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This is an edited transcript of the August 21, 2013 SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast interview titled: [Pam Slim on Entrepreneurship, Community, and Her New Book: 'Body of Work'](#).

Announcer: Are you a hard-working, self-employed professional striving for small business success? There is help. Welcome to the SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast featuring candid conversations about successful self-employment.

Stephen Lahey: Welcome to the SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast. I'm Stephen Lahey, and I'll be your host. Today I'm excited to have author and entrepreneur Pamela Slim on the podcast. If you're like me, you might know Pam based on reading her award-winning book, *Escape from Cubicle Nation*, or her small business blog found at [EscapefromCubicleNation.com](#).

Pam is frequently quoted as an expert on entrepreneurship in publications such as the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Businessweek*, *Forbes*, *Entrepreneur*, *Money Magazine*, and *Psychology Today*. As an author, speaker, and seasoned coach, Pam has created an impressive body of work and has helped small business owners all around the world to pursue their passion more successfully.

Today she is going to share some of her business wisdom with us; and as a bonus, she'll be pulling back the curtain on her exciting new book which is scheduled to be published later this year. Thanks for joining me on the podcast today, Pam.

Pamela Slim: Thanks for having me. I'm delighted to be here.

Stephen Lahey: I'm really looking forward to hearing about your new book, which I guess is tentatively titled, *Body of Work*, correct?

Pamela Slim: That is correct.

Stephen Lahey: But before we do that, I find your story very interesting. You had a life before you became an entrepreneur and there's an interesting story about what lead you to actually start your own business. Can you talk us through that just a little bit?

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Pamela Slim:

Definitely. Well, as of August 15 of this year 2013, I'll have been in business for 17 years, and that is really divided into two different kinds of businesses that are related. They're both on the human side of business, but kind of focusing on different areas.

So my life prior to working for myself, the last real paying job that I held as an employee was at Barclays Global Investors, which is a financial services firm in San Francisco, which I loved. I know sometimes when people hear *Escape from Cubicle Nation*, they think I am rabidly anti-corporate and I'm actually not, nor have I ever been. I really enjoyed my time in corporate. I was a director of training and development and got to meet all kinds of interesting people and really focus on their own training and growth.

And the path that led me there was kind of this interesting journey through different work modes. When I was in college, I was an international service and development major with a focus in non-formal education in Latin America. And so the roots of that, I think, were always being interested in helping people to make positive social change, especially people who were in extremely dire economic circumstances. I've always been a huge advocate for grassroots development. That is, looking at what people already have inside them and using that wisdom in order to make change, as opposed to kind of a top down kind of change.

So from that focus as I began to do the work in Latin America, I lived in Mexico and Columbia when I was in college, I recognized that my appropriate role was not as an expatriate aid worker but more doing work in my own country. And then it became a journey of working in nonprofits, and a community foundation, and local nonprofits, and kind of an art and science museum, and always with this thread of being interested in personal growth and development, learning and development. Eventually, it led me into corporate training and development, which has been an area that I've loved for many years.

So I had this really rich variety of experiences. I also ran a nonprofit as a volunteer executive director that was a martial arts organization with the Afro-Brazilian form of Capoeira for about ten years.

So by the time I was 30, I had all kinds of interesting, different training and work experience. I was also really tired because I was

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working full-time during the day and teaching martial arts at night and performing on the weekends. And so I quit and just started to do consulting and that was really the first part of about the first nine years of my business was doing consulting inside companies—many large companies in the tech sector, Silicon Valley, and financial services companies like Charles Schwab.

After doing that work for a long time, which I really loved, I did recognize that a lot of people were really smart and creative and a subset of them did want to leave to try entrepreneurship but they really had no idea how. So that was the seed that sowed the idea of beginning my blog, *Escape from Cubicle Nation*, which turned into a book, which turned into a business and that kind of brings us up to today.

Stephen Lahey:

Well, one of the things that I hear in your background – and by the way, mine isn't so different. I don't know if you've ever glanced at my LinkedIn profile, but fresh out of college I was working for an environmental coalition in fundraising, which is very practical, I suppose. I felt like I was making a difference because I could measure it.

But you're also very practical. When you're working with people in poverty, it's not about grand ideas, it's about helping them. And that practicality, it sounds like it's a thread that runs throughout your work.

I think there are a lot of people out there (they're in sort of the fluff and unicorns set) and they may not have ever really dealt with serious human problems. Of course, doing that will cure you of fluff and unicorns beliefs. I mean, it's nice to think positive, that's great, but people need help. And I think that's a very important part of your background, isn't it?

Pamela Slim:

It is. Yes. That's a really interesting way of looking at it because it's a very strong foundation and interest I've always had. I really learned early on sometimes we love, especially today with the social media environment, we love to kind of debate huge societal questions, right? Like what should we do with young people and how do we solve crime and issues of poverty? When we are talking in big picture terms, it unfortunately tends to just end in arguments. I'm right, this is my side, this is yours.

But what I've always been fascinated by, and I think specifically to the work that I did with Capoeira with the organization where I was working with teenagers in their neighborhoods, walking down the streets, talking to people who were in rough situations, extremely poor with sometimes a parent in jail, some of the kids had already been involved in gangs and so forth given the nature of the neighborhoods – I was always really interested, as you said, in what we could actually do to help a kid make a positive change and actually to feel some ownership of that change.

So I was lucky in finding the art of Capoeira which is an amazing, exciting art that was really attractive, I think, to a lot of teenagers. The way that Brazilians talk about Capoeira is the art of liberation because it was started by African slaves in Brazil. And so there's a really wonderful story to it, right? A story about maintaining your identity, celebrating who you are.

But my reality was actually helping these kids to get through high school, helping them to leave a gang, sometimes needing to find alternative housing so they would be out of their neighborhood so literally their life would not be threatened. Some of them were threatened with death if they were to leave their neighborhood or leave their gang.

So that may make me a tad self-righteous, I will admit. But when I'm having big conversations about what do we need to do with youths, should we just make stronger penalties and lock them all away, that's where I can really sit back and say, you know what, after having had pretty close interaction at least in one main area with a lot of teenagers, here's what I have seen that actually worked. Here's what I personally did to help them to graduate from high school, to help them stop being involved in things that were really destructive to them.

And I think the same thing is true, especially in my work in *Escape from Cubicle Nation*, when I'm working with people to help them leave a relatively stable corporate job where they do get a regular paycheck, they have benefits and all that in order to start a business, I take that extremely seriously. I am not one at all that ever says just jump and a net will appear and don't worry about it, you'll figure it out. I mean, it keeps me up at night. I want to make sure that people are thinking things through very specifically. And I think that's part of what has allowed me to really develop some

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specific expertise in this area is caring and being concerned about the individual decisions that people are making.

As any kind of advisor knows, you can never have everybody follow advice 100%. I know I don't always follow advice 100% from my advisors. But I do believe in that real feet in the street, real things are at stake kind of experience. Personally that's what gets my creativity and my excitement up. We're not talking about hypothetical people, we're not just making up a big promise, kind of a big marketing promise to get everybody revved up. It's about what actually is helping people to make a positive change.

Stephen Lahey: This is a very interesting conversation and I like that it's actually going in a direction that I didn't think about upfront because it's so important when people think about the resources that are out there for them, things they can learn from, books, training programs and so on, that they be practical. Because it all comes down to whether or not it works in your world. Something that might be a fit for me might not be a fit for you and so on.

And I think you need to also learn how to kind of analyze that because you don't want to go in and take advice and revamp your business based on someone else's reality that may work for them. I think Mark Twain had a quote something like my habits are great for me, but they might kill you, sort of thing.

Pamela Slim: Yeah.

Stephen Lahey: Well, my business habits are great for me, but they might not be workable for you. So, I mean, it's a tricky little equation. And we could probably go into that a lot, but you're dealing with a certain group of people that you find are sort of your tribe, your community, and you've talked about community building. Tell us about your tribe, your community.

Pamela Slim: The people that I really get energized in working with (and that tend to gravitate toward working with me or my message) are people that, first of all, do see a deeper purpose besides just making money or taking care of their family. It's people that get kind of fired up by wanting to make some kind of significant change in the world.

So sometimes those are societal changes like helping get people to work, or solving big problems like hunger, poverty, all that kind of thing, kind of social entrepreneur types. But it's also, I find, people who are really excited by innovating the way that things are done and improving things and having really creative ways of creating tools like different kind of software or a different approach to running companies that can really make things better.

I find, probably because of my roots of being concerned and connected about the bigger issues in the world, it always makes me feel really good where somebody is fired up about what it is that they're doing.

At the same time, I think, one of the things that's the most interesting to me that I enjoy about my community is it is not just made up of all one type of person. So not just from one age demographic. I have a big contingency of folks who are much younger, who are in their 20s. I have folks who are in their 40s, 50s, even 60s. And people that come from different ethnic backgrounds, and sometimes from different political backgrounds.

But often the thread that ties everybody together is an interest and a curiosity about learning from other people and recognizing that the best kind of problem solving comes from not just delivering one kind of formula, like this is my way and this is it, but in really working together across diverse lines in order to make things happen. And that to me is always so interesting when you can have that kind of dialogue.

So where there may not be some of the core demographic characteristics where there's total unity within the community, definitely from the psychographic perspective in terms of characteristics, folks need to enjoy differing points of view, they need to have compassion. I really don't do well with straight up arguing, or the kind of really intense discussion that happens where people are just kind of screaming at each other, even online.

I remember a few years ago I was talking to a really popular blogger who is quite controversial in the way that she puts herself out online. She was talking about all the hate mail and troll comments and all of that. She said, well, what do you do? And I sat back and I was like, you know, maybe there's been one or two I can remember in all of the years that I've had my blog.

And maybe some of it is because I just don't enjoy that kind of conflict. I like different perspectives. But it's very important to me that the kind of conversation happens with kind of a constructive context and with a context of respect. And that tends to be the kind of person that I see that's really interested in my work.

But the thing that's fascinating to me is it is also cross-dimensional where there are people like software developers and artists and social entrepreneurs and people interested in business-to-business, corporate kinds of people, and that to me is just really exciting about my community.

Stephen Lahey: You've said in the past, and I think it's a great philosophy, that you're not looking to build a quote, unquote, empire. You're looking to build a community. And it's really in line with your values because if you were an empire builder, if you're going to build an empire, you're going to deal with unbelievable amounts of conflict and pushback from so many different directions. Look at Donald Trump, for example. Does he seem like a guy who dislikes conflict? No.

Pamela Slim: Oh no.

Stephen Lahey: Empire builders tend to be very aggressive and they kind of thrive on that sort of thing. But it sounds like one very important value for you in your community striving for harmony because that creates the best learning environment.

Pamela Slim: Yes. Exactly. And I think even to be building community, it's really important to be able to discuss different points of view, to be able to hold very different opinions about things. But to me the context of it is that it's all done with a foundation of respect for each other.

One of my dear friends here from Arizona actually ran the social media political campaign of the opposite candidate that I voted for in the election. And we had such a good time just kind of bantering back and forth, but in a really fun way, you know, where I'd say I hope you have total success and I hope your candidate loses, and he would banter back and forth with me. But when there are like supercharged political issues that are coming up, we really like to discuss it because I know at no point will he ever point the

finger and say “you liberal” whatever, and I won't the point the finger and say “you conservative.”

We really try to understand where your framework is coming from, where are you getting your information, have you thought about this? And to me that just, I believe, that is the way that we can begin to solve bigger problems. I see that as being a really deep issue that we have. Everything so quickly devolves into camps that makes it really hard for things to happen.

So it's not that I dislike different points of view, it's not that I don't ever want to be challenged because I love to be challenged, but it's different for somebody to say you, fill in the blank, whatever title they think I fit into, you always believe this, or you guys always say this. That just totally defeats the purpose of any kind of critical thought and that's just not interesting to me and I don't think it's constructive.

Stephen Lahey: I agree. The reason I'm want to talk about this with you is because I think there are so many people that really aren't clear on what kind of community or what kind of tribe, if you will, or what kind of market segment they're really going for. And everything about what you're doing is staying true to that aspect of your values and I like that a lot.

Tell me a little bit about your book *Body of Work*, which is also, I think, rooted in your values. Even the title *Body of Work* versus Empire. [laughs]

Pamela Slim: Right.

Stephen Lahey: You could have titled it My Empire, but you titled it *Body of Work*. So tell me a little bit about that and how that relates to your values and how that relates to the group or groups that you're serving.

Pamela Slim: Yes. My first book was *Escape from Cubicle Nation* which was really built on the specific work of helping corporate employees to leave and start a business. And after doing this kind of work where I've coached many, many people that are going through that process, one of things that I've noticed is that in the way we like to make things black and white, and right and wrong, often within the entrepreneurial community we would begin to point fingers and

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say, you know, those terrible people in corporate jobs, or, if you stay there, then you're not really an innovator, right? Whereas we entrepreneurs have it all figured out. You know, we're kind of the cool kids. And I do not believe that to be true.

I think that there is a lot more complexity in the new world of work where things are not as stable as they have been in the past and I don't believe they ever will be. I'd love to be proven wrong. It would be fantastic if we all of a sudden hit 50 years of totally improvement and really stable career paths and all of that. I don't believe that to be true and I would rather be more risk-averse and plan for a world of work that's much more disruptive.

So the premise of the book is really – if we can't control a career path, we cannot guarantee that our career is going to be there, that our job will be there in any given industry or company, if we can't control the fact that our business will be stable, that our nonprofit will be able to continue to be funded because things are changing so quickly in the market, the one thing we can really be conscious of and control is what is that body of work that we want to create throughout the course of our life.

And to be extremely conscious about how we want to create that. So what do we want to create? What are the specific things? Is it books? Is it software code? Intellectual property? What do we want to create in terms of things like a community impact? How do we want to have an impact within our own family? What kind of parents do we want to be, if we're parents? Et cetera.

And then what are the specific skills that are required in order to be very flexible in moving between different work modes. Because I think that's really what the wave of the future is, right? You may have your business for a while, you may go freelance, an opportunity may come up where you are excited to work for a company and be an employee, you know, a startup or a bigger company, and so you need to figure out how you can be flexible and move between those different work modes.

As an example, I think one of the core skills that's required in the new world of work is the ability to tell a compelling story, right? How do you tell the story about why a company should hire you after you've been on your own? When you leave a company how do you tell a story to the marketplace about why even though you

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have been in corporate life your whole life, you actually are going to be an amazing business owner and you're going to be providing great value? I think that storytelling is one example of a skill that is an essential part of being successful in the new world of work.

So I'm excited about it because it feels to me like it will be providing relief and options and opening up possibilities for people that just see the new world of work as being not the way that it used to be. And although we can grieve that for a while at a certain point that just is the way it is and the way it's going to be. So operating with new rules and new guidelines and developing new skills, I think, is hopefully going to be very empowering to people.

And I'm excited as well to be bringing the message not just to people who are in the world of entrepreneurship, but everywhere because all work is honorable. All that matters is that you find the particular work mode that matches what your needs are at a given stage of your life.

Stephen Lahey:

I totally agree. And one of the things that some people listening to this podcast might not know is that I run an executive search practice dealing with placing marketing executives with multibillion dollar companies. They're consumer products companies whose brands you would probably know. And I think that a lot of them, at this point in time, even though they've seen a lot of change and many of them are fairly mature in their careers, they are still sort of hoping against hope that things will go back to some stable reality.

And I keep telling them very honestly as a recruiter that unless your current company has some systematic blockage that is impacting you, one that you can't do anything about, you know, unless your boss gets hit by a bus, you're not going to get promoted or whatever, then if you leave you are taking on a lot of additional risk. You really have no idea what's going to be happening within a new company. A new job. And that may sound like a bizarre thing for a headhunter to say, but it's reality. Change is rampant and it's not going to stop.

And I think that for folks also who are job hunting who might be listening to this, absolutely you want to consider being a consultant even just to get in front of potential employers and doing some consulting to get to know potential employers. And I tell this to job

candidates all the time, it's about flexibility, and I think that's what you're saying, and sort of reading things more accurately. It's about dealing with the new reality.

Well, just thinking in terms of your new book and your business, obviously, this is a whole new chapter, literally and figuratively. I'm guessing you're going to develop new keynotes, training programs, things like that. Is that true?

Pamela Slim:

It's very true. And it's really exciting because I do notice that it's usually around every seven or eight years, but for my own body of work, to use my own terminology, that I do, like, I love to dig deeply into a particular area. As I said, the first nine years or so of my consulting practice, it was so intoxicating. It was so interesting to try to figure out how to really develop internal human capability inside big companies and I just loved digging into that.

As I started to get towards the end of it, I was less interested. It became less energizing because I had just done so much of it and it just wasn't as interesting, which led me into this totally new arena ***Escape from Cubicle Nation***, which I've done now for the last eight years.

And I think what I'm really looking to is to be able to develop new keynotes in general about the new world of work. And one of the beautiful things about having a very clear and compelling brand like ***Escape from Cubicle Nation*** is that people immediately know what it's about. The subtitle for the book is ***From Corporate Prisoner to Thriving Entrepreneur***, so it's been very useful and sticky in getting people to understand the work that I do.

Of course, it's exceptionally not useful to get myself in front of corporate audiences, right? I still am totally energized in thinking about helping people to work more effectively and think strategically within their careers and helping companies to manage the modern day workforce and all these areas that I'm still really passionate about. But what corporate meeting planner in their right mind would bring in the ***Escape from Cubicle Nation*** lady? It scares people, even though I have never been anti-corporate. In my book I'm not. I never say it in any kind of interviews. It's more that there are certain components of corporate life for some people that really do become suffocating and I think these are things that we can and should address.

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So that part is exciting to me – talking about the bigger themes, like about these new skills for the new world of work, about what success means, about what new leadership means, and I'm totally excited about really developing those talks.

And then I think on the professional services side, I have been so focused on my business, a direct to the consumer model, where I've really done training and worked with individual entrepreneurs; and now what I'm really looking at doing more of is in working with fewer clients but in really helping to shape and develop their body of work.

So folks who might be a little bit further along in their own business cycle where they have an amazing message, incredible content, and they really want to grow and scale it. Or also in working with companies, I've begun to do some work with other companies that serve the small business market, for example, in really helping them to create very compelling content to share with their market.

So that's kind of the fun thing about it is in many ways it goes back to my roots of what I did as a consultant doing tons of training and development and really understanding how people develop content and then being able to use it with a new market based on all the experience it got working with individuals. So it feels very exciting and very energizing.

Of course, there's a part of it which is difficult because it means working with far fewer people than I have. I've done a lot of one-on-one work, so I've really helped hundreds of people throughout the last eight years make that transition from corporate life to working for themselves, but it does feel like the right decision for myself and for my family. It's a lot of work to be on the phone or on Skype all the time. And I am actually at a point, my kids are five and eight, and I really want to be able to pick them up after school and working on bigger projects so I have a little bit more flexibility in my schedule.

Stephen Lahey:

You've certainly earned the right. Now, my listeners are primarily consultants and business coaches, and I know some of them are probably thinking about doing what you're doing. In other words, writing a book. Any advice as we wrap up on how to even begin?

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Pamela Slim:

Yes. I find what's useful personally is there are many reasons to write a book and I don't diminish any of them because one for some people can simply be how cool would it be to have written a book as part of my legacy, as part of my body of work, and that can actually be a valid thing that there's something very cool about getting your thoughts down in the form of a book. And so from one perspective where you just want to create that, there are many different ways that you can do that.

But from a strategic business perspective, if you're wanting to use your book, for example, to drive sales in your business, then choosing a topic for what that book should be is going to be driven based on what are the main questions that people are always asking you about? What's that core expertise you have that can really be of service and of value where you can be sharing something very concrete and tactical with people that will help solve real world problems? I think those kinds of books are always going to be really useful.

You can also have the type of book that is about a bigger idea, a kind of Malcolm Gladwell type of book where you want to share a different way of thinking about the world. And from that perspective you might want to build your platform and approach with a traditional publisher.

Whether you're publishing something as a self-publishing project or if you're going with a traditional publisher, the basic premise is the same. You have to always have a case for why people would be interested in buying your book and it is your primary job as a writer to sell your own book.

It doesn't matter if you're self-publishing or traditional publishing. Traditional publishers can help, they do have some resources just for distribution and sometimes a little bit of a marketing budget in a very short window of time when your book comes out, but for the most part you need to be able to do that.

So this is a part that can be a little bit difficult where you might have a passion for an idea and you feel like I'd love to get this message that I'm so passionate about out into the world; however, who is the market for that idea? How are you actually going to sell it? And that often can be the thing that can help you sort through a variety of different ideas.

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If you've sold more practical books and you've helped people, then you get a good reputation. Later maybe some of your cool passion projects like the next Harry Potter series or some cool book can be easier to sell or easier to promote when you're already known. But if it's the first one that you're doing, I would suggest be really pragmatic and help solve a problem, tell it in a clear way, and that's going to be the most successful route.

- Stephen Lahey: Absolutely. Well, I'm sure that a lot of people would like to learn more about you and your work and hopefully subscribe to your newsletter and so on. Where should they go to do that?
- Pamela Slim: They can go to EscapefromCubicleNation.com. Now that my book is finally finished, I'm eventually going to be moving most of my platform to PamelaSlim.com. Right now it's mainly a holding place where I just have a main page, but eventually that's really where I'm going to be having most of my information. So right now at EscapefromCubicleNation.com is where you can find all my contact information, but then probably in the next couple months is when PamelaSlim.com will kick in.
- Stephen Lahey: That makes a lot of sense. Well, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast, Pam. I appreciate it.
- Pamela Slim: Well, thanks so much for having me.
- Stephen Lahey: And to our listeners, thank you for spending some time with us today. And if you like what you heard, I encourage you to visit SmallBusinessTalent.com now and subscribe to the podcast by email. And when you do, you'll be alerted whenever we post fresh podcast content of course, but you'll also receive special resources for email subscribers only, including our new LinkedIn guide, which I know you're going to love, and much more. Thanks again for listening today and best wishes for your success.
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