



## Season 5, Episode 2 – Women in Global Careers

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[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. What a treat we have in store for you today! U.S. Ambassador Susan Stevenson is with us to talk about her career as a U.S. diplomat. Susan served as U.S. Ambassador to Equatorial Guinea for almost three years and is now back in Washington, DC, serving as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Research. Over the course of her career, she has lived and worked in Thailand, China, Hong Kong, Mexico City, and Paris, where she began her global career working as a product manager for Kellogg. She speaks Chinese, French, Spanish and Thai - just wow. Welcome Ambassador Stevenson! Such a pleasure to have you with us today.

#### **Susan Stevenson:**

Thank you. It's a real pleasure to be with you, Stacie.

#### **Stacie Berdan:**

Great. So, one of the objectives of our podcasts is to provide a sense of the careers that are out – there not just titles, right. Tell us, what is it that you do?

#### **Susan Stevenson:**

It's interesting, as a diplomat, I think people have varying imagination of what that entails. And the way I see it, I facilitate communication and understanding between the United States and the rest of the world. And I say that because for much of my career, I've been the press attaché. So I literally communicated U.S. policy, and hopefully broadened understanding with international publics of what we were trying to accomplish, and how we were trying to work together with the countries and territories where I've been posted. But in my current job, I function much more like a Chief Operating Officer for the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department, ensuring that we have the resources we need to ensure the best intelligence for State Department leadership, up to and including the Secretary of State. But all of this involves understanding our foreign policy priorities, and figuring out how to achieve them. I do have a friend that's also a diplomat that used to say her job entailed reading, which is also true. But I think for me, because I've been lucky enough to be in public diplomacy, it is both reaching out and interacting with foreign publics. And then understanding how what they are thinking and trying to do and what the United States is thinking and trying to do can intersect and work together.



**Stacie Berdan:**

All right. So that's great. And I know you didn't start out that way. And so like many of our listeners, I believe you have a business degree and you started working in product management for Kellogg and worked in Paris... How did you go from that kind of a business background early in your career, and transitioned to being a diplomat?

**Susan Stevenson:**

It was interesting, because I don't think I knew that diplomacy existed as a career when I was going to university, and I wanted something tangible. And I have a sister that was in product management. So I thought, well, that sounds like something I could do. But everybody's got different motivations of what makes them happy, and what makes them fulfilled. And I realized early on that I wasn't necessarily motivated by money. But really, I was motivated by mission, and this thrill of cross-cultural communication. I had been lucky enough to study abroad when I was at university and I really enjoyed the travel and interacting with foreign cultures and communities. So I liked working with Kellogg's when I was working on brands that touched on health and you know, prevention of cancer. And back then we used to think other than, you know... now we understand that carbohydrates are too much, and sugar can be bad... back then it was too much fat. And so cereal was seen as a good way to manage that. And that I found motivating. But then, when I was sent to France – in my background... I'd studied there, I spoke French – I was all on children's brands. And I just thought, wow, this is not really making me fulfilled. And I was surrounded by co-workers who were very enthusiastic about in dial displays in grocery stores and reading Advertising Age, while I was reading The Economist and really interested in international events. And then a friend shared the Chicago World Affairs Council guide to careers in world affairs, which is the first time that I became aware of the Foreign Service as a career. I guess I thought just the ambassador worked at an embassy. I didn't realize that there's a whole staff of professional diplomats. So I took the Foreign Service exams – it consists of a written exam and then an oral exam – and I received the initial offer from the State Department just after Kellogg's sent me to France. So I ended up staving off the State Department for two subsequent offers before deciding to go ahead and accept an offer from the U.S. Information Agency. So I like to say I switched from marketing cereal to marketing the United States. And then if I just take a step back, for anybody that's interested in changing careers, I think what I was able to do is identify what I didn't like doing and then identify what would make me more fulfilled. And I feel very fortunate I was able to do that. And then I left Kellogg's after four years. So that's not a lot of time. But I left before I got too used to, you know, the difference in salaries – of course, it's more lucrative to be in the private sector. But I think the public sector, which you make up for, is having this job satisfaction. So I tell people, don't be afraid if you realize you're in a job that doesn't make you happy to look for what really does make you happy, and take that leap, because it can have long lasting benefit.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Oh, that's great advice. Thank you for that. I love that. Specifically, the money, the not spending too much time... that's great. Because you really never know. And communication skills are critical, clearly in your job and being a diplomat. And they're actually really important I think, in almost every job around the world. So I'm so happy that you highlighted them. They're one of my... one of my special ties in encouraging people to actually focus on great communications. You've had such a great a stellar career so far, you've worked around the world, so many places, at so many exciting moments in history. Can you share some of the highlights with us, maybe some things you've learned throughout your global career?

**Susan Stevenson:**

Sure, when I worked at Kellogg's, I got some invaluable management techniques about how to prioritize, delegate what other people can be doing now while you work on things that only you can do. And I think that is hugely important because people tend to get bogged down and don't realize that projects can be moving forward, even if they themselves are not concentrating on them. But when I joined the Foreign Service, I learned so much about the world and this cross-cultural communication. And I think being sent to Kellogg's France helped pave the way for



me because I was already used to being American communicating in a different country in a different cultural context. And that served me in good stead as I've adapted to all the different countries and territories where I've been posted. The most important thing to understand is when you're trying to do that communication or influence, you need to first understand what people are thinking on the ground. And I think marketing is a great tool for that. Because when you're thinking of an advertising campaign, you don't just say what you want people to think you have to first understand what do people believe, and then what do I want them to believe? And how do I create that bridge to get them there? And that has been invaluable to me once I joined the Government, because then I learned, okay, not only am I trying to convince people of the foreign policy priorities that the United States has, but I first have to understand what's motivating them, what are they thinking? And then how do I get them there? How do I play into what their belief system already is, to show how much we are alike, and how what the United States goals are could help them as well. So I think that's been very important. And then I also think that people tend to underestimate the federal government, but I think it gives you an enormous ability to make a difference. A former political appointee, boss of mine, told me that one dies a little bit every time they leave Government, because there's just so much you can get done with the weight of the United States Government behind you. I mean, even from my very first tour, I was working in the Consular Affairs Section, and I had an inquiry from parents of a missing American. And I thought, well, you know, here I am this, like 27 year old, cold calling hotels and airlines, etc. But people just... as soon as they found out I was working for the U.S. Embassy, they were super willing to provide information, work with me. And I feel like that is very powerful. Also, it's important to understand the different perspectives of where you're serving. So when I my second tour was in Mexico City, a country I thought I knew about, given its proximity, its influence in the United States... But once I was there, I realized just how nuanced and diverse the country was. And just a little example, I think people tend to say, oh, there's, you know, Mexican drug cartels, it's their fault we've got a drug problem... Well, the Mexicans blamed the international drug trade on American consumers. They said it was our fault because of the demand. That different perspective is very important to keep in mind. And then, when I was in China, even in the mid-2000s, when I first got to Hong Kong in 2000 and then to Beijing in 2006, we had a difficult bilateral relationship as China began inserting itself in the world stage. You know, went from joining the WTO in 2002 to suddenly having this consequential economy – sooner we used to see and they, the Chinese, thought they were going to have. But it was fascinating to be there in the run up to the housing market collapse, because we spent a lot of time chastising China for its lack of intellectual property rights protections, and then suddenly, the Chinese government was chastising us for our "irresponsible financial markets". So it's important to understand the sentiment on the ground, when deciding how to pursue these foreign policy priorities. That's how you're going to make the best traction.

### **Stacie Berdan:**

How satisfying, what a satisfying career! Because you see something from one perspective, but you must look at it from so many different perspectives. You're, I mean, you're supposed to and you're almost... you're forced to, because you're looking at it through the lens of a different... being on the ground... different people... that is so cool. But I gotta believe there are lots of challenges. Can you share one or two of the biggest challenges that you have faced in your career and how you dealt with it?

### **Susan Stevenson:**

Well, yes, Foreign Service in general is challenging because unlike the path I had been on before, where I had studied in France, I was working in France, I could get a very in-depth knowledge on a particular country, language, etc. With the Foreign Service, you sort of dabble in each – you are in a country three years and then you move on. You know, I've been fortunate to stay a little bit longer in some of my postings and to get very good at the foreign languages I was using. But still it's dislocating. Once you are on top of what you're doing – the language, the issues that you're dealing with – then you have to move and start over. Although I think that is a benefit too because it keeps it fresh, you can never get bored, because you're always moving. But you know, on a personal level, every new posting, it can be difficult. You've got to find a new doctor, a new dentist, you know, your dry cleaners, your grocery store, and all those little things that make up your life change. And then when you have



families, it can be particularly difficult for children to go to new schools and new friends... it can be equally difficult for spouses who have to look for new jobs. And I think it's hard on families. I've been able to have a lot of the intense jobs that I've had, because I had live-in help, so that's a huge advantage, because it was much more affordable overseas than in the United States. But then I've also had to pass up opportunities that wouldn't have been the right fit for my family. So it's a balance, and you always have to confront that.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Mm hmm... And of course, men and women both have children, but a lot of times it falls on the woman to actually be the caregiver or be responsible for. Do you find that that played a role on being a woman internationally, and in some of these challenges personally and with families?

**Susan Stevenson:**

It was interesting, when I worked at Kellogg's, I was actually passed over for an opportunity to go to Asia (even though I had said very vocally when I first joined that I wanted to do an international tour) because the company felt that women would not have as much traction and effectiveness in a male dominated culture like Asia. And because they were very preoccupied with the bottom line, profits, they didn't want to take a chance. With the Government, we don't have that profit imperative. So they're willing to be more creative. And I think people would be surprised to hear that, but it's true. I felt much more entrepreneurial in the Government, ironically, than I ever did in working in a big business. And so, as a woman, I was able, you know, as a foreign woman I should say, I was able to transcend some of those gender roles. For example, I did a three month stint in the Middle East – I was in Qatar preparing for a Secretary of State and Secretary of Commerce visit for big international conference. And as a foreign woman, I was not subject to the same constraints that a Qatari woman in a very conservative society would have been. So I was able to deal with male government officials, male counterparts, but then I also had entree into women in the private sector, or talking to women in government, that my male counterparts might have struggled to have. The other thing I think, is women, internationally, unfortunately, tend to be underestimated. And maybe that's our superpower, because when you're underestimated you got a lot more room to operate and maneuver. And you are able to surprise your interlocutors in a way, I think, that my male counterparts wouldn't be. And so I... you have to be comfortable in it... and I always was. I worked for the great Christy Kinney when she was ambassador to Thailand, and this is right after the WikiLeaks scandal. And when she first arrived in Thailand, there was an interview with her where they almost treated her like... I shouldn't say a pretty face, but something like that. It was very condescending article that was talking about her more as a woman than as a serious diplomat and she'd already been ambassador to Ecuador and the Philippines. I was her Consul General in Chiang Mai at the time, we were in Northern Thailand, and I was a little outraged at how she had been treated. And she said, oh, you know, I'm not worried about it. And her objective was to connect with people personally. So she just said, it's fine. And if this allows people to see me more as a person, then I can connect with the Thai public and that'll be all to the good. And that really stayed with me because I thought, that's true, we don't have to get hung up. She knew her ability and so it didn't bother her. And she was able to use that to her advantage. And that's something that I took with me and have adopted as well.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's wonderful. I'd love to point about being a woman as a superpower. I think that's true for many women in businesses, too, I think we are often underestimated. And I love the fact... the non difference, you know, between private sector and public... You mentioned you were in Thailand, you speak Thai, you speak Chinese, you speak French and Spanish, and you probably speak a little bit of so many other languages, it's been a significant part of your career. In your opinion, experience – there's a lot of debate over whether it's important or not, or it's too difficult to learn – what's the role of languages in today's world workspace?



**Susan Stevenson:**

I think it depends on your career and what you want to do. Let's say, you focus on medicine, for example, maybe Latin is important to understand, references to diseases and cures. But maybe mastering Polish or Thai is not as useful. In hospitality, I think, language could help cater to foreign tourists, that's certainly the case overseas. And for companies looking to expand or maintain operations internationally, the person who can master a foreign language will have an edge over those who can only speak English. For me though, I had this moment when I was getting ready to go to Equatorial Guinea, which was a former Spanish colony and so they speak Spanish, where I hadn't spoken Spanish since my posting in Mexico in the late 90s and my Spanish was super rusty compared to my French, and I thought, my God, is this worth it? Because I'm going out as an ambassador. And if I don't speak Spanish well, I'm gonna look, you know, silly, and maybe I shouldn't do that. And I finally decided to persevere. And what's so important about that is your interlocutors can speak their language and can be very relaxed about it. And then you get insight into what's going on that you wouldn't if you didn't understand the language. So I think for me, I have found learning other languages so helpful to understanding mindsets, to understanding how people think and how they operate, what motivates them, you get a lot of insight into the Chinese culture, for example, by realizing not only are Chinese characters written in a certain way, the stroke order is very important. But even the direction of the strokes are important, and there is no way to write Chinese characters and to remember them other than rote memorization. That influences the culture, it doesn't tend to be as creative, for example, as other Western cultures because of the rigidity of having to learn the language. So I think language learning is hugely important.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Do you have any tips for people – besides do it, attack it, try to do it – tips for learning?

**Susan Stevenson:**

Don't be afraid of making errors. I studied Chinese in Hong Kong with a lot of Japanese students who are perfectionists, and they were really reluctant to speak for fear of making mistakes. And I don't know what it says about me, but both my Thai language and Chinese language teachers told me that I was able to make progress because I was not worried about looking silly or saying the wrong thing. I mean, that's the epitome of faking it till you make it. I mean, you have to play around with the words and be corrected before you know how to speak. But I think some people want to understand everything and have everything perfect before they can actually communicate. And that's just not going to work. You do have to get out there and have people correct you... particularly in Thai, which is tonal... I had Thais look at me and see my foreign face and think I'm not going to understand a word of out of this person's mouth, so I'm not going to listen. And so that made me have a very good accent. Otherwise, I couldn't communicate with them.

**Stacie Berdan:**

What's great, wonderful. Well, you just sound so confident and things have been great and fabulous. And you've touched on some of the challenges. Is there something that still baffles you, something you still find challenging that you need to grasp?

**Susan Stevenson:**

In the federal government, there are career employees and then there are political appointees. And in the United States, we have this four-year political cycle. And so I think what is frustrating for me is we career diplomats are looking at long term goals and achievements. And different administrations come in and they feel like they've got four years to get things done, and they want to do as much as possible in those four years. And that tension between the leadership at headquarters, the political leadership, and then the career professionals exists constantly. And I also think the tension between Washington and those of us in the field is also there. Because when we're on the ground in the field, we understand much better the constraints we're operating under and what's possible, whereas in Washington, sometimes, particularly with the political appointees who maybe haven't served overseas and don't





understand how embassies operate, they expect everyone just sitting around waiting for them to issue instructions and then we'll carry them out. So there are some efforts that the leadership in Washington might have, for example, World Water Day... well, World Water Day is not going to be very important for Ethiopia, which is a landlocked country, or maybe it will be because of the water tables. But our oceans endeavors are not going to be particularly meaningful for countries that are in the interior. For example, like Hungry, or, you know, I don't know, Bhutan. And so, you need to weigh, right, what is like to be the most useful thing for me to do versus what Washington wants you to do. A lot of times, you have *démarches*, where Washington says, please go meet the government and deliver this *démarche*, which is a request for the foreign governments leadership to support X, Y, or Z. And those of us in the field have to make the decision, this is going to get traction, this isn't... For example, you know, I don't know... there was a campaign for democracy, what democracy means to me? Well, while I was in the People's Republic of China, somebody participating in that competition could actually attract very unwanted attention from their own government and it could put them in danger. And that is not something that you want to do. So I think that constant, constant tension between the political appointees and the career people and between Washington and the field is something that continues. And it is frustrating. I think, also, if I could just add, the political leadership coming in, doesn't understand how the career staff could work just as diligently for the new administration as they did for the old, particularly if they're from different parties. And that nonpartisan support, I mean, that's crucial to what we're doing. We're looking for the benefit to the country, not to any particular administration, but we want to help all the administrations.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Yeah, that's gotta be frustrating. It's got to be... it actually is a question just as a civilian every now and then you kind of wonder how it all works. But it does, it works really well. You're passionate about diplomacy, entrepreneurship, creating economies abroad and relationship, and moving relationships forward. What drives you in doing this? Why do you do this every day?

**Susan Stevenson:**

As I said, I realized my motivation was cross-cultural communication. I think there's some people that go into diplomacy because they're really jazzed about foreign policy or a particular region of the world. Whereas I've been lucky enough to serve in Mexico, which is really North America, but Latin America, I worked in the private sector in Europe, I've served in Africa, I've served in Asia, I've had that little stint in the Middle East... It's been very interesting for me to gain all those perspectives, and that's what I've really enjoyed. I've enjoyed learning about countries and territories in which I've served. And I think that thrill of being able to be in another country, and not, you know, blend in – I'm always going to be an American – but to get that entree that is reserved for very few people, because I've had the benefit of studying and learning these foreign languages, learning about the culture, the history about the country, or the territory before I even got there, that really has motivated me. And I think at the end of the day, when I look back at which postings have been the most satisfying, it's those where I felt like I was able to make an impact, you know, no matter what level I was at, in my work every day. I mean, that's what gets me out of bed every day is if I can go in and make a difference. And I think that has been very satisfying. As I said at the outset, everybody's different. Everybody has different motivations. And I was lucky enough to find out what mine was. And it's really that cross-cultural communication.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's wonderful. Yeah. So for our listeners, just kind of turning a little bit, what do you see on the horizon for those entering the workforce in the next year or two? What do they need to be aware of, prepare for? What kind of tips or guidance do you have for them?



**Susan Stevenson:**

Well, it's really interesting. I've got three children who are now adults, and my son is the youngest, still at university. But when he was deciding what to study, he was very worried about being replaced by a robot or artificial intelligence. So he wanted to know, you know, what careers could he go into that he could not be replaced. Now I'm hasten to say diplomacy is one of them. But he just decided to choose medicine because he felt that that was a relatively safe industry. I think those are complications that I certainly never had to worry about when I was first starting out. I think the people who are choosing careers today need to be aware of the importance of technology, of communication. As you've said, it's been important in your career and in mine, and I think with text messaging, etc, there has been a little bit of atrophy of being... have good writing skills, good presentation skills, good, good speaking. But that is incredibly important. I think having a good understanding of mathematics, finance are obviously trends to watch. But I also think the United States needs to continue to spot future trends and prepare ourselves. As my old boss, Rick Stengel used to say – he quoted Wayne Gretzky saying: You don't need to skate to where the puck is, but where the puck is going to be. And that is very, very difficult. We, in 2010, we're tooting the internet as this beacon of freedom and access to information. And then six short years later, we were looking at the Internet as this dangerous gateway for misinformation, as we saw with the influence, the negative influence from Russia in the 2016 elections. So we need to have that imagination, what's the new technology going to be? What's the new energy sources? What's the new commercial opportunities? And how can the United States best position ourselves to be at the forefront? We can't take for granted that the United States will always be in a leadership position, because we won't if we're not able to adapt and continually retrain. I think we thought that manufacturing could be outsourced but white collar jobs couldn't. And we saw with the rise of bandwidth that suddenly call centers were relocated, and even accounting etc., was offshored into places that are less expensive. And then, after the pandemic, we saw, well, globalization and all these far-flung supply chains are also dangerous. And so we need to be self-sufficient. And so it's finding that balance and continually exploring and trying to look around the corner. I don't have all the answers. But I do think that it's important for us to continue to challenge ourselves and be in the forefront. But in my own experience, I would say the most important thing is to study something or choose a career where you're interested, you'll be engaged in it, it fits your skill set, then you'll always be satisfied.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Excellent advice. Before we wrap up, just couple more questions. Do you have a favorite place that you have lived and worked? I know, it's a tough question.

**Susan Stevenson:**

Oh, that is a tough question. Because I've been very privileged to be in a lot of very interesting places. But I think, probably my first tour in Bangkok, Thailand, because it was my first tour with the Foreign Service. And it is such a different culture than the West. And there... at the time... you know, it's very traditional... And I just felt so privileged to be there and to be able to communicate in this very gentle and interesting culture. The religion was different – t's a majority Buddhist country. It was a very mystical country, my interlocutors would tell me very matter of factly they wanted to be a doctor but they were afraid of ghosts, so that wouldn't have been a good career. I mean, just it was endlessly fascinating. And so I think perhaps because of that, it remains one of my favorite postings. But really, even Equatorial Guinea, my last post, it's just such a beautiful country with so much potential, and that I myself, had such an important role to play as the head of a mission was also deeply satisfying. So I guess if I had to answer I would say those two postings.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's good. Thank you for answering a very difficult question. I appreciate that. It's like picking your favorite child. Yes. Before we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to add, something that maybe I haven't asked you a question about that you'd like to share with our listeners?



**Susan Stevenson:**

Well, I guess I think if I look back at what I imagined for myself when I was choosing a university and choosing a career, I did not see myself as a diplomat, because as I said, I didn't even know if it was an option as a career. And I ended up living a life I never even dreamed was out there, was possible – learning several languages, living all over the world. So I encourage anyone starting out now to assess, as I said, what motivates them, where do they derive the most satisfaction and look for that career that lets you concentrate on those things. And if you do, then you'll have a wonderful time. I tell new Foreign Service officers always be open and flexible to new challenges, to challenge yourself on what you thought your comfort zone is, because if you don't push yourself out there, you're never going to have those experiences.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's wonderful! Thank you so much Ambassador Stevenson. It's been a joy to talk with you today. Great tips and advice for our listeners, so thanks for taking the time out of your busy schedule.

**Susan Stevenson:**

My pleasure. Thank you very much.

[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!