Kristin Gecan (00:01):
Welcome to With Intent, a podcast from IIT Institute of Design about how design permeates our world, whether we call it design or not. I’m Kristin Gecan. This month, I talk to Tope Sadiku. Tope is the global head of employee digital experience at the Kraft Heinz company. So what does that mean? She describes herself as a corporate doctor. Her patients are Kraft employees and her medicine is technology.

In this conversation, we consider the employee experience today and how technology can enhance it. Here’s Tope starting us off with how she became a corporate doctor.

Tope Sadiku (00:48):
I hope that I don’t romanticize this story because I think when you look at anything in retrospect you’re able to make sense of it, whereas maybe in the moment, it doesn’t make sense. But if I was to look in retrospect and try and make sense of my life today, I started my career in finance. I was probably in finance for almost like 10 years. I became a chartered management accountant, so I understood how organizations made money. Actually, I recommend that as a good way for most people to start their careers, or even if not start, delve into finance because whether you’re self-employed, you work for big organization, or you maybe want to start your own company, you need to know how money works and that was really what I learned.

And then I began to realize, "Well, hang on, if it makes so much sense, if it's something that you can just learn, why isn’t everybody like rich? Why isn't everybody rich? And why do organizations fail?" It doesn't make sense because this is something you can be taught. And if it's something that obvious, I just did on some way, saying companies failed. I'm being silly and provocative, but you know, on [inaudible 00:01:43] you can say, "Well, why then isn't everybody rich?" And then I began to look at it more and I realized, "Okay, well, there's a lot of people in this and you can't really control people." And a lot of economic models say like, "Humans are rational." But the reality is just, it wasn't really what I saw. And if you think about supply and demand, well, "Hang on, how come it doesn't always work like that? And why don’t people just do what makes like financial sense?" Like, "This product makes sense? Why aren't people just buying it if there's a gap for it." Right?

Something curious about people and like why, and like, to what degree are humans rational? When are we irrational? And then I read this book called Nudge by Thaler and Sunstein, it's a really old book, but I absolutely loved it. And I remember I was on the tube in London, reading this book on the way to... It took me about maybe a week or so to read it. And I was jumping up and down on the tube in London, so excited because I thought, "Oh, hang on. This all makes sense because humans are irrational and we act emotionally and we’re kind of predictably irrational." Right?

And I got more interested in like people and how you could encourage people to do the right thing without necessarily giving a lot of... How do you architect choice? You know, this concept of libertarian paternalism. That was the first time I was introduced to that concept and they were talking about it in the sense of healthcare and how you encourage patients to take care of their health, or from the government and how you encourage people to invest in their pension and how you can make things automatic, easy.
So then I started to combine finance and psychology and I started to look at the psychology of investments and why we invest in things that we invest in and why we sell when things crash and why we invest when things are high and why we don't necessarily feel brave enough to do it in the reverse. And then I moved to Croatian and then I started to get more interested in, "Okay, well, how does technology play into all of this?" Because you've got this way of making money, but you understand how people work and sure your technology can be used as the mechanism to kind of eliminate human error and gain global scale. You don't really need to know how tech works, you need to be like a critical thinker. And actually, if we invest so much in technology, does it actually add value to the end user's life? Surely that is the purpose of what we're trying to do.

I'll never forget, I was in business school. I went to Rotterdam and I took a Uber from the train station to my school, it was like an hour. And my Uber driver was telling me about how the internet was created and it was created by looking at ants and how ants transfer information with their antenna. And that was how the, well, not the internet, but wifi, was conceptualized. And I remember thinking, "Okay, well, the answer to the questions in the world must exist in the world already. And all we have to do is look at how nature works and that would give us inspiration about how people and technology can work as well."

Kristin Gecan (04:32):
It really strikes me. I have a six year old and he, alternately on any given day, will tell me he wants to be a scientist and then he wants to be an artist and then he wants to be a scientist. And so we'll go back and forth, which is fantastic, I think. And it's also, I think probably why you and other curious people often do end up working at least tangentially with design in some ways, because it brings all these ways of knowing together. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about when you say that you're interested in democratizing technology to enable people to achieve the promise of work and life. So there's two chunks of that that I really want to tease out with you. And one is the democratizing technology piece and the other is the promise work and life.

And I'm going to start with the end of it because it's a values question, it's a balance question, it's a question of... Employees don't all necessarily want the same things so not only does that probably make your job a challenge, right? But it's also a question for me of like, "Why, you know, now in the 21st century, when we've seen the importance of work life balance, is it still something we struggle to preserve? And why do we still have the 40 hour work week?" And how do you think about these things in your current role and how do you decide whether you're doing a good job?

Tope Sadiku (06:09):
It's a good point. So let's talk about this idea of achieving the promise of work slash life. And I say work, because I work in an organization where I care about employees, but then I actually think life, because I don't really see a differentiation between this concept of work life balance doesn't mean anything to me. And I look it as a life balance and I want to be fulfilled in everything I do. And I want everything to work towards the bigger goal of why Tope exists and why am I here? And what's like my purpose on this planet, in this human experience? And I look at people and I think, "Well, everybody wants to achieve their purpose." And I agree that it's
not the same for everybody, I get that. In fact, I say my purpose on this planet now is to enable people to be happier and healthier. And I really believe that I do that in everything I do.

In the work I do in Kraft Heinz, I look at an employee's day and I say, "Okay, how do I like eliminate just waste or, like, 'yuck work'"? Because I want to give people time back to just feel creative and inspired. I actually want to give people time back so they can go outside, get the fresh air on their skin and breathe and just get excited. And who knows what you create? Maybe you create the next ketchup, who knows? Maybe you create the next product, who knows? Maybe you fix a problem that you just haven't had the mental capacity to give enough time to, who knows? But I feel like everyone deserves that on basic human level, everybody deserves that time just to think, to breathe, to sit and to wonder.

So that's my aspiration and I am a believer that if I'm able to eliminate this like yuck work this time when we're not... If we can do the things that we used to do in maybe cool new novel ways maybe, and also save a bit of time on it. I'm just curious to see what people create at the end. So how do I measure success? I can do that on a very tangible level and I can say, "Okay, this activity took this amount of time. Now it takes this amount of time." I can say, "Okay, I've been able to eliminate waste in this activity." Or, "I've been able to give this team..." I don't know, maybe they were spending this amount of money to deliver this activity and actually we've reduced the cost because we've rationalized what they use.

The hard part is where does that thing get reinvested into, right? Because I'm not saying give it to me, I'm actually not even saying about like the displacement of jobs in any kind of way. I want people to be able to reinvest that time elsewhere. So I say that my mantra, my objective is to give our employees time back to be more productive so that they can be creative and inspired. But then I say within that creative and inspired, it's like bounded creativity.

I like this idea of frugal innovation in the sense that I say, "I want you to be creative, but I'm giving you like an easel, I'm giving you like a canvas and I'm giving you some paint and paint something. I have an art gallery, I only have walls. So whatever you make has to be able to be hung on my wall, but I don't care if you want to make a painting of your dog, if something really abstract, whatever you want to paint is your own prerogative. And however long you want it to take however, whatever size you want it to be, it's really up to you, but I want to see a painting."

And at least that for me, it creates those boundaries for creativity. And I guess I can measure success in the productivity side and then I can measure success in the creativity side, because is my gallery full of paintings on the wall? And are they paintings? And it's not really up to me if I like them or not, but does it inspire something else within others? Even if it's not always just me. That's a bit harder to measure, but at least I can theoretically conceptualize what that could look like.

Kristin Gecan (09:50):

I like what you're saying about boundaries to creativity. I mean, I think creative people talk a lot about the importance of constraints, right? In order to be creative, sometimes being given a blank canvas is the most challenging thing, right? I also think what I'm hearing you say is that you're a creativity enabler, right? You're setting up the conditions for creativity.

I wonder how you think about this question that we were addressing in the Latham talk, which is why are we making this and how sort of social responsibility is embedded in that question? And
I think that the answer probably is somewhat attached to what you were just describing of, "Why are we making this at this moment in time?" But I also wonder how you think of your sense of responsibility. You're employed by Kraft Heinz, but it sounds a lot like you're also thinking about your responsibility to the employees of Kraft Heinz. So maybe you could speak to that a bit.

Tope Sadiku (10:52):

Sure. A lot of things have happened in the last few days that have just made me maybe reflect. Yesterday was earth day and for whatever reason, this earth day I was like, "Is this every year, because why does it feel different this year?" It felt so different. And on top of that, I listened to this Guy Raz, How I Built This Podcast. And he interviewed a guy who was the founder and CEO of a company called American Giant. Now, I'm not familiar with American Giant, I'm kind of like quite new to America. But it's an organization where they make these sweatshirts. What he was talking about was that, and maybe at least what I took, was that for a product to be quality, you can actually create a good quality product that is really bad for the world and like bad for people, but it tastes great and it will last forever. And that's what we used to deem good quality, but now good quality is like, "What is its wider impact on the environment?"

It's not always like the cheapest, most robust product that tastes delicious. It's bigger than just cost and taste. It's like, "What is the lasting impact on the world? Like beyond just the initial consumption of whatever you're trying to create." And I think, "Okay, I work for a food manufacturing organization. We can think of like products that we make." But then I can even think about like, "How do my employees consume new technology?" Like, "What is the impact on their lives there?" Because we're looking at like ESG and while that's its own bigger agenda within Kraft Heinz, I remember yesterday for Earth Day, our CEO said, "But this is all of your responsibility." And I thought, "Oh yeah, it is."

When I think about encouraging people to meet smarter, actually it is my responsibility to think about the wide impact of that. Okay, I can encourage people how to have smart remote meetings, but really, what is the bigger impact of that? Because look, we may actually end up producing travel costs if we ever go back to whatever the world was, but once travel opens up again, do we actually need to travel? Can we actually deliver what we were trying to deliver through this democratization of technology? To put tech into the hands of everybody and showing people ways to achieve objectives in smart, new, novel ways. And those types of things excite me because it's like, "Okay, I can teach you how to have a smart remote meeting, but what is the longer world impact of that?"

I was having a conversation friend of mine, he's the director of AI at Google. And he's talking to me about some of the work that Google are doing. And I said to him, "But you know, when you know all of this information, do you not feel you have this like moral obligation to make people happier and healthier on this planet?" And we laughed and we joked and I thought, "Well, that's the same with me when the more I study and the more I know, and the more I experiment and test around how people interact with tech. It's like my moral obligation to kind of encourage people to be happier and healthier in their day through what I know."

So I try and bring everything I know into a development. So for example, when everybody moved to be remote, we rolled out Microsoft teams. We did a huge rollout to all of our, we have 40,000 employees. And we split 50, 50 between knowledge workers and frontline workers. And we rolled out teams to all of our knowledge workers. And actually we're now exploring what it
looks like to roll out to our frontline workers in their every day. But then for me, it was more than just a technical deployment. It was an opportunity to kind of try and connect people. And how do we give people time to relax, even, to stop stressing, to feel like they have to be too formal. How do we connect people and bring them closer together? I'm trying to layer in everything that I know into everything that I do without it being too bombarding. I can't deny certain things that I know, once I've been taught, anyway.

Tope Sadiku (14:41):

(music)

Kristin Gecan (14:46):

Can you speak to that idea of the values that you're finding among employees and how you're greeting those, how you're trying to satisfy those?

Tope Sadiku (14:57):

I wouldn't say I'm just learning this, but I'm realizing that it's very, very important that people want to be able to have a life balance. Previously you would go to the office, like you want to work, I don't know, 8:00 till 6:00, those are the hours that you're in the office. And then maybe you want to do some admin, you got to take a morning or afternoon off work or try and do over the weekend. People want to have a life balance and actually everyone feels better when they do. And that might mean like I'm not in back to back meetings. It might also mean that I'm able to just have lunch with my children or I can go and take the dog for a walk or I can just sit and have peace, or maybe I feel like I'm the most effective at this time of the day and therefore I want to have the means to be able to, I don't know, have my focus time at, I don't know, the hours between midnight and 3:00 AM, silly example.

And these values are this like...I guess the overarching principle for me is this idea of life balance and how do we enable technology to give you that life balance? I was talking about wellbeing and employee experience, maybe nine months ago. And someone said, "Who's responsibility is it?" And I thought, "It's very difficult to say like it's the employer's responsibility, but it's also very difficult it's the employee's responsibility." It's like, it's a dual responsibility that both have to be mindful of how the other one feels and what's available to achieve certain objectives.

Tope Sadiku (16:19):

I guess that it's easier in that knowledge worker space because it's not outcome driven in the same way. It is like for someone on a factory line, right? You got to make, I don't know, X amount of B product in C time. It's not necessarily like that in the knowledge worker space. But I think in both kind of archetypes that we have this idea of life balance is bigger now than ever.

Kristin Gecan (16:45):

Yeah. And what you were saying before, I think was that you try to think about it in terms of life balance, not life work balance. Work is part of life, right? So one thing that we talked about in the panel discussion was getting feedback and metrics and quantifying things and how difficult that can be in design or in the work that you do, which sounds much like design. And one of the things that I really [inaudible 00:17:14] on that you said is that we don't quantify love or happiness, but we know that they're critical to our wellbeing, to our life, to our performance. So given that, are there ways that you decide whether an effort that you have is successful or whether it's time to try something new?
Tope Sadiku (17:36):
I guess one of the things I can think of is around when we were at Microsoft teams, we did a lot of ethnography so we kind of just watched how groups work and we kind of said, "How do you work today? And how do you think you want to work in the future? And then how do we think we can... Like where are the things that you may not have realized? But we might also know just based on like knowledge of like the wider organization and the technology tools we have access to." And I guess when it comes to like being successful, we ran these ethnographies, we did some webinars and then we realized that, "Oh, hang on, it's great to have that one way, this is what we've learned in general. And here, here are some tips and tricks in essence, like here's the art collaboration, here's how you can meet smarter, here's how you can be agile, here's how you can think like from a design thinking principle."

But then we realized, "Okay, people need a bit more of an interaction. They need a bit more like interaction so then we started to run these workshops. And I guess when it comes to being successful, I don't know, there's some general feeling that something has like run its course, and maybe we need to evolve or tweak or ramp up. But we really reach out to so many different groups. We have like a group of employees and something called our Collaborations Champions Network. Then we speak with our exec and then we speak with like leadership and then we just solicit feedback from all different channels. And we really say, "Look, guys, tell us, tell us, tell us, tell us." And then we do these quantifiable surveys where we just like ask generic persons and we can see the benchmark of how people feel.

And then we come together as a group and we say, "Okay, what do we think this tells us now?" If I wasn't in the group and I was looking at it, I could say, "How much of that is really what you believe and if you're in a group, do you look for the answers that you want?" It's very difficult to take all of that out, right? But I think when you take feedback from a number of different angles, you can't help, but just see the truth there and that you have to pivot and change. Because at the end of the day, my obligation is to the employees, not to myself. I'm almost like a vessel, right? The pipeline by which they get what they need. And like, it's not for me, a successful employee experience.

Maybe it makes my life happier in the short term, like my Tope life, but really it's to serve others. So I have to kind of solicit the feedback of others and understand how people feel. And even if one person says, "Oh, hang on, I didn't really like this." I tend to just listen to that voice as well. I might not significantly throw away and scrap an entire strategy, but I try and tweak what we do to like the pulse I have of employees.

Kristin Gecan (20:03):
Another thing I wanted to ask you about is, you describe yourself as a corporate doctor who uses technology to enhance the lives of your patients. So I wonder, is there any sort of creed that you live by much like doctors do, like first do no harm? Is there anything that you have come to sort of check yourself with to make sure that you're proceeding in the right direction?

Tope Sadiku (20:29):
I guess maybe I could go back to like my life principle, there are a few things that were running in my mind. I thought, "As long as I'm enabling people to be happier, to feel happier and healthier." And I say, "Feel." As opposed to kind of like, "Be." Because sometimes it's like perception is reality and I even struggle myself, like when it comes to medication, to what
degree is it the medication or is it like the placebo effect you just feel? But either way it works and as long as it works, it works. So for me, I'm like, "Does the person feel happier? Do they feel better? Do they feel healthier?" That's probably my overarching principle, like my guiding star, my north star.

My CIO, he says he wants people to have a delightful experience. And I guess like, delightful is another way of saying, "Do you feel happier? Healthier? I don't know, excited to be in work?"

So, yeah, I guess it's a lot around feelings, which again is probably quite interesting for somebody who has a background in finance. How do you quantify feelings? [inaudible 00:21:26] like that love. It's very difficult to quantify. It's easy for someone to say, "I feel a certain way." And then they take that feeling with them, whether or not it is the reality, again, going back to like placebos, if they work, they work. Right?

Kristin Gecan (21:38):

It's interesting that what you said about your CEO wanting folks to have a delightful experience. And then as you just underscored your own background in finance. But then also this challenge of being able to quantify what impact you're having. And so I wonder how you've been able to see that, like, I'm actually not aware, is yours a new role at Kraft Heinz? Have you been able to see how making people feel happy actually? I mean, at the end of the day, people are still curious about like, "Well, what does that do for the bottom line?" Right? And so I wonder if you could speak to that at all. Like what impact or outcomes you've seen from just actually being concerned about people's wellbeing?

Tope Sadiku (22:20):

Yeah. And I should be very clear, like my role sits within technology and actually it is a new role. It was a role that we created in Kraft Heinz in 2019. And I think, okay, I talk a lot about feelings, but my reality is I'm going to talk about business case. I do talk about the financial implication. So for example, a move towards Microsoft teams does reduce travel, it does help the synchronize and harmonize and also like create a universal platform for people to work in. So then we can remove a number of different alternative solutions we have, which have a very material, financial benefit, right? When it comes to the feelings, you can even say that was a side effect. Although it was kind of the driving reason why we took a certain decision or why we took the decision to move to a certain way.

But yeah, we still have to be able to quantify things. I treat the company's money as though it's my own. And I think, "Well, hang on, is this like the correct holistic business case of... You know, if I bought a new house, yes, I want my children and my family to feel great in my new home, but doesn't make economical sense for my family. Is it close to somewhere that, you know... Does it help where we need to travel for work and other recreational activities?" You have to think about the total package and I won't pretend that we just say, "Okay, people feel great, let's just spend." No, we think about the entire package around that. So in that way, it's quite easy to quantify. Are you delivering on what you said you would deliver?

Kristin Gecan (23:44):

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. What energizes you most about the work that you're doing?

Tope Sadiku (23:50):

That's a very fun question. What energizes me the most? I guess I get excited by thinking of, and I hate this phrase, but it kind of works, yeah like the art of the possible, like what could be.
Imagine if there was a workspace where you just didn't know if you were physically or virtually next to someone, it kind of like felt the same, somehow. And I felt like I could touch someone, even if I didn't know if they were physically or virtually there. And then somehow I was able to like achieve business objectives, irrespective of where I was based. And then I get excited when I think about like VR, AR, a mixed reality. And then I think, "Okay, to be able to even have those conversations, you need to have like a certain type of behavior or mentality embedded in your organization, within your employees. And then you need your it team or your technology team to think in a certain way."

And imagine if you could use tech to like heal people. I mean, that exists today. There's so many projects and experiments and organizations that I'm able to kind of work with in that space. So for me, the idea of being able to use technology to really heal people and to connect people, that excites me. I can tell you, I work, I don't even know, I don't watch TV for a start and I save so much time by not wasting time on TV and social media. I really don't do any of them. I'm able to then invest time to things that I get super excited by and run experiments and have some really, really cool conversations with some really innovative people and organizations.

So yeah, that really excites me about what I do. And then I see the work I do in Kraft Heinz, like contributing towards that. I see the work that I do with these different boards, contributing towards that. I see the startups that I get to work with contributing towards that. And I find it really fun.

Kristin Gecan (25:28):

Maybe just one last question about the, we talked about, being responsible. I wonder just about being cooperative, right? And this must be very important to your role because you're thinking about everyone that works at Kraft Heinz and I'm sure you're working with any number of people on making technology work in service of those people and in service of the organization. So just any sort of top level thoughts about how you've been able to do that cooperatively and bring the people that you are sort of working for into the equation, if that makes sense.

Tope Sadiku (26:06):

Well, I guess for me, there's this concept of goal congruence. And when I recognize is that everybody's goal, like the aspiration is the same. People want to feel great at work. If you didn't care about feeling great, you just wouldn't come to work, so people want to feel great. If you have an aspiration, a mission, a goal, as broad as like feel great when I come to work, it fits into what everybody wants to do. And it's actually not that difficult to get that goal congruence.

I've learned a lot about listening to people. I listen so much more than I probably have in my entire life. And I appreciate the ability to listen and talk a lot about like the death of this self, like dying to my own ego and being more humble. And I recognize that when it comes like enabling people to be their best selves at work, there is a lot of death of ego. I'm like a servant, right? I'm like of service to employees. So that's really helped. I don't know if that answers your question, but I would say that that definitely has really, really helped me.

Kristin Gecan (27:03):

Well, thank you so much for joining me today. I hope you have a good rest of your day and weekend.

Tope Sadiku (27:10):
Oh, thank you so much and you too take care. Enjoy the sunshine.

Tope Sadiku (27:12):

(music)

Kristin Gecan (27:18):

Tope is a 2021 Latham Fellow, for more about our Latham Fellows and their discussions, visit the IIT Institute of Design website and YouTube channel. You can also find show notes and a full transcript on our site. Please subscribe, rate, and review With Intent on your favorite service. This is a new show and we'd love your support. Our theme music comes from ID alum Adithya Ravi. Until next time.

Kristin Gecan (27:47):

(music)