



## Season 5, Episode 1 – Women in Global Careers

### **Stacie Berdan**

*International Careers Expert  
(Podcast Host)*

### **Alison Lands**

*Head of Strategy  
SkyHive Technologies*

[Music]

#### **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 5, we focus on women in global careers: the challenges and opportunities and how things have evolved over the last few years. Join us as we hear from eight global women as they share their inspiring stories working around the world in such fields as tech, diplomacy, investing, marketing and so much more. Our guest today is a self-described skills evangelist who has dedicated her career to helping others tackle the challenges of the future of work. Allison Lands leads Strategy at SkyHive Technologies, a skills intelligence platform focused on analyzing the world’s labor market data and using it to unleash human potential at scale. For over 20 years, Allison has operated at the intersection of economic and workforce development, arming companies, job seekers, students and governments with the skills they need to prosper in a globalized digital economy. An economy that is evolving more rapidly and unpredictably every single day. Allison joins us from the hustle and bustle of 42nd Street in Midtown Manhattan. Welcome, Alison. It is a pleasure to have you with us today.

#### **Alison Lands:**

Thank you, Stacy, and forgive any sirens you may hear in the background of this podcast.

#### **Stacie Berdan:**

No problem. So, one of the objectives of our podcast is to provide a sense of the careers that are out there – more than just titles. What is it that you do as a skills evangelist?

#### **Alison Lands:**

It’s interesting. I’m both a self-described skills evangelist, it’s actually also a formal part of my role at SkyHive. Interestingly enough, as I got into this job, I realized that I had been a skills evangelist for much longer than my current role, it had been coming forth in my career for probably about the last 10 years. My formal title is Director of Strategy. And in most technology startups, you might expect a Director of Strategy to focus on things like competitive positioning, go-to-market strategy, more traditional corporate strategy subjects. At SkyHive, we operate on a tour-of-duty model, which some may be familiar with from a book called “The Alliance” authored by LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman and one of SkyHive’s board members, Chris Yee. It’s a very interesting model where you actually craft a role around an individual’s unique strengths and a company’s unique needs. And so, as Director of Strategy, I do less of the traditional corporate strategy and more of the strategy of how to help SkyHive build products that resonate with learners, with job seekers for the future of work which reflect our mission and our goals and priorities as a B Corp., and also to evangelize both the need for us all to continually upskill and reskill, as well as to focus in on what those skills needs are and how individuals as well as folks in university or in a job seeking or corporate environment can actually go about finding and acquiring those skills to stay continually relevant for the future of



work. It's an interesting role. Its title is a bit deceptive. But this tour of duty model (if anyone's interested, there's some great LinkedIn training about it on LinkedIn Learning) is a really interesting way to explore how to craft a role for yourself that aligns to your unique capabilities.

**Stacie Berdan:**

I love it. That's great. Sounds perfect for where everybody is thinking today, right. That's great. So you started your career, though, working for some of these big companies, you know, you're at a tech startup – more of an entrepreneurial initiative? How did that happen?

**Alison Lands:**

It's true. My first role was actually in local government, straight out of undergrad. That's what lit the fire in within me for economic development and workforce development and really starting to think about the future of work and skills. I lucked into that role. Most people don't find their calling or their vocation straight out of the gate, I was fortunate enough to do so. And a few years later, I was hired into the big floor strategy consulting at Deloitte, where I spent a very long chapter of my career followed by a shorter chapter at the Boston Consulting Group. And those large firms I think, are amazing launch pads for a career and a really intense training ground for you to gain a lot of different business skills, technical skills, and ways of working. As I came to, sort of the terminal point of that journey, where you go up for Partner or Director, I realized that my passion or my mission orientation towards workforce and economic development was slightly at odds at the time with the profitability and metrics that I would need to attain in order to be a productive Partner within the partnership. There was simply the economics of it just weren't working out. And that really created a fork in the road for me and a tough decision, at which point I pivoted out and started doing workforce and economic development work as an advocate, a lobbyist in the nonprofit sector, kind of as a policy wonk. And as I did those types of roles, I found the need to upskill myself, to actually turn the workforce lens on myself and see where I could invest in my own skills. And that's, strangely, how I found myself working in tech, because as soon as I tried to use a lot of the upskilling platforms and learning platforms that were out there, I encountered a very classic challenge that many of us face when we're trying to invest in ourselves, and invest in our skills, which is finding out which skills do I need? And once I know the answer to that question, which one of these many, many courses that's available online is appropriate for me? Where do I even start? That paradox of choice, that friction is what prevents many people from adding to their skill sets over time and investing in themselves as professionals. And it was that friction that caused me to reach out to the learning companies, in this case Coursera, and actually offer my services as a consultant and say: how can I help remove this friction for more learners? How can I help more people unlock lifelong learning and do it in a way that helps them to advance?

**Stacie Berdan:**

Wow, that's fantastic. What a great journey. You're kind of like a poster child, in a way actually, for what you're doing.

**Alison Lands:**

Yeah! I entered the profession by being a consumer first and encountering the pain of the consumer led me to become a practitioner and an evangelist for the companies themselves.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Yeah, that's super important, really important. And how is it – working for a tech startup in today's world?

**Alison Lands:**

I think working in the world of tech, especially for the past several years, where it's been a real boon time for tech, even during the pandemic, has been a real wild ride. Most of these companies are smaller, they're more agile, they



experiment quite a bit. And so, as opposed to say a bit for a consulting path, where the career journey is relatively straightforward, it's well understood by many people in the company, the progression path is clear and rather well defined. In the tech world, there's a lot more movement, there's a lot more transferable skills, allowing you to move throughout an organization and try on different hats. I think that's both a really interesting way to shape a career and find out what you're interested in and what you're not very quickly. And it's also a way to, I think, even advance more quickly. In this world, a lot of the tech companies are expanding to a global footprint. It actually allows leaders to work in a global capacity in ways that perhaps before they had to move to another part of the world, or actually do a secondment tour of duty to achieve, you can now do quite a bit of that remotely. And you can do it in a fast moving, fast growing company. That's giving you quite a bit of latitude and autonomy to shape your role, the way you see fit and the way that matches with the company's desired objectives. So, I think there's a lot of flexibility, and there's also a lot of ambiguity; and for a certain type of worker, that can be very liberating and very exciting way to shape a career.

**Stacie Berdan:**

You mentioned earlier, the kind of the personalization of skills, figuring out what skills you have and how to use those to tap into your next job, your next role, your career path... What are some of the skills – I appreciate that they are personalized – but what are some of the skills that you see now that are kind of transferable on a global scale, for our listeners – they always ask those questions. What are the skills today, what's trending for tomorrow, in the next couple of years...?

**Alison Lands:**

When I was working with Coursera for the past several years prior to SkyHive, I met regularly with heads of learning and heads of HR and corporate executives with, in this case, over 250 different companies in the Fortune 500. And as many different variations of skills as they articulated for their people, there were inevitably four commonalities, four key themes that almost every company was seeking. And those were, by and large, the digital skills of data analysis, familiarity and conversancy with artificial intelligence and machine learning, cloud computing (because many companies, particularly in the finance realm are migrating into cloud computing) cybersecurity, as well as software development (software development both to create software, products and services as well as to service software within an organization or to implement it). And those are all relatively common themes regardless of industry and regardless of geographic location. So, when we parsed labor market data, both by industry and sector as well as by global geography, country and region, we found that these patterns held pretty strongly and were forecasted to continue. And I say this because as a person who majored in a social science and has a liberal arts background, for me, this was very interesting insight that you could layer these skills on top of most subjects that you would major in or study in higher ed, and you would shape for yourself a really compelling value proposition, because every employer was competing for the same extremely scarce talent. And you could actually stand out just by developing conversancy in these topics, not even necessarily becoming an expert yourself. And that's something that's very achievable now with the online learning that's available for free.

**Stacie Berdan:**

So, I want to dive into a couple of those, because yes, I do hear a lot of those... um, data analytics, cybersecurity, in particular, they've been critical. But what about, you didn't mention anything like communications or intercultural competence? What do you think about those skills that are necessary for the future?

**Alison Lands:**

I love that you brought that up. And of course, those are universally transferable, those durable human skills that as you acquire them – and in some cases you acquire them through experience, in some cases you acquire them through on-the-job learning and actual, you know, project work or client work – they're universally transferable. They don't fade over time, they just get stronger. And interestingly enough, you hear quite a bit these days about the “T-shaped”



employee – somebody who has both breadth, as well as depth in a subject matter area and can work across different functions or different teams. What we're now seeing, and this was popularized by one of my favorite future-of-work thought leaders, Heather McGowan, is the idea of an “X-shaped” employee. And that's somebody who can really tap into their uniquely human skills, those skills of communication, problem solving, judgment, critical thinking, teamwork, and team building, and can use it to work across subjects, and also to partner constructively with machine intelligence, which, if you've been following the news and you've seen all of the headlines and all of the LinkedIn posts around ChatGPT, is really disrupting the ways that we work and the ways that we learn. So those skills, you know, as we moved from, you know, individual subject matter expert or “I-shaped” employee to a “T-shaped” employee, and now we're moving towards an “X-shaped” employee, it's actually the human and durable skills that are taking precedence in terms of everyone needing to develop them, and then being an evergreen part of our future of work.

**Stacie Berdan:**

I'm very glad to hear that. When it comes to upskilling and a global career, what kind of advice do you have for our listeners?

**Alison Lands:**

When thinking about a global career, at least in the earlier part of my career, it was very necessary to have at least one global tour of duty in order to position yourself if your goal was to work in an Executive or VP capacity. I think that still holds, particularly as our work becomes more optimized across a global footprint. So, we see employers, tech employers as well as across other industries, really looking to optimize their workforce over a global geographic landscape, not just within one region, or even just within one country. And in order to be a leader in a global or multinational organization, one would really need to focus on cross-cultural competence, as well as leadership skills and how to translate those leadership skills across a remote or hybrid working environment. And really bring teams together towards a shared purpose, when they may be distributed across time zones, across different cultural backgrounds, or different cultural working norms, and actually be able to achieve, you know, OKRs (objectives and key results) and outcomes, assembling a team across a really broader distributed landscape. So, I think, you know, clearly, the transferable digital skills are universal, they're across the entire globe. And the language of data or the language of technology is somewhat universal. But when we start to talk about those human or durable skills, those ones that really point to leadership, to attracting and retaining the best and brightest, those can take a different flavor depending on what part of the world you're working in. And you may be a remote global leader managing across time zones and teams. And I think learning how to balance those responsibilities as well as to get the best from a global team and to bring them together and smooth some of the friction of cross-cultural hybrid global work will be one of the big challenges that sets apart tomorrow's global leader from perhaps one of previous eras where we would go on site and work, you know, in person on site with our teams.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Hm... So interesting. How about the role of gender? You know, this season we are talking and focusing on women in global careers. Do you see any pros and cons, particular challenges gender plays, women in particular, pursuing some type of international career?

**Alison Lands:**

I think perhaps in the past, there may have been a bit of a glass ceiling to having or being able to execute one of those global tours of duty if it meant uprooting your family, perhaps your children, moving across the world to a different geographic location. In some cases, it would work and in other cases, it might present an obstacle that was just insurmountable. Nowadays, I think you can actually execute a global role without having to do such a, you know, a full physical relocation. In some cases, it may still be necessary, certain types of work is still on site and still requires face-to-face in-person communication. But I think some of those barriers have actually been either eliminated or



lessened to a degree to where it opens the door for more women to be able to balance both the family side of work and the work-life balance means with being able to actually sort of be virtually present for a global team and to manage and lead that global team. That's one area where I think there might be a benefit to the world of work that we now live in. On the challenges side, I think there's still, you know, a number of critiques in our tech sector, about career mobility for women. I know, there's a lot of work that's being done to try to, one, understand it and really see where that's happening and how to dismantle and mitigate it. At the same time, you know, every woman is still, you know, facing quite a tall order in terms of their career mobility, in terms of balancing, you know, the emotional labor of the household. And at least in my case, I know I do, I can't speak for everyone, but the emotional labor of household with a full-time job, and in some cases, also balancing care commitments. So unfortunately, I don't think there's been enough work done there to really level the playing field. But at least in the post-COVID world, there are some advantages. And now there's, I think, a little bit less of a barrier to being able to be a global leader. Now that we've leveraged technology, and we've leveraged our ability to work in a hybrid capacity, I do think that opens the door for more female leaders. We still have quite a bit of work to do in terms of the culture change that positions women to have equal opportunity and also to be, you know, leverage the full breadth of their own talents and skills in the workplace. And to be seen as equals in that way.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Hear, hear, well said! Thank you for that. What is one of the most challenging issues that you have faced in your career so far?

**Alison Lands:**

I think, having worked for some of those blue chip firms, you really, especially if you are there for any length of time, you start to conflate the work that you do with your own, your professional identity and your personal identity, sort of become a little bit melded or merged with one another. And I think this results a little bit in not being able to take a step back and sort of see the bigger picture or see alternative avenues or adjacent careers that you might be interested in, be good at, might even allow you to take a less linear but higher velocity path towards what you want. And I think for me, in my career, I really, you know, was working in an environment that had a very defined career path, I had my eyes set on the terminal, you know, success of becoming a Partner. And in the meantime, I was working in many different organizations with different clients that presented, you know, a multitude of interesting career paths that I probably observed, but maybe didn't see for myself. And I think staying in one place for too long can sometimes have a dampening effect on a career as opposed to an accelerating effect. So I think one of the most challenging issues was just being a bit anchored to an up-or-out kind of a career model, which, ironically, was disrupted in the intervening years between then and now, and isn't even really the standard these days. There's much more moving around, but I think becoming a little bit too wedded to a career path, and maybe allowing that to put blinders on and not see other opportunities may have been a challenge for me in the earlier part of my career. I can't say I where I would be today, if I had looked around a bit more or perhaps even taking a bit more of an active rein in guiding my career, as opposed to following a path that was already set or that I perceived was set for me.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Thanks for sharing that story. Because I think so many of our listeners actually say: no, I want to go with this big company, that's what I'm going to do. And it's really landing that job, right? That's the first thought. And then you really do have to figure out what's next not too long after you've landed that job. So thanks for sharing that story. That's good. And I do believe so much more moving around now, which is really quite liberating and exciting and inspiring and doing different things is cool and fun and benefits everybody, for sure.

**Alison Lands:**

I think at a minimum, we all owe it to ourselves, not to set it and forget it. Even if you're extremely successful and achieving high performance ratings and moving up the progression chain, you know, with your various promotions



every few years, that's all great. But I think in every instance, in every project even, you sort of owe it to yourself to figure out that uncomfortable edge, and push yourself a little bit, if only to say, Hey, I'm really happy where I am, I'm glad with what I'm doing, I commit to staying, I recommit myself to this position. And if you find yourself on the uncomfortable edge, and there's something there, and you'd know it, you'd know it in your gut, then that's telling you that there's a thread to pull and the narrative to explore, there may be another role or another project or even another company, that's a better fit. And you have to sort of... I think, when you choose yourself and you choose your path, and you choose your company, that's real career satisfaction, when you allow it to, you know, to allow yourself to be guided, in some ways by a career path that's already predetermined, you do run the risk of maybe not examining things that could give you greater fulfillment in the process.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Hm... Good. That's great advice. Good advice. So it's... I want to go back to your work in economic development specifically. What are some of the biggest takeaways or learnings while working with governments, nonprofits, corporations, educational institutes in the economic development space?

**Alison Lands:**

In the economic development space, the name of the game is all about creating more good work for more people and helping regions and economies thrive. So, on the one hand, all of these different organizations – at the government level, impact organizations, companies, and educational institutions – they all want the same thing. And they're oriented towards this mission, the way that they go about achieving it can be very different. And, in my experience, every community has some combination of these players working towards a shared aim, but perhaps taking different approaches of how to execute it, how to fund it, what the priorities are. And so, for a person who's interested in working in economic development, on the one hand, there are many interesting sub careers within this field, I can't recommend it highly enough. And on the other hand, one of the key superpowers that you'll have to develop is the ability to understand the motivations of the different players to know that it's a coalition building business, and to bring together these different parties using their shared mission and their shared desire, but also making sure that you're able to craft really creative solutions in some cases, to help them achieve their goals, and each help them achieve success as they define it. And so, for me, that's a... it's a nuanced skill. It's one that you're going to continue to learn for the rest of your career, and it'll look a little bit different in every city, state, or country that you do it. It's part of what makes the profession so fascinating.

**Stacie Berdan:**

And I agree, I agree. It's so fascinating. And you're so thoughtful, Alison, and I wonder, is there a piece of advice that you would like to go back and give your younger self?

**Alison Lands:**

I think for me, if I went back and were to advise myself with the hindsight that I have today, I would let my future-of-work interested self know that the future of work was really going to look even more different than our projections at the time portrayed. So, you know, I would tell myself about the pandemic and post-pandemic work. I would tell myself about how work was going to disrupt itself and encourage myself to explore more different avenues. One, if only to just advance my skill set... I think some of the most talented future-of-work practitioners and economic developers that I know are the ones that have moved around a little bit and tried... worn different hats, tried on different aspects of our profession and our role. But at the same time, I think sometimes we get a little bit locked into the fallacy of sunk costs. Well, I've spent a few years at this company and I'm almost up for promotion, so I'm just going to stick around until promotion, and then I'll evaluate at some future point in time, what I should do next. And I really do think that we owe it to ourselves to be regularly checking in and making sure that we're where we want to be, and if we're not – then that's okay. It's actually okay to feel uncomfortable. It's natural. Moving around is natural, and there's really no failure in not sticking the course and staying until, you know, the next big title promotion or the



next big milestone... We can't necessarily measure ourselves by those milestones, we have to separate our professional identity from our personal identity a little bit more.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's great. This has been a wonderful conversation. I really appreciate your time. And before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to add, Alison, for our listeners?

**Alison Lands:**

I think this is an amazing series to help rising women leaders really think about what they want from their careers and also figure out where to get it. And in today's global marketplace, the sky is really the limit for folks who are curious, invested in building their skills and, you know, ambitious and want to take advantage of all that it holds. So, thanks to you, Stacey for having me. And I wish everyone listening good luck! And if you have any questions about building skills, please reach out to me on LinkedIn. Happy to support.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's wonderful. Thank you so much, Alison, really appreciate having you with us today.

**Alison Lands:**

Thanks, Stacie.

[Music]

**Stacie Berdan:**

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