

Musk apologizes for mocking and firing Twitter exec with muscular dystrophy

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After a tweet exchange where Twitter CEO Elon Musk questioned a fired former Twitter executive's disabilities and work performance, Musk has issued a rare apology and offered to rehire former Senior Director of Product Design Haraldur "Halli" Thorleifsson.

Thorleifsson joined Twitter in 2021, saying on the podcast Fast Politics with Molly Jong-Fast that he decided to let his successful design agency Ueno get acquired by Twitter because he really believed that, much like Musk, Twitter had "never lived up to its potential." Until his exit from Twitter, Thorleifsson led an innovation team at Twitter, but Musk apparently was not familiar with the meaningful contributions Thorleifsson made to the company until after he let Thorleifsson go. Now Musk apparently regrets dismissing Thorleifsson.

"I would like to apologize to Halli for my misunderstanding of his situation," Musk tweeted. "It was based on things I was told that were untrue or, in some cases, true, but not meaningful."

According to Musk, Thorleifsson “is considering remaining at Twitter.”

Ars could not immediately reach Thorleifsson to confirm whether he'll likely rejoin Twitter. In interviews since his exit, Thorleifsson is focusing less on Twitter drama and instead promoting a new restaurant that he's opening in Iceland in a few weeks, which will be named after his mother, AnnaJona.

Thorleifsson told Jong-Fast on her podcast that his mom died in a car accident when he was 11 years old. After he moved back to the neighborhood where he grew up, he decided to build a restaurant in her memory in a beautiful house that came up for sale that he fondly remembered frequently walking past with his mother as a boy.

Musk regrets tweets about Thorleifsson

Musk's controversial tweet exchange erupted after Thorleifsson tweeted nine days after losing access to his work computer, asking Musk to confirm whether or not he had been laid off. Musk responded after four hours, saying, “What work have you been doing?”

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Thorleifsson told Musk that a confidentiality agreement prevented him from describing his Twitter projects, and then things seemed to become more heated when Musk immediately granted permission for Thorleifsson to openly discuss his work, then responded with two laughing emojis when Thorleifsson attempted to do that.

Thorleifsson told the BBC that shortly after this exchange, he was notified that he'd been fired, and the next day, Musk sent out a now-deleted tweet, saying of Thorleifsson, “He's the

worst, sorry.”

The next day, Musk lashed out at Thorleifsson again, tweeting, “The reality is that this guy (who is independently wealthy) did no actual work, claimed as his excuse that he had a disability that prevented him from typing, yet was simultaneously tweeting up a storm. Can’t say I have a lot of respect for that.”

Thorleifsson’s agency, Ueno, was massively successful before Twitter acquired it, completing ambitious projects for many major tech companies, from executing novelty projects like Google’s Santa Tracker to building the tools that support Apple Maps. Thorleifsson, who uses a wheelchair, told Jong-Fast that he had offers from Twitter and other tech companies for years to sell the agency, but he never seriously considered it until his muscular dystrophy started progressing, losing strength in his arms and making it harder for him to work.

Beyond becoming a recognizable talent to top tech industry heads, Thorleifsson also advocated on behalf of people with disabilities. In Iceland, Thorleifsson was named person of the year by several media outlets in 2022, BBC reported. He was recognized for his work campaigning to expand wheelchair access and his decision not to receive his Twitter payout as a lump sum but as wages that could be taxed to support Iceland’s social services.

This stellar reputation as a dedicated worker began haunting Musk, who began backpedaling on his criticism of Thorleifsson after Daniel Houghton—the former CEO of Lonely Planet, who worked directly with Thorleifsson on online content and e-commerce platforms—told Musk, “this is super disappointing to see.”

“Not only is his work ethic next level, his talent and humility are world class,” Houghton told Musk. “Exactly the

kind of person you want on your team when the odds are stacked. I feel certain there's a deep misunderstanding somewhere in here of 'did no actual work.'"

Houghton's tweet moved Musk to finally call Thorleifsson "to figure out what's real vs what I was told."

"Better to talk to people than communicate via tweet," Musk admitted.

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