Something Extra EP 129 – Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge

[00:00:00] Lisa Nichols: Chromosomes, little strands of nucleic acids and proteins are the fundamental genetic instructions that tell us who we are at birth. Most people are born with 46 chromosomes, but each year in the United States, about 6,000 people are born with an extra chromosome, making them a person with Down's syndrome. If you've ever encountered someone with Down's syndrome, you know that they are some of the kindest, most joyful people you will ever meet. They truly have something extra.

My name is Lisa Nichols and I have spent the last 24 years as both the CEO of Technology Partners and as the mother to Ally. Ally has something extra in every sense of the word. I have been blessed to be by her side as she impacts everyone she meets. Through these two important roles as CEO and mother to Ally, I have witnessed countless life lessons that have fundamentally changed the way I look at the world. While you may not have an extra chromosome, every leader has something extra that defines who you are. Join me as I explore the something extra in leaders from all walks of life and discover how that difference in each of them has made a difference in their companies, their families, their communities, and in themselves.

I'm thrilled to have Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge on the show today. Rhonda is executive director of the St. Louis Lambert Airport. Well, Rhonda, welcome to the *Something Extra* podcast. I am so excited about our conversation today. I know one thing's for sure, we are going to have a lot of fun.

[00:01:46] Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge: Well, thank you. I'm excited to be here.

[00:01:48] Lisa: We have our friend Don to thank. I was telling you, oh, my goodness, Rhonda, I've known about you, but we have never met person to person, but I said we're connected to all each other's connections.

[00:02:02] Rhonda: I knew. I think Don and I met a few years ago at an art museum event and just got to be really good friends and obviously stayed in touch and have a lot of the same interests. We were talking and I said, "No, I have not met Lisa. I know who she is, but I have not met her." He said, "I just can't believe you haven't met each other." It's funny.

[00:02:19] Lisa: I know a little bit about your background, but why don't you tell our listeners? I know that you're a Missouri girl, grew up in the Bootheel on a farm. Why don't you tell our listeners a little bit about how you grew up?

[00:02:30] Rhonda: Yes, I did. I grew up in Oran, a small town in the Bootheel of Missouri, grew up with three brothers. People always ask how my competitiveness started and I say it's because I competed with three brothers my whole life. We were used to farm life. We were used to getting up early. We were used to helping Mom and Dad. Whatever needed work on the farm, we were part of. There wasn't anything I felt that I couldn't do that my brothers did. We became very competitive in life early on.

I loved growing up on a farm. It was a small town, went to a small school. I always had the urge to want to do more and wanted to see more. I always had the idea that if I had good grades and I was competitive, that I could, hopefully, get some scholarships and move on to college and move out. I always came back to Missouri, so you never lose those roots.

[00:03:17] Lisa: We, over the years, Rhonda, have hired so many farm kids. I will tell you, you will not find a harder worker.

[00:03:25] Rhonda: I think it's instilled into you. You have to. If you're living on a farm and that's your life, get up every morning at the crack of dawn and feed the chickens or feed the pigs or feed the baby calves, and your work is never done. I think if you grow up on a farm, that is instilled in you that you have to work hard in life and you have to be consistent.

[00:03:17] Lisa: You and I have something else in common that you don't know that we have in common, but you had a pet pig that was deaf.

[00:03:50] Rhonda: I did have a pet pig that was deaf. When you grow up on a farm, obviously, so many of the animals you raise to butcher, and there's always one that's stuck to your heart and you hear the stories a lot. I had a pet pig and the reason he was always mine was because he was deaf. When it came time, I convinced my dad that he wasn't worth killing, but yes, it was a pet pig that I cared very deeply for.

[00:04:13] Lisa: I did not have a pig, but I had a blind goat. Our nanny had three goats and the runt ended up being blind. We could tell because it's eyes were glassed over. I did the same thing with my Dad, and I said, "Dad, oh, please, let me take care of him." I bottle-fed him. His name was Barnaby. I just remember those were such good solid memories for me growing up and having the animals to take care of. Great life lessons for kids, I think, Rhonda.

[00:04:46] Rhonda: I do think it's a critical piece of shaping people.

[00:04:49] Lisa: It's the simpler life. In a way, it's hard work, but there's a simpleness to it, and just a beauty there. I know you were an aspiring CIA agent. [laughs] When you were in high school, you thought, "I wanted to work for the CIA." Now, did that come about from having the brothers? Were they always part of shenanigans and stuff and you were trying to investigate, or what? Where did that come from do you think, Rhonda?

[00:05:19] Rhonda: It just always intrigued me. I'm very patriotic so I think doing something for your country is important and so I always had the idea early on in life that that's what I want to do. I wanted to work for the CIA, and I think everybody, my brothers, and my folks thought it was funny and that it was a fling that, "Okay, go ahead and have your dream." It was something that I wanted to do. The other thing that was important to me being competitive was grades in high school.

It was a small high school. They were 55 in my class, maybe 250 in the whole high school, but grades were important to me. I went to the University of Missouri at Columbia.

My idea was, if I could major in a foreign language or two foreign languages, then I'd have a better shot of hopefully being on the international front for the CIA. Part of it was a dream aspiration to see the world and part of it was that aspiration of just doing something that can be giving back to our country. That's what I was convinced in my mind I was going to do.

[00:06:16] Lisa: It's funny because I was thinking, so many people talk about having a career plan. "Got to have a plan." I used to have an old boss. He was an ex-marine and he would say, "Failing to plan is planning to fail," and he just really instilled that in us. One thing though that you said is, it's great to have a plan, dreams, and passion, but you also have to be flexible. You ended up not going into the CIA. You actually got recruited by Ozark Airline.

[00:06:47] Rhonda: Well, I was graduating so I was a senior. I had started interviewing for the CIA. I knew it was a lengthy process, but I didn't know how lengthy of a process. I'm a senior. It's rolling around to January, February of my senior year and I'm looking at May around the corner. I'm thinking I have to have a job. I can't graduate college without a job. I had learned that it was going to be another 12 to 18-month process within the CIA. I thought, "Okay, there's something I need to do in the short term," and Ozark was recruiting and hiring. At the time, they were hiring for positions.

They were getting ready to open up LaGuardia Airport and they had a firm belief that they hired from the Midwest and that people from the Midwest would go out into their other cities and do a great job for them. I applied and I'm thinking, "I'd love to go to New York. If it's a way to go to New York, I would be happy to," and so I did apply, ended up getting the job. It was a customer service agent job, very ground-level position. Went to New York, LaGuardia my first day. I just remember, this was just like a dream come true. Went to the airport day one, thought this is exciting.

As I got into it, two months later I thought, "I love this. This is incredible." Every day was different. Every day was a new learning curve. The next round came for the CIA to advance to that next interview. I said no, and I think I shocked myself when I said no because it had been something that I had dreamed of doing for my whole life.

In a split second, I said, "I'm not interested anymore. I like what I'm doing. I think this is fascinating." Here I am, 37 years later in the same industry and it's all because I think I opened up and just said, "It's okay to change your plan along the way." I tell young people all the time, especially my children, "You don't have to do what you always dreamed of. Things can change. For me, I've had a great career." If I had stuck to that and only said this is what I must do, I think I would have turned away a lot of opportunities.

[00:08:44] Lisa: You even had the amazing career that you've had. I think a plan is important, but really just to have your hands open because you just don't know what is going to come your way. Sometimes at that age, Rhonda, I feel like you don't even know what precisely it is you're going to enjoy. You may find yourself somewhere that you're like you did, "I love this. This is so exciting. Who would have wanted to be in the Big Apple?" [laughs] Well, that started you on a journey. Then in 1998, you became the North American operations director for TWA which was a huge jump for you. Did you have any fear and trepidation at all?

[00:09:26] Rhonda: It was funny because leading up to that, I had a lot of big positions, and those used to scare me, especially when I was given my first opportunity here at the Hub running the passenger services department. I remember saying, "Oh, you think I'm ready for this?" The individual who ultimately I replaced as the vice president for North America said, "I can't tell you if you're ready. Only you can make that decision." I thought, "Well, if he's got enough faith in me to offer me the job, then I've got to be ready." I think early on those things scared me and I worked my way through them.

The day that he called me into the office and he had been in the position for many, many years and the day he called me into his office and he said, "I'm retiring next year and I'm going to recommend to our board of directors that you replace me." I could have fallen off my chair. It caught me off guard and by surprise, and it was a great honor to me. This individual who had mentored me for years saw me as his replacement.

It took me until he said that to realize that he had had a plan a long time ago, that ultimately, I was going to replace him. I wasn't scared at that point. When he said to me, "You've got some learning you need to do on a corporate level, so we're going to work together for the next year," but I wasn't scared because I think of the relationship and just the past years of knowing his confidence in me.

[00:10:41] Lisa: Sometimes people don't even see in themselves what other people see in them and it really just elevates, I believe a leader's responsibility to be looking at their people and to be grooming them even maybe when they don't even realize it. To speak that into you, gave you such confidence that, "Wow, if he has faith in me, then sure, I can do this."

[00:11:05] Rhonda: Looking back, I asked him, I said, "What was it that you saw in me all those years? Help me understand the good pieces and the things I need to work on." He said, "It was your lack of fear. It was your lack of speaking out." He said, "You were always willing to engage in the conversation. You were always willing to have your opinions heard, but in a respectful manner." He said, "It was just your lack of fear. "He said, "You always seem to me that you could tackle the world."

He said, "That's who I wanted to replace me, was that individual." I thought, "God, if I could get that trait, if I could somehow be able to really look at people and find that one thing that makes them stand out, that would be a great thing as a leader to have." I often thought about that in all those years of him mentoring me, but really grooming me for that position without even my knowing, what was it that he saw in me.

[00:11:59] Lisa: I love that. Just such a great lesson for later. It's a big responsibility. You are to be developing others. Then in 2010, this brings us up to modern day. You were appointed by Mayor Sly as the director for Lambert International Airport. If you talk about, as an airport, number one, you have a huge impact on the St. Louis economy, on the GDP, something like $5 billion. Is that still about the economic impact or is it different than that now?

[00:12:29] Rhonda: We were just about to engage in another economic impact study when COVID hit. Obviously, we postponed that. This is probably not the best year, but we believe that value based on 2019 is probably closer to $7 billion. We are a huge asset to the region.

[00:12:44] Lisa: Huge asset to the region. Absolutely. You talk about this and you say, "With an airport, it's not about making money. It's really about doing what you can to stay competitive."

[00:12:52] Rhonda: You look at that local market, which you are going to capture, so that MSA, which for us is about 2.8 million people and we know that the people that live in the St. Louis region even maybe out a little bit to the Washington, Eureka, Union, those areas, are going to come here, but it's that broader group that you look at. You really take that circle and you look at those people that are within a four to six-hour drive, and now all of a sudden, we have access to 4.8 million people. Like you said, many of those, the Cape Gerardo can drive to Nashville as well. You really look to say, "What can elevate us and make us different than the rest of those?"

One, I think, we are an airport that is easy to traverse. We're close in, you can park, you can walk right in. It's not a big, scary airport, which for a lot of people, if they don't travel all the time, they like being able to do that, but it's also about the access. One of the things that we knew was going to be critically important after we lost our hub here was really growing back traffic. That's where the partnership with Southwest has become so strong, and as they push connecting traffic through St. Louis, then that gives us more flight activity for that local and regional MSA that goes out a little bit further.

[00:14:04] Lisa: I have so much more that I want to talk about, but we do need to take a quick break and then we'll be right back with Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge.

[00:14:12] Commercial Ad: Are you an IT executive with years of experience? Are you energized when you empower others? If I piqued your interest thus far, you may be a great mentor for the TechLX program in St. Louis. TechLX prepares rising IT leaders to tackle today's challenges and prepare for tomorrow's demanding roles by pairing them with senior IT executives like yourself. Mentors receive coaching from technology partners and will be invited to all TechLX networking events, featuring outstanding speakers of the IT industry. To apply, visit tpi.co/tlx.

[00:14:45] Lisa: Rhonda, tell our listeners, and they may already know, they may have read about this, but last year was the 100th birthday of St. Louis International Airport. Tell us that story, and I want you to talk to about our Terminal One. Tell our listeners about the history of the airport.

[00:15:04] Rhonda: Sure. This started out as Kinloch Field and it was a hot air balloonist, Albert Bond Lambert who our airport obviously has been named after was a golfer in the 1904 World's Fair. He came from the Listerine family. His family was the inventor of Listerine, very prolific individual. He had just had a passion for hot air ballooning. He started it right here. He looked for the location. He thought, at the time, the best location for him to be able to land and so this was an open area. He named it Kinloch Field. Obviously, we sit near Kinloch. That eventually morphed into what we know today as St. Louis Lambert International Airport. Last year when we had the 2020 100-year anniversary, we had so many things planned because it was a big celebration for us. Obviously, those got changed. The one exciting piece that we do have, and the installation should be going in, in the next two weeks, a tribute to him. It is a glass-art screen. It really carries him from his days as a hot air balloonist, but also all the way through.

It's a historic piece of aviation, and I don't think necessarily St. Louisans realize the historic value of this airport, and then of course, in 1950s, the region wanted to have a really significant structure and so they engaged with Minoru Yamasaki, who was a well-known architect, has done Charles de Gaulle, did the Dallas airport,

and he designed Terminal One here and you see the dome ceilings, they're historic. It was a very futuristic modern look to what airports at the time. He designed to what I think as one of the greatest structures in aviation.

A few years ago, it was after the tornado. I was giving a speech over in Europe and it was about the tornado and working through that disaster, but the first screen I popped up, the picture on the screen, was a picture of the iconic terminal in the front and what it looked like on April 10th. Then the next screen was what it looked like on April the 11th. There was someone back in the audience and there were several hundred people at this conference. Someone back in the audience yelled and said, "Is that Yamasaki's design?"

It made me feel so good all the way across the world, sitting in Sweden, I'm hearing someone who recognized the architecture of this terminal. I thought, "Wow, if we could just have St. Louisans as proud of that as what I am and is what so many people are--" Yes, it was a very futuristic design at the time, still noted across the world as one of the great terminal designs of the century.

[00:17:29] Lisa: Going back to what we talked about before, that with an airport, it's not about the making the money, it's about staying competitive. The culture of the airport is so important, and so I look at that design and I think, "Wow, he was truly ahead of his time," because of the openness and to be designed back in 1950 was really pretty incredible.

[00:17:50] Rhonda: Working with Gio Abada, who also worked with him at the time and I've had lots of conversations with Gio over the years about this, "Tell me what it was, what was the feeling?" He said, "Airports are known to be busy and somewhat nerve-wracking." What they wanted to install was this sense of calm, this sense of open space, which is not what you normally feel at an airport.

I think they did that in the design, and it's been critically important to us as we thought about the airport experience and as we thought about making sure that it is an older terminal, but how do we be competitive with some of these new terminals coming up and popping up and still giving a nod to the history?

One of the things that we looked at was the art and being able to bring the local art as well as international artists in to the airport, because initially when the airport was designed, there was this beautiful Bertoia, almost a landscape piece. It was a structure. Unfortunately, we believe that got destroyed when the terminal had some renovations years ago, but it was about people taking time to relax and enjoy things. We've had a fun time creating a really vivid art program and bringing not only all the talent we have in the St. Louis region, but really bringing some very well-known artists across the world into our terminal.

[00:19:09] Lisa: Yes, that's so amazing. Every organization today, Rhonda, is thinking about the employee experience, but they're also being obsessed with the customer. It's about customer obsession and winning the heart of the customer. I love that, that you guys have been very intentional about creating a certain feeling, and it's the emotion that people feel a lot of times that connects them. I love that you guys have done that and plus just highlighting artists that need exposure, I think, is an awesome thing, too. It's a double-win there I feel. Obviously 2020 was not something that any of us had on our radar. It changed every organization I know, and it certainly has changed yours. How have you guys managed? That was a very challenging year.

[00:19:57] Rhonda: 2019 was our best year in terms of revenue, in terms of employments in over 15 years. We had a really strong year and on a very good trajectory going forward with growth, both in passenger, but destinations and partners, and 2020 started out terrific. January and February, we had two strong months, even stronger than the year prior. We had a lot of plans to really do some fun things. March hit, and you started hearing late February, some cases around the world a little bit, and then March hit and you started hearing more and more about COVID.

I can tell you, March is a busy month because it's spring break and St. Louisans love to travel, and so bookings were really strong. After the second week, by the time it had really been full blown, I would say into the media, we were seeing 44,000 people a day come through the airport, and that dropped off to a thousand people a day overnight. It was just devastating, and so not knowing, well, what does this mean long-term? What does it mean short term? We really had to make some quick adjustments.

There was two things we needed to do. One was stop the bleeding of the cash, obviously, and pull back on costs where we could without jeopardizing safety. The second was how do we ensure the customers that we're a safe airport to travel through from a clean standpoint, from just germs-spreading standpoint, and all those things takes a little bit into your world, Lisa, the technology. You have to think about how can you have touchpoints that people no longer have to touch? What things can you do to allow people to not have to physically touch something.

We did a pretty good in-depth study with our air partners and our airlines out here to meet the regulations that, one, were coming, they were changing every week between the CDC and obviously what the city and county were also asking to do, but we immediately went to putting up the barriers between the frontline customer and the employees. We immediately went to the social distancing and all the stickers. We had like three hand sanitizer stations at the checkpoint.

Now, I think we have 250 spreads throughout the airport, but making sure that people knew we were taking it serious and we were doing everything that we could in conjunction with the airlines to say, "It's safe to travel." You really had two pieces. You had the piece of the safety and the perception, but you also had the piece of financial strength and making sure that we could get through.

Obviously, we saw the passenger numbers in April's were devastating. They were 20% of what we had seen the year prior and that was standard for the industry. It picked up over the summer and we got back to a 50%-60% level. December was strong again, but those revenues that were coming in, whether it was parking revenues, ground transportation revenues, obviously the restaurants, all of those things dropped as well commensurate with the loss of travel.

Where we were seeing $195 million coming in a year before, all of a sudden 50% of that non-aeronautical revenues just walking away. It was a challenge to be able to, I think, put all the pieces into play. What helped us tremendously is that we had such a strong footing going in, we had gotten our finances under control. We had gotten our cost under control. We were very cost competitive, which is why the airlines were growing here because we were cost competitive and they could see the value in that. We had a strong footing to begin with and that helped us survive.

The other piece that I think you had to look at was what was the end game, and in so many of the emergencies or the disasters that I've dealt with over the years, faith infinite, whether it was 9/11, whether it was the tornado here in 2011, it happened in a split second, and it was over. You saw the damage, you saw what you needed to do. You put a plan together, you executed, and you moved on. In this, the end in sight has been strung out over 10 months and still not what we could say done or over.

It's been that uncertainty and that changing atmosphere every week with what are the new protocols? What are the new things that we've really had to adjust to? Kudos to the team here. God love them. This is where my people stand out. Everybody putting their heads together and saying, "Okay, we do what we need to do." That's the operational strength coming out of people. Then I think it takes the greater vision to look and say, "Okay, along with this, keeping your partners in tune, making sure they're on the same page, and we will come out of this and we will be stronger on the backside. I have no doubt."

[00:24:26] Lisa: Well, you and I have talked about that and I think most of the airlines flights are full. Things are coming back, and as leaders, if you have not faced challenging times yet, which I can't imagine now that we've gone through 2020, every one of us had to adjust to some level, you will face challenging times, but really just knowing that sometimes you just do what you have to do. That's really all that you can ask of your team to, is to do that.
I have to ask you this one quick question, and then we'll get into something extra. We've talked about this and you said, "My leadership style," I think there's like 15 of them or something, "has not really changed, but I've learned some lessons along the way." I absolutely love what you said. One of the biggest lessons for you that you've learned, and can you tell our listeners that?

[00:25:14] Rhonda: Sure. It's to accept criticism. I think early on in my career, I moved up quickly in my career. That was very encouraging to me, but I used to get very defensive when someone would say, "I think we could do this better," or "I think maybe you should have looked at this," and I would be defensive. I would try to find the way to vent what my decision was or my action was. I think as I've grown over the years, that's the one piece that I've learned. I look at criticism today as a value. You look at it and say, "Someone's giving you advice for free."

That can impact how you look at the situation, how you look at your corporation, how you look at your people, whatever that advice may be. I take it today and I watch a lot of my staff that still struggles with that because maybe they're early in their career or they haven't quite got to the level that I have. I try to encourage them and say, "Don't get defensive when someone's trying to give you some criticism." Criticism sounds harsh. To me, it really is advice. It's free advice. Take it. I think that's the one piece that over the years that I've learned, never turn down the criticism, take it.

[00:26:18] Lisa: Never turn it down. Listen, I don't care who you are. You may think you've reached-- We all have some blind spots and a blind spot is just that, it's a spot that we can't really see. To have people to speak into you and to give you that feedback, I always say, it's a gift. Rhonda, this is *Something Extra* and what do you believe is the something extra that every leader needs?

[00:26:40] Rhonda: To me, don't forget that you're human and don't forget that the people in the company are just like you. They're there to do your job every day. I think the higher you get, the larger your corporation is, employees want to put you out there on an island. They want to think that you're untouchable, that they can't relate with you. I just think that's so sad. I always have told myself, and I try to tell the people that work for me, "Make sure you recognize every level of the organization."

You come through the front door and there's a guard standing there at the front of your building, say, "Good morning. How are you?" If there's a receptionist who welcomes thousands of people into your building every day, stop and say, "Good morning," and thank that individual. Maybe it's the custodial that comes into your office to empty your trash throughout the day, taking five seconds to recognize them, and you'll learn. People are willing to share many things about them. Talk some of those things away, and it helps people to relate to you as a human.

In an organization, especially if you're large, for those individuals that may not get to interact with you because they're either virtual or in another building, or they don't have the close access, that word will spread and people will relate to you. I think if people can't relate to the senior leaders of an organization, they're never going to feel committed to that organization. To me, be human. Just like everybody else, be as human as you can.

[00:27:59] Lisa: I do believe fundamentally, Rhonda, that people are like, "Do they really care about me? Do they care, not just about what I can do for the organization, but do they care about me as a person?" I could not agree more. It's so important. Truett Cathy is iconic,

right? They said, you're with Truett, and he never wants to talk about him. He's always like asking you about your family and "Tell me about your kids," but it's being human and I could not agree more. I love that. I wanted to give you an opportunity to talk about anything you want to talk about that's coming up, what do you want to tell our listeners about and how can they get involved?

[00:28:40] Rhonda: Well, I think the first I would tell the listeners is about, we all like history and past, and we tend not to want to forget the past. In the past, this was a very large hub. I know, I ran it for many years. I think one of the challenges when I first took this job in trying to convince people, let go of the past, let's look to the future. I think we have made some tremendous strides at this airport and we've certainly grown back a lot of traffic. We can do more together. What I would tell people, instead of being on the critical side of, "Well, we used to have that," or "We used to have that," look at what we do have and compare ourselves to the mid-size cities that are out there, whether it's the Pittsburghs, the Cincinnatis, the San Antonios, the Nashvilles, those are the markets that we compete with. How do we compare with those markets and how can we pull together as a region to tell the positive stories?

I'm a firm believer that doom spreads gloom, and positive news can really enhance. I love some of the things going on with Greater St. Louis, Inc. I am so thrilled about Jason and what I think the organization will do. I think I would just pitch to all the listeners to really think about the airport in a positive light and look at the things that we are doing. Yes, there's always room for improvement, and trust me, you're never at an airport, you're never done. I don't care if it's a brand new one, it's always something going on, but I think it's a time for us to look forward and not in the past so much and really be grateful for what we have and where we can go.

[00:30:07] Lisa: Right. It's changing the narrative is one person at a time.

[00:30:11] Rhonda: That's right.

[00:30:12] Lisa: Just as the bad apple spoils the whole bushel, so can a positive person really change the trajectory, and change the trajectory in your circle of influence. I can do that, you can do that, and guess what, if enough of us do that, the narrative will change.

[00:30:30] Rhonda: Yes, absolutely. I couldn't agree more.

[00:30:32] Lisa: Well, Rhonda, this has just been such a pleasure. I have had so much fun just getting to know you. I'm just so excited for our listeners to hear your story.

[00:30:41] Rhonda: Well, likewise, and thank you again for having me on your podcast. It's been a pleasure and I look forward to meeting you in person.

[00:30:49] Narrator: Thank you for listening to today's show. *Something Extra* with Lisa Nichols is a Technology Partners Production. Copyright Technology Partners Inc, 2019. For show notes or to reach Lisa, visit tpi.co/podcast. Don't forget to leave a review on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, or wherever you listen.