



Episode 5 – Technology

Dana Abu-Nasrah, Managing Consultant, Global Government – IBM
Ms. Stacie Berdan, International Careers Expert (Podcast Host)

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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 about what it's like to work globally. If you love adventure and thrive on taking risks and operating outside your comfort zone, join us as we explore the ins and outs of pursuing an international career! My name is Stacie Nevadomski Berdan, and I'll be your host! Our First Season dives into what it's like **Working Globally Through the Pandemic** – and the outlook for global careers in a post-COVID-19 world.

As the pandemic began, many organizations weren't ready for so much change so quickly. Particularly, because the workforce required digital transformation almost overnight. But there are companies that have been helping governments, corporations, and non-profit organizations around the world develop and implement effective and efficient workforce strategies. And today's quest works for one of them.

Dana Abu-Nasrah, is Managing Consultant on IBM's Global Public Sector team based in Dubai. She is an IBM Design Thinking Coach and Co-Creator whose enthusiasm for her job is evident and inspiring. And, she is a GW alumna. Dana shares her perspectives on workforce trends such as flexible remote work, greater emphasis on diversity and inclusion, and the increasing importance of empathy and communication for success. She offers relevant advice on international internships, honing the skills necessary for a global job, and the importance of being a life-long learner. Join us as we dive into the field of enterprise technology and the effect the pandemic has had on workplaces around the world. Welcome, Dana, it's a pleasure to have you!

Dana Abu-Nasrah:

Thank you, Stacie, for having me. I'm really excited to talk to you and the GW community.

Stacie Berdan:

Terrific! Let's get started. One of the objectives of this podcast is to provide a sense of the careers that are out there. Do you remember when you were a student, and you'd practice your elevator pitch with the Career Counselor? May be even in front of the mirror? Give us your elevator pitch, if you will, a tool that students can relate to – and learn from!

Dana Abu-Nasrah:

Sure. So, my name is Dana Abu-Nasrah and I am a Managing Consultant on IBM's Global Public Sector team, where we help governments with their digital transformation initiatives, and our team cuts across all of IBM. So, that includes consulting, research, technology services, you know – everything that we do with regards to the public sector my team kind of touches. And my specific focus is on emerging technologies and new ways of working.

Stacie Berdan:

Excellent. So, you've been with IBM for six years now, which means you started right after graduation, right?



Dana Abu-Nasrah:

Yeah, so this was my first full time job after graduating from GW. I was, you know, I was making a decision between staying in DC or heading back to the region where I've spent most of my life in the Middle East. And I did, you know, I scored opportunities in both DC and Dubai and ended up, you know, landing with IBM in what is now my dream job. So...

Stacie Berdan:

Wow, Dana! Do you know how lucky you are that you found your dream job so quickly! Fabulous! What makes it such a great job?

Dana Abu-Nasrah:

So, what I love most about IBM is the work that I do makes a tangible impact on societies. So I feel very passionate about what I'm doing and it blends together my different interests. So, while I was at GW while I was in the Business School, I also minored in journalism and had a big interest in the Elliott School, as well, of international affairs, so I took classes, kind of, within these three different schools. And what I'm doing now is working on public sector problems, which, you know, very much could be public policy related, related to society, the UN global goals, and applying – you know – technology and business solutions to those problems. So, I feel like, you know, it really blends together my interests, and I've just found, you know, a way to make an impact and a place where I see myself long term.

Stacie Berdan:

Wow sounds wonderful – making an impact. And I understand that it's a global job, too. Tell us about it.

Dana Abu-Nasrah:

My first two years at IBM were focused here in the Middle East and Africa region, but the past four years I've been part of the global public sector team in various roles. In some of my roles I've focused on specific markets. So, for one year I was focusing on emerging markets, but currently I'm supporting our global team wherever there may be a need – you know, proposal support in Finland, or I'm currently working on a value proposition with IBM Japan. When we could travel, it was, you know, wonderful experiences learning about different cultures around the world and also seeing how our corporate culture, IBM, has really ingrained itself and embodied itself around the world. So, we have something called the 1-3-9, which is our 1 purpose - 3 values - and 9 practices, which you, you know, you can find them online. And what has really amazed me traveling to all these different IBM offices and meeting different IBM-ers around the world, is the 1-3-9 culture really cuts across. So, even though we speak different languages, we have different experiences, we hold, these, you know, values really true to the work that we do every day.

Stacie Berdan:

Dana, you've touched on a very important point about culture, and you're fortunate that IBM has such a strong culture. It makes it so much easier to work with colleagues across borders and in different languages since you share a common corporate culture. But, you know, not every organization is like IBM, and more often than not workers face many cross-cultural communication challenges when working on diverse teams. This is something for our listeners to remember when looking for a global position...ESPECIALLY now when the vast majority of people are working remotely and have significantly less time in an office or shared location to learn and absorb the corporate culture. That's a real issue these days. Tell me, how has your industry been affected by COVID-19?



Dana Abu-Nasrah:

So, I think every industry has been impacted in a different way... and my industry is obviously the enterprise technology industry. And, what we found is the pandemic and COVID-19 has really accelerated digital transformation agendas for clients, whether, you know, from across all industries. So, what this has really shown us is, you know, the need for technical business resiliency... the need to move from paper-based processes to digital processes. You know, within Government – the need to, you know, provide citizens with services or constituents with services while they are home, and also the government workers – employees, civil servants who are working from home. So, it really has shown, you know, the need for digital transformation and, yeah, as I said, accelerated, you know, the discussions and projects that tech companies are doing with clients. And, as the CEO of Microsoft Satya Nadella said, he saw during the pandemic two years’ worth of digital transformation done in just two months. So, you know, companies, enterprises, governments were forced to really look at their portfolio of information technology and see what needed to be digitized, you know, how could chat bots help... so there’s all sorts of projects and work that came out of the pandemic.

Stacie Berdan:

Absolutely! And so many of us are saying “finally, finally!” Why did it have to take a global pandemic to get us to a place we knew we needed to be, right?! Have you seen a change or increase in clients turning to IBM to help them deal with issues arising from the pandemic? I don’t want you to betray any confidence of a particular client or anything, but tell us – what kind of strategies governments are looking for? What does it mean for students who are looking for jobs around the world?

Dana Abu-Nasrah:

Great question. So, governments have always had, you know, this mission-critical responsibility to be effective, to be accessible, and to serve every constituent, you know, in their country. And IBM has always supported governments on this mission through various technology projects. But what we’ve seen now was like a sudden need to, you know, support governments with business continuity, so that means, you know, continuing to deliver your services like unemployment claims while, you know, employees and your customers are remote, and then also doing things like just answering questions. So that could be a citizen chat bot... Another way that governments are working with IBM is contact tracing – so, ensuring smooth and safe interactions and regulations within different cities, countries, counties, whatever it may be. So, definitely governments are working and prioritizing technology at this moment in time and, as, you know, we move into different phases and waves of the pandemic there’s different needs that, hopefully, different partners like IBM can help governments with.

Stacie Berdan:

Dana, I’m really beginning to get an understanding for why you love your job so much! You really are making a difference, you know, especially at a moment in time when your kind of difference really matters to governments whose efficiencies make an even greater difference to all the people it serves, right? And you’re doing this from one of the most exciting and fastest growing cities in the world, Dubai! I love it! It’s a place I’ve bene to, have not been recently, but I have watched with astonishment at the rapid changes taking place there. What is it that you like about living and working in Dubai?

Dana Abu-Nasrah:

My favorite thing about Dubai is how international it is. So, when I was interning here during GW, I first noticed how many different languages when you are sitting in the office you would hear around you during a given workday. And, you would hear may be five-six languages on the same day. So, I love the international aspect and how it’s kind of a hub for East meets West. So, that’s one great aspect about Dubai. The second is, as you mentioned, it’s an up-and-coming city that has a very, you know, visionary government. So when it comes to, in



my field, which is like smart government, digital transformation, Dubai is always seen as, you know, on a pedestal, and governments around the world want to learn about what Dubai is doing.

Stacie Berdan:

That sounds great, and I'm envious! You have described a forward-thinking place, that has embraced globalization, right? But the rest of the world has not done the same, at the same pace. There is still a perception in many places around the world, by many people around the world, that globalization is not good, it's harmful in some way. How do you see globalization emerging through this pandemic?

Dana Abu-Nasrah:

I think the pandemic has really shown us, it's made it even easier to be global. Even though we can't (which is not what you would expect), but even though we can't travel like we used to, it's easier than ever to work globally because everyone is at home, you know, everyone is kind of based in their home country, all conferences are digital, you know, so open to anyone to attend, you can, you know, there's so many opportunities to work globally that I think weren't there before. So I think, in addition to digital transformation that I mentioned before, I think the pandemic has also accelerated and shown how the whole world can come together. You know, the United Nations can run a global conference where everyone can attend because, you know, everyone's at home. So, I think, you know, that time period has shown us how important it is and impactful it is when we all come together.

Stacie Berdan:

So true, so true, and you work for a global company that is a leader in workforce design. Can you share with us some of those things that you see as new ways of working in this new world order?

Dana Abu-Nasrah:

People, places, and processes. So people are, you know, the types of people you bring to the table and work with. Places used to be kind of the studio approach, you know, brainstorming throughout the day, collaborating in real time. So that used to be done physically and now you are doing that all virtually. And processes is kind of how you work. So, all of these – people, places, and processes – are rapidly changing, and, you know, in the new world it's being collaborative, it's using agility, it's using data versus your assumptions, it's being, you know, using new tools to collaborate, like Slack, Zoom (we're on Zoom right now, from across the world). So that's really how I see new ways of working, and you know, in my job part of it is working with governments on embracing these new ways of working. And then, my thinking in terms of what students and early professionals, you know, what they should take away from new ways of working is to always be curious, to be a lifelong learner, so that's a huge theme in terms of new ways of working. You know, the half-life of skills is shrinking, and, you know we always need to be refreshing our skills, getting micro credentials, doing trainings, badges, you know, getting badges and so on... And then, also for students, a new trend in terms of new ways of working is enhanced focus on like impact and ethics when it comes to business. So, it's not just about making money but how do you take care of the environment, how do you take care of your community as you conduct business. So that would be my take-aways on new ways of working.

Stacie Berdan:

I like what you said about being a lifelong learner. You know, it seems to me that that's one of the most important skills for job seekers today. You've been working globally for a while now, an envy to many of your former colleagues and students, I'm sure... what are the top skills you believe are essential to working successfully across cultures?



Dana Abu-Nasrah:

So, I think that, you know, two things... I would say the first skill which can be innate or can be learned is empathy. And, you know, in most of my feedback reviews, I've gotten the feedback that I'm very empathetic and able to, you know, put myself in the shoes of whomever I'm working with or whomever I'm talking to, you know, across cultures. And, that's also another principle of IBM design thinking, or just design thinking in general, is a practice that started at the Stanford design school, you know, more than fifteen years ago, where you really learn how to put yourself in your users' shoes and design solutions around your user. So, for me, I see that as a skill that I use in my everyday job, which is trying to understand what the client is going through, what my colleague is going through in a different culture, in a different country, and, you know, adjust how you work based of that, you know, common understanding and respect. So that would be one thing... And then, secondly, flexibility... So, one thing about working at a multinational and having a global career is kind of the unpredictable hours and time zones you have to work with, and the different types of projects and tasks you have to work on. It could be something extremely high level and strategic or it can be, you know, an excel sheet. So having flexibility in terms of how you work and what you work on, I think is another really important skill or trait to have during a global career.

Stacie Berdan:

Great examples, and I agree with you – particularly empathy and flexibility – they are critical. We've seen a rise in both, but also there are a lot of examples where people are not doing that, right? So that's great advice, Dana, and definitely things to focus on for those entering the job market, for all of us actually. But before they get there, they're probably going to have a couple of internships, right? So, some of the students out there haven't graduated yet... While you were a student, you had a variety of international internships, great stuff. Give us a flavor of those, how did they prepare you for your global role?

Dana Abu-Nasrah:

Yeah, so, one thing I'm really proud of and which GW really helped me with was finding unique internships, you know, through the portal, through, you know, the careers portal and also through the network and professors. So, I had nine internships, eight or nine, you know, throughout college, and before I started at IBM, in different categories. So, I had some marketing internships where I was doing social media and branding strategy. I had an internship at SAP, so that was my first time working at a tech company, and then I also had some internships in the media space 'cos one of my interests as a student was journalism, so I worked at a startup magazine and a news agency. So, very not linear internship experiences, some of these were online, some were in Dubai, and also some were in DC while I was, you know, at GW. So, the internships kind of formed building blocks for my career; you know, you can learn, as long as you set your mind to it, you can learn from any internship or any task that you are assigned – that's the way I look at it. And, by having so much diverse internship experience taught me what I want in a full-time career and what kind of company I want to work for. And two, it also allowed me, once it was time to find a full-time job, to have a lot of cases to talk about, a log of examples to give, 'cos I had this diverse internship experience. So, yeah, I enjoyed all my internships and the things I learned in them helped me every day. So, I really recommend exploring your career portal and trying to get an internship even if that means cold emailing someone. You never know who might respond or what opportunity might come out of just one internship.

Stacie Berdan:

That's so inspiring, Dana, to hear you share your story, I just love it. I'm sure you worked hard at landing those internships AND working at them. It is so hard these days with almost everything online, students aren't on campus and so they need to be so much more disciplined about their search, but as you've pointed out, there is so much to be gained from a wide variety of these kinds of internships – EVEN IF you do not plan to pursue a career in that particular field. Is there something that you've done that really helped you succeed, some advice you can give others?



Dana Abu-Nasrah:

Be known for something, so, whether you have a job now or you want to get into a new industry... that's what I found helped me go from being just a country-based resource to a global resource was networking, volunteering within my company and becoming known. So, early on in my career I was known as the customer journey mapping girl. I loved to make customer journey maps which are kind of this way of visualizing business processes, in highly visual persona-driven way, and I would just email different leaders in my company and say "Hey, I want to, you know, can I help you create a customer journey map on my own time." So, I think that, which is a really small example, is what made me known and gave me this opportunity to join a global team, which was only supposed to be for one year, like a one-yeartime period for me to learn and contribute. And then every year, you know, I'd change the role, my scope changed as I continued to grow and learn.

Stacie Berdan:

I love that – there's so much competition out there! So, be known for something, you know, make your mark. Dana, you are at the beginning of what I suspect is going to be a long and fulfilling career. Do you have a favorite experience to share – something that illustrates your global life, to bring it to life for people?

Dana Abu-Nasrah:

So, my favorite experience by far and what I'm most proud of is I did a series of workshops with the UN at three different locations to hundreds of member-states on using design thinking to go from single-interest shared purpose. And one of the conferences that I presented at the 8th Secretary General of the UN Ban Ki-moon, it was in Korea, and I just... it was just a cool way of bringing together my interests from design to technology to, international relations and make a real impact and show, you know, and demonstrate how you can use design thinking to accelerate your journey to the 2030 UN Sustainable Development goals. So that was definitely a highlight of my career so far, and it took me to Shanghai, to Incheon in South Korea, and to Trinidad and Tobago.

Stacie Berdan:

Wow – that's a really neat story! You've accomplished so much in such a short time since graduating GW! Before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to add?

Dana Abu-Nasrah:

How you do anything is how you do everything. So, what that means is no matter what, and I touched on that earlier, no matter what task you got or assignment you got, do your absolute best at it.

Stacie Berdan:

That's excellent advice, Dana, thank you for it and all of the terrific tips, insight, inspiration. You know, I can't wait to hear how your career continues as the years go by! Thanks so much for taking the time today, I really appreciate it and you.

Dana Abu-Nasrah:

Thank you so much, Stacie.

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Stacie Berdan:

You have been listening to the GW-CIBER Global Careers podcast "Working Globally Through the Pandemic" and the outlook for global careers in a post COVID-19 world. Join us again next time, and in the meantime – go global!