



## Season 3, Episode 5 – Entrepreneurship & Sustainability

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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 three, we explore the rising trend of ESG and how it is shifting the talent landscape on a global scale. Come with us as we share with you how responsible active engagement is changing the face of the global workforce today. Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Levent Erkan – the Founder of WEglobal, a consultancy that offers project management, technology, and sustainability to clients across four continents. Prior to this role, he founded and sold another UK-based consultancy, which was eventually bought by Tetra Tech. In addition to being an entrepreneur, Levent had a stint at Microsoft and is a registered Angel Investor. He’s an inspiring and motivating speaker, and has had more than 25 business articles published. A native to Turkey, he has lived in many cities across the US, and is now based in London. And he has finished three marathons – Istanbul, New York, and Stockholm. Welcome Levent. I’m so excited to be talking to you today!

**Levent Erkan:**

Hi Stacie. Thank you.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Great! So, you have had such a really interesting, fascinating career. One of the objectives of our podcast is to share what types of careers are out there to listener. So as the Founder of WEglobal, can you tell us about the organization and what it is that you do and how you got there?

**Levent Erkan:**

Sure, WEglobal, we are the change management consultants, mostly working with global development projects. What I mean with the global development projects, or sustainable development projects, usually implemented at the developing countries, and mostly funded by international organizations such as World Bank, European Union, and others. We aim for a better world, a sustainable world. And in order to do that, we focus to climate projects, transportation projects, education projects, employment, and technology. So, this is what we do. And it has been a tough road. We had some failures, some successes, but now doing quite alright.

**Stacie Berdan:**

How many years has WEglobal been operating now?

**Levent Erkan:**

WEglobal has been operating under the brand name of WEglobal since 2018. So, when you look at the history, it looks like a four-year old company, but three companies came together in 2018, October 17<sup>th</sup>, and those three companies with a history of more than 20 years, we came together under the brand of WEglobal. So, you might say officially four years, but informally, it’s more than 20 years now.



**Stacie Berdan:**

Wow. That's really interesting. So, I mean, so many people who dream, right, of starting their own business. And so you started one, sold it., And now it sounds like you've kind of come together with other partners and other businesses to found WEglobal... What advice can you offer listeners in this space, especially when it comes to a global business?

**Levent Erkan:**

First of all, if you think that you have the idea, which can be implemented globally, I mean, focus to your idea, have a good plan, have a good people around you, and then stick to your plan, and then be a disciplined person. So, for instance, at WEglobal, we really get together some good friends, good ex-colleagues, with ex-partners, some managers and colleagues combined. So we had really good people all around us. And then, we also had a good idea that we think that can be implemented globally. And we are really sticking to the plan. Obviously, we are... keep changing our plan according to the world issues, or we had a flexibility. But still, we are really sticking to our plan, what we want to do... And, globally, if your idea, you think that it can be implemented globally, you also need to have, obviously, global friends, global partners, global maybe investors in order to do that. So, it's not easy to get out of your local environment and be global. So that is all obviously the next stage in the business life.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's really interesting. So, good idea, good talent, good camaraderie. Have a... have something that people want to buy, and the investors, and, certainly, on a global scale. That would be pretty tricky. When it comes back to the work that you're actually doing – sustainability, ESG, we hear people talking about it a lot – what types of specific projects are you working on, so our listeners can get an idea of what kind of work is actually out there?

**Levent Erkan:**

Right... I mean, that's a good question. Really, sustainable development goals and ESG, really, it is kind of a trending area right now. What we have been doing in the development projects, actually, we used to call them international development consultancy. And we have been doing it for the last 20 years. And the UN restructured all that. And since 2015, the last seven years, it's more structured under 17 different goals. And they are called Sustainable Development Goals now, and ESG and sustainable development goals are quite linked to each other. So first, I mean, the concept is that we want a better world, equal world and everything like that. But for instance, when you go to the specific projects... I can think of a project that I'm currently involved... Our company is managing 45 projects in four different continents. But for instance, my home country Turkey, I'm involved in one of those projects. The project is in a less-developed city, and the city is in Turkey, less-developed region... The neighbor of those... of that city is in the South, it's Syria, and in the East – it's Iraq. So, the neighbors are challenging neighbors, because they're in the transition, as you all are aware of that. And it's a risky area, less developed. So how do you make the young people and their education properly there? How do you make the people work in that city? How do you make new entrepreneurs or small businesses, you know, startups... you know, start from there? How do you do that? Really it's not easy. Less-developed area, the borders are challenging. So we start a project about employment, education, and entrepreneurship. So what we are doing is that we have been involved with the universities there. So we include four cities in that region. Each city has a major university, there are partners, beneficial partners, we included development agencies there, we included the private organizations there, and obviously the government. So, the government, private organization, the university, we are trying to make them come together. And us it's like the Project Coordinator, trying to improve the quality of education there, trying to bring some good people all around the world so that they can influence the students, the university students there – to educate better and then find better jobs and start up some good companies in those regions or around the world... Because now it's a remote world, you could stay in the city and maybe sell your business to all around the world, or maybe start up an NGO, because you can really help people around there – to the refugees, or to any known poverty issues, you can really do a lot of good things there. So we started this project in a less-developed area about education and employment, and also entrepreneurship areas. And the project is going well, with all the university



students for the next level of education or identifying their careers, their new jobs, or starting up businesses where they are good at.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's wonderful. Thank you for explaining that and going into the example because now I really understand why project management is one of the key skills you bring, clearly technology, because so many of these small startups and companies need that kind of help, and specifically with respect to sustainability. It's really interesting. How did it actually you come to, I mean, this idea? Clearly, there's a need for this kind of work. But your past jobs, say, had a lot to do with project management – what inspired you to pursue something with respect to sustainability?

**Levent Erkan:**

When I was living and working in the United States, I was, again, working as a project manager. I was certified professionally about it. And I worked for large clients, financial institutions, such as Bank of America, I was working for them as a consultant. So I thought that, I am a good project manager, and I thought that I can do more in different areas. Then I went back to my home country. As soon as I went back, always... although I say some things you have to plan well, some things, you know, just life happens to you, you know... So, I was again trying to work with some large financial institutions as a client. But it took time. Then, one of the UN organizations, United Nation organizations, needed a project management consultant in the less-developed areas of Turkey. So they offered me a consultant job, and I went there. And when I went there, you know, before I went there, I was in New York, and then I went to one of the very less-developed areas in the Southeast Anatolia, and it was at first sad, you know – the difference – and you feel like you can add so much value with your skills and experiences... Then I earned less, much less, at the beginning. But then of course, the value that you add, you see it right in the field to the people you touch. So, it really inspired me. And then, by the way, I mean, this sounds like a... you know, like an NGO job or a social responsible thing... Not just that, because I earned money out of that, too, like all the United Nations employees also had their salaries, but the salary that I earned was really, for a good value. So it really inspired me those first, I think, my first six months. I made my mind switch – what I wanted to do as a project manager again, and then as an entrepreneur, and etc. But that six months was tough, but also quite influential.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's so interesting, because you're obviously a business person, project manager. And the way you've bridged NGOs, and business and bringing your skills to bear, it sounds like you don't put yourself in a bucket. So many students, young, young professionals, I need to, oh, I only want to do business, I want to do this, oh, I only want to work for an NGO or nonprofit, and I do feel good stuff. But indeed, they all are kind of mixed up together these days, even more and more so as businesses tackle ESG. Right?

**Levent Erkan:**

I totally agree. I mean, for instance, ESG or, you know, the SDG, you know, those are for everybody. I mean, they have some targets some goals for everyone, every individual, every NGO, every government, every private organization now, because we're living in the same world. So, if I continue from the same type of project, if you want your country to have the same equal socio-economic level, so in order to do that, you go to the students there, and then you know, try to improve them. And nowadays, again, remote world, I'm in London, I don't really need to go there anymore. I can really touch too many people from wherever I am sitting right now. And then I can talk to them and coach them online, help their business plans, help their career developments, and help their projects. And then those students are going to help NGOs, help their governments, help their private organizations to improve.

**Stacie Berdan:**

Yeah, well, that's interesting, because clearly, you're able to actually offer this kind of guidance and advice remotely, because you also understand the cultural context, which is super important. And so I want to touch on



that you've worked around the world in many different capacities. And I imagine you've got a lot of insight on working internationally, can you share some tips for our listeners?

**Levent Erkan:**

International... working internationally... I think everybody should feel an experience that somehow... You don't, again, need to go to maybe, you know, 100 countries to feel yourself global. I think, if you are good at something, in what you do, you can immediately feel yourself a global person, you feel like you're a global citizen (you can read what global citizen is, you know), then if you feel that, then you start trusting yourself. And then, when you trust yourself in the global environment, just talk with your expertise, talk with your skills and knowledge, and people will respect you, no matter where you are from, who you are... So, just in my opinion, trust with yourself and skills and experience. So obviously, language, maybe it will be less important in the long run, maybe some computer translations will come immediately. But today, as we speak today, obviously English or some common languages are important to know. I mean, for me, although I maybe make it sound like an easy to go to a country or to work remotely, language might be a barrier. In order not to have that barriers, in my opinion, if you want to be a global person, you need to really improve your language and then your organizational skills just to get the culture, understand the cultural differences, and then do what you're good at.

**Stacie Berdan:**

And that's an interesting point about languages. You speak English, and you speak Turkish... And do you speak a smattering of other languages?

**Levent Erkan:**

Ha-ha, you know, I wish I could, you know, this is really one of my lessons learned in life. I did know like four or five languages quite well, but I only know English and Turkish right now, to express myself. About the global feeling is that for instance, now, you're in the US, I'm in the UK, you know, talking quite openly, and in order to do that, we are also using technologies. So again, nowadays, to be a good global citizen, you have to also use the technology quite well, to again not have any barrier...

**Stacie Berdan:**

Right, that's good. So yes, language skills, communication skills, ability to negotiate... And you talked a lot about managing projects, specifically as one of your top skills. But clearly, the need to be able to use technology in any different... in all different types of ways, right, to enhance the business. And so much change every single day, every week, that constantly we need to learn new things. What else do you see on the horizon for those entering the workforce, you know – in the next couple of years? What do they need to know or to be aware of?

**Levent Erkan:**

Maybe I'll pick some words, from what I just said. First of all, technology – I mean, it's not just I worked for Microsoft, for some time... I always loved technology. And by the way, when I was working at Microsoft, I didn't have any, like a, like a coding background or anything like that. But they made me their Deputy General Manager, because I love technology, and I understood the best usage of technology, so that I was able to explain why we are using this technology to make our work better. And so that we are more efficient, you know, so that maybe we can help it for the people that can use technology and be better off even the disabled people and etc. So, technology, I think any regular people in the world should understand the need of technology and should be able to utilize and use all the technologies that they can use, you know, for their efficiency and everything purposes. I think technology is really key – you have to keep updating yourself, you know. And then, secondly... The technology, I would like to underline technology... So you should have a good feeling of what kind of technologies you should use and know. The second thing that I can tell you is that, maybe I'm too into this sustainable development goals, or you know, ESG, and everything like that, but when you look at the world, right now, the world is rapidly changing, and those issues will keep coming up. So if I'm working for a bank, I have to think about the movement of people in the world. If I'm working for a bank, I need to understand the environment. If I'm working for a government, I



have to understand all those 17 different goals. If I'm working for an NGO, I have to understand... So, the world issues, you have to understand, and then start dreaming, and then feel which ones fit you well, so that maybe you can focus. For instance, from my experience out of those 17, or how many different goals there are, I picked up a couple of them to myself, and I started to become one of the experts in those areas. So if I'm working for a private organization, or an NGO, or if I'm running my own business, or a government, you know, then people will come to me, and we will talk about those issues and find solutions. So, what I would give as an advice for the future is that those issues won't disappear, no matter what we do. So you have to really understand the issues, and focus with some solutions. If you can find some solutions for these issues, I mean, your future is really good. And, of course, adding the usage of technology on top of that.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's great, wonderful advice. Thanks so much. So technology for sure. And you're referring to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, there are 17 of them and can be found on the UN website, and all businesses all companies are needing to address these. So, you know, I like the way you expressed it, find one that you're passionate about and make a difference, right? Because you can do both you can actually work, make money and make a difference in the world. So... I love it. So, is there a piece of advice that you would like to go back and give your younger self?

**Levent Erkan:**

Younger self? Yes... I mean, I mean, I did my Masters in the US. Till that time, I did my undergrad and high school, and everything in Turkey, my home country, and I always studied in you know, good schools when you compare it, you know... And when I started doing my Master's I saw that my English wasn't good enough yet. And then I started a company, obviously a US company, US consulting company, and my English in my opinion wasn't like a native English. And although I was a hard worker, two things that I was mentioned – one is "lose this accent", you know... because I have a Turkish English accent... "Lose this accent". I mean, I was doing presentations to, you know, really top level of people, I was responsible for the Wall Street projects for three years and... "Levent, lose this accent!". You know, I wish I learned English better when I was younger. I mean, my first thing I would tell myself that. And second thing is that what I heard the most about myself to improve (which I'm really working hard on it), like the time management... being on time, you know, when you are working at you know, working environment are, you know, in an environment, if you are not on time, if you promise something to do, something on time, or if you are coming late to your meeting, you know, meetings and everything like that... I wish I started being on time earlier. I think I started being on time, maybe in the last three-four years, maybe because of the remote work. You know, you go to the meetings, and then if you're even late five minutes, then it's five minutes. But early. I mean, at my earlier career, I was like, late, which I don't want to remember too much. So, the language, and then the time management and you know, timing about all that.

**Stacie Berdan:**

No, that's great. Thank you for your frank and honest answer. That's wonderful. That's wonderful. And your English is great. Yes, yes, you have an accent, but your English and the speed at which you talk is wonderful. So, so good for you. But thank you for that. Well, as we, as we wrap up, is there anything else that you'd like to add to share? Maybe it's something you didn't touch on?

**Levent Erkan:**

What I would like to add, I don't think anybody is successful in the world. And I think success comes with different things. So what is success? You know, I sometimes asked myself - am I successful? Or being successful, you know... So I think everybody in their life cycle, you know, we have good days, bad days, we feel good about ourselves, bad about ourselves, you know, but the life moves on. So in order to feel yourself good, you do not need anybody, you do not need your manager to tell you that you are their good staff, or you're a very good employee... you don't need anybody to tell you what is good, or how good you are, I think you are the only person who should tell yourself that you are good or you have to improve... you know better. So, I think, self-motivation, self-



discipline, continuing, sustainable... to have self-motivation and discipline, with some positivity, I think are very key. Because, in our life, we will feel that we are, you know, failing a lot of issues. But if you stick into that, you will never, you know, stand up and continue. So your self-motivation is you; your self-discipline is you. So just keep moving forward. Obviously, you need to rest from time to time, don't forget your holidays, for sure. Do some thinking time. And then, you know, refresh, and then come back with some good self-motivation and discipline.

**Stacie Berdan:**

That's beautiful advice. Thank you. Thank you for that. And thank you so much for your time, Levent, for your time, for sharing your stories, your insights, your expertise... You're really good friend of GW and CIBER. So thank you for that. Really, really enjoyed talking with you.

**Levent Erkan:**

Same – it's really great to be with all of you. 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!