Kathryn:

Welcome to episode 52 of Compass, I'm your host Kathryn Hunter. Are you looking for a way to combine your analytical side with your creative side? Today, Arpine Ayvazyan and I talk about that and more when we discuss becoming a product designer. You're listening to Compass, where we talk with location independent womxn about their work and the paths that got them there. We get into their stories of struggle and success, finding clients, figuring out what to charge, and of course, we talk money. Join us and take the next step in finding your direction. Arpine, welcome to the show.

Arpine:

Hi Kathryn. Thank you for inviting me.

Kathryn:

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?

Arpine:

That's a good question. And funny enough, I was visiting my family and friends a couple of weeks ago and I was near the school, where I went to in, near the neighborhood where I grew up and I was thinking about these exact same questions and I don't think I ever had a profession in my mind or something that I badly wanted to be when I grew up, when I was five. But one thing that is true and I think has been since then is my passion for knowledge. I was a very curious kid, and I would just ask the other kids, who were already in school to teach me whatever they learned during the day. I think it was a torture for them to be honest, but it was a very interesting way to explore the world, other people. And I was curious to know what they think, what they learn. And I think it also kind of stayed with me during my school years enough that and still in my work or my professional life, it's still there.

Kathryn:

How had that changed by the time you left high school?

Arpine:

I think that the curiosity is still there and it has definitely stayed with me. It has changed its shape or direction so to say but simply based on my education and my work experience, but the curiosity in itself is still there. And I think I'm really grateful for that because it kind of helps you explore new ideas and projects. It also helps you in creative industries or creative projects which I do. So, it kind of helps you understand different things, try to combine different things that maybe nobody thought about combining but it's definitely there and I think by the time I finished my high school I wanted to pursue something creative and I was just looking for the opportunities to do so.

Kathryn:

Did you pursue college?

Arpine:

I do have university degree. I did bachelors and masters. Both of them are not very creative. My bachelor is actually in economics, behavioral economics and I did my masters in game theory which is also kind of understanding how people think, understanding the decision making of individuals and

groups and such as for example, consumer behavior, how we decide about products, what makes us buy something like product a not product b. And it was not necessarily the typical way to start something creative like a creative profession, but it was something that definitely helped me in designing projects, designing and developing new products and also understanding the consumer who is going to buy this product.

Kathryn:

Is there anything else from those studies that you use now?

Arpine:

Definitely. I think studying economics is something that gives you a more mathematical or a, more business kind of mind and I think this is something that it's usually very challenging for people in creative industries because being creative and having more business, and structural, structured way of working is not very common. And I think this can be challenging for lots of people and studying something if that direction helps me definitely to feel much more confident when negotiating for prices, negotiating for contracts for example, or feeling that my work is worth something which is also challenging. If you are a creative person, if you are not sure it should work, you can be as understood as you think it should be. So it kind of makes it a bit difficult for people to put a price on something creative. If it's, if it's digital you can see it but you can't touch it. I think it could be more difficult for lots of people and so the clients do not treat products that are digital for example, the same way that they do something that is physically there. And I think studying something that is more down to earth and more analytical helps me definitely in combining this ideas in the business side of my project.

Kathryn:

How did you get into being location independent?

Arpine:

It was never my goal to be location independent. It kind of became more of a necessity I was living in Armenia for a really long time. I'm, I'm from there and you know, just to study my masters, to continue my education, I decided to move to Europe and eventually left all my family and friends in Armenia. When you work you have just a fixed amount of days during the year you can take and you can use for whatever reason. And I have realized if I want to visit my family often enough or if I want to see my friends, not for just a day or two but maybe like a month or two, then I would definitely need either more financial stability or I have to change my job every time I have to do that. And I think being location dependent was more of a question of being financially independent no matter where I live. So it's kind of morphed into this idea. And I eventually started the whole journey of being self-employed, trying to be financially stable enough that I can decide where I want to be and how long I want to be.

Kathryn:

How do you describe your job to people who are just being polite when they ask?

Arpine:

Well, the easiest and the most understandable way to explain my job is to say I'm a graphic designer and I just design products visually. And I think this is something people would understand.

Kathryn:

And when you're talking with people who really want to know the details,

Arpine:

I do product design and product development and so, I not only use 2D technology, but I also use 3D technology. So my goal is to make products that you can actually print with a 3D printer or you can put into production and have a 3D product to say, at the end. So for example, if you have anything such as a new cosmetic line or a new garment that you don't know in, how many colors, shades you want to produce and you also want to maybe be sustainable. And to not way too many materials in pre production or testing some samples on clients or consumers. You can definitely use the modern technology to make the 3D version of the product without wasting resources on that and then test which ones could be pre-ordered or which ones your clients want to preorder and reduce the cost of production by basically providing product before it ever produced.

Kathryn:
How did you get started in product design?

Arpine:

There are multiple things that contributed in what I do now. I've always been drawing and coming up with ideas. I was designing some fashion collections when I was in high school, never realized this, but never actually done any. I've been sewing my own clothes for a while now. So these are different creative inputs that I had for awhile and then I studied consumer behavior and everything that I do kind of merges into just one project that I do and I can implement the knowledge like more academic knowledge let's say with some creative ideas, some creative design and also in terms of, for example, fashion needs to be, I could also implement my understanding of how clothes work, how you construct your own clothes. So like different things that come into play and I think it's kind of evolved during time from, I don't know, my school years being just a kid who draws a lot, who is curious who tries different things, to my academic years, to actually think here what I do now and trying to implement all these ideas into one business today.

Kathryn:
What inspired you to bring it all together?

Arpine:

I think I just want to do the things that I love doing and there is no one profession that I guess incorporates everything together. So I'm trying to create kind of my own way or my own path.

Kathryn:
How did you find your first clients?

Arpine:

Well, my first clients were my friends so I wouldn't necessarily, I wouldn't necessarily say that I found them. I guess they found me, because they liked what I do and then they just asked me if I would do exactly that for their business. Because they were launching something and they wanted some design for the company or they wanted something for their project or for a wedding or anything else. That kind of came naturally that lots of people appreciated my work and my friends appreciated my work, but

they were willing to pay me to do that. Not just like, Oh, you know, you kind of do this, do this for me for free. And it gave me enough confidence that I would think I could do this as a full time job and I eventually started networking. I actually started networking the first thing to be honest, and just getting to events, trying to talk to people, explain what I do, try to find some clients that would be interested in doing small projects with me and see how it goes. If I like it, if they like it, for example, if I feel comfortable doing the job. So it's kind of evolved, I guess from my friends, but then I spend a lot of time in different events and networking with people I didn't know. Trying to explain what I do and trying to make them interested such they are interested enough to start a project with me.

Kathryn:

Tell us about your first major struggle.

Arpine:

My first major struggle was I guess with a challenging client, deciding to stop the project. I think it was a difficult decision because I never thought about the idea that I could just pause or stop the project on my side or discontinue the cooperation the partnership with the client. I kind of always thought about this as like, Oh, I'm the one who provides the service and if the client is not happy, they could always discontinue this or just stop the project and go away. But I'm kind of on the other side. I have to do this and I think the first struggle was when I had this project where the client was so difficult that it made me realize I'm, I have exactly the same, rights. If I don't like this, I have the right to discontinue the project as much as my clients and I guess this was also the time where where I realized that the point of being self employed for me was to have much more fun in my job to have to opportunity to decide who I liked work and if it's not the case then I would just as well be employed with any company and work for the clients with the company. But if I want to do it myself, I have to be able to also stop projects that I don't like and I think this was the first struggle, but also the first major lesson learned.

Kathryn:

How about your first major success?

Arpine:

Apart from recurring clients, which I think is a very good evaluation of your work. Not necessarily the success of projects, but the clients that come back to you and say, Oh, you know, I would like to work with you again. Apart from that, the major success to me was when very big company approached me for a project and then accepted all my terms without negotiating, to start a project. This is a very big company and I never approached them personally, so they found me and then approached me and this was a moment where I felt really, really happy and this was also a moment when I was like, Oh, this is actually quite a milestone that I just unlocked for myself. So this was a very nice moment of realizing that what I do might actually be successful.

Kathryn:

If you could go back and give your younger self just starting this business, any advice, what would you say?

Arpine:

I guess I would say two things. The first one would be if you underestimate yourself or your work, your clients will do that too. I think this was a big lesson learned for me to understand that surprisingly the

clients that pay you the most are often the clients that disrespect you, your time and your work the most. So, it came to me that I should not underestimate my work and I should be proud of what I do, independent of how I feel about very tiny details. You know, if you do design, you might be unhappy with some tiny detail, but it might also make your client happy because they like that specific detail in your whole design, you know the happy accidents as you would say. But this would also be the biggest struggle I guess when I was starting because I was usually underestimate my work and undercharge what I did. And I think this was a major mistake because the second lesson that I would like my younger self to know was that there is always someone, always someone who is ready to do the same work for less money. So if you're going to go for the market that is just infinitely cheap, you are never going to be satisfied with what you do and you're never going to be satisfied of what you're paid. So this is not the best way to go with your own ideas. And I think understanding what you want to do understanding your own style, understanding how you, how important your niche is or how important the ideas are that you have that others, for example, do you know are also worth the money.

Kathryn:

Odds are there's no such thing as a typical day for you. Do you want to give us what a random day looks like?

Arpine:

Well, a random day would most probably starts with social media. Even though I try to reduce it, it's still part of my day, but also because I would keep in touch with lots of people who are social media. So it's also part of my business and I can't really skip it. I would typically have dedicated time for checking my emails unless I'm awaiting something urgent or there is a situation I have to put my attention to immediately. I would typically have dedicated time for it and I would usually have dedicated time slots for anything else as well, including creative time because as much as you might have random ideas that, creative ideas during the day and you might write them down or make some little drawing to not forget them. You have to keep in mind that if it's a job, it's still a job and you have to have dedicated time.

Arpine:

If you don't feel creative still, it's good to have a training, a more rhythm or schedule that makes it feel you're working and makes your brain work in the creative direction. And I think all things come up with trial and error. So you have to try different things until you find the solution that you were looking for. And it's also important to have the dedicated time for creative work. I would typically plan my day to not forget about physical activity. I'm not the sporty person to be honest, but I, since my work is connected with lots of sitting and staring at my laptop or sitting and staring at a piece of paper, this is important that I still keep some kind of physical activity. So I try not to forget it. And I guess one thing that I would usually plan in advance for the day or for the week would be the networking independent of, it's an event like physical events that I want to attend to or if it's some social media networking. So I would definitely put a time slots for that as well. I would spend more time on planning some events for the whole week and Sunday and I would typically spend some five to 10 minutes each day into evening to plan my next day to make sure that I haven't forgotten anything. If I have to take something with me, if I have to present anything or if I have to have enough resources and materials with me for anything like an event just so for the next day. So this would be a random day I guess.

Kathryn:

Do you keep up with any kind of continuing education, formal or informal?

Arpine:

Currently, I do not have that much time to go for a more formal education like a university degree, if if I put it that way, but I have to keep up with the newest trends. I have to keep up with the newest maybe technology with companies, development, and social media. So there is a lot of information that I consume on everyday basis anyway and I definitely try to use the newest platforms such as Coursera or Skillshare or pretty much any other platform that offers few short courses. If it's some ideas such as if you're a beginner, maybe like the color theory, which is something that you would definitely find a lot of information about. If you're not a beginner, that might be some specific courses on tools or specific concepts or specific ways of saying things. So then I'm always up to date. If it's the technology for example, what is new is the newest version or what are the newest tools that are being used. Maybe this could be something important for me and also about the trends, like from Pantone colors to the newest trends, for example in fashion, what people use, what people do, could just be some things that I would like to incorporate in my work, so it's definitely a lot of information.

Kathryn:

What are you excited about right now in product design?

Arpine:

I guess I'm excited about the technology and the opportunities it gives us. For example, if you think about 3D printers, this was a dream come true. If you think about it, 20 years back or 30 years back as a kid and you want to think, Oh that would be so cool. What if there was this kind of thing and this is what makes me excited. I think there is this knowledge, it gives us opportunities that we couldn't think of or dream of. I definitely help with inclusion for example, because I just thought about a project that I did a design of labels and information for a museum in braille that you could definitely print with this 3D printer and just helps you be more flexible, be more inclusive even if you're a small company, you don't have to spend huge amounts of resources to be inclusive. You can start with small things like this one and then keep up, or try to keep up and respect as many people or include as many people on your projects as you can. One interesting was, interesting project for example, the Louvre was that they made 3D pieces of artwork in original sizes. They basically redid the artwork for blind people that could touch the artwork and feel the artwork, which was most probably not very possible long time ago or it was very expensive or time consuming. The technology and information that is available now is exciting. It definitely looks very exciting to me, I don't know. I like technology and I like seeing the development and I like seeing how it merges into creative fields as well, not just technical fields.

Kathryn:

Now it's time to get into the numbers. What would you say your income range is and how long have you been doing the work?

Arpine:

I've been doing this for, like officially I've been doing this for almost a year now. I started with pretty much zero. I would say like you would start any business. I definitely had, you know, financial stability to not be forced into projects that I didn't like at all, it took me a while to kind of understand what's my prices look like, how much time I spent on projects, how valuable certain projects are and how I could put a price on those. So it definitely took a time snf I'm still learning, I'm not, I'm definitely not there yet. I have a lot to learn and I will say that I would currently my ranch, the average number per month would be 3-5 k you could definitely grow much, much bigger if you want to start a company with employees

and go bigger than one person company. But you would also need more responsibility and different way of doing business.

Kathryn:

With the 3-5 k is that euros?

Arpine:

Yeah, it's euros.

Kathryn:

How do you decide what to charge?

Arpine:

That's definitely a lifelong question because you are definitely going to undercharge at the beginning or underestimate your worth. At least it was my case. So I ended up also with lots of trial and errors. For example, talking to clients and negotiating prices and trying to ask other people about what they would typically charge for something. But since this is usually a difficult topic to talk about, but no, many people would say, Oh I'm going to charge business much. I think, but the beginners, it might be a good way of calculating it by thinking about the hours you're going to spend on your project and then calculating 10 to 20% on top of it because you would never knew what gets wrong. And maybe your clients need more communication that you need, should account for. And this is also something you should think about as client work, because communication is also part of the project and it also has to be paid, to say it's not free of charge.

Arpine:

And you could definitely explain this to our parents as well. I never had a problem with that. Never have I heard from a client that, Oh no we're not going to pay for a, I don't know, a two hours long meeting. It was never a problem. But I guess you will have a better understanding of your work and your project and how long you have to invest or how much you have to invest in projects to kind of have a better understanding of how much project is worth and then there is the second side of it and you will have the best understanding about is the longer you are in the business and it takes a lot longer actually to understand how much this project is worth for the client because it might be very different from what you think your work is worth. And as I said, there are certain clients that want to pay more for the project because it's about the image more than the project itself.

Arpine:

So this also comes into the game that you might be too cheap for a client, which is a weird thing. A weird situation you wouldn't expect it to be, but think about if you are going to buy shoes, you can buy, I don't know, cheap shoes for any fast fashion in any retailer and then you can buy shoes that are specifically made for you with a local shoemaker who uses very special and leather and very special materials. These are very different price points and you are going to be a very different type of client. Think about your work in the same way. What people want to pay for is most probably or what you want to do is most probably the second shoe, because everything else that is already done or it needs less customization or you just want to buy a readymade product is most probably going to be cheaper than your time invested in this project. So I would suggest going for the second one and also maybe trying different price points with different clients of see which one works best and which one doesn't and then

you will have a better understanding of time, what's the amount that is suitable for the project that you want to do.

Kathryn:

Is there anything you do to keep your income stable?

Arpine:

Well, I guess depending on the industry you could think about either the opportunities to have a more timed project in the sense that maybe this is a year long project and what I would suggest doing if not having one invoice at the end of the project but having for example multiple invoices throughout the year. For example, monthly invoices. This would definitely help you to keep more financial stability during the year and if you're working for example, on project basis, this is often times the problem because you're going to get paid at the very end of the project and it also means you have to survive kind of the whole time. So what I would definitely do if you could talk to clients and you can divide the project into different milestones, you can definitely put an invoice at the end of the milestone because that's going to help you have a more balanced financial distribution during the you and the other thing I would suggest maybe would be to try to find projects that you might do on a recurring basis. For example, if there is a newsletter or is you're for example getting into graphic design or into product design, whatever that is. If there is a product that is produced on monthly basis, weekly basis or quarterly, whatever it is, it would definitely give you some time, stability during the year so you can plan your finances better. So what I would suggesting go for the projects that are big, bold, interesting, cool. But also think about the projects that might not be as cool or interesting but they would be financially stable.

Kathryn:

What tools or gear would you recommend to beginners start with?

Arpine:

If you want to do design or CAD, what I use wouldn't be anything revolutionary I guess. I use Adobe products like Illustrator or Photoshop and I think you could definitely use them currently on a monthly basis because you could just pay monthly for Adobe products, for example. And this could be as low as, I think €10-20 a month. So depending on what you need, you might end up trying some software and see if it works for you or not. Or if it works for your needs or your goals. I'm got a product I use. Rhino Six or Rhinoceros, which is a 3D program, but if you just want to try some things might not necessarily try the most expensive thing. You might go for open source versions for example you might go for Gimp, which would be the open source version of the Photoshop and try see if you actually like working with this kind of software or this kind of product.

Kathryn:

What's your number one tip for women looking to get into product design

Arpine:

For women, I would say independent of what they want to do, is to go for it and do not underestimate yourself and do not forget about networking. I think lots of people start business and lots of womxn as well, in that sense, forget about networking and then expect that this is going to develop itself without much effort in terms of finding clients and trying to knock the door maybe not once or twice, maybe

three or four times and I think being there and stuff, stepping your foot down and trying again not giving up too soon is definitely one thing that you have to do if you're going to have a successful business. Try to approach people, companies not once, not twice, try to do it regularly because as much as doing work or doing projects is part of their business, finding new clients is also a part of your business so you shouldn't forget about it.

Kathryn:

What are your next steps?

Arpine:

Well, that's a good question. I think the next step would be a big project that I want to do. I don't want to disclose it. I'm currently in negotiation phase and I hope I'm going to do that. It would be a really big project now with the client and it also would be connecting with the big financial goals to say and I hope I'm going to achieve that. But in terms of just general goals, I think I would definitely want to keep the focus on sustainable products and developing ideas, concepts and products that work for sustainable businesses and they work for inclusivity and upcycling and reusing and repurposing the products that I design.

Kathryn:

Where can listeners find you?

Arpine:

Well, you can definitely find my contact information on my website which would be thestudio414.de for the German DE and you could definitely find my email and my contact details there. You can get in touch with me anytime by email or the contact, the website contact form. You can definitely find me on social media, but it wouldn't be my preferred method of contact for business services. If you would just have any questions about your business. If you want some business advice, I'm happy to help you on social media as well. If you are looking for partnerships or business opportunities, I'm happy to help as well. I would definitely prefer your contact or your email via professional contact information.

Kathryn:

Arpine, thank you so much for joining us, this has been great!

Arpine:

Thank you, Kathryn, for inviting me. This was lovely talking to you.

Kathryn:

If you want your own location independent life and are eager to take that next step, join us in compass insiders where every week I send you actionable tips, inspiration, and motivation so you can take that next step towards going remote. Join us now at compasspod.com/insiders Did you enjoy this episode of Compass? If so, please take a moment to write a review. Leaving a review helps other women find us so they can find their direction too. Thank you for listening to Compass. You can find today's show notes at compasspod.com/052, that's compasspod.com/052. Join us next time when we talk with Chrystabelle, messenger bot marketer.