. Thank you for sharing, and I know that you have also founded two startups. So can you tell us about those? And what is it like to be an entrepreneur?

CLAYTON:

Of course, just starting at the top, I really haven't realized wild financial success as an entrepreneur or from either much. Startups, which, maybe naively, when you first go into a startup, you think, you know you've got the next unicorn. And rarely that's the case. But you take really big lessons from all of those these ventures. And I kind of view entrepreneurship more of a personality trait, because you can't really get rid of it. And if you got it, you got it, it's just something that you you exude, I guess, or a frame of mind, perhaps. My first one was focused on developing a new product for the fitness industry, and I ended up folding that company in about a year into it as a competitor had made it to the market first, they established a large partnership within a real niche market, and I just, I just felt like it wasn't viable anymore, but I learned so much from that, customer discovery, product development, manufacturing, sales, things of that nature. My second startup is when I formed with four of my friends. It's far more relaxed if we're committed from day one to slowly building the brain and the company as we build our own careers, with our own careers really being our our first focus. So in a way, my second start is more of a way for our friend group to stay together and grow together as as professionals.

KARA:

And that, I think, is so interesting. Tell us about the pros and cons of going into business with friends, because obviously you want to stay friends. So walk us through that.

CLAYTON:

There's definitely just a different dynamic. When you're your friends, become your business colleagues, and you're all managing each other's funds in some capacity, I think it could probably best summarized as the lows are lower and the highs are higher. Guess when, when you fail with your friends, it hurts worse, but when you win with your friends, it really is a special feeling that it is worth it. In our mind, we're a pretty solid group. There's definitely been some challenges, and I guess to me, that the biggest challenge is, when you're with your friends, being able to separate leisure from business, because that the propensity is always to steer conversations towards business or work instead of just unplugging.

KARA:

That's a great point. And so you're wearing all these different hats. You have these businesses, you have your full time day job. How would you describe your leadership style? And I'm curious if you find that it shifts depending on what role you're playing.

CLAYTON:

I think my personality in work and out of work is really the same. I'm a real energetic, inquisitive person with a lot of passion, and so that's that's how you'll experience me if you run into me at a grocery store, versus if you run into me in a strategic planning meeting for any of my roles, but my style, I would say, I really like to build teams that are agile and interdisciplinary. I prioritize teams that move really fast deliver results. I like to find people that are passionate. And my goal when building teams is, I don't want to be a choke point. I want teams to have the autonomy to make their own decisions, and really, I just want to set shared goals that everybody can shoot towards.

KARA:

I do have a question for you jumping off of that, if we're thinking about students interviewing for those entry level positions, trying to be part of a team. What can they do to convey their willingness to be a good teammate? What should they be thinking about throughout the interview process?

CLAYTON:

You know, I think that starts before the interview. As a student, you should probably be putting yourself in into groups or organizations where you can have some small exposure to a job or

something that you can speak to when you're in that interview, that you can point back to to demonstrate that you do have a skill set that the employer is looking for. The biggest thing when interviewing and really in life, is just listening. And when you are in in an interview, often the questions are written in a way to pull out the types of responses the company is looking for. And so if you, if you really listen, use your critical thinking skills tailor your answers to what the company needs they are paying you to do a job, especially as an entry level once you're in that job, I think that is when you can take some liberties and start to demonstrate some other strengths or skill sets that you think the company could leverage to promote yourself.

KARA:

That's great advice. Thank you. Well, we are going to finish with a speed round. So just go with your first instinct on these questions. Are you a texter or a talker?

CLAYTON:

Ooh, can I say FaceTime?

KARA:

Oh, I like that.

CLAYTON:

Okay, I'm a FaceTime.

KARA:

Coffee or tea?

CLAYTON:

Coffee

KARA:

How do you take it?

CLAYTON:

Some creamer for the first cup, and then no creamer for any subsequent cups.

KARA:

I like that. Ease into your day... And what's your favorite season?

CLAYTON:

Summer- in the Midwest.

KARA:

Good point, good point. And what is your favorite thing to cook for dinner?

CLAYTON:

Jambalaya.

KARA:

If you have a free Saturday, how would you spend it?

CLAYTON:

Playing with our eight month old son right now, if he was walking, we'd be hiking.

KARA:

Well, you know, I think that's what baby carriers are for, right?

CLAYTON:

Yeah, gotta get my strength up right, right?

KARA:

And I ask everybody this: Avantis gondola or pub-two cheese balls?

CLAYTON:

Oh, hands down the gondola.

KARA:

I love that you're so definitive. Most people kind of hem and haw around and you feel very passionate.



CLAYTON:

I've had a lot of both.

KARA:

Okay, so you've done this scientifically.

CLAYTON:

you could say that...

KARA:

All right. And if you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

CLAYTON:

Really, going back to that point earlier, about your time in college is really special, and it's it's probably not something you'll get to experience again, and it's really important to do well in classes. But I feel like it's just as important to curate yourself intellectually and and take this time to develop critical, independent thinking skills, explore new topics, make friends with people that aren't carbon copies of yourself. Invest in things that bring you joy, and don't be afraid to take a risk, especially if you're interested in entrepreneurship. Doing that while in colleges is one of the best times.

KARA:

Well, thank you for that advice, and thanks again for being here.

CLAYTON:

Yeah, thanks for having me. I really appreciate it.

KARA:

That was Clayton Connell, assistant vice president of operations and Strategic Initiatives at Sam Houston, State University. Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our CAST alumni.