WE ARE ETH – Episode 26

With Petra Ehmann, ETH Zurich Alumna and Advocate for Diversity in Tech

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[00:00:00] **Petra Ehmann:** **One of the most proudest moments was definitely when we managed to launch indoor navigation and no matter on which technical news platform, you could see pictures from Zurich instead of pictures from, I don't know, San Francisco airport.**

[00:00:23] **Susan Kish:** In this episode, I'm talking with technology executive and advocate for diversity Petra Aman, who studied mechanical engineering at ETH Zurich, as well as management science and engineering at Stanford University. This is the We Are ETH podcast, and I'm Susan Kish, your host.

Petra, I'm so happy to meet you and was so impressed that you speak not one, not two, not three, but four languages fluently. Now usually there's a great story behind that. So how do you end up speaking four languages?

[00:01:03] **Petra Ehmann:** Oh, thanks for having me, Susan, first of all. It's a pleasure to be here with such a friendly and sympathetic host, so I love it. The story behind it is, I grew up in Latin America. My parents, they wanted to work in a different place, and then they got the offer to go to Bolivia. So we went to Bolivia.

I was a small child when I was there. And this is where I then learned Spanish because, yeah, obviously you've got to speak Spanish if you want to get across in the country. And so we lived there, we loved living in Latin America, so we extended our stay, my parents extended the contract year by year. And then after the maximum period we had to return to Germany, so this is one language.

Then English at one point, I moved to Stanford. And I had English, obviously, at school before, but that's obviously what honed it even further, and then working at Google for almost nine years did also some extra. Till today, I prefer writing emails also in English

[00:02:06] **Susan Kish:** I bet you do.

[00:02:07] **Petra Ehmann:** It's easier, and also there is no Du or Sie, which, even for me as a Germanist.

I think it's complicated. And then Portuguese came because at one point I went to Brazil and I worked at an internet startup in Sao Paulo. So, this is how yeah.

[00:02:27] **Susan Kish:** And German because that was the language you spoke at home?

[00:02:29] **Petra Ehmann:** Exactly, yeah. My parents are both Germans.

[00:02:32] **Susan Kish:** Very cool. And did you grow up in La Paz in Bolivia?

[00:02:36] **Petra Ehmann:** yes, indeed. So that's every time I arrive there, it feels home when I leave the airport. Yeah,

[00:02:43] **Susan Kish:** I bet it does. And I bet it's beautiful.

[00:02:45] **Petra Ehmann:** the scenery. Yeah, it's very typical.

[00:02:48] **Susan Kish:** Fantastic. So just as a question, I understand your father was a physicist and a mathematician. Did this inspire you in your chosen career down the path around engineering?

[00:03:02] **Petra Ehmann:** I think for sure. I think for sure. So whenever I had a question at school, I could get the perfect answer. So we talked about it, and he was very passionate about it. So that definitely inspired me. And it was in fact my two favorite subjects at high school, math and physics.

[00:03:22] **Susan Kish:** Really?

[00:03:23] **Petra Ehmann:** Then, yeah, that was like the One of the reasons why I then decided to study mechanical engineering, because it's logical and you can't argue with the facts.

[00:03:35] **Susan Kish:** And it's also very tangible,

[00:03:37] **Petra Ehmann:** It is. It is. Yeah, I did. I played piano professionally on competitions and concerts at high school. And I realized that your... very vulnerable to a certain degree and dependent on the jury's opinion. Do they like that you're very technical or would they love you to play more emotionally and soft and...

[00:04:00] **Susan Kish:** and with passion

[00:04:01] **Petra Ehmann:** Exactly. And so I was quite glad that with mechanical engineering there is not that "Oh, I didn't feel like you write this in that way. You

should have done this or that!" So it's a number or it's a result and it's right or it's wrong. So I enjoyed that one quite a lot.

[00:04:17] **Susan Kish:** I can imagine. Do you still play

[00:04:19] **Petra Ehmann:** I had in my last year, how do I say, I had tendonitis?

[00:04:23] **Susan Kish:** Tendonitis!

[00:04:24] **Petra Ehmann:** Tendonitis, yes, and that lasted for 11 months and then after that I just graduated from high school and then I went to ETH and

[00:04:34] **Susan Kish:** And life went a different path,

[00:04:36] **Petra Ehmann:** Yeah, exactly, yeah.

[00:04:38] **Susan Kish:** What caused you to think about the ETH? Because I don't hear Switzerland when you talk about Bolivia and La Paz and German parents.

[00:04:47] **Petra Ehmann:** That's true, and in fact at the beginning I wanted to go as far away as possible. And then I just

[00:04:55] **Susan Kish:** How yould you define that? Do you mean far away from La Paz or far away?

[00:04:59] **Petra Ehmann:** From Constance as far as possible. Yeah. I did Abitur in Constance, and at the beginning I wanted to go as far away as possible, and then I went just around the corner. Now what brought me there is my cousin, who finished almost about the same time with high school we visited a few universities.

So we went to Munich once, and we figured out it's bit disorganized. When we arrived there, we realized that the introduction for students is actually not at that site where we went, but it was in downtown. that felt a bit disorganized. We also went to Karlsruhe, it's also very good university. And then they had a finite elements modeling of a bra.

And the entire audience thought this is super funny, how you see how it goes up and down and how the different parts move. I just thought, okay, that's that's an interesting one. And then ETH...

[00:05:57] **Susan Kish:** That's a great story. I'm sorry.

[00:06:01] **Petra Ehmann:** The older brother of a friend, we, she played the cello and I the piano, and so we participated at competitions. Her older brother, he was at ETH. And for one day we went with him, visited lectures. He was also in some

student associations. And I had the impression this is super structured, it has a really good and very tough reputation.

And I knew that if I, no matter where I go to, I want to do my best. And so why not choosing the best universities, even if it's right in front of your doors. I decided to go to ETH.

[00:06:38] **Susan Kish:** What difference do you think it made in your career and your choices that you went to the ETH? Because it, it was a conscious path,

[00:06:48] **Petra Ehmann:** It was... It was a very conscious path to go there and to get the best engineering education I could get to go through this very structured and rigid program. in multiple senses, I think on one hand side, it gave me a very analytical and logical thinking, which is important. That to break down big problems and dissect them into small ones, solve them, and then have the big problem solved, and especially in top management, I think it's important.

It also equipped me with a critical thinking to question all the numbers and ask tough questions, which is not liked by too many people. But I'm also on the board of directors of a company that is publicly listed, and I think it's crucial to have that skill and dissect that. And I think last but not least, it equipped me with a deep technical understanding that It's tough to catch up with if you have done that for four years, it is such a solid foundation that at Google, for instance, I was the bridge between business and engineering and product.

And for that I think it's really good to have such a technical education.

[00:08:00] **Susan Kish:** Fantastic. Fantastic. And that ability to be the bridge. It sounds like you translate in languages, and you translate in perspectives.

[00:08:11] **Petra Ehmann:** Exactly. In terms of all the different requirements that there are for a product. But also what it should solve or what is technically feasible, but then also shining a light on what do the users actually want. And is that what is technically feasible really, is it really moving the needle or do users want actually something that is super simple?

The Nintendo Wii, for instance it's probably not the technically most sophisticated product, but it was a huge success globally. And so building that bridge and shining lights on different perspectives that definitely then helps to build a better product.

[00:08:47] **Susan Kish:** Let's talk a little bit about what you did at Google, right? It's such a big company in Zurich, right? Has such a global presence and a Zurich presence. And you were doing really what from I could read really wicked cool, as we would say in Boston, wicked cool stuff. Can you talk about what you're proud of from your time at Google?

[00:09:09] **Petra Ehmann:** Wow, there, there are so many things. It's such a diverse range of products I worked on from maps to advertising to augmented reality to finance. I think one of the most proudest moments was definitely when we managed to launch indoor navigation and no matter on which technical News platform, you could see pictures from Zurich instead of pictures from, I don't know, San Francisco airport, et cetera.

So that one was made me very proud that despite being a global company, we could for once lift Switzerland on the global spotlight.

[00:09:50] **Susan Kish:** Just to dig into that. Internal navigation. That means you're in an airport and it tells you what gate you're at, as opposed to you're just at the generic airport.

[00:10:02] **Petra Ehmann:** Exactly. For instance, or you're at an airport and you want to know where is the female bathroom, or you're at the airport and want to know where is an ATM where I can briefly get some further cash. And that is something that we launched at airports train stations and shopping malls, because those are obviously the...

Public hubs where most people are and what is interesting, most people don't know that 80 to 90% of our time we actually spend indoors. But maps is predominantly known for outdoor navigation. And indoor navigation definitely helps. Or you're in a shopping mall and you want to quickly know, Oh, I still want to buy this and that.

And I need to go to that store.

[00:10:44] **Susan Kish:** That So cool.

[00:10:44] **Petra Ehmann:** And then you stand in front of that map. And you gotta figure out,

[00:10:48] **Susan Kish:** Oh, that big law on a pilot where you're going like, you are here.

[00:10:53] **Petra Ehmann:** You're here. Okay. Good.

[00:10:56] **Susan Kish:** Exactly.

[00:10:57] **Petra Ehmann:** How do I get to that store now?

[00:11:00] **Susan Kish:** So the technology for that was developed in Zurich.

[00:11:04] **Petra Ehmann:** Yeah. Yeah. So the underlying technology is called VPS and that's a team actually, which is also should be a proud moment also for ETH. The majority of the team members are from ETH. In fact.

[00:11:18] **Susan Kish:** Very cool. So recently you left Google about a year plus ago and you went over to Ringier and if I understand correctly, you're the chief innovation officer, which is just like the world's best title.

[00:11:32] **Petra Ehmann:** Not sure

[00:11:33] **Susan Kish:** the only question it raises is what exactly, what's your mandate? What is success as a chief innovation officer?

[00:11:38] **Petra Ehmann:** that's a very fair question because innovation can be everything, right? What innovation means to us is innovation on a product and service level and innovation on a business model level. So we want to build new products, new services or enhance existing ones. Now what we want to achieve is we want to lift up revenue growth in the long term.

So what we actually want to do is we want to define new business opportunities in media, in marketplaces and tech and data that can then generate or that can build the future. So our motto, for instance, I launched an accelerator called Ringier X and our motto is, we built the future of tomorrow today,

We have that long term angle that we want to ensure that the businesses is set up for more longevity and it is aligned with what users actually need and demand and we provide solutions to them.

[00:12:25] **Susan Kish:** Got it. Got it. And Ringier, if I recall correctly, it's a relatively old company, but it has a hundred plus properties. It's all over Europe and South America, or Africa, where exactly?

[00:12:56] **Petra Ehmann:** In Africa, yes, you're absolutely right. For most people, they associate Ringier with Switzerland. And actually,

[00:13:01] **Susan Kish:** Blick!

[00:13:02] **Petra Ehmann:** Blick for instance. Yes, Blick is one Handelszeitung, Beobachter, et cetera. There are a few titles here in Switzerland, but Ringier is active in 19 countries. So predominantly in Switzerland, in Eastern Europe, so in the Baltics, Poland, Hungary, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria. Now I'm forgetting a few probably. then in Africa, yeah. So Nigeria, Kenya Ghana, but also South Africa. And in Mauritius we actually have a larger engineering team.

[00:13:33] **Susan Kish:** I think you really need to visit Mauritius on a regular basis.

[00:13:37] **Petra Ehmann:** I hear this every once in a while. So yesterday in my team meeting I heard as well, hey we should do an offsite there. I think they need some workshops.

[00:13:48] **Susan Kish:** think, I think in person, none of this virtual

[00:13:51] **Petra Ehmann:** only in person. Yeah, virtual is over now. We got to do it.

[00:13:56] **Susan Kish:** Exactly, you talked about how your time at the ETH gave you the technical, both foundation and confidence to, to bridge those conversations. Can you just, in terms of the position you have now, how did ETH prepare you for this? For looking at innovation at a, effectively at a media company?

[00:14:16] **Petra Ehmann:** I think it equipped me with a bunch of skills that are very helpful. So it's about this structured analytical thinking, but it's also base your work on facts and evidence, not merely opinions. And if I just touch upon the late letter one, base your work on facts and evidence.

It's really important that we actually do what really will move the needle. And in order to approach problems in a fact based way for instance, in two weeks time Ringier X, this is the accelerator that I launched, the C teams will graduate. And the jury will... Determine upon whether they may continue or not based on the evidence that they provide.

So that they sign a letter of intent. What is a click through rate? How many customers or what's the feedback from customers? Yeah, so we'll base the decisions on evidence. And obviously it's never 100% evidence. You can never dissect it and leave out opinions. But I want to do it, my job, in such a way that we have the best impact.

We don't choose ideas because, oh, people fall in love with it. And it's the favorite idea of I don't know whom. But because they have the highest potential and because we know the team does the best job possible. And they have, they're on track and that team is. really behind it and intrinsically motivated.

I think that's probably one of the aspects where you figure out, okay, it's rather, yeah, I got trained in a very logical and fact based way, and that still shines through.

[00:15:59] **Susan Kish:** It certainly sounds as it does.

When you're judging these startups, one of the things I've always wondered is this thing they call about the beauty of how people write code. That there's messy code. And there's clean code.

How do you ever evaluate that? Or do you not worry about it and just worry about the impact of that code and its results?

[00:16:23] **Petra Ehmann:** So for the teams that are currently, that will finish the seed phase of the first phase.

[00:16:28] **Petra Ehmann:** They're not supposed to code anything yet. So it's just about plug and play and getting the evidence from the market and from the users. In the second stage, there will be about developing the product, but only once they got the evidence.

And then the third stage is about scaling is where monetization takes place. Obviously, there's beautiful code and maybe not so beautiful code, but I think at the end of the day, I have a more pragmatic approach. It should be working and it should be working in the sense that once you scale, it doesn't break down.

So probably there comes some beauty into it. It should not be too messy. But yeah, if it works, it's probably good enough. And most people maybe also go for a 100% solution, but an 80% solution is also good enough.

[00:17:20] **Susan Kish:** That's great. That's great. do you still engage with the ETH?

[00:17:27] **Petra Ehmann:** Yeah, on various levels, I think on a personal level, so friends of mine who I got to know at ETH, we're still in touch and that's very enriching, really deep conversations on tech on life, on society, on the future, how, yeah, we're now at an age where we should shape the future.

And it's our responsibility to ensure things go into the right direction. So on a personal level, but then also on a more professional level, obviously, ETH is at our doorstep, so to say, from Ringier. And there are some great programs or the AI Center, for instance, or I'm still in touch with a few other friends who are now professors.

And it's interesting to see what they're doing and learning on that professional, on that technical level what they're up to. So that's always enriching to hear.

[00:18:21] **Susan Kish:** Fabulous. Fabulous. It feels like there are two passion topics, if I can call that. One is around education and inspiring the next generation, and one is around diversity.

So one of the things I read on your resume was that you were engaged and on the board for Technorama. Now, for anybody who didn't grow up with little kids in Switzerland, they may not know that Technorama is like the coolest place on a Saturday when it rains.

My recollection is it's a hands on science museum. That really encourages kids of a pretty wide range of ages to roll up their sleeves and get messy and ask questions and try things. And it's been around since something like the 1940s. It's very cool. So how did you get engaged and why did you get engaged?

[00:19:12] **Petra Ehmann:** I think my first touchpoints with the Technorama, they stem back quite a bit. At high school, we did an excursion, and I remember that we could roam around through those hallways and see, or do different experiments and

see physics or natural sciences. And experience that. And why I engage there is because looking forward with all the labor shortages that we're facing, we need more people in crucial disciplines.

And the STEM fields are crucial disciplines. So I hope to contribute to get more girls and boys choose technical studies. I hope that with my work I can, help the technorama to redesign in a certain way that more young folks will decide, Hey, actually, this is really cool what happens in physics, or, electrical engineering, or computer science.

I hope we can inspire them to pick and choose one of those subjects.

[00:20:17] **Susan Kish:** Fantastic. And I have very fond memories of that place.

[00:20:22] **Petra Ehmann:** Yeah, because you can experience it too, right? You not only see it, but you can actually do those experiments yourself.

[00:20:30] **Susan Kish:** yeah. And just like role models, it's a way of giving people Access, giving them the sense they too can do this, right? That it isn't something locked away in an ivory tower or something that people in other countries do. They can do it regardless of their gender, their race, whatever.

[00:20:50] **Petra Ehmann:** Exactly. And oftentimes I hear people say, Oh I'm not good at math. I can't do this. It's too complicated. I'm not so intelligent. But actually, the technorama is made in a way that you can comprehend it and that's I think a very hopeful message that you just need to start engaging with it and then you'll, you get a sense and how it works and, yeah, it's not that remote as people often pretend it to be.

[00:21:19] **Susan Kish:** Petra, one of the organizations I read about that you have supported is We Shape Tech. Can you tell us a bit more about who We Shape Tech is and what is their mission?

[00:21:30] **Petra Ehmann:** So sure. We shape tech is an association for greater diversity in tech. And our mission is that we bring in more women into tech, but also we retain those women who are in tech, that they stay there. I'm obviously as an engineer by training, but also if I just look back at my last meetings that I had this week there are so many instances where I'm the only woman who sits at the table.

[00:21:58] **Susan Kish:** Still the only woman.

[00:21:59] **Petra Ehmann:** still and we have the ambition that we want to create a change here. We want to inspire other women that come in. And at one point I convinced Iris Bohnet, a Harvard professor on gender equality.

[00:22:16] **Susan Kish:** the best.

[00:22:17] **Petra Ehmann:** She is so friendly, so knowledgeable, so generous. Yeah

[00:22:23] **Susan Kish:** And what was the name of her book again? It was called

[00:22:26] **Petra Ehmann:** What Works?

[00:22:27] **Susan Kish:** What Works. Fabulous.

[00:22:28] **Petra Ehmann:** What Works.

Why did you invite Iris to the board? Or why were you an advocate for adding Iris Bohnet?

Because, touching upon what I mentioned before, Bringing evidence and facts is one of the things that yeah, still probably influenced me from ETH. I wanted to have her as somebody who can tell us which initiatives will really move the needle.

And bringing in the evidence that she and her teams and other researchers actually gathered.

And so she for instance advised us that we should focus on role models. predominantly because they influence what others will do. So seeing is believing. And if you see another woman stand up and being the CEO of a startup, or if you see another woman who is director in product management,

[00:23:28] **Susan Kish:** Head of engineering.

[00:23:29] **Petra Ehmann:** Head of engineering, exactly.

That triggers something because at one point you start to identify yourself with that person and think. If she can do it, I should try it,

[00:23:40] **Susan Kish:** I can.

[00:23:41] **Petra Ehmann:** Exactly. And that's, yeah, that's what we wanted to do.

[00:23:45] **Susan Kish:** I'd love to thank you for your time and to close with some questions we ask most of our guests. Is that okay?

[00:23:52] **Petra Ehmann:** Sure.

[00:23:53] **Susan Kish:** Fantastic. So first off, books, we already talked about Iris Bohnet's book: What Works. What else is on your bed stand or on your Kindle or that you are reading right now?

[00:24:05] **Petra Ehmann:** One book that I recently read was Radical Candor, from Kim Scott. Obviously very well written, but also very practical on what you can apply to have frank conversation at work and lead with a certain degree of authenticity.

[00:24:26] **Susan Kish:** How about podcasts? Do you listen to Podcasts very much?

[00:24:29] **Petra Ehmann:** I used to listen to podcasts way more than I do right now. But I still do. Especially because I think it's great that Yeah, you can listen to them while you're commuting, or while you're in the kitchen, or while you're on the bike, etc. I love Pivot with Kara Swisher and Scott Galloway. I love the tone that they have,

It feels like you're sitting right next to them. It has a very personal touch. I like In Depth, which is about startups, and learning from successful startup founders, but also startup members on their growth journey. I like Masters of Scale.

[00:25:13] **Susan Kish:** Oh yes. With Reid Hoffman, right?

[00:25:15] **Petra Ehmann:** Exactly.

[00:25:16] **Susan Kish:** When you're living in Zurich and you work so close to the lake, what is your favorite place to hang out if you have a choice?

[00:25:24] **Petra Ehmann:** I think for me, the view is always important. A place with a view up on a hill, on the ETH terrace, that's beautiful.

[00:25:35] **Susan Kish:** And when you were young, when you were growing up in La Paz, what did you want to be when you grew up?

[00:25:42] **Petra Ehmann:** Oh, it changed tremendously. I think when I was a teenager, at one point, I decided I wanted to become a pilot. And I'm actually very glad it didn't work out. I wouldn't have enjoyed being on the road every day. Having the world, yeah, or visiting the world. That's something, a passion that I still have.

[00:26:03] **Susan Kish:** If you had to say what the top three places are you'd like to visit that you haven't been in, lived in, studied in, or grown up in, what would those three places be?

[00:26:16] **Petra Ehmann:** Tough question. I think a place that is still missing is definitely Africa. I've been to Morocco, but not to many other countries. So I think, I heard good things about Namibia. The desert must be amazing. So I would love to see that. Tanzania might also be interesting, but rather because I would like to go kitesurfing on Zanzibar. And,

[00:26:40] **Susan Kish:** Such a great name. Zanzibar just, it makes you shiver.

[00:26:44] **Petra Ehmann:** It sounds so tropical. And then I think some very remote islands in the Southern Pacific that sounds just lovely. Just being completely detached and remote for a certain while.

[00:26:56] **Susan Kish:** Fantastic. Fantastic. Petra, thank you so much again. It's been a pleasure.

[00:27:02] **Petra Ehmann:** You're welcome. It was a joy.

[00:27:11] **Susan Kish:** I'm Susan Kish, host of the We Are ETH series, telling the story the alumni and friends of the ETH Zurich, 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, please subscribe to this podcast and join us wherever you listen and give us a good rating on Spotify or Apple.

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