LELAND ROLING 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 Leland. Rowling. Leland is an information technology alum and currently serves as the Director of Information Systems Development for GrowMark. Welcome and thank you for being here. Thanks for having me. Well, let's start at the beginning. Why did you choose ISU?

LELAND
So I basically started out in Champaign at Parkland College, went through their computer engineering program, and at the time, I just had a lot of friends at ISU. I didn't have really a heavy, you know- I didn't have a lot of family in Champaign. I didn't have really a lot of friends in Champaign. So a lot of them were kind of telling me, Hey, you got to come over here. You got to come over. That's a lot of fun. There's a lot of things to do, and so I kind of looked into their computer science program, and sure enough, they had one and then I transferred, and the rest is history.

KARA
So how did you find computers as your passion? How did that speak to you?

LELAND
So I started learning about computers when I was about nine or 10. My dad worked for the federal government. And back then, you know, you'd computers were just a big box, right? Like a big, giant box on top of your desktop. And he would actually bring those home. He'd bring his home that kind of like a old school laptop, right? Except he'd bring the entire big box home with a monitor and everything, and he kind of is the one that got me into it. And it was first, just started. Starting playing little tiny games on your on this, on this giant box of computer. And then that turned into, you know, a couple years later, the internet started coming around, very old school, you know. I'm sure some of your listeners may know, you know, America Online, or COP you serve, or and those old, old internet providers we would get online using that. And from that, I started getting really into computers and games. And then I started kind of getting into how does all this stuff work? And so then I started going online. And at the time, you know, there wasn't a whole lot of information out there online. So luckily, I had one course in high school that kind of introduced me to programming, and from there, I just kind of started messing around and figuring out, okay, now I know how to kind of build basic things, and that kind of piqued my interest. And then I moved into actual development, and that's kind of how I picked where I wanted to go.

KARA
I love that, because you're taking me back to the days of Oregon Trail, right?

LELAND

Oh, yeah, yeah. We had Oregon Trail, an old Commodore with a green screen. And, yeah, that was something that, you know, I would look at that and go, I wonder how they did all that. And then, you I kind of eventually got there. I think the big difference that I always I I manage a lot of interns these days from ISU and and they haven't necessarily had to go through that experience. But, like, I think a lot of people don't realize, like, today you can just Google all the stuff, and back then, you couldn't do that. So it was really hard to, like, figure out how that stuff worked and get someone to show you, and I just got really lucky along the way.

KARA

So tell us, when you think back to your time as a student, what do you miss the most about your time on campus?

LELAND

Yeah, I think, I think it's kind of a tough one, because, like, I think probably the thing I missed the most was I had a lot of lab hours where I was in the computer lab and the ITK building at the time, or an old Union, and those areas where I was just in there doing projects, and you started getting into the mode of, kind of what I do today, which is I have a lot of people around me that are developers, and a lot of people who are really in the stuff, the technical stuff, and you're kind of building camaraderie with people talking about the thing that you guys are most passionate about. And I get a lot of that today, but I think back then, I really do miss kind of the organic way it would come up, right? Like, I have a project and you have a project, and we're all kind of on the same project, and we would all start spitballing ideas, and then next thing you know, you got five people who just all randomly showed up in the lab at that same time, and you're all talking about it, and you're all kind of trying to figure it out on your own. And it's kind of like organic learning in a way, right? And so that's probably the thing I miss the most about when I was in when I was in school, was just that coming about out of nowhere, and then you kind of sitting there for three, four or five hours just having a ball, trying to figure these things out. And so I did that quite a bit when I was in school, especially in my later years, when I was doing a lot of project work.

KARA

Well, there's something very special about being surrounded by people that have the same passion as you. And you know, no matter where you end up working as an alum. I think some of that that you capture on campus, where you have those big five hour chunks of time, where you are all in the same environment together, that can be incredibly hard to replicate. So I think it is very special to acknowledge that that's what happens in that learning environment here.

LELAND

Yeah, for sure, it's really hard to replicate. And as you kind of get moving through your career, you start to get less and less that. And then it's almost like you're, you're trying to get back to that. So I'm, I'm fortunate enough in my current role that I still get a little bit of that, because I sit with all my my peers, and I sit with all the developers, and so I can kind of see that happen. But I definitely remember those days, and it's really just about it, just organically coming up out of the blue it. Nowadays, I might have a meeting on something, and we know we're going to talk

about it, but back then, it was like, hey, you know, someone showed up for my one of my classes, and you know what? I'm going to ask him how he's doing it or and then we may get new discussion. I think that's just something that along the way, it didn't, it wasn't that anymore. But that is something I miss.

KARA
It's a different kind of energy, for sure. So tell us, then, what was this initial job search like for you? And I'm, I'm actually very curious about this from with your story, specifically because you talked about how your friends wanted you to come to ISU and come to Bloomington, normal, and knowing that you work for grow mark, it's clear that not only was the campus a great fit for you, but you the community as well, since you're still here, so why don't you talk us through that journey?

LELAND
Yeah, so I was a little bit of a different animal here in terms of my job search, so I just wasn't as in tune with like, all the internship possibilities in town and all the things around I went through the kind of, at the time, there was kind of a capstone program where what I did was I partnered with another student, and they had a they had their father had an appointment agency in town. And so part of our capstone project was, can we bring them kind of into the digital age? So they were doing everything manually. And so we did, like an actual project where we brought that company into more of a had, like a digital platform, basically had a website. And so as I did that, I kind of just started to see, like, Okay, this is kind of cool. This is what I want to do. So then the next step of that was, all right, I need to try to find a job. And I need to try to find a job maybe, and this is where I want to go. And so my initial job search was really, you know, for most, at least a lot it people that I know it was a little bit more of me searching, a little bit kind of trying to find stuff, but I was trying to be a little bit picky. And I think as time went on, I was like, you know, I really, really need to get a job. I really want to make some money, and that was the whole kind of goal of of getting into it. But also I really loved computers, so I was like, I just need to find something and kind of get into the profession. Of get into the professional development of it all. And so at the time, I landed a job with the state of Illinois doing some web development work for some of the child care programs that they have, basically just data entry and website development for a lot of these programs get quality ratings. So a lot of these places in town have, you know, some sort of quality rating that says, hey, they're a plus for for child care. And you should, you should know that if you send your child there, they have all these standards in place and everything and all that's tracked. And so that was kind of my first initial foray into it. I think the thing that I really would stress to people is I went through a contracting agency to do that. So they actually headhunted me at the time, I was still working my college job, which was I was working at at Walmart as a, as a, I was working in the lube shop, just doing oil changes. And they actually contacted me and said, hey, you know, you seem like a good candidate for this. And they actually were the ones that helped me get my foot in the door and then get the interview. And so I think a lot of students kind of walk away from that, because they're like, What is this? It seems maybe it could be scammy or something like that, but in reality, they're really it really did help me get my foot in the door. And then eventually I moved away from that contracting piece once I got here, into Grow mark, which is the next step. After a couple years, I kind of had reached my plateau and then applied at Growmark and was able to get in the door here.

KARA
And what has your path looked like since then, since you joined GrowMark?

LELAND
I started out here on a small contract for a couple months, I was basically doing exactly the work that was aligned with my skill set, and I'd done, apparently I'd done a good enough job, because two months in, they asked me to come on board. I only had a six month contract. And then from there, I was a programmer, just heads down, programmer, very shy guy. I didn't really want to talk to anybody. I was, I was fairly scared of all the higher ups, and didn't, didn't know, you know, what am I going to continue to do a good job? You're going to put me on something really hard, like, how does this work? And I went from that to kind of getting a lay of the land and seeing how all the systems worked, and became more of a technical lead. So I was leading some of the projects, and it was usually like a project at a time. And then I started getting more into kind of seeing the bigger picture in terms of our business and seeing like where things could be reused, and where we could maybe have a different strategy to do things. And so I moved more into a senior role where I was managing four or five, six different projects at a time. And really, I think the big piece there was my social interactions, my Soft Skills began to develop, like I said before, like I literally was scared to talk to people I didn't know who to. Off to what was going on. I worked for grow mark, which, you know, it's an agricultural Co Op, and so the terminology is a lot different there than, say, a State Farm, where you're talking a little bit more in corporate speak. And here there's a lot of agriculture terminology you have to learn. And so as I got comfortable, I really moved up the chain with those soft skills. And so at some point along the way, I kind of identified that we needed to have more of this broad strategic discussions around where we're going as a company in terms of our IT department and the technologies we use and things like that. So I became a manager in our Enterprise Architecture area, which we didn't have an enterprise architecture area, so I kind of was the inaugural manager for that. And then just more recently, here in the last year, I became the director of the area and control of the development for grumb. And

KARA
so tell me, I have a couple follow up questions on this one, I hear you talk about how you know you were a contract employee that then went to full time. And I also know in your current role, you work with interns very closely. So I'm curious, both from your personal experience as somebody on a temporary contract and then in the work that you do with your interns, what are skills that stand out to you as hireability? I mean, what do you think made Growmark want to keep you around on a permanent basis? What are qualities that you see in your interns? What are things in your that you really want to add in people to your team permanently? What are things that stand out for you?

LELAND
So I think the term that we always say in a lot of the interviews we do is we always say technical agility. So while yes, we may be looking for a very specific, you know, you know this programming language, or, you know, this skill we've really turned the corner on. We don't necessarily care about that. Yes, we want you to know some program. We want you to know a

programming language. We want you to have that background. But we're not necessarily looking for you have to have the specific thing. What we're trying to vet from our candidates, whenever we start doing the internships, is like, can you just learn and can you prove that to us in some way? And so many of the interns that we have in here, they have some of those soft skills too, right? Like they they're not afraid to talk to somebody. We do take our answers on the people who are kind of like what I was, right? The person that's maybe not. So what's going on here, you know what? I don't really want to open up, but I'm trying to figure this thing out. And then they end up flourishing once they get in here, because they kind of get the lay of the land. They kind of see where they need to go. We do try to kind of figure out, okay, yeah, we need to have a mix. Because if we have the right group, we take our internship programs five people at a time, so we usually have a group of five. We kind of have that mix. We have some people in there that are really good on the soft skill side, maybe have kind of proven they can learn the things. And then we have others that are really highly technical, can definitely learn whatever we throw at them. But maybe aren't so strong on that soft skill side, and they're going to hopefully get some of that as they go through the program. So we look pretty heavily at technical agility, and I would say that's the main thing. We also look for individuals that can have conversations with low social friction, but high intellectual friction. So basically, can you argue ideas without a get in person, right? So can you really have those conversations about how we want to solve something and get to the best solution, even if it might not be your idea, without getting personally offended by the conversations it's having. Right? People may say, Well, that's wrong. That's we shouldn't be going that route. We look for people who can take themselves out of the that personal struggle and be more like, Hey, we're really solution focused on trying to find the best thing. And so that's one of the things that we really look for in our in our candidates.

KARA
And then the other thing I wanted to follow up with you on was tell me more about the soft skills. And you know, you talked a little bit about being afraid of some of those personal interactions with people when you first started. How did you get over that fear? Was it a certain instance? Was it a moment in time, or was it a conscious decision that you had to make to move past that to be able to go to the next level?

LELAND
Yes, that's a good question. I remember very distinctly the conversation I had, I had gotten into a more of a technical role, and it was my first project I had, and I was, I was put with another person who was a senior project person. They were basically the senior lead, and I was kind of coming along for the ride, and I was going to help out and do more of the technical stuff. And I remember I didn't know anything that they were talking about in these meetings, right? Because it's, it's all terminology that's very foreign to me. It's the first time I've kind of been in those rooms where we're talking about certain things about these projects and certain things of the business. It's really how the business operates. And I just remember being very quiet. I was writing everything down. I was trying to get everything documented. But I just remember I was very quiet. And I remember my first performance review. This is my first kind of formal performance review. I got kind of dinged on, like you never say anything, you never speak up. Never do this, and you really got to speak up, because you need to earn the business trust to be able to kind of trust you to do these projects and know what they're talking about. And I

remember reading that and going, okay, yeah, she's not wrong. Like, I didn't I've been very hesitant, and I think that was a little bit of a turning point for me, because I thought in my head, well, I know I've been recording all this stuff, I just really need to dive deep into what exactly, how does all this stuff actually, you know, work with the business? And so my immediate thing was to I set up a lot of meetings with that person and tried to understand, you know, how do they understand the system and how does it work? And then I also even reached out to people within the business that were in those meetings and just said, Hey, can you just bare bones like walk me through this, because I just don't know any of this terminology, and it's just really hard for me to understand. And so once I started doing that, I think where the turning point there was is I got really comfortable with those people. You're talking to them every day. You're in the room with them, you get to kind of know them. You know stuff about their families, you know all sorts of things. And you're sharing things too. And then it just becomes more of a camaraderie. And you're, you guys are all kind of talking about the same thing. And then it became pretty easy. And then once I started knowing quite a few people in the building that opened up the door to a lot of other conversations, because you're almost, you're almost always in a room now with somebody that you've met or talked to before, and it becomes a lot more comfortable situation of all these people I know, versus just it's always brand new all the time now, now, years later, it doesn't really matter, but at the time, it was just a huge problem for me to just walk into a room just cold and be like, Hey, how's it going? Like, we're going to help you do this. And that. Nowadays it's a lot better, but it's because of those conversations up front of me just trying to get comfortable with the A, the actual what is going on and what does this thing do, and B, I don't know any of you, and I really need to understand. I need you guys to be a little bit play ball with me, a little bit in terms of, like, this kid doesn't know anything. We'll help him along.

KARA
Well, thank you for sharing, because I am sure you're not the only person that struggles with that. And I think it's so important for students to hear that not only have someone that's been in their shoes struggled with it, but they figured out how to be proactive and overcome it, and their career is better off for it. So I appreciate you sharing that story. Tell us, what does a Director of Information Systems Development do? Do you have a typical day. What does this look like for you?

LELAND
So yeah, I basically am in charge of our custom development teams within GrowMark. So we do a lot of custom development around our we have a platform that basically all of our member companies interact with to order things from the conglomerate as a whole. So a lot of our member companies order, you know, seed and fuel and everything that oak farmer would need. Basically all of our member companies serve our farmers, and we serve the member companies. And so I am the one that kind of supports and helps develop those platforms that we use to interact with our member companies. So I have multiple teams that do that, and we're talking everything from mobile apps to the web development to even our data architecture, so that might that's my primary role, is to manage those teams, and then obviously there's our internship program. I help do some of those things with our interns and source projects from the business. But I'd say the majority of my job is really around interaction with our business areas, in helping to determine where they want to go and in terms of products and things that

they're going to create. And so I've had a lot of conversations with internal stakeholders about where they want to go and what they want to do. And it could be everything from we want to we want to build something from scratch to, hey, we're talking to this vendor, and they have a product and we want to integrate. And so I'm there to kind of help them along in that journey and figure out where they want to go.

KARA
What would you say your favorite part of your job is?

LELAND
Favorite part is probably just, I think I say this a lot internally- I get this question a lot from internal candidates, a lot, because they're trying to figure out, you know, what is the appeal? And I think the biggest appeal for me is we have so many different product divisions, so many areas of business that you're basically doing something different all the time. Good example is, you know, few weeks ago, we were working on a mobile app for a specific business unit, a logistics business unit, and in the same day, I was working with our HR department on a certain type of web application, right? And so you're swinging from literally, like something that has to do with a supply chain issue to something that has to do with the Human Resources thing. And there could be another day I'm working with something with our credit department. So there's just a wide variety of different things and different problems, and you're getting kind of thrown around in these different areas where you're like, Oh, this is kind of interesting. And you're getting to see various aspects of of the business. It's not just like a clear cut, like we have one product, and we have to keep supporting that product, and we have to keep on building features into that product. There are tons of different business areas within GrowMark that are vying for those resources, and so that's probably the biggest thing. It's just so much variety.

KARA
And on the flip side, I like to ask, what do you consider to be? Most challenging thing about your job?

LELAND
I would say it's really time management's a big one. I have a ton of things that I'm doing, and that's probably because of the variety, but time management and just really keeping up with the business and making sure everybody's getting what they want. There's so many different areas. So you're really trying to you're truly trying to juggle a lot of balls in the air at once, and you're trying to make sure that you're appeasing everybody's requests and getting them there in a timely fashion. So dealing with that's a big piece of it, and just the people we have, a lot of we have, you know, 30 to 40 people internally, and lot of different personalities, and really trying to make sure everybody has what they need, and everybody's doing the best job that they possibly can.

KARA
All right. Well, thanks so much for sharing Leland, this has been so much fun. We are going to finish with a speed round. So just go with your first instinct on these questions. The first one, are you a morning person or a night owl?

LELAND
Um, I would say I'm a morning person now. Used to be a night owl.

KARA
Sometimes that growing up just requires that shift, right? Texting or talking?

LELAND
I would say I'm more talking, mainly because it seems like every time I'm texting, something gets put across incorrectly.

KARA
Fair enough. coffee or tea?

LELAND
Coffee for sure.

KARA
How do you take it?

LELAND
I take one cream and I take one packet of stevia. I'm on the stevia bandwagon right now.

KARA
Easy enough. What's your favorite season?

LELAND
I would say fall. It's not, it's not really- It's starting to get cooler, but it's not too cold.

KARA
What's your favorite thing to cook for dinner?

LELAND
Oh, that's a good one, probably just a big fat steak.

KARA
Best trip you've ever taken.

LELAND
Oh, it's a good one. I haven't really been out of the US much, but I would say best trip I've ever taken. My family, we all go down to Amelia Island every year, and it's pretty much the best trip I've had every single year.

KARA

That's awesome. What a neat tradition for you. And I ask everyone who comes on the podcast, Avantis gondola, or pub two cheese balls?

LELAND
Oh, it's pub two cheese balls. Easy.

KARA
And one last question for you. If you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

LELAND
I would say just always be learning. I mean, that's probably the easiest one to say, but especially in my field of work, it's never going to end. You're going to be learning. I think, I think a lot of technology students, a lot of IT professionals, they all know that that's the case. But definitely get good at learning. Get really fast at learning. Things utilize all the stuff that's out there to your advantage. It's funny because AI comes up all the time nowadays, and some people are really afraid of it, but I would say, use that to your advantage, and get really good at helping, letting that augment your ability to learn. And so if that's, if there's one piece I would give it's: get good at learning.

KARA
Thank you for that advice, and thanks again for being here. That was Leland Rowling, Director of Information Systems Development for GrowMark. Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our cast alumni.