



Season 5, Episode 8 – Women in Global Careers

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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 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. My guest today is Sarah Campbell Donia, Global Corporate Affairs leader at Randstad, the world's largest HR services provider. Sarah has over 20 years of experience leading multidisciplinary marketing, communications, and public affairs teams literally around the world – in Asia Pacific, the Middle East, and Europe. She holds both dual American and Australian citizenship and lives in Haarlem, the Netherlands, with her Dutch husband and two children. She's a member of Page, the world's leading professional association for senior corporate affairs executives, and serves on the board of UNFOLD movement, a collective of corporate affairs professionals committed to positively shaping the role of business in the world. Wow. Welcome, Sarah. So great to have you with us today.

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Thanks for having me, Stacie. I'm really excited to be here.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah! So, you know, one of the objectives of this podcast is to provide a sense of careers that are out there. You have outstanding experience in international business, public relations around the world. Tell us about it. What is it that you do?

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Great, I will. And I think, you know, when I was a student, I had no idea what a role of a communicator or a public affairs professional could be. So, it's really exciting to share... I would say that my role in an organization is to both articulate the strategy of that organization to a wide variety of stakeholder groups - so that could be media, Government, clients, and of course, our own employees. And what's really important is that when I'm articulating the strategy to them, I'm also trying to get a sense of what their expectations are of the organization and what's on their minds. And twofold, my job is to bring the outside world in. So I read a lot of news, I try to understand what's happening macro economically. And ultimately, I try to improve the ability of my company to make the impact that it aims in the world. So in the case of Randstad, we're the world's largest talent company. We operate in 39 countries and are headquartered here in the Netherlands. And our job is really to help people find jobs. So, if you can imagine in 2022 we helped 2 million people find a job, we're making a real big impact on individual lives, and also the societies that we work in. So, that's essentially what I do.



Stacie Berdan:

Oh, it's neat... And so, working and having operations, I guess, and helping people find jobs, as you as you put it, around the world is global. And you've had a stellar global career working around the world. Can you share some highlights with us and how you see the intersection between that experience and how you kind of apply it to what you're doing today?

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Yeah, definitely. My journey, I would say, started with my parents, as everyone's journey would. But my mother is Australian. And she left Australia, as many did at a very young age, and is a person that really is curious about the world. And she traveled everywhere before she settled, she settled in the U.S. and met my dad. And what my parents tried to instill in my brother and I was this sense of wonder and curiosity about the world. So I think it was inevitable that we would both leave and not come back. But for as long as I can remember, I really grasped this opportunity to be a global citizen. I was addicted to news. I watched CNN for as many hours as I could every day. I chose academic pursuits that were aligned with this interest. So, I think you know, when many people were studying accounting in business, I studied politics and history because I really just wanted to learn about the world. So, when I had the opportunity to move abroad, I did – first doing international exchange my junior year, and then I moved to Australia permanently in 2002. And I think, you know, there was just the opportunity to learn everything. And I always say to people, it's not that I don't love the U.S. because I definitely, definitely do, but I just think there's such a world out there. And this real sense of purpose I can have to be an ambassador for all things American, and then vice versa, for all things of the world back to the U.S. So, during my career, I've worked in Australia, I've worked in Asia, in the Middle East, in Europe, and my real true ambition and hope in life was to become a diplomat. But as you mentioned before, I have dual citizenship. And so, I wasn't able to make that dream real, but through my career and the people I meet, I hope that I am still achieving those same goals.

Stacie Berdan:

That's neat, so neat. So, you said, leave and not come back. So I want to ask you about that. Because that's, that's cool. So truly a global citizen, moving all over, working all over the place. Oftentimes, I hear from students or people, they're like, yeah, I want to go for just a couple of years and I want to come back. But you kept going, and you... and you haven't returned. Tell us, what that's like? Actually, I see, I heard what you said, in that continuing to move, and that was... that's kind of what motivates you... But what kind of a... what's life... what's the lifestyle?

Sarah Campbell Donia:

I think for me, it all comes down to knowing what makes you happy. And I think the first few job opportunities I had, or move opportunities I had, were related to my job. But I really came to a place where I don't want the moves that I make to be related to my work, I want them to be related to what makes me happy. So, moving to Australia was easy. Obviously, I had family there, it was a place that I knew and understood. Working in in Asia, that was really challenging and really different. But I actually stayed living in Australia during that time. So I always had this sense of being able to come home. And to be honest, I was always quite sure that I would never leave Australia. So, when I did, that was a surprise for me. But the surprise was in the excitement about moving to the Middle East and learning something completely different. And then of course, the move to Europe was more, more one of creating a sense of home for my young children who were born in the Middle East but having three nationalities had no real place of their own. So, I think it was just natural how all of these moves happened, but what was consistent was it made me happy.

Stacie Berdan:

That's really good advice. So many times people will... And we often encourage people to go anywhere. It's not just one spot, right. If you really want that first global experience, you might not be able to just go to the one place



where you're happy. But I'd like to hear that story. Yeah, that's wonderful. And how has all of this had an impact on your ability to deliver from a professional standpoint?

Sarah Campbell Donia:

The more people you meet, the more experiences you have, you're really filling up your cup, so to speak. So, I just, I'm very grateful for the ability to work with people from different cultures on a daily basis. I think one of the most prominent memories in my mind when I first moved to Dubai, I was in a group of 15 people, and we were 15 different nationalities. And I thought, wow, am I so lucky to be in this position, because we all come from completely different perspectives. And I would say, maybe this is a bit contentious, but you know, when you watch the news, you typically only get one perspective. So, to be able to, you know, use the Middle East as an example, be in a place with such rich history but really difficult stories to understand, as an outsider I feel that that was just such a wonderful experience that I could take to all of the other assignments that I've had. You can't look at a person and assume that you know their experiences or to overlay your experiences on what you think theirs have been like, because it's very likely that is not the case.

Stacie Berdan:

That's so true. So really understanding differences, understanding and living through that... Wow, 15 different nationalities, 15 people. That's so cool. That's so cool. Yeah, yeah. What do you think it takes, besides what... kind of like building on what you just said, what do you think it takes to be successful in international business today?

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Yeah, so, I think, a couple of things that have served me well, I would say, first of all communication skills. I don't think that that's different than in any other role. But we know now that the soft skills are just as important in a career and forging relationships in businesses is just so important. So, communication skills, whether it's speaking or writing, and also listening – that is a very important communication skill. I would also say curiosity. So, one area where I see people often fall down in their pursuit of wanting to grow in their careers is that they stay very focused on their function and they don't look around themselves. So, let's say you're studying finance, and you're working in finance, but you have no idea what the HR team does, or you have very little knowledge of the strategy. Yeah, maybe you don't know what the tax policy is, really, really could be anything. But the more experiences you gain outside of your normal day-to-day tasks, the more successful you're likely to be. And I think that also comes down to the fact that you're able to meet people where they're at. So just as you don't know where a person has come from, what their values are, you also need to understand what drives your colleagues at work, what are they being incentivized on, how can you contribute to that. I also think emotional intelligence is something that's very important in international business. And that also starts with, as I said before, really taking the time to understand people, different cultures, value different behaviors. And the more you know about those, the more you can leverage your emotional intelligence in the situations as they come. And then, the last one, and this is, you know, I think relevant for anything that we do in life, but – have initiative! If you think you can do something, try and do it, put your hand up, don't have limiting self-beliefs. And just yeah, just go for it. But always with a learning mindset.

Stacie Berdan:

I love that. That's great. Thank you so much. I mean, it's not... you didn't list anything else, anything like quantum physics or higher level of economics... all really good skills. And you're right, I think they go across the board.

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Well, it's funny, Stacie, because I asked my husband the same question last night, and he gave me very functional answers. So, it goes to show you can have different perspectives on these things.



Stacie Berdan:

Absolutely. And to that point, you know, you've worked so much around the world in so many different roles... Is there something that still baffles you? Maybe there are a lot of things, but something that you still find challenging? I mean, I remember my first six months in Hong Kong was like, it was so overwhelming and everything baffled me. Actually, once I realized that things actually were not as they seemed... But what kind of tips and advice can you give in this space?

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Um, I think, I mean, I was I was thinking, what... what baffles me? I think, you know, what baffles me is that no matter how hard I try, I can't know everything. So, I think what I would say to people, is that you probably will never know everything, and that's okay. But the joy is that you probably know someone that does know what you need to know. So it's like this degrees of separation. And I think that the challenging or the fun part is using your network to find those answers.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great. Yes, turning to people, right. That's great. So, even if you are baffled, you actually turn to people, which is... that's a great tip. Okay, great. So, working on a global scale, right, there's this balance of global and local market priorities... Can you share examples, when you've when you've experienced this kind of smart or dynamic tension?

Sarah Campbell Donia:

I would say that the most important piece of advice that I would give, first off, is that if you want to have a global career – that starts locally. So I would never advise someone to go straight into a global headquarters, I would always say, get your hands dirty in a local environment, understand what drives that business, and then go and understand what drives another business, and then another. And then, if you still want to go to a global role, then you have a suite of tools that you can bring with you. You know, I've experienced the dynamic tension so many times that I can't count. But I'll give one story which relates to a previous role. We were facing legislation in Australia at the time around a product, and I'll just keep what the product is out of the story, but the product was going to be banned quite suddenly in Australia. And I remember contacting the global organization and saying, hey, this product is being banned, I really need some help with messaging and Q&A, and we need an expert to come and help us mitigate this situation. And the response that I got at the time was, oh, yeah, no, in Europe, it's not gonna be banned for five years. So, yeah, you're on your own. And I remember thinking, is that really what the global organization is supposed to do? I thought they were here to serve local teams. So, I think that you have to understand what a global organization is there for. In my book, that is to serve, and support, and to steer the local organization. But nuances are such that the organization in Australia is going to be different than the organization in Vietnam, and it's going to be different to the organization in South Africa. And that's why it's just so important to get those experiences and what it's really like on the ground. Otherwise, you can never truly have a global perspective.

Stacie Berdan:

And that's a really good point. Because you really do need to understand how to operate locally, because you may not get much global attention anyway, depending on what percentage of the business you are, right?

Sarah Campbell Donia:

If you're lucky, you don't get any!



Stacie Berdan:

Ha-ha... That's great. Yes, that's true. I love it. Okay. Let's talk about gender, as a woman working around the world... Big topic. What do you think? What experiences have you had? What tips do you have? What's it been like? You've lived and worked in a lot of places...

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Yeah, I have. I think that first and foremost is, you know, to be aware and respect the culture that you are working in. So, I think it's really easy as an American to, first of all, assume that different cultures share the same values as you may have been raised to hold. So, first of all, it's knowing how different are the values of the culture that you're operating in versus your own, and then starting to understand how, where, if, and when you can express your own values. So I'll give maybe two different examples. When I was quite young, I was working in an Australian organization. As people may know, the Australian culture has been known as being quite misogynistic, and I had to really learn how to stick up for myself. And I saw other women choosing to do it in a, you know, using characteristics that you would say were more male or more macho. And I really didn't want to do that, I really wanted to stick up for myself but by being a woman and trying to create a safe space for other young women around me. So, I think I successfully navigated that without losing myself a little bit too much. But the Australian culture is very, very hard to navigate as a female, although it's getting better. And then on the flip side, you know, if I look at the Middle East, I mean, you would assume, and many people assume, that it's not a safe space for women or women in the workplace. But there I felt completely respected and completely safe. Even when I was working in Saudi Arabia quite a lot. Women, in fact, weren't allowed to work when I was there working. So I would be in an office sometimes with maybe one other female who was visiting with me. But we didn't have, of all things, a bathroom that we could go to, because the offices simply weren't catered for women. I couldn't go outside by myself, I certainly couldn't get a taxi by myself. And we even stayed in those days in all female hotels. So, you know, when I say I felt safe and I felt respected, but I was in an environment that was very, very different from the values that I understood. So, for me, it's always been about trying to take care to understand that culture, trying to take care to understand how people expect me to behave, and pushing the boundaries when I think it's possible to do so. But also, just knowing when it's not.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great advice. And you know, what you've exposed, kind of in our discussion, is kind of like stereotypes. People may think one thing about one place versus another. I can't tell you how many, probably you too, how many Americans want to go to Australia, right, because I think it's just like the U.S. And it's interesting, because really getting to know the culture does matter. Because they're all those slight little differences that you're not really aware of from afar, so...

Sarah Campbell Donia:

And Europe, you know, Europe is not one big, it's not one big territory, every country is distinctly different. And I think also, for me that's been the really exciting part about being so close in Europe now is that you can truly see the nuances country to country.

Stacie Berdan:

How many, how many do you work across your... How many countries do you work across?

Sarah Campbell Donia:

All of them! All of them, yeah.



Stacie Berdan:

Ok, so you really see it. Yeah. So that's great. That must be really interesting. Yeah, yeah, the nuances... I can think of a couple actually, having just returned but... How about um, you're married, have kids, you said the kids were born in the Middle East and you came back to the Netherlands... How do you manage the personal, the professional?

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Well, the first, I mean, the first answer is you don't. And I'm sure you recognize that. But I think what's always been important to us is that we're true to what drives us. So, I would say, my husband and I are both people that really enjoy working and what we do. And we want to share our sense of curiosity with our children. So, our children are five and seven and, you know, they understand that my husband plants trees and they understand that I help people find jobs. And we're pretty happy that they have that level of understanding for now. But if we are happy in ourselves, then we can be happy in our relationship, and our kids can also feel safe and happy.

Stacie Berdan:

But clearly, I mean, needing help... and if you both work, then there's an element of needing help, or outside help, or anything like that. But you're right, it's really difficult to just manage it, just kind of...

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Yeah, and I think, you know, let me let me extrapolate on that for a second. I mean, coming back to the places where, where you feel safe, and you choose it for the lifestyle... we lived in Dubai and we had nearly full-time help. And at that point in our lives with, you know, with babies, I was able to go back to work full time. And that was something that was really important to me, and really worked well. But when we moved to the Netherlands, we chose not to have outside help. And we moved to a country where parents of young children are expected to only work four days a week. And yet, we both work five days a week. So, we have a sort of a different juggle, and you know, talking about cultural differences, there are very, very few of my friends who work five-day weeks, and that goes for men as for women, but that's also why we choose to live here, because it's a great place with flexibility to have a family.

Stacie Berdan:

Hm, neat, neat. And so, the kids are learning Dutch as well, right?

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Yeah...

Stacie Berdan:

And yeah, of course, in the Netherlands, I think I read somewhere, 95% of the people speak English as well.

Sarah Campbell Donia:

They do. Yeah, so that's good for me.

Stacie Berdan:

That's great. So, what do you see on the horizon, right, kind of changing the topic a little bit, what do you see? So, our listeners – students, undergrad, graduates – what do you think they need to be prepared for the next couple of years as they enter the workforce?



Sarah Campbell Donia:

Yeah, yeah... So, I think the first one I would say is artificial intelligence – don't fear it, learn how it can support you! So, I think there's been this this sense of, oh, AI is scary, and it's going to change, it's going to take away jobs or change jobs... It will! So, learn how to make it work for you would be my first thought on that. And the other one is just, you know, in the job market, in general, the labor market is going to continue to change shape. You know, the fact of the matter is that we don't have the population in most Western countries to drive the level of growth that we've been used to. So labor is going to have to come from either different locations (so whether through immigration or through offshoring) or through technology like AI. And I also just think, you know, it's important to consider where the work is going to be. So, we know that care, and healthcare, and green jobs are going to continue to be very, very much in demand. So, if I'm a young person entering the workforce, I'm thinking about, how can I position myself to take advantage of those macroeconomic trends, and how quickly can I find a specialization or a niche that helps me stand apart from the crowd. Those would be my three pieces of advice.

Stacie Berdan:

Excellent advice. Thank you. Great stuff. So, you are a global thinker, you talked about the curiosity, you talked about... it's really kind of like part of your DNA clearly... So many people though are not like that, but we live in a global world. How can you actually...you did a little bit in the beginning... but is there like one thing that you would say to someone who's like, nah, yeah, you know, I'm okay here, I don't really need to, I don't really need to understand the world.

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Yeah, I mean, I would pick up any product around you and you know... or think back to what life was like during the pandemic. The supply chains are global. And that means that, you know, what is used in the U,S, is, you know, is made in Thailand, is made in India, or part of it is. I saw a really good post on LinkedIn last week and someone was holding a cup of fruit and they were on a, I think, a European airline, then it said, the fruit was from Southeast Asia, but it was packaged in Brazil, and then it was on a European airline. I mean, it was something crazy like that. But nothing, nothing is local anymore. And I would also say, if you are a person that thinks how can I get a sense of the world, you know, there's so many opportunities that don't cost any money. If you can't travel, read a National Geographic, you know, watch, watch the documentaries, be, be mindful and aware of what's happening in the world. And you'll realize that it affects you.

Stacie Berdan:

Very true, very true, great advice. And actually, doing those things might actually open up one's eyes to actually see how interesting and wonderful and complex the world really is.

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Completely agree.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah. So, you're so thoughtful... Is there a piece of advice that you would actually like to go back and give your younger self?

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Well, I am often crazy thinking about my younger self, and what I think about was, I was terrified of asking for help. I never ever said that I don't know. I thought that was a fatal flaw and that was a phrase that just could not come out of my mouth. And so my primary piece of advice is ask for help. Asking others to help you to collaborate with you also means that you can experience a lot of positive benefits, you can learn. But more importantly, you



remove the stress, I would say to myself, you remove the stress that you're putting on yourself to perform as an individual. So, I've experienced, you know, later, I would say in my career, that asking for help can bring you so many beautiful learnings and also, you know, showcases to others that you're also a human. And I think at the end of the day, we all want to see each other just as we are, and by asking for help is one great way that you can do that.

Stacie Berdan:

That's a great tip. Great tip. And you have to ask for help when you're working in other parts of the world where you don't know everything, you just have to.

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Yeah, absolutely.

Stacie Berdan:

Great. So, before we wrap up... it's been a great interview, Sarah, I've really enjoyed talking with you... Is there anything else you want to add? Maybe something that I didn't ask you, that you want to leave with our listeners?

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Um, you know, I would say if you have any inclination to explore the world, and as I said before, don't let physical restraints stop you, explore! You know, there are opportunities at your fingertips. Speak to people that you work with, reach out into your network. I would say, anyone who has worked abroad – and Stacie you would know this – would be willing to have a chat about what their country is like, what their job is like, what their life is like. So, this is coming a bit like coming back and asking for help. But just... yeah, reach out and ask people to tell you about their experiences. And I'm sure they will be more than willing to do it.

Stacie Berdan:

And that's wonderful, great advice. Thank you so much for that, Sarah. I really, really appreciate that. And I really appreciate the fact that you took the time out of your super busy schedule. So thanks!

Sarah Campbell Donia:

Oh, it was my absolute pleasure. Thanks for having me.

[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!