



Season 7: Navigating a Global Career Amidst Emerging Technologies Episode 5

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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 seven, we focus on the intersection of technology and globalization across all types of industries and functions. What aspects of tech do we all need to understand to adapt and thrive in the workplace? What types of global tech jobs are out there? And what skills are needed to compete? Join us as we hear from seasoned executives who will help us navigate global careers and emerging technologies around the world. Today's guest is Anna Berg Åsberg, Vice President of Research and Development IT for AstraZeneca, where she has built a career for almost 20 years. Anna is an engineer with a vision to use technology to transform the speed and quality of discovery and delivery of medicine to patients, and she leads a global team of hundreds of people across three continents who work to optimize scientists' daily lives through tech. Anna is Swedish, and her international career has taken her to Germany, France, and now the US for the second time. She's also a board member for the Swedish American Chamber of Commerce. Welcome, Anna. It's wonderful to have you with us.

Anna Berg Åsberg:

Thank you so much for having me.

Stacie Berdan:

Yeah. So, one of our objectives of the podcast is to provide a sense of the careers that are out there. You've had an amazing career so far. Can you tell us what you do?

Anna Berg Åsberg:

Yes. So, right now, I would say I have the best job in the world. So, I work at AstraZeneca and I equip our researchers in R&D with technology to help them discover and develop new medicines for patients. And, as I said, it is a biopharmaceutical company, and the ambition is to eliminate cancer as a cause of death and to protect the lives of patients suffering with chronic disease, such as heart failures, obesity, and lung disease. So, you can imagine it's incredibly exciting to really help the researchers move from idea to medicines in the patient's hand much faster with technology. And just to explain a little bit what we do, it's thinking about how to leverage technology, especially generative AI as our digital coworkers, so helping the researchers and all employees to create more value every day, helping them to bring the medicines to the patients.



Stacie Berdan:

That is a great career. So that's what you're doing now. That's really neat, and it involves a lot of tech in pharmaceutical... What role does tech play in speeding up the discovery of new medicines?

Anna Berg Åsberg:

Today, it's at the heart of speeding up discovery and development of medicines in all pharma. And one of the pivotal moments was actually during COVID, where everyone had to accelerate the processes and work differently. But a couple of examples what we do: so, in the very beginning of the research process, you need to really understand, sift through a lot of large amount of data, read a lot of papers, create new insights to hunt the new medicines... That's really where AI can come in and help them select the right targets. Because it's something technology is good at – it's sifting through a lot of information and drawing out the golden nuggets from it. Just like you use Google to watch Netflix and get recommendations, we use Knowledge Graph, and we use generative AI to help the researchers very quickly, in minutes, sift through massive amount of text, massive amount of data of our previous experiments or previous publications of information out there. And then they need to focus their knowledge and their manual time on really validating what is it they gonna take forward of the suggestions. It's really cool. So that is one example of how it is. And another one is actually... researchers than taking you from idea to medicines, they need to do a lot of vet lab experiments, so they go in and experiment in the vet lab. And with AI predictions, you can actually help them to land to more right molecule from the very start. It means that they have to do less number of experiments in that lab environment, which is a great contribution to better environment for sustainability. And because we consume less material and time into labs, etc. Then you can get quicker to the right solution. So, technology is really at the heart of drug discovery capabilities.

Stacie Berdan:

Wow. So tell me, the people that are doing the initial, the first example you gave of sifting through all of the data – are they software engineer types, are they people with medical backgrounds? What type of people are doing that kind of a job?

Anna Berg Åsberg:

The background is normally true scientists, so they are a chemistry background, medicine background, or various. So, they do research, they understand the disease, they understand the chemistry and biology behind it. But, I would say that everyone who goes to university learns to program, to handle data, etc. So, they do have some fair knowledge of how to create some code and really help them with that. They're more focused on the science than technology.

Stacie Berdan:

So, it's a really good example of human plus AI, right. That is so cool. Yeah. So earlier in your career, you went from telecommunications, to manufacturing, to pharmaceuticals... What made you decide to do the move?

Anna Berg Åsberg:

So, they all had a common thread – I always worked on how we can use technology to actually do things differently and advance how we do it – do it faster, more insightful, more right first time... and do it in a different way, and enable growth really. And, the very first job I had was at Ericsson, when I did an IT strategy for the manufacturing of a very advanced technology. I really liked how technology can create a completely different shift and work very, very differently. That's also what brought me to manufacturing. And then, I really felt that I wanted to do something different. And I heard about AstraZeneca and I wanted to move there, which I did, and one of the reasons is I find biopharmaceutical industry meaningful, because we don't create phones or things that are easy to consume; we really, really contribute to the life of people. And also the whole company itself is very different from the other companies I've ever been exposed to in that we have 50% female representation on the senior technology roles in



AstraZeneca. And I hadn't come across that in others, so I felt very much at home. It's a very inclusive environment. But I would say, bottom line, it is about the bigger purpose to work for a company that does something you really believe in. We all have someone we know, friend, family, maybe ourselves they've had either cancer, a heart disease, or lung disease, or diabetes, or rare disease, and it feels very, very good working on bringing solutions to those people in the world so they get more time with their loved ones.

Stacie Berdan:

That's a beautiful thing. That's wonderful. That's wonderful. And I love the fact that more than 50% at the senior level are women. What's it like being a woman in those fields in general?

Anna Berg Åsberg:

So, when I started working from the very beginning, I must say I was one of the few women in my field. And even at university, it was about 20% female representation at the Technology Institute I started out. I never saw it as a hinder. It felt so much easier once I could see myself, I had actually role models – females that actually made a career I wanted to do – that was a big relief. And also it was better to... it felt so much better to work in an environment where I wasn't always the one that stood out but actually having others around the table that looked like me, had similar situation as me, and maybe had similar background as me. I never missed it when I didn't have it but it felt so much better when I had it around the table, and I felt more secure when I had it around the table. And the most is that having a role model, seeing that others can do it – that look and feel like yourself – that actually make me feel that yes, I can do it. And I think that's really important, no matter what kind of diversity you're looking at to see that you're not the only one trying to make it, that others have done it before, others that paved the way for you. I think that's really, really important. I'm very energized by having a very inclusive environment that is very diverse, not only female and male but in other aspects too, but most importantly, it is very inclusive.

Stacie Berdan:

So important, that's great. You're in a job where you can make a difference in people's lives. And you're working at a wonderful company that has an inclusive environment. That's terrific. What do you think, Anna, a career in global tech looks like today?

Anna Berg Åsberg:

Tech never stands still. We talked about this earlier today that we need to make sure that every single member of the team remembers to always put a little bit of time aside for learning. The career means constantly, constantly evolving; and it feels like it's moving faster and faster every year. I think that successful leaders in tech will understand the challenge or opportunity to trying to solve with a tech... So it's not only about the tech, it's about putting yourself into the shoes of the ones that have the problem you're trying to solve, and really understand the problem; then go for the technical solution, then absolutely stay on top of what's possible, stay on top of the techs. So, you can actually solve the problem with tech in a way that you solve the real problem, with the latest tech, with the latest opportunities. But I think learning both every day about what tech can do, but also learning about the industry you work in, the problems you're trying to solve, to really understand what you're trying to solve, it's so important. And both are moving so fast these days.

Stacie Berdan:

So that sounds like no matter what industry you're in, tech matters. And, as you just said, learning your own industry, and, I guess, how tech solutions actually can bring you to a better problem solving end result. So turning to your global career, you're on your second assignment in the US and you've lived and worked in France and Germany, as well as Sweden, just talk to us about it. What's it like?



Anna Berg Åsberg:

Yeah, I actually lived in Spain as well.

Stacie Berdan:

Ah, Spain too!

Anna Berg Åsberg:

And Switzerland... The first time I lived abroad, it was extremely tough, because you're used to a culture, you're used to a language, used to one way of doing it... And I landed actually in Switzerland that very first time. It was during high school, I did an exchange student year. And it was extremely tough to understand that everything was just... everything looked and felt the same but it was different. It was only when I realized I can't filter everything through how I learned it in Sweden, I needed to shift my perspective and understand how they are perceiving the world and learn how they think, and then I can flip between the two sides – that's when I started to really feel home. Later in career, it's the same thing – that when you move country, it's kind of the same. Because you've been working with those countries in global roles, but when you really have to work in a different work environment, there's so many nuances that pop up that you haven't thought about. And you really need to make an effort to try to understand that perspective, and the local culture, and the local ways of thinking, in order to create a mix that works for you. And also make sure that they understand what you're trying to make or how you try to collaborate with different people in office. But honestly, I think that it helps you with a gift of actually shifting between different cultures or see a different perspective, understand how it would resonate with different cultures. And most of us are working with some other cultures or geographies in our jobs, even if we don't work in other countries. And I think that learning, which you can do by moving to another country, or being in a country only as active learning about trying to see the other perspective, is a muscle you really exercise when you move country. And it's so helpful, as our teams are... our customers are normally global. So it's really, really a useful thing to learn. It's been really, really hard, but it's been really, really good to learn.

Stacie Berdan:

That sounds wonderful. Yes, it's really kind of... I like to say, your head is forever screwed on differently, right. You see things differently from a different perspective. And coming to grips with that sounds like... yeah... so, on the ground, in a job, and carries through to working on your global teams, as you mentioned. So all of us need it today. But how about the personal challenges? So you've got a family, three kids, you've moved them to lots of places. How do you manage?

Anna Berg Åsberg:

It's not the easiest, but I think also, this is the greatest gift I can give to my children, even if they don't appreciate it in the moment. I think when we moved to the US the very first time, I had three children; there were the two of us – me and my husband – and three children. So it wasn't enough of us grownups. You know, you move to a new country and you don't have any relatives that can help you. And we had three kids that needed to start the first class in a new school on the same day. And it wasn't just enough of us, me and my husband, to go with all three. So one of them, we had to put on the bus and say good luck, here are some post-its, post-it notes – with this one you can show if they have to call us, this is the one you can show if you need to do that, etc., etc. And we are hoping it's gonna go well. My kids weren't very impressed that first day, but a couple of years later, they say it's the best thing that ever can happen for them, to move country. It was the hardest they ever experienced but we were there for them. They learned that it can feel like you are... you don't understand a word, what anyone is saying in school, you don't know where to go, you don't understand anything... But you learn to work it through. And you learn that it becomes better, you make friends, you learn the language, etc. And overcome hard situations as a young child with a supporting environment, because they always had us at home and we were helping them and supporting them, that it really learned them that nothing is impossible. So even though it's hard, I think it's the greatest gift you



can give to your children, but you need to work quite hard to make it work, at the same time as you move job and you move to another country; you will normally have to work far more than you normally would do. So it's a little bit challenging time for anyone moving country, but it's for the greater good in the end.

Stacie Berdan:

Clearly very challenging. What advice do you have for listeners as they seek to stand out, you know, in their field and pursue an international assignment?

Anna Berg Åsberg:

First of all, you need to decide that you want to do it. And then you need to talk, you need to seek opportunities. But what's even more important is if you have a partner, or if you have children, you probably need to talk to them too. So you can almost warm them up to if we get an offer, we can move to decision very quickly. So both creating opportunities and seeking opportunities by moving to maybe a company or a faculty that offer that global experience, and then articulating with your superiors and other people you meet that this is something you would like to do, as well as warming up the family, the people close to you, that this may happen. And think through a couple of scenarios, you can decide very quickly on the spot when you get a question. And then I think also making sure that you show, you know, inclusivity. So trying to... maybe you can't get an international assignment in near term, make sure you can work with a global environment and really try to learn about the global environment, to show interest for the area. And really create the opportunities yourself and be flexible. You may want to do France, but you end up in Italy, that's fine. You maybe want to do China, but you end up in US, it's fine too. Just be a little bit flexible. And yes, get going and go with what you get and try to make the best out of it.

Stacie Berdan:

I'm gonna ask another piece of advice. So you've described a full-on career, very busy, moving around family, managing that – how do you find the time? And how do you approach networking and relationship building on a global scale?

Anna Berg Åsberg:

I'm quite social. I will never forget that very first week in the house when I moved to US. We moved between Christmas and New Year, the very first time we moved as a family. And we were in the big empty house and New Year's Eve approached, and we didn't have a single friend in the new country. We didn't have a single friend in the neighborhood, of course, but not in the whole country. And we couldn't be with family and he felt so lonely. It was great, because it was great family bonding, but it was lonely; and then I decided I need to create a network. So I took every opportunity. I was working of course full time, so creating network through work, but I also tried to create network through my children's friends, parents or contacting a Swedish women association to build network there. So try to reach out and find the small spots... And tonight, for example, I signed up to go and support sports – it's an event at a school here in the US for sports parents. I didn't have a single soul, but me and my husband, we're gonna go because we can make some friends and create a little bit of network. And I think you need to throw yourself out there. And then the real friends, of course, will stay on, so creating them and nurture them, etc. But you just need to get out and start building, because starting from scratch is scary, but also a great opportunity. Because staying, creating new friends (and you always have the old ones alive and investing time of keeping the old networks alive is always very important) but building new ones can be tough, but it's really, really rewarding when you get it going.

Stacie Berdan:

You mentioned your spouse are actually there. So having them go around with you to all these places too – how do you manage that?



Anna Berg Åsberg:

Oh, it's been a little bit complicated. But we actually promised each other back in the university, we met in college... And when we started working, we made a deal that we both wanted to work international. And we said we take every second time – so, the very first international assignment we've earned was his. And I told my manager that I'm going to move to Madrid and I can go and find another job. Or, if we have a job in Madrid, I would be very happy to do whatever job that's available in Madrid. So he gave me a job in Madrid to do mergers and acquisitions. And I went with my husband. And the next time, my husband went with me. And it took him six months to get his work permit so he was home with the children for six months, which the children loved, and then he found a local job. So it's been a little bit complicated, it hasn't been straightforward all the time. But because we made that commitment to each other that we would allow each other to take turns and actually try it and the other one would do the back-seat situation, it always worked out really, really well.

Stacie Berdan:

Sounds like yes, commitment and good communication, right? Because you have to be... Especially, throw in all of those additional stressors, and work, and travel. That's awesome. That is awesome. So, Anna, you're a global thinker. Not everybody understands the value of having a global mindset. What do you tell listeners who think that globalization or internationalization don't really affect their careers?

Anna Berg Åsberg:

So, working globally is a huge benefit. I love learning from different cultures, and I started when I was an exchange student, as I told you about, in high school. And it really... different cultures, different ways of thinking make our work so much richer. You know that tech never stays the same, so if your employer might do a business deal with a company in another country, another customer base, it's really a gift to have the experience in yourself and in the organization to be able to understand a little bit more, having different culture, different mindset around it. For example, when we have a problem or a challenge in my leadership team or receive a problem in the business – something is moving very quick, like generative AI, for example – we quickly make sure that we go around the table and listens to the people from India, from China, from US, from the different parts of US, from Europe, different parts of Europe, and they all give their perspective. And you know what, we all see it differently because it has moved different quickly in their countries, in their network... But think about, when they reach back into their network, and then bring it back to the LT – what a knowledge base we have in a heartbeat. And that is really a gift because now you can have so much more insightful decision that you need to pay a company to do research around the globe for a month or two to understand how it's moving, but in a day or two, you can do it through your team if you have a true multi-cultural multi-geography team at your hand.

Stacie Berdan:

Oh, I just love it. I would love to sit around that table and listen to all those different perspectives. Is there a piece of advice, Anna, you'd like to go back and give your younger self?

Anna Berg Åsberg:

Yeah, to always be myself, and never be giving excuses for being myself. Authenticity is so important, showing up as true yourself, but also show others to remind them to be authentic. And I think, early on in my career, when I tried to... when I was the only woman I sometimes tried to hide. You know, I had small children at home and all my colleagues were male with stay-at-home wives. I tried to hide the fact that I sometimes, well, very often, had to go a bit earlier, or the kids were ill or something. I tried to work around it and worked doubly hard, so they wouldn't see it. I think I would be recommending myself, younger self, to be more authentic and very... you know, telling them, hey, I'm going to work double as hard, but I do have a sick child, and I need to do this and this, and showing others it's okay to do that. And I think that would be allowing more people to support each other. And everyone has



something going on, and if you bring your whole self to work, it becomes a bit easier for everyone to navigate. And you don't need to put the energy of trying to hide or like polish the surface or try to be like everyone else. So, authenticity, absolutely. I would say, yes, always bring your whole self to work

Stacie Berdan:

Beautiful advice. That's great. This has been a wonderful conversation, Anna, I've really enjoyed every bit of it. And before we wrap up, I'd like to ask, is there anything else you want to add, maybe something we didn't touch on, to share with our listeners?

Anna Berg Åsberg:

Yeah, I think it's important that every time we have come somewhere in our career, maybe you're a senior at university, or maybe you're like me, many years into a career, it's always important to look around and see – is there someone that needs my advice, or my help; is there somewhere I can give back. And maybe I have very little time because maybe have three small children or something, but it's only something you can do. It's always someone you can help and make them a little bit stronger so they can navigate a little bit easier. And I think that is important to put, even if it's a tiny, tiny piece of... maybe 30 minutes a month that you're mentoring someone, or it's maybe a little bit more or less, I don't know. But think about what you can do for others, to help others through their career.

Stacie Berdan:

What a wonderful piece of advice, what a wonderful way to end a terrific interview. Thank you so much, Anna, for your time today. This has been great.

Anna Berg Åsberg:

And thank you 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!