Season 7: Navigating a Global Career Amidst Emerging Technologies
Episode 6

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Stacie Berdan:
Welcome to the global careers podcast sponsored by GW-CIBER – THE source for inspiring stories from seasoned professionals who have embraced a global role and reaped the benefits. We offer practical advice and insider tips across a broad swath of industries and fields around the world. Whether or not you've considered moving abroad or taking on an international role, globalization will impact your career. So join us for a lively discussion as we explore what an international career really means. My name is Stacie Nevadomski Berdan and I'll be your host!

In season seven, we focus on the intersection of technology and globalization across all types of industries and functions. What aspects of tech do we all need to understand to adapt and thrive in the workplace? What types of global tech jobs are out there? And what skills are needed to compete? Join us as we hear from seasoned executives who will help us navigate global careers and emerging technologies around the world. I'd like to welcome Gina Ruebensaal to our podcast today. Gina has more than 20 years of experience advising leaders in technology and national security arenas. Her strengths lie in synthesizing complexity, managing ambiguity, and having a deep understanding of how people and organizations manage change. Most recently, she was part of the operations leadership team driving VMware's ambitious SaaS transformation, one that led employees through one of the largest tech acquisitions in history with Broadcom's acquisition of VMware. Welcome, Gina, it is great to have you with us today.

Gina Ruebensaal:
Thanks for having me.

Stacie Berdan:
Yeah. So let's dive in… One of the objectives of this podcast is to provide a sense of careers that are out there. So, you have outstanding experience in tech, national security, and organizational change. Tell us what that means in terms of an actual job?

Gina Ruebensaal:
Oh, that's a good question. You know, I think about 20 years, at, you know, in probably a pretty varied kind of career path, at least in terms of how I thought it would go… So, I started out in consulting largely to, you know, national security agencies, like you said, and then pivoted to a large enterprise tech company, which is something again, I never thought I would do so. You know, a challenge for me has been finding a succinct description of what my career field is. I'm not a programmer, or a lawyer, or something that you can just describe, in, you know, one or two words… The best I've found is strategy and operations – which is essentially helping organizations adapt to changes in their ecosystem, so, either internally in the company or more often something that's going on out in the world or the market. So, you know, tactically what that means is, picture yourself as a leader of an agency or company and you're looking out at the world and things are changing – you either have something kind of happening out there in a global theater or in the market, and you need help. And that's, you know, not something that organizations traditionally have embedded. Because you're focused on doing the thing you were set up to do, either making a product or providing the mission set that you were set up to provide. So you know, you need

specialized talent. And that's something when I started out I didn't know that was a thing, you know, beyond just consulting. And so that's meant, you know, in terms of projects – I've done everything from, you know, back in the Afghanistan War days, helping the Joint IED Defeat Organization figure out how to use commercial innovation technologies against IEDs, which were, by definition being improvised every day, and they didn't know how to adapt or change, kind of, warfighting techniques that had been tried and true for so long. And, you know, another example was completely different, you know, like you said, helping VMware change from selling perpetual and license-based software to selling it as a service, with software as a service, which required a complete change of how they did business and their business model. So you know, the actual skills at the base of that are still the same – understanding what the problem is, understanding the current state and the future state, and then getting creative on how to get people to get from A to B.

Stacie Berdan:
Wow, that is so interesting, and so diverse, so neat. No one goes to college thinking they're going to do what you've just described, right. Yeah, so you've described the understanding people, humanity, and organizations… How does technology play a role in your field?

Gina Ruebensaal:
Yeah, well, technology is largely the thing that causes people to have to change. So in national security, it might be an adversary using or acquiring technology in a new way that, you know, that we weren't prepared for or that we don't quite have, you know, strategies and techniques developed for. Or, on the flip side, us as in the United States, being able to use technology, either, you know, differently with an existing technology or a completely new technology to gain advantage. And that's just not on the battlefield, that's also on the back end. So how we're using technology to make decisions better or faster, or, you know, how we're using or accessing or integrating data to make decisions faster and better. In private companies, it's not that different. So instead of adversaries, you're talking about competitors or the market, and what's important is that you're ahead of the game. And so, you know, people focus so much on the technology itself, but what I think we often miss is that the technology is the enabler. Ultimately, it's about the thing you're trying to do. And whether you can get an organization, again, a federal agency or company, to actually use that technology differently in support of, you know, your mission or your value statement.

Stacie Berdan:
What do you… what are some of the global trends you see in that space, to kind of take that thinking a little further...?

Gina Ruebensaal:
I think, you know, the global trends that I see, are that companies, and again, federal agencies, are starting to really truly recognize the importance of adaptability, of being able to change. So, you know, I think over the last couple of decades, you hear things like 'change management' and 'change' as corporate buzzwords, you see certifications popping up around it. But to date, I think it's largely been around very discrete changes. So, we're moving from system A to system B and we need a set of change management capabilities around that. I think what's happening now and more recently is that they're starting to realize that it's not a discrete thing. I mean, change is not something that has a start and a finish. And it's not something that you can wrap into one part of the organization. It's really a perpetual transformation – how do you transform your ability to transform. I kind of stole that from somebody I used to work with… But how do you get into a state of perpetual agility? And I don't know that anyone's quite got that yet. Because, you know, efficiencies and the way people are used to operating requires things like set processes, right, and, you know, training people to really get something right through repetition. And I think we're really starting to see particularly large organizations start to wrestle with that.

Stacie Berdan:
Hmm, perpetual agility – that doesn't sound like something that at least the federal government is prepared to do. That's for sure. But necessary, but necessary… And everyone… I mean, it's just, we're not like that, right? People aren't thinking like that on a regular basis. But how can listeners, how can students today prepare for these changes?

Gina Ruebensaal:
Um, that's, you know, that's a good question. I think what people can do is, you know, one, stay on top of what's going on around them. It's so easy right now to put your head down in whether you're a student in school working towards a degree, or you're in your first, second, third, whatever job, and focus on the thing you've got ahead of you, the deadline. And you don't pick your head up and listen to podcasts or read articles or even, you know, the news digests and taking a second to read that daily email that pops in. That tends to be the first thing to go, at least for me, when I get busy in my day-to-day… my day-to-day gets ahead of me. But those, you know, the things that are happening around you are happening really, really, really fast. Change is not something that is taking years to kind of manifest and have a substantive impact on you as an individual. And so, it's really important to stay on top of what's happening because it's not just affecting, you know, headlines.

Stacie Berdan:
So whether that's tech, or the organizational changes, or anything that's going on in the world… Yeah, that's a good… and not just get kind of enamored and sucked into, I guess, kind of just entertaining social media, right, that's one thing, versus really paying attention to what's going on. That's important – paying attention. Yeah…

Gina Ruebensaal:
Paying attention, and then, also, you taking those few extra steps or rotation in your thought process of how might this affect me? Or, or what I'm, you know, what I'm doing, or my company, or my organization… I think it's those people that are making those connections and kind of looking to their left and their right to see how what's happening in their immediate world impacts their organization that really get ahead.

Stacie Berdan:
Mm hmm. That's a great advice. That's great advice. And that's one of the pieces of advice that I've regularly given to students when they say I want an international career – well, it's not just about you, right? It's about actually what does your organization want? And where around the world that you might be able to help make a difference? So what skills do you see is critical to working on a global scale?

Gina Ruebensaal:
I think… so, first, I would say listening. It's something that people have been saying for a while, and you do read about it and hear about it, but I think most of us still aren't very good at it. When you're talking about working on a global scale, you can't fall back on cultural cues or phrases to understand the message that somebody's trying to get across. When those aren't available, you really have to focus on what the person is actually saying and the context in which they're saying it. And, you know, it's probably true for working across generations, or even across distraction levels, when we're working in a remote world. Listening is not something that you can take for granted in those environments, you really have to apply energy to it. So I think that's a really important skill. I think another one is adaptability, just being able to roll with things. It's definitely a skill that can be learned and honed, even though it's not one you always see on lists. But the people that take a long time to process a change, either in the thing they were hired to do – oh, you know, my work changed or my team changed, or, you know, we changed a program… Being able to adapt to that, you know, within, obviously, limitations, if you're hired to do something, and you're, you know, they substantively changed it, I'm not talking about that, but I'm talking about being able to adapt to changes in your team, in your organization, in your industry quickly. And then, I think the third thing I would say, in terms of working on a global scale, is work ethic. And I'm not talking about working a ton of hours,

but more the commitment to having an impact on the people around you. Because I think that's kind of a universal language. You know, either you're helping somebody do something they care about, or you're working together towards a shared goal. And that's something that I find, you know, when all else fails, it can really unify people, regardless of you know, where they're sitting on the planet.

Stacie Berdan:
Mm hmm. That's great advice. I love it. So listening, adaptability, and work ethic. That's great. Now, so you… this is not new or strange to you, because you grew up around the world as a child of diplomats. What skills did you gain? And how do you, when you think back, how do you apply it to your life and your career?

Gina Ruebensaal:
Um, well, you know, it's so funny to think about gaining skills as a child, but it is probably something most of us don't appreciate as much as we should, those skills we gained kind of through our school years. I think one is getting smart fast. So when you're, you know, something that's pretty core to at least being a diplomat is that you move a lot. And it's important to be able to get up to speed quickly on your new environment. And when you're a kid, it's, you know, on your new school, and the new social system, and the new teachers and education system, but the ability to get spun up really quickly has been something I think I developed as a kid and it could not be more central to what has helped me as an adult. Because, like I said before, things change so fast in the workplace. And the ability to get up to speed quickly has been a game changer. I think another one is figuring out what people are saying or what they really mean, where they're coming from. And this probably isn't a good thing in terms of where it started, I think as a, you know, moving a lot as a teenager, you kind of just want to make friends, right. And so, I was always trying to figure out, okay, how do I meet people like me. And that's about, you know, fitting in and, you know, again, peer pressure, all sorts of negative connotations there. But as I got older, what it meant was, I had less of an ego, which helped a lot. And it's not that I couldn't advocate for myself, or I didn't know my value or worth, but that it was less about me or getting credit, which, when you're younger, is really important because it gives other people the confidence and a degree of comfort that you're in it for the team. You know, whether or not I was, you know, that's how people, I think, perceived me and it helped a lot. And I saw the value of it, and I saw the value of working in teams. And in a culture that can be – I'm talking about the US culture here – can be pretty focused on the individual, I think it helped me stand out. And then the last thing, I think there's a certain level of credibility that you get when you can say you've either lived or worked abroad, I think people really appreciate that. And so, just as a pretty surface-level thing, but it really helped.

Stacie Berdan:
Yeah, where did you live?

Gina Ruebensaal:
I lived in Tel Aviv, Bangkok, and Geneva, and then Washington, DC.

Stacie Berdan:
Ah, I love it. Some of my… four of my favorite places! That's great. Cool, that is great, that is great. How about being a woman, you know, has it helped you in your career? Any obstacles? Or have you found that gender doesn't matter?

Gina Ruebensaal:
I don't think I've faced any overt obstacles. And, you know, I think part of that is that I've been fortunate, and this is just, honestly luck to have landed in places where I had one or two people that were senior to me and really advocated for me. And I think again, it was because, you know, I was in it as a teammate. And they, we developed

really strong relationships. And so that always helps. And so there are certainly… I'm sure were instances where, you know, being a woman probably hurt me in a way I didn't notice; I spent a lot of time in very male dominated environments… But the flip side is, you know, those were largely in military spaces, which are also really hierarchical. So I wasn't getting a lot of my time anyway. So you know, if it was there, I didn't notice. For better or for worse. And I don't… to this day, I don't feel like I was at a disadvantage. Again, because I had the sponsors within that environment. And there are some cases where it helped a lot. The work I referenced earlier, doing counter IED work during the Afghanistan war, we interviewed Afghan tribal elders, to help us understand what they really kind of needed at their core in terms of US military support, so that they were less likely to bury IEDs in the ground, because we were finding that our technology was unable to detect those IEDs. And we, you know, that's a culture where, if they were getting interviewed by a Western male, there were kind of, there were certain cultural elements that were likely to make them less open, or perhaps less forthcoming with those interviewers. We couldn't have Afghan women interview them, because that just wouldn't have been a kind of a situation where they would have seen them as professional equals or would have found that normal. But there's something about a Western woman in that case, which was such an anomaly, that they were completely open to it, and it resulted in really open, fascinating interviews. So in that case, it helped. You know, all that to say, I don't think I would go so far as to say gender doesn't matter. I think it's a situation where… I think we're in a world where it is coming down to the specifics of who you are, and the environment you're in, and the people that you have in your immediate circle that are going to lift you up.

Stacie Berdan:
Mm hmm. That's great. Well said, that's very interesting. I really like that. Thanks for sharing those stories. Gina, you said you're not a technologist, right, but you have had to use technology in your career. What aspect of tech do you think everyone, all of our listeners, need to understand about technology to be successful in the marketplace?

Gina Ruebensaal:
That understanding that technology is no longer enough. I kind of always felt at a disadvantage that I didn't know about the ones and the zeros and that I couldn't code. But because technology, at the end of the day, is a means to an end, you have to understand what, when, where, how that technology is going to be used. And then you have to understand how to make that happen. So if you're selling the technology, how do you get it into the consumers' hands, how do you get them to want it? How do you get companies to want to buy it? How do you get it to market? And how do you keep it interesting, and relevant, and interoperable. And that entire ecosystem that grows up around one technology is just as important as the ones and the zeros. I mean, I don't even want to think about the number of game-changing technologies that have probably been out there and on garage floors, because no one understood the people element of it. So, you know, and I think it's true for coders or programmers or whatever, you know, hardware builders, they have to understand it too. And I would say that's becoming even more true today, as you're seeing the beginnings of AI start to kind of take over the ones and the zeros, you know, be able to take over the ones and the zeros themselves… we need to get a lot smarter on what is the actual tangible impact of the technology.

Stacie Berdan:
Well said, that's very interesting. So it's not just those who are not techie understanding the tech, because we understand the human element, but the techs understanding the human element as well. Great. So you are a global thinker, Gina, but not everyone understands the value of a global mindset. You know, what would you tell listeners who say ah, globalization, internationalization – that doesn't really affect me…?

Gina Ruebensaal:
I actually can't think, and maybe this is a limitation on my thinking (I'm willing to put that out there), but I actually can't think of a single sector or space that isn't at least indirectly impacted, in one way or another, by globalization.

And that's whether globalization and global markets are expanding or contracting. There's an impact and it's not even like it's, you know, super indirect, I would say it's pretty close. You know, if good strategy is thinking three to five moves out, and anticipating, you know, counter moves or reactions, you hit a global force pretty quick. So let's say you're in the middle of the United States, or in the middle of Australia, and you run a restaurant, right, and you say, there's no way global forces impact me. I don't think you have to go that far to see how kind of labor shortages or food supply or, you know, even the supply chain that builds your restaurant or sends you the plates is going to be impacted by a global force in one way or another.

Stacie Berdan:
That's great. I love it. I love it. And tech has only accelerated the closing of the gap in all of those situations much more. Right? For sure. You're so thoughtful, Gina, I would love to know, is there a piece of advice you'd love to go back and give your younger self?

Gina Ruebensaal:
Yes, I think I would say that, you know, it's all going to be okay. I think, at least for me, when I was younger, I spent so much time thinking about my career path, and what's my long term plan, and where am I, kind of, headed professionally… And I was so focused on that. And I think it really took away from my ability to focus on the present, and investing that time on the relationships and the people around me. Because ultimately, that's where so much of my learning ultimately came from. And then also those relationships and the people are where my professional advancement has stemmed from. It never was a degree or a job application. It was someone I knew. And I can't imagine that investing more in those people, or what I could learn from them or a job or a project, wouldn't have just increased exponentially the value I got from any given experience. And it's not to say career planning isn't important, but I think what I would have done instead, in addition to focusing on getting as much learning and relationship building out of a present opportunity, would be to just create optionality for the future. It's so hard to plan these days, because things happen so quickly. Plan a couple moves ahead and just try to create as many options as you can for yourself. Because as you change and grow, and as your environment changes, you want to be able to maneuver and not be stuck on something really concrete. So, I think that's what I would say.

Stacie Berdan:
That's wonderful. Just beautiful advice regarding relationships. It's so true, it is so true. It's the people, right, at the end of the day. That's great. And I like the way… you're right, it's not just about… and it's important to have great relationships with people and friendships… but it's also that is where opportunities often stem from, the energy that you put in there. So thanks for sharing that. That's great. Well, we're wrapping up, it has been a fantastic conversation. But is there anything else you'd like to add, maybe something that you didn't touch on or a question I didn't ask, you?

Gina Ruebensaal:
No, I really appreciate the questions you did ask and the time.

Stacie Berdan:
That's great. Thank you so much, Gina. I really appreciate the time. I know you're busy and life is hectic, but I appreciate, as our listeners do, that you're taking the time to actually speak with us today. Thanks!

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Stacie Berdan:
You have been listening to the GW-CIBER Global Careers podcast. Join us again next time, and in the meantime – go global!