

# WE ARE ETH – Episode 34

## With Anne Scherer, ETH Alumna, Co-Founder of Delta Labs AG and author of the book *You & AI*

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**[00:00:00] Anne Scherer:** In a personal sense, it actually has become more and more important to me in the last couple of months to increase that kind of AI literacy in our society, to communicate these very complex things in a more easy way so everybody can engage in that discussion in an informed manner.

**[00:00:20] Susan Kish:** In this episode, I'm talking with ETH alumna, a lecturer and postdoc, Anne Scherer, co founder of Delta Labs AG, and author of the book, *You & AI*, published in 2023. This is the We Are ETH podcast, and I'm Susan Kish, your host. And I have to say the best part about reading your bio was the list of what you did after your dissertation. Scuba diving in the Red Sea, climbing 5, 200 stairs at the Adams Peak in Sri Lanka, cooking in Ho Chi Minh, swimming with the sharks in French Polynesia, cycling in Easter Island, tubing down the Amazon River or some river in Bolivia.

Oh my gosh, that sounds like an amazing voyage, what was your inspiration and how did you just take the globe and figure out all the 25 places you wanted to go?

**[00:01:16] Anne Scherer:** That's actually a good question going on a trip around the world has already been on the back of my hat for a really long time. I've always loved

to travel and explore new places and I did it exactly after my Ph. D. and that was like the perfect time to go because it's you are in depth in one very particular topic, very much focused and it felt like you need a face to open up and see the world and explore new things and get that new inspiration, so that was a very long dream already throughout my PhD to do that. So it's been a long process and the one thing I remember about planning the journey is that I decided that it had to be Bora Bora.

So Bora Bora is an island on French Polynesia and I'd read about it and it's like the furthest you can go from Germany or Switzerland. So I figured this has to be on a trip when you go around the world because it's really hard to go there otherwise.

So we planned everything around that, so actually from Bora Bora it's really good to stop on the Easter islands and all that came along. And in the end, it was very diverse, lots of different nature, landscape, cities, cultures, and that has been extremely inspiring to see.

[00:02:29] **Susan Kish:** So can you connect the dots between that trip, that exploration and your exploration around technology? Cause it does seem you do a lot of work in the area where human behavior and human psychology intersects with all of these emerging technologies. How do those two lines connect?

[00:02:47] **Anne Scherer:** So I think what I really like to do in general is taking different perspectives and putting them together. I think that is a common theme throughout my life. And in research, it's been very much on, having that psychological lens and looking at that through that at technology and how do humans interact with technology, how does design of technology effect behaviories, trust in AI , et cetera. And all that is also what I do in my free time, I love to explore new things, try out new things and see a world through different lenses and understand it better and challenge myself and my own beliefs along the way, which I think is a very important aspect and I think traveling really helps to do that because you see different cultures that have different values, et cetera, and seeing the world through these different lenses can be really inspiring and also eye opening and making yourself aware of your own bubble.

[00:03:40 ] **Susan Kish:** So in other words, a nice little dose of humility as well as everything else.

[00:03:44] **Anne Scherer:** Yeah.

[00:03:46] **Susan Kish:** Really interesting. Now, speaking of the other end from Bora, a few weeks ago, you were up at the WEF, and in addition to getting that very cool pink hat from the AI stand, which looked great, what were your big takeaways?

It sounds like AI was really front and center in terms of many of the conversations there.

[00:04:05] **Anne Scherer:** First off, it was really inspiring to see the AI house first time at the WEF and it was already crowded, everybody's standing there and pushing each other through the corridors. So there's huge interest that you could just see by the crowd of people that were there but also, there's something different, there's something really big ahead of us that kind of left me and people talking about this pace of development at the moment, AI is nothing new and we've talked about it for so many years, but in the past year, since the, especially since the introduction of ChatGPT, the whole discussions and the rate of development has just sparked. And that was also a feeling that I had during the WEF and at the AI house that people were underlining, this time, this generative AI, there's so much we can do, it can automate so many, also very mundane back office processes, so it's affecting everyone essentially. But it's also becoming a lot easier to use, so the hurdles to interact with AI are becoming less and less. So yeah, I think my takeaway was we can expect to be surprised within the next year and the rate of development that we'll be seeing, but it was very inspiring to see all that, the many people that are so enthusiastic about what AI can do for individuals, but also for society at large.

[00:05:30] **Susan Kish:** So whenever I hear that kind of description, I always think of that, what is it called, the Gartner hype cycle, that sort of trough and that arch going up there of, oh my god, it's going to solve the world's problems. And you're absolutely right, we've been talking about AI for what? 10, 15, 20 years and that lovely line between machine learning and AI that whatever, I can never quite figure out where they go. Is this and those valuations, some of these companies are raising it and the size of their routes are just mind boggling, is this just another hype and we'll settle? Or is this actually world changing?

[00:06:13] **Anne Scherer:** This is a very tough question. I agree with you that there's lots of technological developments also that I've seen throughout my career, I was just thinking about the metaverse since you mentioned the hype cycle, right?

So two years ago, it's all about the metaverse and we got so many questions from companies. Should we move into the metaverse? How do we do that? How do we interact with customers in the metaverse? And now nobody's talking about it anymore.

[00:06:37] **Susan Kish:** Can you imagine being the person who rebranded Facebook as Meta? Oops.

[00:06:41] **Anne Scherer:** Yep. Yep. Yep. That was a tough decision and now, yeah they also mentioned that they want to move more into generative AI now.

[00:06:48] **Susan Kish:** What a surprise.

[00:06:50] **Anne Scherer:** Definitely a change that we can see. I think generative AI however, is different in several regards and one of the key components being what I mentioned before, the hurdles to using this technology are extremely low.

If you think about OpenAI's GPT models, they've been around for more than this past year, but this past year has been the big change where everybody, even in the media, is talking about it and the big difference was ChatGPT. So now we have a very simple chat interface that people can use to interact with an AI.

So even my parents use it and they're not very technology enthusiastic or all about AI. Now you can easily interact with it, this is one thing and the other aspect I think that is different now is how diverse you can use this technology. So it's not like a, if you think about it in the past, you had an AI that was optimized to perform chess or play chess. But now we have, for instance, these large language models were basically trained on all of the internet, right? The language. (S: This is breathtaking) And language is the basis of so many things, so you can use this technology for your vacation planner, right? So I actually tested for my next vacation route, where to go, ChatGPT is really helpful.

So on the one hand, you can use it very easily and on the other, you can use it for so many different things.

[00:08:12] **Susan Kish:** Can you tell us about your book? You & AI. It's a, what a great title first of all, you and I, you and AI, just I'd love to, to hear about it.

[00:08:24] **Anne Scherer:** So we published a book last year in April, it was a joint project with my former PhD student, Cindy Kandrian who also did research and I supervised her in the area of trust in AI. My personal motivation was I knew that my time at UZH in academia as an assistant professor was coming to an end. For me, this was also a closing, trying to recapture all the research that I did.

But another motivation was also very personal, so my parents never really knew what I did so whenever they were asked about what's your daughter doing? It's something like robotics something with technology and I felt I have to communicate very simply and easily what I'm doing. So the idea was that this book is not for a scientific audience, but for a general audience and telling them what it is about AI, trying to simplify terms and explain these concepts in a very engaging way and also highlight this intersection that I've been focusing on this psychological components, so how do we interact with AI on a daily basis? Maybe there's lots of AI tools that we're not even aware of that were already interacting on a day to day basis and what are companies doing in AI design that affects the way we interact with these interfaces.

So trying to make people more aware of what's going on in this field and also trying to reduce that fear of technology and AI is something too complex or too technical to get everybody on board to have that discussion about AI, which I think in a personal sense it actually has become more and more important to me in the last couple of months to increase that kind of AI literacy in our society, to communicate these very complex things in a more easy way, so everybody can engage in that discussion in an informed manner.

[00:10:22] **Susan Kish:** I listened to your TED talk, the one in 2020, you did a TEDx in Zurich, and one of your prime hypotheses seems to be that in some way, because of the absence of some social standards, people are sometimes more honest. And you give some wonderful illustrative anecdotes to make that point that I'd love to hear you talk through.

But do you think this is becoming more front and center, this question about trust and comfort with AI than it was before?

[00:10:54] **Anne Scherer:** Yes, I think the whole discussion about trust in AI is extremely important. What I experienced though, it often very quickly goes into this whole discussion about data, but our focus has been more on the design and this is what I've also been discussing in my TED talk, the design of the technology or the interaction with AI influences very much on which kind of mental rules or heuristics we apply in that interaction. So sometimes if I humanize technology more, I will simply, and very mindlessly apply social rules to my interaction with AI or any other technology that is, but what we're saying in that tech talk is that sometimes do not actually want to humanize technology as much, and you want to make sure that people know this is a machine because then they do not apply the social rule and in this case, we were talking about impression management, right? Or the fear of social evaluation, which we typically have with other humans, so we try to present ourselves in the best positive light. We don't want to look like a fool and this sometimes makes it very hard for us to open up and talk about sensitive topics, and this is where technology can be really helpful.

What actually inspired my research in that area was I was invited to the California Institute of Technology and they had a project jointly with the US Army and they developed this digital therapist for soldiers because what they observed is initially whenever soldiers come back from combat, they typically, they are interviewed, but typically in these interviews, they would state all is fine, I'm good nothing to worry about, but whenever they introduced that digital therapist, what they observed is that now they open up more easily and they were reporting more nightmares, they were reporting that they had more or higher anxiety levels, things like that. And we wanted to take that a step further if you have a technology that people interact with, does it even make a difference on how humanized that technology is? And with humanized, there's many different components that you can use using when we think about language, using speed, disfluency is a way to humanize. So for instance, aha oh yeah these things are very human. It's a social component of our language that you can use to humanize that interaction and simply introducing such little elements cues us to apply more social rules. And then we have, again, we have more impression management and people do not open up as easily, so we were focused more on the technology design.

If you think about it in social interactions, right? Again, we present ourselves in the best positive light and sometimes it's when you observe children, they blurred out things and very sensitive things and do not consider that these social norms and these, this fear of social evaluation yet and that also inspired us to, oh, this is interesting.

Yeah. So when do we, the question was to understand when do we open up more easily, more honestly and the result was that sometimes, letting the machine be a machine can be very helpful in that regard.

[00:14:16] **Susan Kish:** You got your PhD with distinction at the Technical University of Munich, and then if I understand correctly, when your professor moved from Munich to the ETH, he asked you to join him and to do some of your postdoc and lecturing there. What kind of research and postdoc research were you doing when you were at the ETH and what kind of lectures?

I'm just trying to understand a bit more about what your ETH experience was like and what it involved.

[00:14:44] **Anne Scherer:** Sure. So it's very positive to put it very shortly. For me, it's been very inspiring, so I've been coming from a technical background already at the technical university I've been doing lots of projects on self service technology back then, long time ago, the self checkout kiosk. What if customers interact more with technology than humans?

And of course that has evolved quite a bit also at ETH. So the technology that we were looking at was quite a bit more advanced and we were developing our own chat bots, online recommender systems to see when do people trust these recommendations? How do we design these technological interfaces? How does that affect consumers trust?

So the chatbot study I initially mentioned with when do we open up more easily, that was also something we did during that time and the interesting and very inspiring aspect for me at ETH was it's it has a very good combination of deep theoretical research on

the one hand, but still, the cool thing was we had all these applications, so we developed our own chatbot. We try to do our own recommender systems. So the experiments we did were also very realistic and not just in a theory or giving people a scenario to think about, but very applied and that was very inspiring. So we had lots of collaborations also with industry partners where ETH is very well connected, obviously in Zurich, but also there's lots of entrepreneurial spirit startups that want to do something, so we collaborated a lot with them when they had an online recommender system and use that to test our theory.

[00:16:24] **Susan Kish:** So how did those years and that experience, how did it prepare you for what you're doing now?

[00:16:30] **Anne Scherer:** Probably the whole entrepreneurial spirit was very much influenced through my time at ETH because I was seeing and working with so many startups that especially at ETH, there's so many cool engineers that have developed a new material or they have developed a new recommender system, or so, so there's so many inspiring minds running around with cool ideas on how to improve society and the world and all the problems that we're seeing.



And that kind of, that feeling is for you use your theoretical knowledge to help society to further that and put that into startup ideas and put it out there in the world, I think this whole mindset was leading up to what I'm doing now with Delta Labs.

[00:17:11] **Susan Kish:** So actually applying it and making a difference. And if anyone wants to become AI literate, what would you recommend that they do?

[00:17:21] **Anne Scherer:** With the news that are coming out, I know this is a very fast paced at the moment, but maybe find some good newsletters also from the universities there's good offers that they keep the research highlights and give you a short update on what's going on. Having a few newsletters that you're subscribed to podcasts like this one to keep up to date and then trying things out chat GPT, et cetera, like I mentioned initially.

They're very easy to use at the moment, a low hurdle, so trying things out and getting hands on experience, I think is also important.

[00:17:56] **Susan Kish:** So I'm going to be more specific about this. What kind of podcasts? What are the podcasts? What are the books? What are the apps? And I'm asking this because we often have a comment section at the bottom when we publish these and if we have specific recommendations, we should go ahead and make them.

[00:18:11] **Anne Scherer:** Very easy answer.

[00:18:13] **Susan Kish:** You & AI, let me guess.

[00:18:16] **Anne Scherer:** Yes, you can read my book. Obviously, it's very easily written, so even if you're not a technical expert in AI, I can totally recommend this book. A book that I can also recommend that was very inspiring to me, but is actually quite old already but a lot of the predictions made in this book still apply today is the book, the second machine age.

So this is a book that inspired very much. Yes on my research in this area, podcast series, obviously your podcast. I think from the ones that I've listened to, it's extremely helpful to get an overview of these different areas of the top minds of ETH, and you learn a lot about these different entrepreneurs, researchers, and what they're doing.

So this is definitely a very. Good podcast to pay (attention to).

[00:19:03] **Susan Kish:** I love recommendations for We Are ETH. That's greatly appreciated. Other things that you're reading these days, other areas that captured your curiosity.

[00:19:13] **Anne Scherer:** Actually the whole art space is something I've not focused so much on previously, but now all the discussion that we just mentioned with artists

and using their artwork to train a generative AI with for mid journey and all these different tools that has actually sparked a lot of my interest. This intersection on AI and creativity, can AI be creative?

What does it mean to be creative? That's something inherently human ? So this is a very new perspective for me. What does it mean to be human in the end of AI can do that? And yeah, that's a very interesting discussion to go and dive further into.

[00:19:56] **Susan Kish:** So when you were a little girl, what did you want to be when you grew up?

[00:20:01] **Anne Scherer:** I remember when I was in, I think it was second grade, I wrote into a school paper that I always wanted to be a sea architect, so underwater architect.

[00:20:12] **Susan Kish:** Very cool. Anne thank you so much for your time and your conversation and your insights. Really appreciate it.

[00:20:18] **Anne Scherer:** Thank you for having me.

[00:20:21] **Susan Kish:** I'm Susan Kish, host of the We Are ETH podcast series, telling the story of the alumni and friends of the ETH Zurich, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology. ETH regularly ranks amongst the top institutions and universities in the world with cutting edge research, science, and people.

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