

WE ARE ETH – Episode 12

With Shanthi Flynn, Executive and Board Advisor, Shanthi Flynn Advisory

[Listen to Podcast](#)

[00:00:00] **Shanthi Flynn:** The people who've been to ETH are not just great sort of engineers and technical people and good scientists, they are also really great people.

[00:00:10] **Susan Kish:** In this episode, I'm talking with Shanthi Flynn. She's the former Chief of Human Resources at Adecco building on 35 years of experience across retail, manufacturing, healthcare, and services. We're gonna talk about her story and about why ETH Zurich is important to her. This is the We are ETH podcast, and I'm Susan Kish.

[00:00:33] Shanthi, we met back in the days before Covid, in 2018 when you came and spoke at that global talent summit at the ETH. You were fantastic.

[00:00:45] **Shanthi Flynn:** Oh, Susan, you are too kind. It was a great privilege to be there.

[00:00:50] **Susan Kish:** It was a wonderful day. And I just wondered, those were the days before Covid. Life is different now. And I understand that you actually attempted to move between countries during Covid. Is that rumor true? And what was that like?

[00:01:07] **Shanthi Flynn:** It was a very interesting journey for us. And in terms of leaving Zurich, which was a wrench for us as well as a family because we all loved living in Zurich and loved being in Switzerland.

[00:01:21] **Susan Kish:** How long were you there?

[00:01:22] **Shanthi Flynn:** Five years.

[00:01:23] **Susan Kish:** Oh, that's a length of time.

[00:01:24] **Shanthi Flynn:** Yes. And I'd bought my flat overlooking the lake. So I was very lucky to have such a wonderful view and swim in the lake in the summer. But yeah, we did move in Covid and it was interesting because I had to video view houses that we were moving to. I had to guess at the school that my three daughters were gonna have to go to and you'd look at video tours. So everything was on video.

[00:01:53] **Susan Kish:** Wow.

[00:01:53] **Shanthi Flynn:** And talking to people remotely. And we couldn't actually visit the area personally cuz we weren't able to because of the quarantine, the schools, quarantine, estate agents, quarantine rules.

[00:02:04] We couldn't actually physically go anywhere and visit places in person. So yes, we put an offer in, on a house based on a video tour, and the girls went to school based on a video tour. Yes, it was all tricky. But then I'm a very strong believer in, once you've made your decisions, then just go with it and adapt as you go.

[00:02:27] **Susan Kish:** Let's go to how life started or how your career started. If I understand correctly, you studied physiology and pharmacology at the University of Manchester.

[00:02:35] **Shanthi Flynn:** Yes.

[00:02:36] **Susan Kish:** Which sounds like a perfect path to go pre-med, but that's not what you did. Can you talk about how you went from your studies to a pretty illustrious career in the area of human resources?

[00:02:47] **Shanthi Flynn:** It was interesting working in laboratories at university and doing lots of scientific analysis, which I loved. I did realize that my real passion, talent was actually dealing with people, but I had no idea what career options were available to me, so I went and sat in the Manchester Careers office and looked at careers that didn't have a specific degree requirement that involved dealing with people.

[00:03:13] And it was quite an interesting journey because of course, I didn't know any human resources people, I didn't know anyone who'd ever done a job like this, so, it was a bit of a kind of a shot in the dark, but having spent my whole career dealing with people of all functions in multiple sectors around the world, I had a lucky break, is probably the best way of describing it, because as I look at other functions, I realized it was the best place for me.

[00:03:39] I enjoyed my life, my career. I enjoyed being in that function, which was always for me and organizations at the heart of everything, because most of the organizations I've worked with have been very people intensive, and as a result, the people element of the strategy has been key to success. So that helped me. I would've hated to be too peripheral.

[00:04:02] **Susan Kish:** In other words, it really gave you a seat at the table for some of those big decisions.

[00:04:07] **Shanthi Flynn:** It did. And that started really in my early days with Ford Motor Company because it was a highly unionized company. And I was in a manufacturing site where we had close to 10,000 people working on the site.

[00:04:21] **Susan Kish:** Geez.

[00:04:21] **Shanthi Flynn:** Building a couple of thousand cars a day. That was in the old days, in the eighties when when we still had that scale of manufacturing going on, the auto side. So that was my rude awakening to the world of work from uni and having done physiology and pharmacology to go straight into a car plant with, basically mostly men because in those days, in factories and on shifts, it was pretty much all men working factories cuz of the factory law, which prevented

[00:04:52] **Susan Kish:** What's the factory law?

[00:04:53] **Shanthi Flynn:** This was a revelation to me at the time as well, is that I started working in 1986 in September and a legacy from World War II was that the factory law was brought in to, to take the women out of the factories who were building war vehicles in the UK because the men were at war. But in 1945, in order to get the women outta the factories, they created the factory law so the men could have their jobs back.

[00:05:21] **Susan Kish:** Oh, you are kidding me.

[00:05:23] **Shanthi Flynn:** It made it illegal to hire women onto shifts in factories.

[00:05:27] **Susan Kish:** Oh my gosh.

[00:05:28] **Shanthi Flynn:** Until 1986 when the Sex Discrimination Act came in, and I was perfectly placed as an industrial relations officer, hiring line workers at the time, to hire the very first women on shifts in that plant in September '86.

[00:05:42] So that was it was, and in fact, Dagenham, which is the plant I worked in, was also the birthplace of the Equal Pay Equal Value Act for women anywhere in the world. So if you've ever seen a film called Made in Dagenham, it was set in 1966 and the sewing machinists of Dagenham fought for equal pay, equal value, and they changed the law in the UK and other countries followed. So it was a pretty groundbreaking place to start my career.

[00:06:11] **Susan Kish:** I was about to say... do you have any specific anecdotes that you still remember?

[00:06:16] **Shanthi Flynn:** Oh there's almost too many to mention working in a car plant with a lot of men who didn't see very many women except in catering. That was actually true.

[00:06:25] But there was a lot of cat calling. I'm not lying when I say there was plenty of pornography on the walls as well. And so it was a rather strange entry into the world of work. But yeah, we had lots, there was always lots of people being dismissed for drugs and fighting and all sorts of other things.

[00:06:44] So that was, again, a rather tough way to start a career. And I honestly can say I never had another job that was harder than those first three years in the car plant because every day was full of conflict and something crazy going on.

[00:07:02] And there, there was one incident where in the engine plant where we woke up in the morning and it was during the Gulf War crisis, the first one, and we woke up to the half the side of the engine plant had been blown out in the night and everyone thought it was a terrorist attack, but in fact it was some line workers had decided that they were gonna set up a gun club and made a cannon, which they'd fired a cannon through the wall.

[00:07:26] **Susan Kish:** On purpose?

[00:07:27] **Shanthi Flynn:** Yes, they were supposed to be working, but they were actually having a gun club instead. I have hundreds of those stories, but I dunno whether you're gonna wanna devote too much of the podcast today.

[00:07:43] **Susan Kish:** They blew a cannon through the wall of the plant. Wow. And if I understand correctly, you were doing industrial relations, which meant you were the bridge between the office and the floor?

[00:08:00] **Shanthi Flynn:** Basically. Yeah. And it was an interesting position to be in because, many occasions you had lot of sympathy with the unions and with the workers.

[00:08:07] When we were stripping asbestos out of the plant, health and safety was a massive concern. So you were more fighting with the unions to get good health and safety equipment. And making sure management did the right thing. And I've got a strong belief, which is, most most organizations don't need a union if the management are doing the right thing.

[00:08:26] And when unions form, it's usually because there is some fear or some actual exploitation going on, so they lost trust, and trust gets diminished and a union is required then to try and make, make management hear that there are genuine concerns, and so when workers strike and they have grievances I have an absolute ear for what are those grievances now?

[00:08:52] Are there things that can be avoided? Is the organization trying to do too much to drive profits at the expense of the welfare and wellbeing of your workforce? And there always has to be a balance. You can't obviously throw away all your profits in order to in order to do, great things for your employees.

[00:09:11] You've got to strike a balance. And obviously there are other occasions where you've got to do a pay deal and it has to be affordable. So again, you've constantly got to make these kinds of decisions that bridge the gap.

[00:09:22] So yes, that's exactly what industrial relations was and the terminology of human resources didn't exist at the time.

[00:09:29] **Susan Kish:** If I understand correctly, you went from there to Boots, which is very much a UK company.

[00:09:35] **Shanthi Flynn:** It really was. And, at one point there was a survey in the UK of which organizations and brands do you trust the most. And Boots came out number two. Our boots was highly innovative very creative.

[00:10:05] **Susan Kish:** Really.

[00:10:06] **Shanthi Flynn:** Yes. Highly innovative, it was ahead of its time. It had very high margins on own label products and oh, it had a vertically integrated supply chain. They were the first organization to have electronic point of sale, which were these tills that captured data.

[00:10:30] They were the first to launch a loyalty card that was smart. Also, was the first to do three for two deals.

[00:10:45] **Susan Kish:** You're kidding.

[00:10:46] **Shanthi Flynn:** Yeah. It piloted so many things that people take for granted. Yes, it was an interesting place to work, and in fact it was there that I did do a UK based job, but it was with them that I got my international experience because I was the Head of HR for their international businesses, both FMCG, healthcare as well as retail

[00:11:09] **Susan Kish:** FMCG, Fast-Moving Consumer Goods?

[00:11:11] **Shanthi Flynn:** Yes. So brands like, because Boots had a pharmaceutical division before but it had sold that, and what it was doing was it was basically selling off patent drugs that they had created. So you may not be aware, Ibuprofen was created by Boots.

[00:11:30] **Susan Kish:** You're kidding.

[00:11:31] **Shanthi Flynn:** So yeah.

[00:11:32] **Susan Kish:** Oh my gosh.

[00:11:32] And did you move overseas?

[00:11:35] **Shanthi Flynn:** For boots I was traveling into Asia a lot because we were we were creating and growing stores in Taiwan. We had a joint venture (JV) partnership with Mitsubishi. So that was my first taste of being a JV partner and also my first taste of how not to do it. So Boots were...

[00:11:53] **Susan Kish:** Wait. That sounds like an interesting story. What do you mean by that? What do you mean by how not to do that?

[00:11:59] **Shanthi Flynn:** It was a 50/50 partnership, which is a disaster on any JV so you should always have a skew one way or the other. You don't get stalemate on any decisions. And Mitsubishi had about 2000 joint venture partnerships in Asia, and Boots had one. So that tells you the experience and savvy level. Mitsubishi Corporation had an investment committee that just decided whether they were going to continue with various ventures that they'd got into, and that committee would make decisions.

[00:12:30] There was a clause that the mergers and acquisitions guy who had not done that many deals and had certainly not done many JV deals at the time, he'd done acquisitions...

[00:12:40] **Susan Kish:** This is the Boots guy you're speaking now?

[00:12:42] **Shanthi Flynn:** Yeah. Yeah. He didn't spot the termination clause that Mitsubishi put in, which meant that they could give us a months notice on terminating a business.

[00:12:51] **Susan Kish:** Whoa.

[00:12:51] **Shanthi Flynn:** So Mitsubishi decided one day that they didn't wanna be in partnership with Boots anymore, and we had a month to close the business, which was absolutely one of the most awful experiences of my career because me and the finance guy were having to find a way of making sure that the individuals got treated well, which was fishing in our pockets pretty deep, but we also had 20 million pounds worth of product on the water going to Japan, to feed the stores that were dedicated to the Japanese market.

[00:13:21] So all these things in the moment they are, they can be stressful and when you look back, you realize they help you inform lots of other decisions later on in your career.

[00:13:33] **Susan Kish:** Absolutely. And after that, you stayed, who is the Watson Group now?

[00:13:40] **Shanthi Flynn:** The Watson Group. And it's a bit like, one of those before Unilever and Procter & Gamble decided to make themselves well known and everyone was using their products without knowing they were behind it. It was, it's a bit like that. So Watson's had eight and a half thousand stores across the world.

[00:13:56] I worked directly for the CEO of the, of the group as his head of HR. And his vision was to lower the risk profile of the group. And in order to do that, he wanted to be less weighted in Asia and more weighted in Europe. So he went on a spending spree in Europe and bought up a lot of organizations.

[00:14:16] And it was me, the finance guy and the legal guy where his due diligence team. We would go and I remember we bought a business called Marionnaud, which is a French perfume, luxury cosmetics, and perfume business, and it had 500 stores in France alone, and it was in seven, or eight countries.

[00:14:34] And I remember having to hire, someone to run that organization, it was a big organization. We didn't have anyone internally to succeed and I had to hire someone and tell him he was gonna be paid in Euros, but I couldn't tell him what he was going to be doing except he was gonna be running this enterprise.

[00:14:52] But because it was listed on the French stock exchange and it was in the process of being de-listed, it was commercially sensitive information.

[00:14:59] **Susan Kish:** Oh. So you couldn't tell him for what company he was gonna raise?

[00:15:03] **Shanthi Flynn:** No. And the person said yes, I had to engage in my most extreme persuasive skills. He and I are still in touch actually, so it's

[00:15:13] **Susan Kish:** I could only imagine. So, let me see. I wanna hire you for a job in a country that can't be named for a retail, that can't be called for. And you got him to say, yes, I am very impressed.

[00:15:28] So what drew you to Walmart? Another classic American company.

[00:15:33] **Shanthi Flynn:** Whilst I was at the Watson's group, I had two of my three children. So I took two sets of maternity leave. Yeah. In three years. I went back after three months. I worked until a week before I had both of them. So it was pretty full on. And I wasn't a young mom either. I was just 40 when I had my oldest.

[00:15:52] So I took three years out. The jobs I've done for many years have been really all or nothing. And so I knew that for me to do justice to my girls I had to step off. And and I will tell you this, and, it's, it is a true story. This is that I had said to

head hunters, I, you know, my profile is quite interesting to head hunters cuz I've got manufacturing, retail, and services now on my profile.

[00:16:17] So head hunters would I was a bit of an easy target. And I would get a call at least once a year and I'd always say, no, I'm looking after my family and yeah, no, I'm not going back. And then one day Karen Pfeiffer of Heidrick & Struggles called me and she hit a day where I'd honestly been saying to my older daughter, can you stop biting your sister on the face?

[00:16:36] And I must have said it about three times. And I just said, yes, I'm gonna talk to Walmart, I'll talk to them.

[00:16:43] **Susan Kish:** I had enough, I'm outta here...

[00:16:46] **Shanthi Flynn:** The following day if they called me, I probably would've said no.

[00:16:50] **Susan Kish:** I have three kids under three, over 40. I totally get this, totally get this, please let me go to the office.

[00:16:58] **Shanthi Flynn:** Oh yes. So that was my rude awakening into Walmart. But what was interesting for me is having had three years out I didn't think I could do the big job anymore.

[00:17:08] I was nervous cuz, my vocabulary shrunk about eight words. And my Mental capacity seemed to have also shrunk and so I honestly didn't think I could hold my own at that senior leveling. I knew what it was like to have to make fast decisions. People relying on you and you're dealing with complex things and firefighting all the time.

[00:17:33] So I did take a step down for the first time in my career when I went back in and I was working for another HR person for the first time in 15 years. So I, he was a nice guy. But six months later he moved on and they gave me the job. So I only had six months of grace, and then I was the head of HR for the Asia region, and we had 150,000 people in the region across Japan, China, India, and Hong Kong.

[00:18:01] **Susan Kish:** So then you took another year and a half, did your own business, and then you went to Adecco. Is that how that worked?

[00:18:07] **Shanthi Flynn:** Yes. I thought I was in semi-retirement, you know, I'd had the fast paced life, I'd been on far too many planes and done too many air miles and actually, the family and big jobs you know, it takes it out of you.

[00:18:24] I thought that was it. And then I got persuaded to live in Zurich of course. Actually Zurich, I can say that now that I've left Adecco, but Zurich was actually the bigger draw. Brutally honest. And I thought it was a wonderful city.

[00:18:40] And I'd never thought about living in Switzerland. It hadn't been on my radar, but as you can tell from my career path, I was an absolute opportunist when it came to my career and when really good opportunities presented themselves, you know, I feel lucky that I was able to take those decisions and take those chances because that's what grew me, gave my family opportunities that they might not have had, and gave us a really interesting perspective and set of experiences.

[00:19:11] I learned and was able to apply all my various other sectors to that industry which was great and had a chance to meet with all of you guys. So we come full circle. Cause it was my Adecco job that got me introduced to ETH.

[00:19:24] **Susan Kish:** Exactly. So tell us about, how did you get introduced to the ETH and why do you think, what is the role that you see ETH playing in Zurich or even on a larger stage?

[00:19:36] **Shanthy Flynn:** Well, I mean, you know, you don't have to look too far to see that ETH is now appearing in many in, in the top five, in some cases top three for a whole variety of advancing technologies, AI you know, there's so much pioneering, good science, good work going on. And Switzerland is famous for its engineering backdrop, it's precision, it's pursuit of perfection if you like.

[00:20:06] **Susan Kish:** That's a good phrase.

[00:20:09] **Shanthy Flynn:** The people who've been to ETH, they're ETH are not just great sort of engineers and technical people and good scientists they are also really great people.

[00:20:20] **Susan Kish:** So you touched on two points that I just wanted to pursue when you talk about the ETH. One is ethics and one is AI, right? And I don't know about you, but I've been playing with this ChatGPT, right? I wrote in a question about what is the future of work, right? It came back with this great essay and it actually, it's about leveraging technology, being more flexible, diversity.

[00:20:47] I'm thinking like, wow, that's all just from a short phrase, prompt. But can you, why did you bring up, and what do you think would be the importance of issues like ethics and issues like AI and how do all these weave into the future of work? Because they all feel connected.

[00:21:05] **Shanthy Flynn:** I think, and I'm a big believer in terms of leadership, is that if you don't lead from a position of ethics and values, you will make bad decisions.

[00:21:17] That's it. And, an ethical framework to your decision making is what allows you to distinguish, doing the right thing in the right way and for the right reasons than doing the wrong things. And I've bumped into plenty of people who've made bad decisions either because it's self-serving or it's because, it's, trying to drive profit over good of people and society.

[00:21:41] And so I think ethics is fundamental and we've seen plenty of corrupt politicians, corrupt practices. In the end, it's very difficult to run any organization, country, even in your family, you need to have some kind of ethical framework. And it's not about religion.

[00:21:58] It's simply about saying, here's stuff that you know, this is the right thing to do, as opposed to doing this for all the wrong reasons and driving bad outcomes. Ethics for me is critical to, as a backdrop and as a, if you like, the concrete foundation to anything that you build on top of it.

[00:22:17] If you've got a bad ethical framework your decisions will ultimately crumble. It's not sustainable.

[00:22:23] **Susan Kish:** And within, or with that as context, how do worlds of AI and technology intersect with this question of ethics?

[00:22:31] **Shanthi Flynn:** Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should.

[00:22:36] And I think sometimes the fact that technology can move faster than the ethical framework within it, that can guide it, because often people will go off and they'll be way ahead of the individuals who are saying how do you ring fence these decisions to make sure that the, when in the wrong hands it doesn't go, it doesn't take us on a path that we can't get back from. And remember having a conversation about data analytics in HR and a lot of organizations were doing, and still are doing an awful lot of background checking. On their own people as well as on future employees.

[00:23:16] Now, background checks has always been, a difficult area ethically because, and in various countries there's laws rightly that protect individuals from over checking them and denying people jobs because of something, some misdemeanor or a dodgy Facebook page. It's, it shouldn't be employers judging an individual because of something they put on their social media network.

[00:23:41] **Susan Kish:** 20 years ago.

[00:23:43] **Shanthi Flynn:** 20 years ago, or, five years ago that they had, that somebody else has reposted something that happens to have them on so I think there's these sorts of things have to be ring fenced because otherwise what happens is people start making bad judgements and and not being fair.

[00:23:59] It's very easy. And then I remember when we were contemplating buying a very large freelance network platform and I asked the question about self-fulfilling prophecies on selection. Because AI is a very interesting one on self-fulfilling, because if you say, I will only want to hire someone who's this level of qualification has worked in these different locations, blah, blah, blah. And then that person gets a job. What happens is it feeds or creates a positive feedback loop, right? And then the

algorithm will constantly be narrowing and narrowing your field. So you end up with less and less diversity of candidates.

[00:24:42] Because by definition, this person was successful, right? It feeds back into the algorithm. So they then only look for those people with a narrower frame, right? Then they'll only feed those candidates to the employers, and as a result, they will only be hiring those candidates.

[00:24:56] Because they're only being fed a certain profile, right? You cut the diversity out completely and you start to narrow the field. So there's lots of bad consequences to what sounds on the surface to be a great piece of tech, but you do need to be careful that it doesn't, you know that people stop thinking about whether this is the right outcome and checking back does this, is this where we want to be? And are we just almost slaves to the tech when in fact we need to be thinking about whether the tech is helping us get the right decisions?

[00:25:28] **Susan Kish:** So what is the role of an institution with the global footprint as the expression goes of something like the ETH in these questions?

[00:25:37] **Shanthi Flynn:** I think trying to get ahead of those ethical question as or before the technology has advanced to the point where it's difficult to pull it back. So if you look at and there's sorts of debates about whether, at what point do you consider an AI to be sentient?

[00:25:55] And as a result, I think the role of a ETH is one where having those discussions and debates while ahead of the technological advancements is that it can challenge and put the framework in. So I think ETH with all of the big brains that are in ETH are able to scan forward and do the Asimov on the future of technology and say, okay, which ones have the capacity to turn us into a terminator scenario and which ones, are not. Where do we have to ring fence?

[00:26:28] And I think only really good scientists and people who understand the technological opportunities and where the boundaries could be, they're the only ones who can get ahead of it because most people just don't know what's within the realms of possibility.

[00:26:43] **Susan Kish:** Within the ETH circle, I understand you've been involved in that pilot around mentoring. Can you give us a bit of background?

[00:26:50] **Shanthi Flynn:** Yeah. The interesting thing is that two of my girls are going to uni. And they have gone on all the analytics of student satisfaction and student welfare and support and that featured as a major reason to where they apply. I would push that very hard because students are very savvy about that now, about how well supported our students, both in terms of their learning, mentoring, et cetera.

[00:27:18] **Susan Kish:** So thank you so much. This has been a fantastic conversation and I'll have to make sure that the ETH takes the time to, as you said, do the Asimov and look to these questions around the future and the role of technology and the ETH's role is a steward and not just a guide to that future.

[00:27:38] But I do have a couple closing questions that we always like to ask. So when you think back to your five years in Zurich, what was your favorite place that you like to hang out? To have coffee to walk around or do things?

[00:27:53] **Shanthi Flynn:** Oh, swimming in the lake in the morning in Rüslikon when no one else was in it, was absolutely without parallel.

[00:28:05] **Susan Kish:** Fantastic. Fantastic. And when you were little and were thinking about what you wanted to be when you grew up, what were the top couple of things you wanted to be?

[00:28:17] **Shanthi Flynn:** Oh gosh. It depends how far back I go, really. I think being an astronaut was fairly early on. No, I think that more recently I now am on the Board of Trustees of BRAC, which is the the largest NGO in the world and it's doing an amazing amount of work. So that's my new passion and just helping people who can't help themselves was always something I wanted to do, and now I've got a bit more time to do it.

[00:28:48] **Susan Kish:** That's a wonderful thing and a wonderful note to close. Shanthi, thank you so much for your time. This has been fantastic.

[00:28:54] **Shanthi Flynn:** Thank you, Susan. Always a pleasure.

[00:28:59] **Susan Kish:** I'm Susan Kish, host of the We Are ETH series, and we tell the stories of the alumni and the friends of the ETH, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich. ETH regularly ranks amongst the top universities in the world. With cutting edge research, science and people. The people who were there, the people who are there, and the people who will be there. These are their stories.

[00:29:24] Please subscribe to We are ETH and join us for more conversations. Give us a good rating on Spotify or Apple if you enjoy today's conversation. I'd like to thank our producers at ETH Circle, Viktoria Ivarsson, and Claudine Beck as well as Ellie Media, Andreas Wullschleger, and thank you, our listeners for joining us.