

Interview Transcription

Beth Thompson: Will you please state your name, your job title, and the name of the organization you work for?

Johnny Alga: My name is Johnny Alga and I work for New River Office Supply in Blacksburg, I'm an outside sale rep(resentative) there, and I'm also Bill Ross's main spotter for ISP radio for football games.

Thompson: Where are you originally from and what did your parents do for a living?

Alga: I am from Clarksville, VA, where there's nothing but a lake and nothing to do down there, uh, Bluestone High School. My parents, uh, my dad is a CPA and he pretty much runs his own business down there, it's a pretty big firm in the south side, uh, and my mom is a principal at an elementary school.

T: How long have you worked at your current job?

A: Three years. Pretty much exactly three years. It'll be three years at the end of October.

T: Would you describe in detail a typical day at your job?

A: Well I work from nine to five thirty everyday, uh, and I get a thirty-minute lunch, pretty much wherever I want, I don't have to go into the office, um, 'cause I'm pretty independent. They give me the freedom to do whatever I want. My job is to go see people during the day and to get sales. Um, so from nine to noon, I ride around and see clients in Blacksburg, Christiansburg, Virginia Tech, Giles County, Pulaski, I don't know, uh, and then I usually try to get back to the office to check my e-mails, voicemails, at about noon, and then I'll stay there and then I might eat lunch there, I might go out and get lunch, I don't know. But then I'll try to leave again at like one, one-thirty, two o'clock and go see people again until about four o'clock. And then I need to come in, get all my orders in, uh, and then at the end of the day I'm in charge of collecting everybody's orders and seeing if we have those products in stock and if we don't then I have to order them from our vendor, which they send to us overnight. So, and then by the end of it, it's about 5:30 and it's about time to go home.

T: Okay. And what do you like best about your job?

A: The freedom of being able to do whatever I want. I mean, I can see whoever I want whenever I want, uh, so pretty much I see different people every day. It's not like I do the same thing every single day. That's what I like about it.

T: And what do you like least about it?

A: Um, least about it...that I, that I don't really get a true lunch and break and stuff. Because it's kinda, when I go inside, it retail, so I might sit down to eat lunch, and the phone'll ring and I'll have to stop eatin' lunch to answer the phone. Or like I'll sit down to eat lunch and a customer will come in the store, and I'll have to help 'em. You know, so I don't get like a true break. But, I mean, like that's not that terrible. But that's probably one thing that does get on my nerves a little bit.

T: How does Virginia Tech affect your business?

A: Well, that's the majority of my customers are, are departments for Tech, so I'm on campus a lot. Um, unfortunately, they're having budget cuts right now, uh, so not a whole lot of people are spending much money, uh, since our economy sucks. But, um, it affects my job a lot. I mean, if Virginia Tech's not here, I'm not here, just, because, that's the majority of my business.

T: Could you tell me about a time when you were tempted to walk away from this job?

A: Oh, we get drama, like every place probably gets, people start fighting with people, you know, not fist fighting, but like arguing and stuff. And it's not worth it. Uh, when, you know, it's unsatisfying to go to work, and everybody's like, it's like World War 3 in there, you know, nobody can get along, nobody is talking to each other, and like that's the main thing, in our business you have to have good communication. And, when nobody's talking to each other, there's no communication and that's how things get screwed up. So I mean, I've never really wanted to walk away, but that's something you don't look forward to going to work, when that's going on like that.

T: Do you normally like the people you work with?

A: Oh yeah, I get along with everybody real well.

T: Are these people from Tech as well?

A: Oh well they're mostly local people, um, we got a few Tech grads in there. Actually, the owners are Tech grads. Mike and Ellen Burnham. Mike's the radio announcer for ISP, the analyst. Um, but we got a guy from Floyd, a lady from Christiansburg, a lady from Radford, another guy from Auburn. It's kinda spread out throughout the New River Valley.

T: If you were to have children, what advice would you give them about working a job similar to this?

A: Um, it's been a good learning experience. I pretty much worked my way from the bottom to the top, and I think that that's good. Because, these people that get things handed to them, they don't have, like the raw background of knowing, like, what

goes on in the trenches really. Like, I mean I started off as a delivery guy, and I pretty much just rode around and met people. Just delivered supplies, and in two months they put me as a sales rep. I guess, you know, people liked me and I don't know, I went to Tech, so I know what's going on. I mean, its definitely been a good learning experience, but it's definitely a stepping stone, I don't see myself staying here forever. Uh, but for the amount of time I've been there and what I've accomplished, I've definitely earned a lot. And, I mean, if I had a kid I would definitely push them to do the same.

T: Alright. Where do you see yourself in five to ten years?

A: Hopefully, uh, five to ten years, by then I'll probably be married, uh, and maybe have a kid. Um, I don't know, I could stay here, I could go elsewhere. I need to start chasing dollar bills here, pretty soon. I mean I can't stay here forever. It's nice to live around here because cost of living is cheap, but, uh, the town stays the same age and I'm getting older. Um, so I don't know, I got my degree in business management at Tech, so maybe get a management job somewhere. Doing something, I don't know. Richmond is a place that interests me, but, we'll see. I mean I'm not opposed to staying here if the right opportunity came along.

T: How many hours a week do you work and do you work these hours year-round?

A: Yep. I work 40 hours a week, every week, um, sometimes, it might be random, because of the radio, like this week it's gonna be random because I'll take off Friday, 'cause we're going to Boston. We'll fly out for Boston on Friday, but then I'm picking up radio hours while I'm doing that. So, for my regular job I'm doing 40 hours a week Monday through Friday, and then, for these football games, there's not telling how many hours I'll work for them, just because, it depends on how long the game takes and it depends on how long it takes us to set up all of our equipment. Um, 'cause we usually, especially far away games, we leave and try to be at that stadium at noon, whether we have to drive or fly. We try to be at the stadium at noon 'cause it can take anywhere from two to four to seven hours to set up all of our equipment and make sure everything is right. Because, you know those radio guys, if something crashes and the game goes off the air, our sponsors are going to be upset. And then, that's how they get paid, and if they're sponsor are upset and pull their money, then that's their money. So, uh, you know, on the Friday, it could be anywhere from 2 to six or seven hours, and then on Saturday, uh we go on the air two hours before the game starts, and we usually have to be there two hours before we go on the air, and then games are usually about three-and-a-half, four hours. And then we're on the air an hour-and-a-half after the game is over. So, this weekend, since the game doesn't start 'til eight, it'll probably be over around midnight and then we'll be on the air for an hour-and-a-half after that. Uh, so , we're talking, you know, one-thirty, ad after that, we have to take everything down and put it away, pack it up, and put it on our truck. So we won't be back 'til, two or three in the morning to our hotel room. And then we have to be out by eight o'clock on Sunday in the morning. So, it's gonna be a

rough weekend. It usually takes 'til about Wednesday to recover from these away games.

T: How did you come to have both of your jobs?

A: Well, uh, actually, my job at New River, one of my buddies from college, Greg Burnham, is the same age as me, his parents own New River Office Supply. So when I graduated, I got a job at 84 Lumber as a manager and trainee, but I was working all the time, and couldn't work football games. So, when there was an opening at New River, they hired me, and I was working for Sports Information from when I was a sophomore until I worked at 84 Lumber. Um, and for them I just worked like the scoreboard for softball games, or baseball games, or I might have done like, live internet stats for wrestling or soccer, just random sports, but I kept track of tackles for football. And, uh, Mike, my boss at New River, knew that, and last year, for the Duke away game, one of the guys couldn't go, so I took his place. And I guess I did a good job 'cause they asked me to come back and not him. Um, so, they asked me this summer if I wanted to go fulltime spotting for Bill, and I said heck yeah, lets go. I mean, I'm that crazy fan that goes to all the games anyways, so. Being in the press box you can't cheer, 'cause you have to be like a neutral, you're working for like whatever, so, you're not allowed to cheer for either team, and that's through sports info. I used to just work on home games then I'd go travel on the away games and actually be a fan and cheer and tailgate and all that good stuff, but, you know, now I don't get do any of that. But, I don't really miss it that much. So, none of that tailgating stuff. Getting to old for that stuff.

T: How is your workplace structured?

A: Not very good. No, um, our computer system is way out of date. We're like 15 years old, and you know how computers are, if you don't have a new computer every two or three years, it's outta date. So, we're really old in that department. And we lack communication. I mean, we communicate, but sometimes things get screwed up, because people don't talk to each other. But we have our boss, our two bosses, co-owned, and it's 60 percent Ellen owns it, so we're technically a woman-owned business. And a SWAM vendor, which is a Small Woman And Minority owned business, which, doesn't mean a whole lot to ya'll but it helps us a lot because with people like Tech and VDOT, places like that where they tell them they have to buy from women-owned places. But, uh, they own it, they're always there and we have a manager, who pretty much, she tells everyone what to do. But she's not like a hard-ass boss or anything like that. Like, she's cool. We have three sales reps; Ellen is technically a sales rep, and there's a guy names Todd, and there's me. Then we have a furniture guru-type guy, he just sits up front and puts together furniture, and he answers phones and helps people who come into the store, and then we have our lady that's in charge of keeping up with the stock of the store. I'm not sure what the pecking order is but everybody is treated the same. I mean, I'm sure, I don't know what everybody gets paid, I'm sure not everybody is getting paid the same, but I imagine the longer people have been there, they're making more money. For me

though, I get paid salary and commission, so the more the sell the more I get. So, I'm probably making more than a lot of those people in there. But, everybody is treated the same. It's not like our managers are like, oh I'm you're manager go do this. I mean, she'll ask you nicely or it's not like the people that have been there 15 or 20 years are like I've been here longer go do this. Everybody is cool about that.

T: What are the opportunities for a pay raise or promotion?

A: I hope good! I mean I work on commission so that's like my way of giving myself a raise, if I go out and make more sales. We do get bonuses every now and then if we do something good, or if we have a good sale, or a high gross profit margin or something. Or they'll give us bonuses here and there. Or if we sell certain products or certain brands, say if you sell an ADI chair they'll give you a check for 10 bucks or if you sell a Sit-On-It Chair they'll give you a check for 10 bucks. Or if you wanted to buy a copier, we don't really sell copiers, not the big ones with a ton of paper like you see in most offices, we refer them to Blue Ridge Copier, and they'll send us a check for 50 bucks. So that's nice about it, that's little perks and stuff. But I mean I should be getting a raise. Any time now. 'Cause I haven't gotten one in a while. I think generally it's every year and a half, and it's been more than that for me. But my sales have increased though so I'm not really complaining.

T: What personality traits are required to be successful at both of your jobs?

A: Um, well for the radio I'm a sports nut so I know all that stuff, you know, the random facts that don't matter but it gives them something to talk about when the games not going on. And just knowing players, just not getting caught up into the game. If like a big play happens, we block a kick, or we get an interception, it's going back for a touchdown, you know, my job is to say who blocked that kick, how many yards did he go, who tackled him. So like I can't get caught up in the moment of like turning into the fan 'cause then it's like, aw crap who did what. And then like, there's no TV, so like, you know, you can't look at replay. So, I don't know, that's for the radio. For the other job, you have to be pretty outgoing. Since they give you the freedom to do whatever you want, you have to be a go-getter and you always gotta be positive. If you're in a bad mood, you can't go in with a bad look on your face because people notice your facial expressions and can tell, and they know something is wrong with you. I don't like that, I don't look for sympathy. I want to go in there and get sales off sympathy, I go in upbeat, smiling, acting like it's the best day of my life, even though it might be the worst. But, that's just how I try to be.

T: If you could change one of the following things about your work, which would it be: the wages, the benefits, the schedule, the location, the availability of childcare, the availability of health care, the kind of people you work with, or something else?

A: What were the first two again?

T: The wages and the benefits.

A: Yeah that's what I'd change the most. I mean it's a small local owned business so I know people in there aren't making like what people work for Tech makes, because Tech is state-owned, or they were. But they still make good money and they're benefits are unbelievable. So, 'cause we have to pay a percentage of our benefits, and New River pays a percentage of it. That's for like health insurance and all that. That'd be definitely those two things, if I had me way, that would be the two.

T: What advice would you give to someone considering your line of work?

A: Well, it took me a while to get up into the ISP radio thing. It wasn't like they were just like, aw, he's a nice kid, we like him, let's just give him the job. Like, they knew my background, and they knew I'd been working for Sports Info for football for the past six years, so they knew I knew my stuff and they went to my boss from Sports Info and asked about me and stuff, and he had nothing but good things to say, I'd imagine because I did get hired at ISP. But, for New River, well it's the same answer really. You gotta go get it. You know the sales aren't gonna come to you. You have to go get 'em. There no difference between you and you, if I call on somebody and then I don't ever show my face again and we have a lot of competitors, office supply store in Radford is the same as us, Staples, Office Max, OSI in Roanoke, Quill, Supply Room, and they're all sending reps around, say another rep goes, and the I go , and the other rep doesn't come back for a week or two weeks, or I don't, what is their motivation to buy from me? I just try to show up, be upbeat, and you have to be able to take rejection well because not everyone is going to want to buy from you. People have friends or New River might have done something ten years ago that I never even knew about that pissed somebody off. And they say screw you I'm gonna buy from Taylor forever or until I don't buy anymore. You have to be able to accept rejection and you can't get mad and give 'em like a mean facial expression like what the heck. Just shake off and move on. You can kinda catch the vibe when you go in, if they're interested or not. You just gotta have the instincts.

T: What is the cost of getting to work?

A: At radio they pay you back for your mileage, but usually I don't drive, I just ride them. And of course they pay for plane tickets when we have to fly, and I think we have to fly to four this year. Plus, hopefully we'll be going to Tampa this year and that'll be another flight and then whatever bowl game we go to. For New River, they also pay me back by mileage. But I do have to use my own car though, which stinks, but that's just the way it is. And doing this for three years I put some wear and tear on my poor little truck that I've had for eight years. But, it's still kickin'. But they pay you back so many cents per mile, and that's supposed to cover oil changes, gas, and like random repairs that you need for your car. I mean, that's pretty good, but I'd like to make more per mile, but, I can't complain.

T: Do you have anything else you'd like to share?

A: Stay in school! Don't graduate, well do graduate, but the economy sucks right now, so keep going to school and getting your education because you know, you get a masters degree or you wanna be a doctor or whatever, or whatever you wanna do, you're more likely to get a job or more likely to make more money, and hopefully the economy is gonna stop being terrible here when the presidents change but, we'll see. That's my advice, just stay young.

T: Well, thank you very much.

A: No problem.