



Season 3, Episode 6 – Living a Global Life

Stacie Berdan

*International Careers Expert
(Podcast Host)*

Shirah Foy

*Assistant Professor of
Entrepreneurship, Strategy and Innovation
TBS Business School - Toulouse, France*

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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 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 Dr. Shirah Foy – Assistant Professor of Entrepreneurship, Strategy, and Innovation at TBS Business School in Toulouse, France. Shirah describes herself as an interdisciplinary social scientist, and entrepreneur, startup mentor, and, most of all, an encourager of the human spirit and individual potential. She has traveled the world, studying and working in more than 60 countries across five continents, studying and learning 12 different languages, with the primary goal of discovering how people see themselves in the world. Shirah and I met when she was an undergrad at Belmont University. Welcome, Shirah, it’s such a pleasure to have you with us.

Shirah Foy:

Thank you for the invitation. It’s a pleasure to be here.

Stacie Berdan:

Great. So you know, one of the objectives of this podcast is to provide a sense of the careers that are out there – more than just the titles and the job description. You are a professor, but what is it that you do right now?

Shirah Foy:

So, my actual title in French formally is a Professor... and the career name is called researcher-teacher, which is quite descriptive, because Professor can be a little bit vague. So, I would say I have about three primary activities. First of all, teaching about something between 120 to 150 hours in front of students each year. And there’s about 4.5 hours of prep time for each of these face to face hours. So that includes building curriculum, designing projects, and assessments. Second, I’m accompanying students, so whether it be in their master dissertations, or through the incubator, the entrepreneurship new business incubator in the university. And third, research, which I tend to mention last, because when I’m not teaching or accompanying students, pretty much every other hour is filled with thinking about interesting research questions, designing studies, collecting data, and then writing this up to submit it to scientific peer reviewed journals.

Stacie Berdan:

When we met as when you were an undergraduate student, you actually had more than 10 years of very interesting international travel. So, how did you get from just about when you graduated to where you are now? Must be a fascinating story?



Shirah Foy:

Yeah, there's a few twists and turns along the way. So, I'll take you briefly on the roller coaster with me. I think what provided me the real foundation to get going is that, you know, I had already done a high school exchange in Belgium for one year, immersion in French, which gave me an initial platform for a globally-oriented career, I would say. In my Bachelor program, I chose to go into the Honors Program, where I had the opportunity to create and defend my own major, which I called International Entrepreneurship, with a minor in a Russian language. During that time, I also had the privilege to conduct a research project for my Bachelor thesis. And I collected data in Russia for this thesis while I was interning at the US Consulate in St. Petersburg. So that was an internship with the US Department of State, which are... they're pretty competitive, but I had prepared to apply for that. And at that time, I was thinking I would go actually into a career in public diplomacy, targeting the State Department. During that internship, I would say, the internship and some of the circumstances, the realities of life and public diplomacy, I ended up deciding to go rather down a research path. And at this time, actually on a whim while I was in Finland, changing my Russian visa (so, you have to leave the country if you change from a business visa to a student visa, so I took the opportunity to go over to Finland, get that done at the US Consulate there), and during that time, I called up a business school locally. And, let's say, I emailed the program director, and I got a tour of the school, I discussed about... at this point it was strategy, I was interested in strategy... So, we had a talk about my motivation, my plan, and it was a really great exchange. I would say that that personal contact was also an important factor in what led to me getting accepted into a Master's degree program at Aalto University in Finland. So, that's a tip that I could suggest is to reach out to individuals and share individual... your individual motivation and plan. During that time, I had the opportunity to submit that bachelor thesis, if you remember, I did that bachelor thesis in Russia. So I was submitting that to some different academic conferences, got into a few, went to one in Canada. And I only was able to do that financially because I had asked for the support from Aalto where I was currently in Finland doing my Masters. So they actually financially supported me to go to this academic conference and present my bachelor research. What happened is, I showed up at the conference, pretty naively, loving the research, getting really excited about the topics but not having any idea about how an academic career works. So I was meeting people for fun, which I learned later was called networking. But it was a very genuine and authentic excitement to understand what other people were studying. And that actually led to getting an invitation to come to Switzerland and do a job talk for a PhD position – basically, a kind of interview where you present the research that you have done in the past, that you want to do in the future... I ended up getting that position in Switzerland. And after five years during my PhD there, I went on to what's called the academic job market during my postdoc, which is a postdoctoral research position. During this time, I applied to 15 different schools across Europe and Asia, including TBS, Toulouse Business School, where I am now. And you know, I applied to TBS, actually, on the very last day that the call for applications was open. So it's never too late until it's really too late. When I interviewed at TBS, I immediately felt culturally within the group that I would be at home here at the school. And so there's the kind of whirlwind trip to where I've been now here at TBS, since last year.

Stacie Berdan:

Wow, what a fabulous story. And what's so interesting about that... I mean, there's so much there that you shared that... just kind of going through the steps, paying attention, yes, networking, meeting people, but really figuring out what to do with all of it, too. I mean, so you clearly you always acted, you took steps, you took the next step, you asked people for help, you asked people for money and support, which is really important, I think, because students always think, well, I can't do that, because I have no money, so they don't even try. So ESG has been rising. It's a rising trend that we see out there, particularly in Europe. I know you do a lot of research – strategy, innovation, entrepreneurship. Do you see that actually taking place? And companies or new entrepreneurs, startups, thinking about ESG and what it means to a future business?

Shirah Foy:

Yes, absolutely. These are key themes that especially in the last two to three years, I've seen student ventures – whether they be classroom exercises, or real life ventures – being geared more and more to touching on this ESG element from the very beginning, from the very initial blueprint and framework of the business. We also see a lot of



demand from companies who are for the first time putting in place Chief Sustainability Officers, for example, and wanting to know, well, hey, okay, so we all know that this is an important role, this is an important theme... But now we have a person – what exactly are they going to do? So in the field of entrepreneurship, and organization studies more broadly, the past few years have really been focused on defining what are grand challenges. And we've seen this aggregate definition come to be that these are really systemic problems that require solutions that are high impact, that involve multiple stakeholders that are going to span different parts of society. So the public sector, the state, the private, private business, even religious sectors. And also, another factor is that grand challenges require a huge amount of resources to be mobilized in order to implement the type of solutions that are going to work. So, we've been moving from this few years of really trying to identify and break down what are the grand challenges and what characterizes these, and now we're moving more into a space where, in terms of research, we're focused on the details of, well, how can we best implement solutions to grand challenges, really in detail, so who exactly is involved and in what capacity – whether it'd be corporations, the state, individual entrepreneurs, communities, small businesses and schools, as well as those individual employees within each company. In terms of how this ties in with my research – it's really in this vein that together with colleagues, I've looked first at the idea of hybrid organizing. So that means a venture that has both a financial and a social or environmental mission, it's really a hybrid of the typical financial mission of a company paired with social or environmental mission. So, for example, we're looking at how a celebrity entrepreneur can leverage his fame – so, his media attention, for example, that comes because of his world records, and how he can really leverage these in order to support his foundation, which is dedicated to promoting the use of clean technology solutions. And then in turn, this important social cause and ecological cause of the foundation maintains his personal brand. We're talking about positive reinforcing mechanisms and virtuous cycles that really promote simultaneously good in the world as well as a financial mission as well.

Stacie Berdan:

That's really interesting. You've done a great job explaining it – thank you for that – when it comes to research and application within companies. But for students still studying now, do you have a tip or two – how can they actually begin to think about this and weave this into their, kind of, future thinking and application as they enter the workforce?

Shirah Foy:

Yeah, I think that there are a lot of practical case studies, there are currently webinars that are being hosted by multiple corporates who want to actually talk about what are the different roles that you can play in an organization that touch on sustainability. So we see sustainability as actually a transversal discipline in the sense that whether you're in finance, whether you are in human resources, or accounting, there are best practices of sustainability, that you're going to find in there. And I think that these are things that professors are updating their curriculums with, some have already in the past, and others are beginning to because these are now, let's say, trickling down sometimes into the classroom. We have bottom-up initiatives, and we have trickling-down initiatives. So the interaction between the business world and the classroom is a kind of two-way directional type of relationship. And so, I think that for students being able to really ask about this, when you go into an internship, when you have guest speakers in your classes, ask, particularly what does sustainability look like in your organization? What are very specific detailed actions that you're taking in the company to promote sustainability?

Stacie Berdan:

That's great, great advice. Great advice. I imagine that in your travels all over, I assume that there's a recognition for change when you go to so many different countries, and you see the variety and the disparity in economics and lifestyles, yet the joy and the environmentally and sustainable living that is done in some places versus others must inspire and educate or inform your path on that. Is that true?



Shirah Foy:

Yeah. And, you know, in some sense, there's different levels, perhaps of sustainability or lenses through which one can look at this. I think about sustainability as, well, what does it mean at the core to be able to sustain life or to sustain livelihood over time. So, when I'm spending time in places that are resource deprived, or where resources are scarce, sustainability in the sense that we think about it in the West is oftentimes almost a frivolous bonus, because people here are just trying to survive. And so, sustainability can look different. It means okay, I'm going to buy seeds that are going to pop up every year and not just once per year. So we get really down into the details when you're living in a place that has scheduled power outages, because simply your neighborhood is not going to get power at that time. Sustainability in terms of saving up energy in batteries or in generators has a little bit of a different importance. So there's relative differences in the mode of sustainability and how important it is to someone's survival. And so I think that is really something that has informed my understanding of what sustainability means across the globe.

Stacie Berdan:

And that's great, great Shirah, because I think it also is a great illustration of how the global experience – let's just say it that way – whether it's traveling, whether it's studying, whatever it is, really does help a person, appreciate and understand the huge variety of responses or solutions to problems that exist for companies. Whether in one geography here or another, and culturally, so there's so many things I think this global, your global experience, and anyone's broad global experience can play in their future careers. So Shirah, you have traveled all over the world, 60 countries, studying and learning 12 languages, you speak five now pretty fluently, you must get asked the question a lot. What is your favorite place? How do you answer that question?

Shirah Foy:

Yeah, I think it's one of the... it's one of the worst questions that people ask me, because it's like, well, which one of your children do you love more? Like, wait... I've lived, I've lived full lives in many of these places, with entire networks of friends and family at school and church. So, it's like, which life have I lived as my favorite? And that's an almost impossible question, because the lessons I've learned in each place have been invaluable and so different. And living in Finland, where the whole winter was like, minus 25 degrees Celsius, with total darkness, I learned a lot, even though it wasn't always comfortable. But it was very meaningful. At the same time, living in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Nepal, teaching English there, eating white rice three times a day with a few lentils, or a carrot once in a while, wasn't really the most comfortable, always. But it was an incredibly meaningful experience in terms of community life, and living something totally outside my comfort zone that I learned much more, I think, from them than I was able to teach in English. So...

Stacie Berdan:

That's a beautiful way to put it. And we're going to start wrapping up. But is there a piece of advice you wish you had been given? Or something that you wish you would have told your younger self?

Shirah Foy:

Yeah, you know, I think when I was going through my Bachelor degree, especially, I, as a young person with a lot of ambition and expectations for myself, headed out into the world, I found myself oscillating between two different mindsets. So, on one hand, a kind of self-deprecation if I wasn't living up to the standards that I expected in terms of performance, or mostly school. And, on the other hand, when I succeeded in writing that paper, or getting the grant or getting the scholarship or the study-abroad place, then it would oscillate sometimes to this space of pride, which, if you are going to walk around with a lot of pride, one crack in your public image, or self-image is really devastating. And so, over the years, thankfully, I was able to work towards integrating both of these. Let's say, if you think of them as a teeter-totter, with pride on one side, and self-deprecation on the other, really getting the teeter-totter to be somehow in balance to what I would call confident humility, to be able to have enough confidence to actually go out in the world and do something, what we call self-efficacy and entrepreneurship, but also being humble enough to keep our eyes open, to also keep our... you know, being okay with being wrong and



understanding that we will be wrong sometimes, and how to assess the risk, and hopefully make sure we don't get it too wrong, when it really matters. So I think that's been... that's one piece of advice I would give to my younger self too – that this is normal, this oscillation between these two extremes is somewhat normal at that stage that I was, and that it is going to get better, but that I do need to work at integrating those two.

Stacie Berdan:

Well, it's been great having you. One last question, before we go: Is there anything else that you want to share or add, that you feel that you want to share with listeners?

Shirah Foy:

Yeah, you know, I'm struck by the fact that there are so many different ways that we can live. So your sense of normal is really shaped largely by the environment you were raised in. And it's through looking at other ways of doing things that you might find new options for yourself. And these could really lead to quite rich lifestyle changes. And you don't even need to shift your value set. You can keep the same set of values that you have today that... to which maybe you feel very... they are very compelling... I mean, you feel very attached to them. But by going out and adopting more of a global mindset, you're going to see your same values operationalized or put into action differently in different places. So you might need to practice suspending judgment for a bit – that means you know, watching questioning until you really have enough understanding to make an informed judgment on any type of, you know...do I need a soup bowl, do I need chopsticks, like in Asia...? And it was really this question, which on one level is... is kind of funny – that I'm having an identity crisis over what, what to eat for breakfast, but at the same time, it's something that is symbolically much deeper this decision of what is my culture at home, after I've seen all the options.

Stacie Berdan:

That's wonderful. Great. And you can actually integrate them all, can't you?

Shirah Foy:

Absolutely. Picking and choosing...

Stacie Berdan:

Absolutely. That's wonderful. Well, thank you so much Shirah, for your time today. This has been terrific. I really appreciate your taking the time and it's been great to catch up.

Shirah Foy:

Thank you, 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!