

## Rethinking the Multi-Teacher Studio

An interview with Liz Jackson Hearn, founder of The Voice Lab

By Cynthia Vaughn

*Liz Jackson Hearn was in her second year of owning a multi-teacher studio when she attended a 2016 NATS Conference session in Chicago presented by Sharon Syzmanski and Cynthia Vaughn on “The Challenges and Rewards of a Multi-Teacher Studio”. Forward to 2022 and Liz is now the founder/owner/director of a thriving nationally known MTS (multi-teacher studio), The Voice Lab, in Chicago. Liz now teaches other voice teachers about the business and art of team teaching.*



Liz Jackson Hearn

FOMO of a waitlist, it can seem like a good entrepreneurial move to take advantage of that waitlist by adding another teacher to the team. My loving suggestion would be to actually grapple with that discomfort, then research business management and team management, and then decide if what you really need to do is just make an adjustment to your pricing or create a referral list, rather than dive into a completely different way of engaging in your career. All of that said, being an MTS owner is incredibly rewarding work!

**InterNos:** Tell us about The Voice Lab? What is your mission and what is unique about your MTS?

**LJH:** The Voice Lab’s mission is to cultivate transformational relationships through voice and music education. We are a proudly LGBTQ+ led organization and we mostly serve queer and trans adult singers and speech students. Our main area of specialty is gender-affirming voice services. I think there are a lot of things that are unique about The Voice Lab! What I see as the biggest difference is our culture. Honoring each individual person’s unique qualities and striving to continue to learn more about how our business culture can support our community is the highest priority for us.

**InterNos:** MTS have been around for quite awhile — at least since the 1980s. Recently there has been a surge in the number of independent studio owners who are interested in adding teachers to their private studios. It sounds simple. Your studio is full and you don’t want to turn students away so you contract another teacher to teach your overload? What could go wrong?

**LJH:** I’ll be honest, I don’t think this is a good way to start an MTS. When you decide to transition from a single service-provider as an independent teacher into being the owner of a business with a team, you choose to take on the responsibility of leadership and management of that team. If leading and managing and growing a business is where you want to invest your money, energy, and time--so that you can continue to support upcoming teachers in this industry--then that is a reason to start an MTS. When teachers grapple with the guilt and

**InterNos:** Since the early days of MTS, teachers have often been hired as Independent Contractors instead of Employees. What’s the difference and why is it important to properly classify the teachers you hire?

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**LJH:** I can’t speak to any MTS’s specific model or give legal advice because I am not a lawyer. However, if workers are misclassified, it puts the business at risk of owing back taxes for all of its independent contractors. Many multi-teacher studios intentionally ride the line between independent contractor and employee, theoretically to save everyone money, but it’s risky. Michelle Markwart Deveaux has a brilliant and well-researched [article](#) about this topic that speaks much more eloquently than I could.

**InterNos:** MTS often get a bad rap for not paying teachers as much as the teachers would make if they were teaching in their own independent studios. How much should a teacher expect to make teaching for a MTS as an employee or independent contractor?

**LJH:** This is a brilliant question, because it highlights the fact that we are unclear as an industry about where working at an MTS belongs in an independent teacher’s career path. Teachers should absolutely not expect to make as much at an MTS as



they would as a solo independent teacher. It has nothing to do with workload, or skill, or even student retention. The most advantageous thing about working at an MTS is that a teacher has the opportunity to spend time investing in their craft, and more importantly, investing in their life management skills. Having worked with many teachers who are in the early part of their career, I see how much energy it takes to learn the skills of time, energy, and priority management. When an opportunity arises that conflicts with their teaching schedule, they have a chance to learn how to prioritize and to learn what really matters. The benefit of working at an MTS is that they don't also have to learn about advanced customer service, marketing and recruiting if they lose a student over poor time management, budgeting if they have to give a refund, or capital acquisition if they need to just get through the next six months without going broke. What a gift, to be able to just focus on yourself, what you need, and how you want to build your life! The compensation for this opportunity to not be responsible for the rest of the business, then, is commensurate with the level of responsibility of the job itself. If the job is to teach without also having to run a business, then the question is not about how much a teacher should make; the question is how to budget the incredible opportunity to be focused on only teaching into your time and financial budget — which, in itself, is a way to practice the unique opportunity to build that life skill as a teacher at an MTS.

**InterNos:** You are a “numbers” person. What kinds of expenses should a new MTS owner expect to pay for overhead?

**LJH:** I am a numbers person! I love accounting. The expenses that seem to surprise folks the most are related to payroll. If you are hiring teachers as employees, which I would recommend for most studios, the additional costs of payroll taxes, payroll services, unemployment insurance, paid trainings, health insurance if you're going to offer it (which we do), etc. make owning a business very expensive. If I could start over again, I would start by figuring out what matters most in terms of the employee experience, and building the business around that.

**InterNos:** Do you own your studio commercial property or do you rent?

**LJH:** We rent a small commercial space. Our business is primarily online at this point, so facilities cost is an overall low portion of our budget. This allows us the opportunity to hire teachers from all over the country and invest in our community through our internal team.

**InterNos:** Do you provide services and training for your MTS employees?

**LJH:** Yes! Quite a bit, actually, and being able to provide training and continuing education for our teachers was one of the big reasons we switched from contractors to employees. With contractors, a business is not allowed to offer instruction or direct guidance about how to perform the work. When we made the switch to employees, however, that gave us a chance to significantly expand our team onboarding and training systems, to create an actual supervisory/management role for the teachers, and offer in-depth continuing education opportunities. Our work is specialized and requires a specific set of skills, knowledge, and language tools.

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**InterNos:** What do you look for in teachers you hire to work for The Voice Lab? Is it necessary to have a formal voice degree?

**LJH:** I don't believe it is necessary to have a formal voice degree. For our team, it is helpful to have enough experience as a teacher and a person in the world to have developed opinions about things like lesson flow and emotional boundaries, in order to support students toward their aspirations. When we hire teachers, we look for congruency in our values, principal among which is student-centered teaching. We look for folks who have done a lot of self-reflecting and are secure in their desire to be a teacher in our areas of specialty. The students that come to The Voice Lab do their best work when their teachers are grounded in their passion for teaching, and are coming to the work with an open heart and focused attention.

**InterNos:** What are the challenges of being a voice teacher and simultaneously running a multi-teacher studio? How many

students do you teach? In the beginning did you do all of the administrative work or did you hire administrative staff?

**LJH:** I have learned over the years that attempting to teach while running a growing business is damn near impossible. I stopped teaching in 2019, after the business had been open for 5 years. In the beginning, I hired admin staff to help with sales and scheduling, but since then I have shifted my role back into a customer-facing sales position because I love it and I'm good at it. Taking on different roles within the business at different points of its growth has given me an enormous amount of insight into how I want my values as a manager and leader to show up in the systems of the business.

**InterNos:** What advice would you give a teacher who is considering starting their own multi-teacher studio?

**LJH:** Philosophically, if you are thinking about starting an MTS, it will be useful to process through your core values and how you want those values to show up in the systems of your business, from your student types to your cancellation policy to the way you pay your teachers to what your role looks like day-to-day.

Most importantly, though, you need to start crunching numbers. How many students do you need, at what price point, so that you can achieve your business and personal financial goals with the business? None of this works without money, and getting comfortable with financials and spreadsheets is imperative to run a successful business. If you can find yourself in a program that will help you develop your business knowledge — led by your values — that would be an invaluable education.

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**Liz Jackson Hearn** (she/they) is co-founder and owner of *The Voice Lab, Inc.*, a multi-teacher voice studio in Chicago and virtually all over the world, specializing in gender-affirming voice care. She is co-author of *"The Singing Teacher's Guide to Transgender Voices"* and author of *"One Weird Trick: A Users Guide to Transgender Voice,"* a personal voice training guide and resource for voice and gender perception, vocal exercises, and tips to help implement new voice and communication patterns in daily life." Jackson Hearn, Jen Blanton, and Michelle Markwart Deveau recently created an in-depth training program for multi-teacher studio business owners, *The MTS Taproom*, hosted by *The Speakeasy Cooperative*.





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