

Kathryn: Podcasting from Fairfield Connecticut, you're listening to Compass, where we talk with location independent women about finding work and getting paid. I'm your host Kathryn Hunter and you're listening to episode 11 with Mari Johnson, data analyst. Today we're talking about keeping sane with timers, shutting down negative self talk, and knowing yourself. Mari, welcome to the show.

Mari: Thank you so much.

Kathryn: So, I like to start with your early life to see where that influences you later on. What did you want to be when you were five?

Mari: I have always had the answer ready for this, which might say something about my personality. I wanted to be in this order, a librarian, a makeup artist, a dancer, and a journalist. I wanted to be all of those things and I, I have more or less done all of those things, so.

Kathryn: Did you have a plan to do them all at once or was it like stages?

Mari: Oh no, nothing ever, I, I gave up planning fairly early on. I, some of it was the way that I was raised was to always look around and see what needed to be done and just go do that, go be useful. And so my grandparents instilled that in me. I started working in an office when I was 13, working for the family business. And I, even then, it was trying to find ways to have news stories, like to be a journalist. I was a citizen journalist when I was 13. Nobody read my articles or anything, but, but I was writing them and illustrating them, actually, very badly. But you know, it all fell apart. I went to the science academy and dropped everything else and decided that that was the thing I wanted to do and then decided, no, no, nevermind, don't want to do that. And then got to college and majored in classical civilizations and English. So yeah, no, there was never any kind of coherent plan to accomplish any of that. I just randomly, when an opportunity presented itself, make myself available rapidly for that, if that makes any kind of sense. It's just, I kind of waited for things to align and they frequently did, which was strange, but there you go.

Kathryn: Yeah. So was there anything from your degree that you currently use?

Mari: I didn't actually finish my degree. I had every intention to, but I liked working more and liked sitting in classrooms far, far less. And back then there wasn't really the option of doing all of that online. So I dropped out and started working and I actually started working in the makeup and beauty business very early on and became, very soon after, one of the first digital beauty journalists and beauty editors. I started working on the Internet when it was very, very new. Back when we had to be careful how many pictures and how big the pictures were because they'd make the site too slow to load.

Kathryn: I have vague recollections of that.

Mari: Yeah. They're like, this is way too big. It'll never load. Oh, nevermind. So yeah, I started working, I loved, I loved the whole idea of the Internet and got active as early as I could

because that kind of hit all the buttons. I could be a journalist, I could work in beauty. I could meet other people who are doing things, movers and shakers and influencers, before there were influencers and that kind of thing. It was just a whole new universe and I loved it. So that kind of took the place of me considering college.

Kathryn: And what was your first foray into being location independent?

Mari: I was working for UT, University of Texas and I had a very sit down job and I was starting to feel the effects of it. You know, the, the stamina and the hits to my health. And I decided I wanted to get a personal trainer and I wanted to learn how to take better care of myself. And then I decided to certify. I decided to become a personal trainer. And at that time I was also dancing. I was a, I still am, a Tango Dancer an Argentine Social Tango Dancer. And I noticed that the dancers around me were having problems with their feet, problems with their back and I was learning really helpful stuff for them, for me, for my job. And I decided that I liked the freedom of setting my own schedule of working with people one on one and being able to help people, help myself, help, you know, the, the quality of my life in a lot of different ways. And that gave me everything I really felt like I needed at that time. Do you know what I mean? It's not a lot of money and there were sacrifices because it's, it's the income is so variable. But that was the first thing I did where I didn't need to be in an office. I could be in other places until they needed me on site.

Kathryn: And so what do you do now?

Mari: I am a data analyst now, which is a strange turn of events. Back when I was a beauty journalist, I worked with another beauty journalist and we worked together, I think for over a year before we realized we were in the same city. And she was like, "Hey, do you want to get a curry?" "Oh my God, you're here?" So when I was working with her, I was also designing websites, at the same time that I was a beauty journalist. I was helping these websites get content up and build frameworks and I was very, what's a good word? Exacting. We'll call it exacting. I think that's positive. That's not so terrible as saying anal retentive. I was very specific about the way I built websites and they were always W3C compliant. I generated very clean code. I had a reputation for building really, really tight, lint free websites. And, my friend remembered that. So she goes off, gets into ad trafficking and advertising operations, digital advertising operations. And her boss comes to her and says, do you know anybody who's obsessive with numbers? And I think the conversation probably went like, well, I know someone who is obsessive. And, so she called me and she said, have you ever done this before? And I said, well, I've done things sort of aligned to it in other jobs, but I've never done this. So, this job that I have now was never advertised. I didn't interview for it. They didn't hire me for my skill set. They hired me for my mindset, because that was the transferable thing that they needed, is somebody who could do, who could stare into Excel for hours and hours and hours at a time and not lose their minds. And that's how I got the job because of a friend of mine who worked in the beauty industry, years and years and years ago who remembered I was obsessive. So, there you go, keep those friends.

Kathryn: And when you're describing your job to people who basically they're being nice, they're kind of curious but they don't want the in depth answer...

Mari: Nobody ever does.

Kathryn: How do you do that?

Mari: Well part of it, I tell people I'm a remote data analyst. I they ask me what industry I'm in, then it's usually it's, it's a less pleasant conversation because saying you work in advertising is like saying you work for Satan. Nobody wants to talk to you, you know, they think I'm the reason for popup ads. And I'm not, I'd like to make that clear. I am not the reason for pop up ads. But, yeah, so the industry is not one anyone wants to talk about. So I usually just say remote data analyst.

Kathryn: When you're describing it to someone who actually does want to know.

Mari: Then I tell them I'm a data wrangler. Which is more accurate to the contract that I'm working on. It's a more specific kind of data analyst. I do a lot of analysis, but the large portion of my day is getting vast quantities of data into one cohesive story.

Kathryn: So, do you have multiple clients or just the main client?

Mari: At this point I only have one client. I'm in the busier part of my year. In the summertime I pick up additional contracts doing other things, but right now that's my main thing.

Kathryn: What would you say your first major struggle was with going remote?

Mari: The combination of doing deep work and being isolated. It sounds like it's perfect because to do deep work you really do need to be isolated to some extent, because you need to work without interruption because starting over sucks and you to have that quiet space to find the problems, to find the things that don't belong. But when you're in the deep work state, you can frequently work many more hours than you intend to, not eat, not take a break, not do the things you need to do, not manage the things you need personally. You know, you just work through until the job is done, whether that's six hours or 14 hours. And that's not necessarily a great way to, to plan your day.

Kathryn: How do you mitigate that?

Mari: I set timers, honestly. I have my little tomato a app and that's not what it's called and I can't remember what it's called.

Kathryn: Pomodoro.

Mari: That's it, yes! I have a little app and I set my timer and I make myself get up cause I was a personal trainer. I know what happens if I just sit here and stare. So you know I try to make myself get up, do my exercises, stretch, get some water, walk around, take my dogs out, something.

Kathryn: What would you say your first major success was?

Mari: Without getting into too much fiddly sort of detail, we had tried a program that was supposed to help us gather the data into one cohesive form and it did not work. It went badly and to undo the damage in the data at that point it was like looking for a crooked needle in a haystack of needles. It took ages and I was having a very hard time sticking with it for as long as it took to find it. And I finally found it and I was super excited and realized there's nobody who's going to care about this, you know, except for obviously the people at my job. But I did a victory dance. There may have been shouting and that kind of thing, but, you know, it's, it's not the sort of victory you can go like, guess what I did. Yeah. Nobody cares. But I was very excited.

Kathryn: And beyond not caring, they probably don't really understand.

Mari: No, they really don't. They have no idea why I was giving myself a migraine over this. But it was, I did learn a lot from that experience because it was the first time I had something go wrong and it was something that wasn't my fault, so I couldn't undo it from my own process. So that was, that was tricky. And shutting down the self talk was really important. That was the first time I had to deal with that. Where you have to stop yourself from saying, I'm never going to get it. This is just taking too long. I should just give up. I'm so bad at this. What did I think I was doing, doing this job? You know, you have to shut that down.

Kathryn: Do you have any tricks for that?

Mari: Oh, I wish I did. I wish I had something other than just shut it up as soon as it hits, you know, as soon as it boils up to the surface, you just stop it.

Kathryn: Just recognize and reset.

Mari: Yeah. Yup. Exactly. So just get up, walk away, come back.

Kathryn: Yeah. I think that's one of the biggest things for me is I always need to take a brain break in between projects. I'll do, I'll do two or three projects on a given day. And if I don't do that, I will start trying to solve project b using the techniques I was using in the project a, which may or may not be relevant.

Mari: Right, right. Yeah. I've had very similar situations.

Kathryn: So if you were starting over today, would you do it differently?

Mari: No, probably not. I actually, I surprised myself at how smoothly that went. And I think a lot of that is because there's so much more material online now. So when, you know, I'm faced with my friend telling me, hey, we need you to do this job. And I'm like, okay, what are your platforms? And she said, they're, these, go for it. And so I go online, I find the certifications, I do everything in an, in a process of I think two weeks I managed to ramp up on, on the platforms that I would be using. I mean, in the old days you couldn't do that. You had to wait for somebody to hold your hand and guide you through it. And she still did that. I mean with the other things that I couldn't learn online. So, that's

incredibly helpful and I still do that. I still, as this industry changes, I'm constantly going through the educational material provided, not only by the companies themselves that run the platforms, but by the compliance agencies for our industry.

Kathryn: And what about schooling? Would you have done that differently?

Mari: Yes. Yes. Stay in school, boys and girls. It's so much easier when you're younger. It only gets harder. It's easier to do it online in terms of logistics. I love that. But really if I could, I was close. I could have just finished and now I will have to for a lot of that, I would have to start over because I don't remember the math. There's, there's no chance that I remember calculus. There's really no chance I remember any of it. I would have to start over and that's daunting. So, I would have finished if I could have.

Kathryn: So, I'm guessing you don't really have a typical day.

Mari: I always think I'm going to have a typical day. That's usually the kiss of death, you know? Oh, I don't have much today... oh crap. Yeah. That's usually how that goes. Usually it's the process itself is the same for the bulk of my work. How much time each of those steps takes is what changes depending on what may or may not be on fire at any given time. But mostly I start everything up, start pulling data, dump everything in, and start looking for problems, start looking for things that shouldn't be there. Things that aren't quite right, the software is good enough to catch the big stuff. So I'm not looking for the obvious things. I'm looking for things that are almost right, which is the hard part. And that takes just, there's no shortcut to learning that unfortunately. And that was frustrating in the beginning. That's what takes the most time to learn is you just have to develop an eye for the things that are close to what they're supposed to be, but just off enough to indicate that there's a problem. And that's usually where my day takes a turn.

Kathryn: You said you went through several certifications. Are there any that you would recommend people start with?

Mari: If you're going to work in data analysis, I strongly recommend Coursera's stuff from Wharton. Wharton has great programs. Duke has some great programs through Coursera and I've done a bunch of those. Some of them I did for the actual certification where you have to pay and do the tests and all that. And some of them I just did as audit to have the material, but you can, because you can do these at your own pace and you can start from wherever you are. They're fantastic. They are really, really fantastic. They, in terms of advertising operations, at some point if you're going to work in ad ops, you're going to deal with Google. And the good news about that is Google has an extensive library of training material for their platforms and they're very good. They're very straightforward. They don't waste your time. I found those very helpful in ramping up really quickly. So at least, even if you're not directly handling their platforms, going through their training material, will tell you what the environment looks like. It will certainly tell you if this is something you want to do.

Kathryn: So are those paid trainings?

Mari: A lot of it's free. A lot of it is totally free. That's the beauty of it.

Kathryn: And do you keep up with any kind of continuing education?

Mari: Other than what I said? Yeah, I, there are things I do in other fields. I still have writing projects that I work on, so I'm constantly taking writing courses, editing courses, technical writing courses. In terms of a university setting? No, just because I'm hooked on doing stuff online.

Kathryn: So now we're going to get into some numbers. What would you say the salary range is and how long have you been doing this?

Mari: I've been doing this for six years. It's hard to talk about salaries with this because it depends on whether or not you're working part time or full time. I'm only full time some of the time, which not everyone can deal with. If you look in places like [glassdoor.com](https://www.glassdoor.com) you can start to drill down on the specific aspects of, of data analysis for ad ops and whether you're doing ad trafficking and that kind of thing. The general range is from about \$45,000 a year to \$80,000 a year. But it really depends on what you're doing, what levels of analysis.

Kathryn: Okay. So the \$45,000, would that be beginning level, part time?

Mari: A beginning level, probably closer to full time, for people who are just doing the beginnings of ad ops. And it depends also on how many campaigns you can handle, because the name of the game in ad trafficking is how many campaigns you can manage at one time. Those are your revenue. So the more you can handle, the more revenue is moving through you. So there's that. I don't do any ad trafficking. I do absolutely none of it. And part of that is because of my own philosophy on data, which is if you are auditing the data, which is my end of it, you should not be the person generating the data. If that makes sense.

Kathryn: It's too easy to not see your own mistakes.

Mari: Yes, yes, I have been in that position in other industries and it always makes things awful. So if I could avoid that, I avoid it.

Kathryn: And do you set your rates or do they?

Mari: It was, we came together on it pretty mutually. I mean, I had what I needed to make. This is, you know, if you want me to do this work for you, I have to make this to be able to do it. And you know, they were able to meet that and come to an agreement on my flexibility and things like that. So yeah, we kind of just came together. It was a very... Casual process.

Kathryn: So it was, it was something of a negotiation, but no hard ball.

Mari: Right, right, exactly. Plus I wasn't in a position to demand very much since I was coming out of a completely different industry and they were taking me on reputation alone. You know, so it was a risk for them and I knew that and I was willing to give them the minimum that I would need to be able to take the job with the understanding that if they were happy with my work, that there would be raises and increased responsibility, which there have been.

Kathryn: And was that included in your contract or was that understood?

Mari: That was in the contract. Got always get it in writing. Yeah.

Kathryn: What would you say your number one tip is for women looking to get started in data analysis?

Mari: Know yourself. Right now, data analysis and data science are hot and we literally cannot get enough people to do this work. But there's a reason for that. It's not just the skill set, it does kind of require a certain mindset and it can be learned. But do you want to be unhappy? You know, it's, know whether or not this is something you want to do day in and day out. I love it. I recommend it for the flexibility and for what you can learn and how much you can grow. It's a great field, but it's very easy to burn out.

Kathryn: And that goes back into staring into the spreadsheets.

Mari: It really does. Staring into the abyss that is Excel. I recommend if you want to get into data analysis, actually learn SQL and Python. That will make things easier in terms of the sort of jobs you can get, especially starting out and learning those things is very straightforward without spending any money going on to any of number of the platforms. The online learning platforms, there are so many. The one I recommend for Python is Python for Everyone. I think that was through Coursera. That's a really good one. If you've got statistics background, that's very helpful. If you at least have a good solid understanding of statistics that can make your offering more flexible for people. Get on the forums and find out, the professional forums like LinkedIn or other forums, find out what people are complaining about and learn how to fix it. If you're finding that people are complaining about the same kinds of things, figure out how they're fixing it, because now you've identified something people are looking for and if you can go into a situation even in an informational interview and say, "Hey, I heard you, you know, this industry is having this kind of problem kind of a lot and you know, I learned how to deal with this aspect of it." You're already coming in with something that you can offer something specific.

Kathryn: Yeah, that's a, that's a great tip. What would you say are your next steps?

Mari: Another piece of advice, actually a piece of career advice talks to my answer to that or speaks to my, my answer to that. I have been six years on an ad ops team. I am the second to newest member. There's one person who's been there less time than me. Everyone else has been on there I think at least a decade. In advertising operations, I can't stress to you how rare that is. Ad ops has a lot of, of churn. It's very stressful work.

The deadlines are tight, the target is always moving. The clients are always changing their minds. It is a constantly changing compliance minefield right now, because of changes in the laws and things like that.

Kathryn: Gdpr kind of thing?

Mari: Yes. In terms of, of how ads have to operate and what they can and cannot do because that is getting more and more strict. And because we don't want to lose money. If you're running an ad that annoys people, you're not making money. You're just annoying people. And they have started to figure this out, that, you know, maybe putting an ad that people can't get off of their screen just makes them hate you. You know? So, that kind of environment leads to a lot of turnover, very high turnover. Two years is usually where people are like, okay, I've done this long enough and they leave the industry, you know, they do something completely different. They might stay in advertising in digital advertising, but in frontline ops it's, it's a tougher thing. And my team is brilliant. I love this team. I love the company. I am happy to do this as long as they will have me. By the way, if I, if I can plug it's adopscentral.com, if that's okay. That's my company. I don't, I'm not an employee. I'm a contractor. But I think it's funny that they have the words "hyper vigilant" and "obsessed" on the main page. So, you can tell why I was hired.

Kathryn: They were speaking directly to you.

Mari: They were talking right to me. Yeah. That's my career advice in relationship to that, is the people are more important than the work. I can do any kind of work. I don't really care. I will learn anything. The team is the important thing, because you can get through some really, really tough times, if your team is great. But you could have the ideal job, and if your team is dysfunctional, you will hate every day you have to be a part of it. So choose the people. The work, I think always comes second for me.

Kathryn: And where can listeners find you?

Mari: I am on the Twitters. I am an old person on the twitters, so it's just @ m k as in Kangaroo johnson (@mkjohnson).

Kathryn: And that'll be linked in the show notes to make it super simple.

Mari: Thank you.

Kathryn: All right. Mari, thank you so much for joining us. This has been great.

Mari: Thank you so much for having me.

Kathryn: Thank you for listening to Compass. You'll find today's show notes at compasspod.com/011. If you enjoyed this show, please share it with a friend, by visiting compasspod.com/011 and clicking the share buttons at the top of the page. Next week we'll be talking to Margaret Tra, music publicist.

