



# Thoughtworks University (TWU)

20 years of extraordinary impact,  
preparing future leaders

**/thoughtworks university**

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## **Thank you for being part of this journey**

This year, we celebrate 20 years of Thoughtworks University (TWU), a milestone that fills me with pride, gratitude and a deep sense of awe. Its impact reaches every corner of this company, shaping who we are and how we grow.

What makes this program truly extraordinary is not just its longevity, but the countless people who have poured themselves into it over the years. It's a living, evolving collection of insights, drawn from past and current leaders, trainers and every cohort of graduates who've walked through its doors. With their wisdom, challenges and breakthroughs, they've contributed to the vibrant learning experience TWU is today.

TWU is more than a training program. It is the heartbeat of Thoughtworks and it's the creation of future leaders. It's where some of the most moving, human and unforgettable stories unfold. It's where careers begin, but more importantly, where perspectives shift, confidence grows and lifelong connections are made. It is a truly special place and I feel incredibly honoured to be a part of it.



This book is a celebration of that journey, a space to reflect on where we started 20 years ago, what we've learned and the incredible impact this program continues to have. It captures the spirit, stories and lessons that define TWU, in the words of the people who've lived it. We have spoken to grads, alumni, trainers and the people behind the program for this project and it's revealed some very heartwarming stories. All these people have walked through TWU over various stages of its — and their — evolution. They bring various perspectives to TWU and we've attempted to tell it in their words.

To everyone who shared their time, thoughts and stories - thank you! And a special thank you to Shalini Jagadish, who brought this book to life - creating the space, holding the stories with care and helping capture the soul of TWU through the voices of those who've experienced it.

Take a look at the stories below, they're full of heart, courage and the kind of transformation that defines what it means to be a Thoughtworker.

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**Jade Daubney-Bennett**

*Global Head of First Year Experience*

## Meet our contributors



**Akanksha Goel**  
TWU Ops



**Ana Boyero**  
Grad, TWU 88



**Ana Elisa Alexandre**  
Grad, TWU 90



**Andrea Velez**  
Grad, TWU 86



**Barbara Morantes**  
Grad, TWU 90



**Beatriz Bazaglia**  
Grad, TWU 86



**Bill Kimmel**  
TWU Ops



**Dipsi Kundal**  
TWU Ops



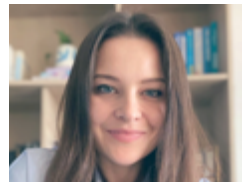
**Eduard Maura i Puig**  
Grad, TWU 62



**Flavia Giovana Dessoldi**  
Grad, TWU 69  
Trainer, TWU 80-81



**Gil Pereira**  
Grad, TWU 31  
Trainer, TWU 42, 43,  
44, 59, 60



**Giulia Sveva Mercurio**  
TWU Ops

Thoughtworks University (TWU)



**Jade Daubney**  
TWU Ops



**Joanna Parke**  
Trainer, TWU 4 | CTaO



**Joanne O'Brein**  
TWU Ops



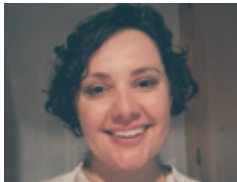
**Jojo Swords**  
Grad, TWU 3



**Kun Pruekthaisong**  
Grad, TWU 90



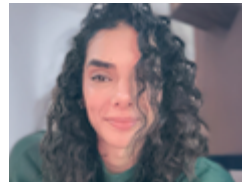
**Meiyin Chang**  
Grad, TWU 90



**Patricia Muniz**  
Trainer, TWU 65-67  
Change team,  
TWU 68-69



**Santiago Minga**  
Grad, TWU 88



**Taynara Rechia**  
Grad, TWU 66



**Thien-An Mac**  
Trainer, TWU 53-54



**Victoria Souza**  
Grad, TWU 88



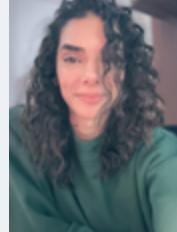
**Zia Tyebee**  
Grad, TWU 90

## Chapter 1

# Crossing thresholds: Graduates at TWU

**“The reality exceeded all expectations. Despite the challenges and insecurities, you experience something almost inexplicable over the course of five weeks. You grow immensely as a human being in ways you didn’t even know were possible.”**

**Taynara Rechia**  
**TWU Graduate**



## **The question nobody asks**

Andrea Velez remembers the brown dog incident.

It was a simulation exercise during her Thoughtworks University program in 2024, designed to teach the fundamentals of client engagement. The task seemed straightforward: gather requirements in a few minutes, then deliver a product that met expectations. Her team was building a house-drawing application.

“The first iteration was a disaster,” Andrea recalls. “We struggled to coordinate as a team and didn’t gather enough information.” But they learned from that failure. By the time the client requested a dog house with the dog included in the drawing, they felt confident. They had this figured out.

When demo day arrived, they presented their work with pride. They had delivered exactly what the client requested: a dog house with a dog.

“We delivered the final product,” Andrea recalls, “and the client pointed out that it wasn’t their dog.”

The team had drawn a generic brown dog. But the client’s actual dog — a very noticeable Dalmatian — had been visible in their Zoom background throughout every single requirements gathering session.

“We had missed a key detail simply by not paying enough attention.”

Andrea laughs about it now, but the moment was revelatory. “It taught us the importance of asking detailed questions, observing carefully and never assuming requirements — even the smallest ones.”





The brown dog story isn't really about dogs or even software requirements. It's about the question that precedes every moment of human growth: What am I not seeing?

Not just about code or client requirements, but about ourselves. Our assumptions. Our blind spots. The difference between what we think we know and what we actually understand. The gap between hearing and listening, between technical competence and human connection.

This is the question nobody prepares you for when you join Thoughtworks University. It's also the question that makes all the difference.

In the last 20 years, over 4000 people from all over the world have been a part of this program. Some of them came equipped with a computer science degree and experience; some were starting fresh in tech after a career change. Many anticipated the program would deliver theoretical and project management training, but instead discovered that the most important learning happens in the moments when you realize you've been looking at the wrong thing entirely.

The goal of TWU isn't just to create consultants, but to create leaders who understand that every technical problem is also a human problem. The most valuable thing you could learn from this institution isn't how to write code, but to notice the dog in the background.



## The expectation trap

Barbara Morantes and Kun Pruekthaisong both arrived expecting straightforward technical education. Barbara, with years of full-stack development experience, anticipated what most corporate training delivers: "I initially anticipated a more theoretical training." Kun, coming from the utilities industry, expected "purely technical training."

Their assumptions were entirely reasonable. Most corporate education follows this pattern — lectures about industry standards, workshops on new tools, clear learning objectives that map neatly onto existing expertise.

Andrea Velez's anxiety ran in a different direction entirely: "I expected I would already need to have solid knowledge of all the basics of development and current technologies before starting." Rather than worrying about content, she worried about readiness — demonstrating competence rather than developing it.

Ana Boyero brought perhaps the most complex set of expectations. After leaving telecommunications engineering for journalism, spending a decade in media, then pursuing screenwriting, she faced technology as a third career change: “After pushing past my imposter syndrome (‘A third career change, seriously?!’), I dared to take a Data Analysis bootcamp — which I absolutely loved.”

These expectations, echoed by many other participants, share something crucial: they all assume that professional development builds on what you already know rather than challenging what you think you understand. They expect confirmation of existing frameworks rather than the dismantling of them.



What they all discovered was captured perfectly by Beatriz Bazaglia, arriving with her law degree and recent tech transition: “I expected TWU to be intense technically. It is, but I didn’t expect it to be so human.” Kun’s realization echoed this: the reality “was much more holistic — teaching consulting skills, collaboration and agile ways of working alongside technical practices.”

## **The innovation hiding in plain sight**

When TWU began in 2005, global companies approached training with efficiency in mind: train people locally, minimize disruption, keep costs manageable. If you had a diverse, international workforce, you created multiple regional programs adapted to local conditions.

TWU took a radically different approach.

“Whoever got the idea to take people from Brazil and Australia and send them to India was a genius,” reflects Giulia Mercurio, who spent five years managing TWU operations. “I don’t think we see that a lot in other companies. Having everyone traveling to such a unique place with all the challenges that brings — and having grads from the entire company from all parts of the world get the same opportunity, the same experience.”

Twenty years later, this approach still seems radical. In an era of remote work and distributed teams, the idea of bringing everyone to one intensive, in-person learning experience runs counter to prevailing trends toward efficiency and convenience.

Yet, this “inefficient” approach created something no regional program could: a shared foundation that connects Thoughtworkers across continents, cultures and time zones long after they return to their home offices. An experience so distinctive that anyone who had been through it would immediately connect with others who had shared it.

## Diversity as a strategic advantage

Santiago, arriving from Ecuador with his software engineering background, found himself on a team where “most of my team was from Brazil and even the ones closer to home had very different backgrounds.”

**“I had teammates that had very different experiences, were in the middle of a career change or came from a wide variety of industries. They brought a lot to the table that I wouldn’t have expected at first glance.”**

**Santiago Minga**  
**TWU 88 Graduate**



The diversity isn’t just geographic. This is what makes TWU different from other diversity initiatives: the program doesn’t just celebrate differences — it systematically leverages them as learning resources.

Santiago discovered this when working with teammates whose non-tech backgrounds became assets: “I remember a teammate whose teaching experience truly shined when we were working on consulting workshops. Another had worked in an animal sanctuary as a biologist and was very knowledgeable about sustainability and green tech.”

Eduard Maura i Puig, who joined Thoughtworks immediately after finishing his university degree, shared that this experience of working with people from numerous cultural backgrounds was his first exposure to such diversity in a professional setting.

Immediately, he noticed that the most challenging part of being in this diverse group was working around everyone's different ways of working and understanding without a common ground

Kun discovered that a simple but intentional way to do this was through moments of connection. through group activities "Group activities at the end of the day were the most effective way to connect with people in our team. We had team activities where we shared the music from our respective countries." His key insight: "You learn from a different perspective and approach. It's evident that a diverse group breeds creativity and innovation."

For Victoria, making her career transition from biology to technology, the revelation comes from meeting others on similar journeys: "What was really cool was meeting people who, like me, migrated from different careers. They showed me how rewarding such a big change can be and how important it is to be proactive in learning new things."

**"One of the best things about TWU (and Thoughtworks in general) is that it goes beyond technology."**

**Ana Boyero**  
**Grad, TWU 88**



The different professional backgrounds don't just add variety — they bring fundamentally different approaches to problem-solving, different ways of thinking about clients and requirements, different perspectives on what constitutes quality or success.

Ana Elisa, a historian transitioning to technology while raising a five-year-old daughter, captures the strategic value: “What surprised me most was how important it is to respect each person’s context. Creating a healthy, respectful environment allows intellectual exchange to happen more freely and meaningfully.”

Ana Boyero discovered that TWU’s approach aligned with her humanistic background: “One of the best things about TWU (and Thoughtworks in general) is that it goes beyond technology. Our instructors encourage us to have discussions about the impact of our decisions as developers and they also foster a critical mindset rather than just a task-driven one. Thoughtworks’ culture is essential in helping us see software not as something cold, functional or robotic, but as a tool made by people, for people.”

This isn’t just a nice sentiment about inclusion — it’s a competitive insight. When diverse teams feel psychologically safe, they outperform homogeneous ones because they can draw on a wider range of perspectives and approaches.

Taynara Rechia’s experience clearly reflects this: “My biggest challenge during TWU was imposter syndrome and a profound insecurity regarding my English. This affected me quite a lot emotionally and the biggest impact was not fully enjoying the first two weeks, as I was constantly afraid of exposing myself and being judged. I didn’t feel comfortable speaking in public or facilitating sessions because of this barrier.”

“On one such instance, I was feeling down, believing I couldn’t complete a certain task. One of the trainers, who is now one of my best friends, literally took my hand and led me to a room. Together, she started writing the entire activity on the board, constantly asking me questions. Afterwards, she showed me that I was capable and that I had actually done it — she merely



guided me and revealed my own potential. She created a safe environment, gave me space and motivated me”, Taynara adds.

The trainer created conditions where Taynara could discover her own capabilities while feeling supported rather than judged. She wasn’t spoon-fed answers — she was given the structure and encouragement to find her own solutions.

### **Safe to fail, designed to grow**

Behind what appears to be the beautiful chaos of diverse groups learning together lies careful orchestration. The TWU team doesn’t hope for transformation — they engineer the conditions where it becomes inevitable. And this begins with selection.

“We made sure that we are looking more at the attitude than aptitude,” explains Dipsi Kundal, a former core team member. “Aptitude was a given and it still is. It’s more of an attitude that makes a lot of sense.”

The program creates conditions that make learning and failing safe while maintaining enough challenge to promote growth. Push too hard and people shut down. Create too much comfort and transformation doesn’t occur. The real engineering happens in how experiences are structured to require vulnerability while maintaining safety.

The program creates what Barbara describes as “dedicated team connection meetings held during work hours. These scheduled sessions provide approximately two hours weekly for the team to engage in non-work activities. We’ve enjoyed playing games like Among Us and Gartic Phone, as well as sharing personal experiences such as vacation stories about Brazil and Ecuador, including discussions about local customs and points of interest.”



At TWU, personal connection isn't seen as separate from professional development. In consulting work, the ability to quickly build rapport with diverse stakeholders often determines project success more than technical expertise alone. The environment allows for experimentation in ways that client projects don't, while also preparing people for the reality that real consulting work requires exactly these kinds of risks.

Beatriz Bazaglia experienced the benefit of building these personal connections during her first major group project that required using Java and React: "My comfort zone was C, a low-level language where I knew the rules. Suddenly, I was in this high-level, abstract world where I felt completely lost and the impostor syndrome was overwhelming. Every pairing session was a lesson in humility. I had to constantly suppress the instinct to pretend I understood and instead say things like, 'I have no idea what that annotation does, can you explain it?'"

**"What made it so memorable was the response. My teammates met my vulnerability not with judgment, but with patience and a genuine desire to help. They created a space where being a beginner was safe."**

**Beatriz Bazaglia**  
**TWU 86 Graduate**



This safety to be vulnerable accelerates learning in ways that traditional training cannot. When people can admit ignorance without shame, they can focus on understanding rather than performance. When they can ask questions without fear, they discover solutions faster.

“It taught me that true collaboration isn’t about everyone being an expert,” Beatriz reflects, “but about creating the trust to learn in public, together.”

This safety becomes especially crucial for career changers. Zia Tyebjee, who transitioned from architecture to software development, talks about how TWU creates space for fundamental reinvention: “Don’t be shy! TWU is a safe place, even if you are someone who doesn’t feel comfortable speaking up in groups this is a perfect place to push yourself out of your comfort zone. Being willing to ask your questions and voice your opinion will serve you well in TWU and for the rest of your career. So take this chance to push yourself - I promise everyone will support you and it will feel great!”

### **The acceleration of transformation**

One of the most remarkable aspects of the TWU experience is how quickly transformation occurs. People consistently report profound changes in just a few weeks — a speed that suggests something important about deep learning.

When people are removed from familiar contexts, placed among supportive but challenging peers and given meaningful problems to solve together, change happens remarkably quickly. The diversity of perspectives accelerates this process — when stuck, there’s always someone with a different background who might see the solution.

Victoria sees this transformation clearly: “What surprised me most was how quickly we all connected and found common ground, despite our different backgrounds. The diverse perspectives actually made our problem-solving stronger and our discussions richer.”



JoJo Swords captures this rapid transformation in her own journey: “When I joined TWU, I was incredibly shy. I often second-guessed myself and stayed quiet, even when I had ideas. A simple piece of advice from my TWU mentor, Jez Humble — ‘ask questions, even if you think you don’t have any’ — unlocked something in me. That shift in confidence completely changed the way I showed up — not just at work, but in life.”

This acceleration extends beyond technical skills to fundamental worldview shifts. As Taynara puts it: “Having the opportunity to be exposed to so many cultures makes us rethink everything, especially different viewpoints, considering each person’s context regardless of their origin. Respect becomes even more evident, empathy also grows.”

The expanded perspective becomes crucial for consulting work, where success often depends on understanding and working effectively with clients from vastly different backgrounds and contexts.

Beatriz reflects on her own rapid development: “My biggest challenge has been letting go of the idea that I need to know everything. Coming from a background where I was expected to have answers, it was tough to shift into a mindset where asking the right questions matters more than having the perfect solution.”

### **The compound effect**

What emerges from this environment is something more valuable than technical skills or cultural competence alone.

As JoJo puts it: “TWU gave me the confidence to evolve, to take risks and to trust that there isn’t just one ‘right’ path but many ways to grow, learn and make an impact. That mindset continues to shape how I approach my work and my career to this day.”

Santiago captures another aspect of this growth: “No matter how different our backgrounds were, we could always find some amount of common ground and relate to each other, which helped us share more amongst the group.”

The most valuable learning is what Andrea discovered after the brown dog incident: “It really emphasized how critical communication and active listening are in software delivery.”

But the lesson goes deeper than communication techniques. It’s about developing what might be called “learning confidence”—the belief that you can adapt to new situations, master unfamiliar challenges and contribute value even when you don’t start with all the answers.

Andrea captures this transformation succinctly: “One of the most valuable mindsets I’ve learned at TWU is that there are no silly or pointless questions, everything is valid. You don’t need to know everything from the start; it’s okay to learn as you go.”

Ana Boyero's perspective on the long-term nature of transformation resonates with many career changers: "Trust the process and don't get discouraged by what you don't understand today, because this is a marathon. Focus on learning and improving a little bit each day; time and your consistency will do the work."

Her advice captures the community aspect: "Seize the immense opportunity that comes with belonging to a group of peers who started at the same time as you. Stay in touch with them, because you are stronger together."

This shift — from needing to know to being willing to learn — may be the most valuable outcome of the entire TWU experience. It prepares people not just for their first consulting assignment, but for careers that will inevitably require continuous adaptation and growth.

Because in a world where technology changes faster than anyone can master it, the ability to ask the right questions matters more than having the right answers. The willingness to notice what you're not seeing becomes more valuable than expertise in what you can already see.

And the diverse perspectives that initially feel challenging become the greatest asset — because they help you see the Dalmatian when everyone else is drawing a brown dog.

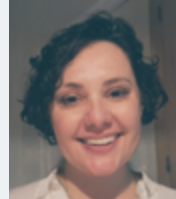


## Chapter 2

# The teachers who learned: Trainers at TWU

**“There is something about teaching that opens our mind in a completely different way. When you start teaching something, sharing your knowledge with other people, there is something that’s unlocked in our brain.”**

**Patricia Muniz**  
**TWU Trainer**



## **The call they least expected**

Patricia Muniz was settled in her role as a tech lead in Brazil when her office manager made an unexpected suggestion. Three years into her Thoughtworks journey, Patricia had asked for a new challenge, something that would stretch her abilities beyond the familiar rhythms of client work.

“We have a position in Thoughtworks University,” her manager said. “You’d be a trainer.”

Patricia’s immediate response was telling: “No, no, I think it’s too much.”

The resistance isn’t unusual. Most people who have become TWU trainers never planned for it. They’re experienced consultants, developers and tech leads who’ve found their groove in client delivery. The idea of suddenly becoming responsible for shaping the next generation of Thoughtworkers can feel overwhelming.

But her manager persisted: “Actually, I think it’s perfect for you.”

This moment — the unexpected invitation followed by self-doubt — is remarkably common among trainers.

Gil Pereira, who would eventually train multiple batches in both India and China, had a more specific motivation: “I’m an introvert. I used to struggle a lot with speaking in public, even going to a meeting where I had to present something to my team or clients. It gave me a lot of anxiety and I wanted to get better.”

For Gil, TWU represented an opportunity to confront her greatest professional fear through immersion: “I thought, if I go to TWU, maybe by doing that every single day I’ll get more comfortable with it.”

Still others discover their calling not through burning desire or specific need, but through smaller moments — mentoring a junior colleague, explaining a complex concept to a client or simply noticing how much they enjoy the human side of technical work.

Thien-An Mac's motivation was straightforward: "I've always liked to teach. It's always been a big thing for me. I really love to teach — it's one thing I'm really passionate about."

But even for natural teachers, the transition from consultant to trainer involves more than enthusiasm. It requires learning to see things that experienced professionals have trained themselves not to notice.



## Coming the full circle

Perhaps no one embodies the complete TWU experience quite like Flavia Dessoldi. Her journey illuminates how the program can fundamentally reshape not just careers, but entire life trajectories — and how that transformation creates trainers uniquely equipped to guide others through similar transitions

Flavia's path to technology was born from necessity and accident, having pivoted from theater to tech after literally falling from a stage. "One day I was acting and I fell down from the stage and I broke my foot," she recalls. During the long recovery that followed, she began questioning her future in theater. "I started to think, well, I should try something different. I decided that I would try something that I had never tried before and that it should allow me to work from anywhere in any situation."



**“We start creating bonds with the team, connection with the trainees and trainers. Acting like a client, acting like a bad consultant or acting like a good consultant. It was a lot of fun, a lot of learning.”**

**Flavia Dessoldi**  
**TWU Graduate**



Technology seemed to offer that flexibility. Through connections in São Paulo's tech community, she learned about a program called Reprograma — a boot camp specifically designed to teach programming to women. “It was during this program that I heard about Thoughtworks because the people that work in Reprograma are all volunteers and one of the volunteers was a Thoughtworker.”

When Flavia, a graduate of TWU69 in 2020, joined the program, she was still finding her footing in technology. The program was in-person in Pune, India — her first time traveling internationally. Despite the physical challenges of adapting to a new environment, she found something transformative in the experience.

“We start creating bonds with the team, connection with the trainees and trainers. Acting like a client, acting like a bad consultant or acting like a good consultant. It was a lot of fun, a lot of learning.” Her theater background, which might have seemed irrelevant in a technology context, became an asset: “I don't know if it's because of my theater background, but acting, it was a lot of fun.”

The program didn't just teach her technical skills — it revealed capabilities she didn't know she possessed.

Three years later, when the opportunity arose to return as a trainer, Flavia faced the same self-doubt that is common in many trainer journeys. "I was really aiming to become a trainer. But I was thinking, you know, would I be able to really teach people about these values, this knowledge that Thoughtworks have?"

When she finally stepped into the trainer role for a remote cohort, she discovered something remarkable: "And then I discovered that yes, I could. I had a lot to share. Actually a lot of experiences."

The transition from graduate to trainer gave Flavia a unique perspective on what creates transformation. As a trainee, she had experienced the vulnerability of learning in public, of being challenged to grow beyond her comfort zone. As a trainer, she could now create that same environment for others, drawing on her recent experience of professional reinvention.

Another trainer who had a similar experience is Gil Pereira.

Reflecting on her experience as a grad, she mentions: "It was the first time I traveled outside of my home country. The program was in English. I had studied English during my teenage years, but I didn't use it much. So when I went to TWU, there were all these different accents that I had to hear. I remember I used to have a headache every single day."

The experience was challenging but transformative. "Despite the challenges, I felt very grateful for everything that I learned. I had to be out of my comfort zone every single day during those five weeks I was there."

When Gil returned as a trainer years later, she brought both the technical skills she'd developed and the emotional intelligence from her own struggles. This perspective — informed by personal experience of the program's challenges — made her particularly effective at creating safety for participants facing similar struggles.



## **When consultants become teachers**

The transition from consultant to trainer involves more than a change of role. There is a fundamental shift in how people see their purpose and measure their impact. This often catches experienced professionals off guard, revealing capacities they didn't know they possessed.

“There is something about teaching that opens our mind in a completely different way,” Patricia explains. “When you start teaching something, sharing your knowledge with other people, there is something that’s unlocked in our brain.”

This cognitive shift is the result of moving from individual contribution to collective enablement, from solving problems to helping others develop the capacity to solve problems themselves. The change can be disorienting for consultants accustomed to being valued for their expertise and ability to deliver solutions quickly.

**Patricia found herself reconnecting with dreams she had set aside decades earlier: “When I was a child, my dream was to become a teacher because my mother, my aunts, most of them were teachers... At TWU, this dream came back to me.”**

But TWU training isn’t classroom teaching in any traditional sense. Patricia discovered that effective training requires a unique combination of skills: “Teaching is like an emotional and scientific thing at the same time, because you need emotional connections. And at the same time, you need strategy and clear objectives.”

The emotional component often proves more challenging than the technical aspects. Trainers must create psychological safety for learners who are thousands of miles from home, communicating and working in a second language and grappling with imposter syndrome. They need to read group dynamics, adapt their approach in real-time and sometimes abandon their carefully prepared content when the group needs something different.

Thien-An experienced the intensity of this transition firsthand during batches 53 and 54. The workload was relentless: “I joke that I aged four years in two batches of four months each. As a trainer, we’re working on average 12-plus hours a day and then even on weekends.”

Despite the demanding schedule, Thien-An describes the experience as “probably the highlight of my career at Thoughtworks. It was a lot of fun.”

This paradox — exhausting work that somehow energizes rather than depletes — characterizes the trainer experience. For Gil, the challenge was learning to balance different types of support: “There’s a fine line between holding your hand and spoon-feeding an answer and guiding them towards it. That makes it very difficult.”

## **Learning to see the invisible**

One of the most delicate skills trainers must develop is noticing when someone is struggling with challenges that aren’t immediately visible. TWU participants often navigate multiple layers of difficulty simultaneously — learning new technical skills while adapting to a new culture, in a second language, surrounded by people from vastly different backgrounds.

Patricia discovered the depth of this challenge when working with a trainee who struggled with language barriers: “That person was really nervous. And every time the person needed to talk to me or the other people from the team, it was clear that they were anxious and nervous.”

Rather than pushing the participant to adapt to the existing structure, Patricia proposed a solution: “I said ‘Hey, would you like to use the translator to talk to me? You can write something, then you just show me what you want to share. And if you are not understanding what I’m talking about, I can do the same with you.’”

The approach required vulnerability from both trainer and trainee. Patricia had to acknowledge that her standard communication methods weren't working, while the participant had to trust that asking for accommodation wouldn't result in judgment.

**“The person accepted. Step by step, little by little, the person started to become more relaxed and began to communicate better.”**

This experience fundamentally changed Patricia's understanding of what creates genuine safety in learning environments. “I learned what a safe environment truly means. Before this, it was like having good relationships with people. So if I'm not fighting with someone in my team, I have a safe environment. But this changed my perspective entirely.”

True safety doesn't come from surface-level politeness or conflict avoidance. It requires creating conditions where people can be authentically vulnerable about what they don't know. Different approaches to communication and learning are to be accommodated rather than merely tolerated.

Gil faced similar challenges, developing specific techniques for managing participation across cultural differences. She learned to be comfortable with silence — a particularly difficult skill: “When you ask a question and one of the ground rules is if you have something to share, raise your hand and wait to be picked. I would wait quietly until I got a hand. Then I'd wait some more to see a hand that I don't usually get.”

The technique requires patience and confidence: “After some time, people would start feeling uncomfortable. And then, a few more hands would come up. Because you’re giving space for people who don’t usually think as fast or are not as comfortable with the language.”

## **The art of productive conflict**

Managing diversity in a TWU cohort goes far beyond ensuring geographic representation or checking demographic boxes. Trainers find themselves orchestrating learning experiences for groups that might include computer science graduates from Germany, mid-career changers from Brazil, experienced developers from India and liberal arts majors from Australia — all trying to learn the same material while navigating vastly different starting points.

Sometimes this diversity creates friction that trainers must navigate carefully. Patricia recalls a conversation with a trainee who was reluctant to work with certain teammates: “I don’t want to pair with some people on the team because we are so different from different perspectives. Different parts of the world, different cultures, so many different things. I would never be friends with this person in my real life.”

Rather than dismiss the concern or mandate collaboration, Patricia used it as a coaching opportunity. She acknowledged the professional context while challenging the underlying assumptions: “We are in a professional environment. We need to interact with people. It’s part of our job... but another thing is that I truly believe that you can have friends at work, why are you not giving them a chance?”

When Patricia checked in with the trainee later, the response revealed genuine transformation: “I changed my mind. We have more in common than I thought... We are from completely different places in the world and also cultures and life experiences, but I discovered that actually, it’s good to work with that person.”

Thien-An took a different approach to the artificial barriers he perceived in traditional trainer-trainee relationships: “There was a clean separation between a trainer and a grad. There’s a line that you cannot cross. I don’t believe that. It’s very weird that basically the first four weeks minus one day, there was a barrier.”

Instead, he preferred to follow Thoughtworks’ broader culture of equality: “I treated them as equals. It’s a flat organization. So the fact that there was a divide was very hard for me to reconcile.”

This sometimes put him at odds with recommended approaches, but he believed authentic connection was essential for genuine learning. His approach required constant calibration — maintaining enough structure to ensure learning objectives were met while creating enough openness for real relationship building.

## **The compound transformation**

While the immediate experience of training is intense and transformative, the real impact often becomes apparent only later, as former trainers apply what they learned in client work and leadership roles. The skills developed through training prove to be foundational for long-term career success.

Patricia reflects on how training fundamentally changed her approach to all subsequent work: “I think that now I’m a better tech lead because of this, because I can connect more with people because of the experience with teaching.”





The change goes deeper than improved interpersonal skills. Training taught her to think differently about objectives and execution: “I discovered that before I was much more of an executor. Because of this, I started to understand my objectives better... Before executing something, I now first understand why we are doing this. What’s the pain? What are the needs that we are trying to solve?”

Gil experienced a similar transformation in her consulting approach. The empathy and communication skills developed through training made her more effective with clients: “When you have trainees who are part of a team and they are not getting along, you need to help bring together different personalities and make sure that people are being respectful... Which is something that always happens in work.”

She learned to approach client conflicts with the same patience and curiosity she had developed: “Sometimes, for instance in a client meeting, a client will be upset about something... I would think, okay, let me understand what’s going on with this human being. I’m not gonna be defensive, because if I’m defensive, I’m not putting myself in their shoes.”

For Flavia, the trainer experience became a form of leadership development: “I think it’s a truly leadership development program. If you’re aiming to become a leader, being a trainer is an amazing opportunity to improve leadership skills and also to make connections all over the world.”

## **The courage to begin again**

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the TWU trainer journey is that it requires experienced professionals to embrace vulnerability at a stage in their careers when they could reasonably expect to be seen as established experts. They trade the comfort of technical mastery for the uncertainty of human development work.

This willingness to start over in a new domain requires a particular kind of courage. Patricia captures this in her advice to future trainers: “Open your mind. Open your mind to learning something new and allow it to change your mind. Embrace the change that can happen not only for you, but for others as well.”

The promise isn’t that training will be easy or comfortable. Instead, it’s that the challenge will be transformative — that the experience of facilitating growth in others will fundamentally change the facilitator as well.

Gil’s journey from introvert struggling with public speaking to confident trainer illustrates this transformation: “Sometimes people don’t believe that I am an introvert, because I can speak a lot more now. So it helped me a lot.”

But deeper learning goes beyond communication skills. As Gil puts it: “I think Thoughtworks University helped me become a better human being, a better consultant, way more than being a better developer.”

The trainers discover that in teaching others to see beyond technical competence to human potential, they develop the same capacity in themselves. They learn to notice not just what people don't know, but what they're capable of becoming.

And in that recognition — that growth is always possible, every person has untapped potential, that the right environment can unlock capabilities people didn't know they had — lies the foundation for everything TWU achieves.

**For those considering the trainer path, Flavia offers this perspective: “This will be the most amazing journey that you will embrace. It’s not just like you sharing your experiences with others, but also much more. You’re gaining experience. You’re gonna build connections. You’re going to increase communication facilitation skills.”**

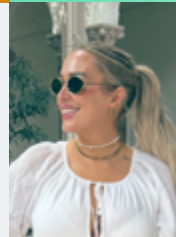


## Chapter 3

# The architects of transformation: Behind the scenes at TWU

**“There is not one business function that we have not worked with this year. Not one. Every single function, whether it’s mobility, travel, legal, finance, marketing, employer brand, comms, recruitment... every single function we have to work with to make sure that we’re all aligned.”**

**Jade Daubney-Bennett**  
Global Head of First Year Experience



## **The orchestration behind the program**

On a Friday evening in July 2025, Joanne O'Brien sits at her computer, diligently managing the logistics for the first in-person batch of Thoughtworks University since the program went remote during COVID. While she keeps an eye on the big picture, her teammate, Vaishnavi Hodarkar is actively tracking the arrivals of 71 trainees on a detailed spreadsheet, sending Joanne constant updates. Each name represents someone boarding a flight from somewhere in the world - Brazil, Germany, Australia, Ecuador - all heading to Pune, India, over the next 48 hours. Every detail needs to be followed through till the end.

Joanne's phone is buzzing constantly with updates from Vaishnavi: a trainer from Bangalore has landed safely, a graduate from Brazil is running late on their connection, someone needs help navigating Mumbai airport at 2 AM local time.

"Until I know that they're all landed, I have a feeling in the pit of my stomach that won't go away," she admits.

As TWU's Operations Lead, Joanne has spent months planning to make this experience possible. The logistics are staggering: visas secured for multiple countries with different requirements, flights coordinated across time zones, accommodations arranged that account for dietary restrictions, religious practices and accessibility needs. Ground transportation organized for airport pickups in a city where traffic can add hours to any journey.

But Joanne's concern goes deeper than logistics. "For some people, they've never traveled out of their home country before and some maybe have never flown before. So it's a huge trip that people are going on for the first time."

This is the central goal driving TWU's core team: how do you create meaningful transformation for individuals while managing a global program that serves an entire organization's strategic needs? How do you notice and respond to your own operational Dalmatians hiding in plain sight — not just in client requirements?

The answer requires operating at multiple levels simultaneously. "We're organized into three buckets," Jade explains. "There's strategy, operations and execution. Strategy is where we define the vision for Thoughtworks University - our innovation, our big ideas, the bets we're making and where we want TWU to go in the future. Operations is all about making that vision workable - it's the logistics, the behind-the-scenes planning that keeps everything running. And finally, there's execution, which is the part everyone sees: actually running the program on the ground. That's the visible piece. But the real magic happens in all three, even if most people only notice one."



## Seeing the needs behind the needs

The psychological safety that graduates and trainers experience stems from decisions the core team makes long before anyone arrives at the training location. These decisions require seeing beyond the obvious requirements to anticipate needs that participants themselves might not recognize.

**“We make sure that we know in advance if people have any challenges, any struggles, any form of support or accommodation that they need.”**

Dipsi Kundal, who managed operations for three years and witnessed over 26 batches explains. “For example, there was a trainer a few years ago, who was a breastfeeding mother. She was coming without her child. But she needed to pump out every now and then. When we were made aware, we made sure she would have that accommodation given.”

In another instance, Dipsi recalls “a trainer came with her partner, They were same-sex partners. But at the same time, knowing how India worked as a country at that point in time, we ensured that information was kept confidential within the core team.”

These aren’t edge cases requiring special handling — they’re examples of the invisible architecture that makes transformation possible. “When I say we held ourselves to the highest level of standards and accountability,” Dipsi reflects, “it’s because there was a heightened sensitive information that we needed to protect a lot of times.”

The team has learned to see patterns in what might seem like individual challenges. Language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, homesickness and imposter syndrome appear predictably across batches. They create systems that address these patterns while remaining flexible enough to handle the unexpected.

## **The rhythm of constant recalibration**

The TWU core team operates in what organizational researchers call “permanent beta” — a state where adaptation isn’t an occasional necessity but a continuous operational requirement. This is the daily reality of managing a program that must remain consistent across cultures while adapting to constantly shifting business needs.

“Sometimes we’re expecting big numbers of hires. And then we don’t execute the program in a specific region. We have to constantly adapt,” explains Giulia Mercurio, who spent five years managing TWU operations. “Or we were planning to have a small term. And suddenly we have 10 more people and then we need more trainers.”

This constant adaptation happens at multiple timescales simultaneously. These adjustments are based on broader organizational changes — market conditions affecting hiring plans, client project timelines influencing when people can be released for training, visa processing delays that compress preparation windows.

Each change requires rethinking not just content delivery but the entire support infrastructure. When the program expanded to China, it involved what Dipsi describes as “a whole year together, sort of replicating the entire program to suit China. So that meant, how do I hand over the entire operation? And how do we set it up for success?”



Replication isn't simple copying — it requires understanding which elements of the Indian experience were culturally specific and which were universally necessary. The team maintains the essential transformative elements while adapting to different food, different accommodation standards, different cultural norms around authority and feedback.

Yet despite this constant flux, the team maintains consistency through careful documentation and transfer processes. “We don’t make any major changes in the program during the year,” Dipsi explains. “It’s only in that cooling period that we have after the terms are over. Those two months are when we do the refresh.”

This discipline creates stability within change — participants can rely on certain foundations while the team continuously improves based on lessons learned.





## The great remote experiment

TWU's most dramatic transformation came not from strategic planning but from external necessity. When COVID lockdowns began in March 2020, the team had to reinvent a fundamentally in-person experience almost overnight.

“When I joined in 2020, the biggest challenge was to bring the program from in-person to remote,” Giulia recalls. “Initially, we thought it was temporary. Initially, we thought about getting everyone in the same zoom call from all around the world and that would be enough.”

Reality forced more fundamental changes. “We had to create a completely different structure. So we created different zones, so we could work with different time zones, bringing all our operations into tools like Trello, Miro, etc. Before this, everyone was in the same room in India and they were able to take decisions very fast and in a very collaborative way.”

The operational challenge was immense. “For us, we then had three different teams of trainers with three different teams of operations and so obviously with time they were starting to do things slightly differently. We also had the challenge to keep the program centralized.”

The remote period became an unexpected experiment in understanding which aspects of TWU were essential versus traditional. Could the transformative power of bringing diverse perspectives together survive video calls and breakout rooms? Could the deep human connections that characterized TWU form through screens?

**“We did prove that it was possible to run it remote,”  
Giulia reflects, “and there were pros and cons, of course.”**

Meiyin Chang, joining TWU 90 remotely, initially worried about the format of delivery. “At first, I expected TWU to be in person, and I was really looking forward to that. I also thought it might be difficult to make real connections with other trainees or trainers.”

Her experience proved the remote adaptation could still deliver transformation: “In reality, the environment was welcoming and warm. We formed strong bonds, had meaningful conversations and created a safe space to grow both technically and personally.”

The remote program succeeded in many ways. Participants still experienced personal and professional growth. They still formed meaningful connections. They still emerged with stronger consulting skills and greater cultural competence. But something was missing — a quality of connection and shared experience that proved difficult to replicate virtually.

## **The business case for human connection**

When the opportunity arose to return to in-person delivery, the decision wasn't driven by sentiment but by specific business needs. The remote program, while successful, had limitations that became apparent over time.

Jade's analysis of the return to in-person delivery focuses on measurable outcomes: "The reason we brought it back was because of the life-changing aspect which we weren't getting at the level we were getting when it was in-person, in terms of connections and that life-changing experience."

More critically, the business case for in-person delivery became compelling when viewed through the lens of long-term retention and engagement. The data showed that graduates who had experienced TWU in-person demonstrated different patterns of organizational commitment and cross-cultural collaboration — capabilities that become increasingly valuable as Thoughtworks expands globally.

"There's a massive part of improving employee retention and engagement," Jade explains. "I think TWU in-person brings such a sense of belonging that is really difficult to do in a remote version."

The decision also reflected practical realities about global talent development. "We are trying to design one program that needs to fit with 17-18 countries," Giulia explains, "which have very different needs in terms of scale, in terms of hiring targets, but also the kind of clients they're working with."



**Remote delivery, while more cost-effective, makes it harder to create the shared cultural foundation.**

**The in-person experience creates what researchers call “shared adversity bonding” — the deep connections formed when people navigate challenges together.**

The discomfort of jet lag, unfamiliar food and cultural adjustment becomes part of what creates lasting relationships.

“When people tell me what’s the biggest win or what’s the best story, there isn’t one,” Jade reflects. “Every single batch, somebody says, ‘TWU changed my life.’ I think TWU in-person takes that to another level.”

### **Scaling transformation across time and location**

Over years of execution, TWU’s core team has excelled at maintaining the transformative quality of the experience while scaling it across thousands of participants and twenty years of operation.

This requires what Dipsi calls “creating a chain effect in all of the projects.” The graduates don’t just return to work with new skills — they become ambassadors for a particular way of working, thinking and treating colleagues.

“TWU is our entry point for a lot of people,” Patricia Muniz observes. “This entry point is like the first seed. Once these people are in projects, this chain effect occurs. These trainees impact other people who will impact other people and other people.”

The multiplication effect also depends on hiring and developing trainers who can recognize and nurture potential in others. “Our strategy always was that we get trainers to commit to be in the program for a minimum of two terms,” Dipsi explains. “First term is really your testing ground. Those who stay for two to three terms end up becoming lead trainers for the next cohort.”

This creates institutional memory and cultural continuity even as specific people move on. The most effective trainers become responsible for developing newcomers, ensuring that the essential elements of the experience transfer from batch to batch.



**“Everything gets documented,” Dipsi notes. “From the session handouts to the case study briefings to how the combination works. The gender distribution, the trainee distribution, global north, global south — all those were part of our strategies to ensure that we were creating a very good balance of people and traits.”**

But documentation alone isn’t sufficient. The real knowledge transfer happens through what Dipsi describes as “very quick feedback cycles. Anything that we are spotting in the grads, their behavior — we used to make sure that every week, once a week, the trainers and the core team gather in the room discussing feedback.”

## **The evolution toward leadership development**

The most recent and significant change to TWU comes from a fundamental shift in how the organization thinks about talent development. From her vantage point as Chief Talent Officer, Joanna Parke describes this evolution: “TWU is a foundational part of our talent strategy. The best way for us to build the culture and capabilities that enable us to deliver extraordinary impact is to build it ourselves, from the beginning of someone’s career in tech.”

This perspective comes from someone who experienced TWU from multiple angles. Joanna was part of TWU4 as a trainer and now oversees talent strategy globally. “In many ways, being a trainer was my first leadership role at Thoughtworks. It taught me how to look after people and how to have empathy and understanding for where someone is at the moment, so you can help them get to the next level of understanding.”

The progression from early trainer to C-level executive illustrates the long-term career impact that validates the strategic investment the organization continues to make.

Jade’s expansion from a five-week intensive to a full year of supported development operationalizes this strategic vision. “I think the biggest innovation that TWU has made is the investment of a one-year experience,” Jade explains. “We’re not creating graduates that are ready for their first project. That isn’t what we do right now. Right now, we’re creating future leaders.”

This expansion required seeing beyond the immediate business need — getting people productive quickly — to the longer-term strategic need for leaders who can navigate complexity, build relationships across cultures and create the conditions for others to thrive.

“The graduates from TWU are our strongest ambassadors of our culture and ways of working,” Joanna notes. “They are, quite literally, the future leaders of our organization.”

“We understand as a learning and development program that putting everything into four weeks wasn’t effective learning for our graduates,” Jade adds. “They can’t take so much information in a four-week term.”

**The year-long program now includes elements that space out the learning over time: “On top of the term that we did historically, we now have advanced days plus self-guided learning, all the support and trainer access plus certifications.”**

“Though the specifics and content of the program has changed many times over the years,” Joanna reflects, “what has remained the same is that TWU is the primary way we shape and grow the culture and talent of the future. While we are preparing the graduates for their first client assignment, we are sowing the seeds for them to become industry leaders one day, whether inside of Thoughtworks or beyond.”

Remarkably, this expansion was achieved “without increasing the cost and time of the program, without increasing time to bill and time to staff. We’ve kept all the important factors in place whilst being able to provide a one-year journey.”

## **Measuring the impact**

While participants experience TWU as transformative and trainers find it professionally defining, the program’s continued investment depends on measurable business value. Bill Kimmel, who ran TWU for five years, demanded hard data on business impact rather than relying on testimonials and satisfaction surveys.



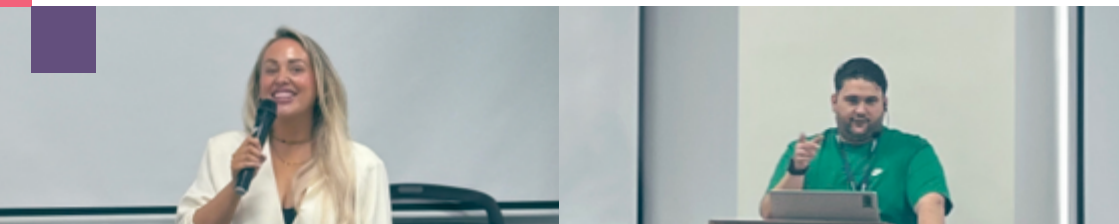
“I wanted to make sure that was a program that contributed to the profitability of our company,” Bill states directly. “TWU graduates came out in five or six weeks and were seen to be profitable for Thoughtworks in the year after. And to me that was a significant metric.”

Bill's approach was systematically data-driven. “I would measure the utilization of people for the year after they graduated. I wanted to know if we were using them. And if not, I would talk to the country and say, ‘What are you doing? These people are good. Put them to work.’”

Bill's analysis went far beyond simple cost-benefit calculations. He looked at correlations between pre-program assessments and TWU performance. He tracked the growth trajectory of the grads well beyond their first year to understand TWU's long-term impact on both individual careers and organizational performance.

His analysis revealed that TWU graduates weren't just becoming productive consultants. They were staying productive longer, showing lower turnover rates and higher engagement scores.

Bill's most significant discovery involved the trainers themselves: “If you were a trainer at Thoughtworks University, you actually stayed at Thoughtworks longer. Many Thoughtworkers who became trainers at Thoughtworks University went on to play senior — and in some cases, really big leadership — roles. The experience from TWU resulted in them understanding the company and their role in helping the next generation better.”



“We focus on the grads, but the impact on the trainers is equally huge,” Bill explains. “We talk about career development and leadership development so much in this company. But one of the biggest programs for leadership development was Thoughtworks University.”

## **The craft of building teachers**

One of the most critical yet invisible functions of TWU's core team involves identifying and developing the people who will actually deliver transformation: the trainers.

**This goes far beyond finding subject matter experts — it requires discovering individuals who can facilitate change in others while managing their own adaptation to unfamiliar cultural contexts.**



Bill Kimmel discovered the importance and complexity of finding the right trainers early in his tenure as product owner. He notes, “Teaching is hard. Some people just think it’s easy. It’s actually quite difficult. The assumption that technical expertise automatically translates to teaching ability is problematic. It underestimates the profession of teaching, when people just think, ‘Oh, I’m a good software developer. I can go and just teach the next generation.’”

The selection process is as strategic as participant selection. “We made sure that we are getting not only their resumes, but also early feedback that would have come through their hiring cycle and the work they have done [in the company],” Dipsi explains.

But selection is only the beginning. The real work begins with what Dipsi calls “very close, but also very direct feedback to the trainers so that they are able to quickly upskill in terms of the behaviors. Capability? We never had doubts.”

Trainers must learn to work effectively with participants from vastly different educational and professional backgrounds. They need to navigate different communication styles, learning preferences and cultural norms around authority and feedback. Some participants come from educational contexts where questioning authority is discouraged; others come from cultures where direct feedback is considered rude.

The interconnected nature of TWU’s curriculum means that insights from one element inform all others. “If there is feedback in the case study that’s passed on to the trainer right then, they are able to understand whether the grads are showing similar behavior traits in their project simulation,” Dipsi continues.

“We used to make sure that every week the trainers and the core team gather in the room for feedback.” This not only improves individual performance, but also creates systematic learning that can be applied to future batches.

“Those lead trainers were the trainers who were then responsible to impart the same context to the next batch of trainers. So there was always a rotation happening and that was our strategy to ensure that the program runs smoothly.”

## Seeing the invisible impact

The ultimate measure of TWU's success isn't what happens during the program — it's what happens years later, in client meetings and project decisions, in moments when former participants apply the question that started this story: "What am I not seeing?"

When graduates return to their home offices, they go back with more than technical skills. They carry a way of approaching problems that considers human factors alongside technical requirements. They notice when team dynamics are hindering performance. They ask questions that reveal unstated assumptions. They create space for perspectives that might otherwise be overlooked.

This is the invisible impact that justifies the visible investment — the complex logistics, the global coordination and the intensive preparation. It's the understanding that in a world where technology changes faster than anyone can master it, the most valuable capability isn't technical expertise but the ability to see what others miss – the brown dog in the client's background, for instance.

Twenty years and over 4,300 graduates of TWU have proven that this kind of seeing can be taught, scaled and systematically developed. But it requires the careful orchestration of hundreds of invisible elements, all designed to create the conditions where transformation becomes not just possible, but inevitable.



As Joanna notes, this transformation extends beyond individual development to organizational capability: “TWU helped me take a leap of faith, believe I can get through stressful times and reflect on who I want to be as a leader.” These leaders then create environments where others can make similar leaps, multiplying the impact across the organization and beyond.

The program’s true success lies not in any single graduate’s achievement, but in the collective capacity it builds — when a TWU graduate prevents a project failure by asking the right cultural question, when they create psychological safety for a struggling teammate or when they challenge a team’s assumptions about user needs. These moments rarely make it into project reports, but they determine the difference between technical success and human transformation.

**The question that began this journey — “What am I not seeing?” — has become the foundation for everything that follows. As TWU enters its third decade, new questions emerge: How does this human-centered approach to technology evolve in an age of AI? What does the future hold for programs that bet everything on the irreplaceable value of human connection?**

# The next twenty years: People transformation in a changing world

“Though the specifics and the content of the program has changed many times over the years, what has remained the same is that TWU is the primary way we shape and grow the culture and talent of the future. While we are preparing the graduates for their first client assignment, we are sowing the seeds for them to become industry leaders one day, whether inside of Thoughtworks or beyond.”

**Joanna Parke**  
Chief Talent Officer



The world of technology is changing faster than ever. From the rise of AI to the growing complexity of global challenges, the pace of transformation shows no signs of slowing down. What we teach, how we work and the problems we're solving today may look entirely different just a few years from now.

But no matter how much the tools or technologies evolve, the heart of TWU remains unchanged: it's about people. It's about shaping thoughtful, resilient, curious consultants who can navigate ambiguity, lead with empathy and bring others along with them. It's about building a culture that's adaptable enough to evolve with the times, while being grounded enough to reflect who we are.

As we look ahead to the next 20 years, we aim to keep preparing future leaders, to keep reflecting the world we work in and to keep pushing the boundaries of what learning can look like. Because no matter how the world changes, our belief stays the same: real impact begins with people who are willing to grow.

*Thank you.  
Jade*



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