ilLUminate Blog Transcript: Brita Turner ’04 on AI and Your Career

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STEPHANIE VETO: 00:18	Welcome to ilLUminate, the podcast for Lehigh University's College of Business. I'm your host, Stephanie Veto. Today we're talking with Brita Turner. She's this year's Donald M. Gruhn Distinguished Finance Speaker Series guest. Turner is a 2004 graduate of Lehigh's College of Business, and she's the global head of M&A integration at eBay.
VETO: 00:39	Hi, Brita. Welcome to the podcast.
BRITA TURNER: 00:41	Hi. Thanks for having me today.
VETO: 00:43	Let's start with your Lehigh story. What did you study, and what career were you interested in pursuing?
TURNER: 00:50	Sure. So I studied on primarily finance and corporate finance. So when I came to Lehigh, there was a set of business majors that interested me, which is why I came to the campus. Not only was it absolutely gorgeous and beautiful, but there were quite a few very interesting classes that interested me within the finance domain. So that's what I focused on primarily.
VETO: 01:15	What would you tell students who feel pressure to have their entire careers figured out before they even graduate?
TURNER: 01:21	Oh, that it's not even possible. Gosh. So when I was looking for roles as an undergrad, I really had limited kind of understanding of what all the career pathing options were that you could move into within business. So I had done an internship in accounting and realized at that point that accounting was probably not the right fit for me. And so I spent a lot of time in career services exploring all the different options of what a finance major could look like. And I accepted an offer to go work in management consulting at IBM from a Lehigh grad and partner for the sole reason of being able to get exposure to multiple different companies and industries, simply because the reason I just wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do. And so management consulting was a great entrance way into the business world to see the various aspects, learn about the various functions, see different industries. I went from media and entertainment, which sounded really fun, and I was on Fox Studios premises in LA to Sony BMG in downtown New York City.
TURNER: 02:33	So I got exposure to a lot of great companies, which helped shape the thinking of where I could go with my finance undergrad. Although I didn't plan my career pathing, I did look into what would interest me next. So from IBM consulting, I really loved corporate strategy. So I went and got an MBA in corporate strategy and then loved digital, so at IBM, I also spent a lot of time in the technology space. And that was a good bridge into the digital and the e-commerce world. And just one role at a time, just thinking about what I enjoyed doing, what did I wake up excited about, what was I passionate about, and then taking a look at roles that kind of satisfied that curiosity, and that's how I got where I am today. If I were to look back sitting in career services in 2004, I would have absolutely no comprehension of where I am today or

how I got to where I am today. It was just a combination of different interests, passions, and learnings along the way and then being willing to pivot and move to different locations and explore and talk to a lot of alumni of what were the options of what you could do.

VETO: 03:48 What I'm hearing is that while you were in school, you really took advantage of as many opportunities within your potential field as you could to get a [inaudible] of. So would you say to students to just explore all aspects of that field, so you learn more about it while you're in school?

TURNER: 04:10 I think that's so important. So going to a lot of info sessions for companies when they're on campus, reaching out to alumni for any role that sounds interesting or company that sounds interesting just to ask them, "What do you do day-to-day?" right, makes it really tangible. My parents come from the medical field, and so, going into the business field, I didn't have someone directly in my family who could say, "Here's what a CMO does," or "Here's what a CFO does day-to-day." So it took a little bit of exploring in order to make sense of what these roles really meant and what companies really did and where I would fit into it and kind of what the expectations were of what I did day-to-day, and it was really important to me that it was something that I enjoyed. And so spending more time upfront, asking alumni, going to info sessions, asking in classes, doing business cases, joining clubs, studying abroad, those are all experiences that will help you contextualize more kind of what is it that you enjoy doing and what are you good at and being able to put the two together to formulate a hypothesis of what does that career pathing look like?

VETO: 05:24 Describe your role at eBay.

TURNER: 05:26 Sure. So right now, I am the global head of M&A integration. So I am responsible for our mergers and acquisition programs. So when we acquire a company, make a strategic investment in a company, or divest a company, we work on ways to integrate the back office functions, so finance, people, technology, into eBay as well as realize value of the deal, which could be synergies or value drivers. So what are ways that we can make-- we call it "one plus one equals three," right, which is all the ways that we can leverage eBay's scale, capacity, talent, knowledge, and expertise to help accelerate the growth of a company that we're acquiring. And so my role is to make sure that we are standing up that infrastructure for the company to succeed with, but also help identify the ways in which eBay can help scale and accelerate their growth in business using all the capabilities that we have, from payments to marketing and more. So that's what I focus on. It's fun. It's interesting. I get to travel. I get to meet a lot of new companies. I get to work with founders, and I get to help businesses grow, which is really, really fun.

VETO: 06:44 When did AI become something that you started paying attention to professionally?

TURNER: 06:50 That's a great question. So, throughout my career, I've been involved in various levels of digital transformation, right? So whether it's deciding when to offer or sell on a website. So 15 years ago, when I was studying abroad in France, I was helping Cartier think about, "Do you sell products online?" And then we went through an era of mobile apps and the importance of introducing mobile experiences. And so there's been various trends throughout my career that take a look at how can technology enable business transformation and optimization, and I think AI is one of the newest trends, right, that is becoming really interesting. And so I started paying closer attention to AI probably two or three years ago and really thinking about how can it help enable and accelerate my day-to-day work. So just starting with fundamentals, both professionally and personally, how can I plan a trip and make it easier? How can I think about buying a car? I bought a new car, and AI helped me do research on it. And then, bridging it into the professional experience, how can I use it to help write emails or help with calendaring or help summarize a business case or help build a valuation model? And so really starting to play with it and see how quickly it moves and advances, and how much room it can help you in your career day to day. So I've really fully adopted AI at this point. It's something that within Silicon Valley is incredibly important to pay attention to and to make sure that you are up on the latest and greatest trends and you understand the capabilities, but also the corporate social responsibility that comes along with it, which makes it a very interesting topic this week [laughter] to discuss in more detail, but one that I've been spending a lot of time engaging with, playing with, navigating with for a couple of years now, and I've really adopted various functionalities into my ways of working.

VETO: 08:58 Well, that leads really well into my next question, which is, how are you finding that balance of encouraging employees to use AI at eBay, but also making sure that they're being responsible with it?

TURNER: 09:12 All companies within Silicon Valley pretty much encourage their employees to actively engage in AI. So most companies in Silicon Valley have business partnerships and contracts with the largest AI providers for enterprise accounts, right, and encourage their employees to openly use AI, again, both in their professional and their personal lives. And so every organization has a team specifically dedicated to regulatory oversight, compliance, and builds and embeds the roles in the way that you operate day to day.

TURNER: 09:50 But really important to note that, as an individual using any form of digital technology or tools, that you have a sense of responsibility yourself to make sure that you are really reviewing the data and information you're getting, making sure it's accurate before you forward it on or share it, making sure that you are cognizant and aware of the technology that you're using, and that you're sharing learnings with others across the board.

TURNER: 10:19 And so keeping track of where we are with the regulations that are ever-changing is important, and understanding the role of human intervention and the role that you play in setting the strategy and making sure that you are comfortable with the results is incredibly important. So AI is a tool that can accelerate the way that you work day to day, but it has to be managed responsibly. And it's up to the individual and the enterprise to make sure that the correct rules and boundaries are put into place.

VETO: 10:54 How should AI factor into decision-making for a student trying to decide what career to pursue?

TURNER: 11:01 Oh, yeah, that's a great point. So I think AI, based on the types of prompts that you use, can be a huge enabler to understanding the various fields, career paths, as well as open jobs within the space today, and probably can do it at a much more accelerated pace than an individual can do kind of going one by one. So even if you were to just start with a prompt that just says, "Hey, I'm interested in finance. Can

	you help me find all the jobs out there?" right, and then you can have a two-way conversation, which I think is really unique with AI versus a chat bot, right, or a Google search, is that you can have that two-way conversation.
TURNER: 11:40	And you can say, "I want to customize my search." And then it'll say back to you, "Well, what are the specific areas of interest for you?" And you can write back and say, "I'm really interested in P&L management, and I'm interested in the ROI line item or the revenue line item or the COGS." And it can say back to you, "Well, you might then want to go into FP&A," right, because FP&A might be the right fit. And maybe you don't want to go into accounting, but you can talk to AI about different fields and professions, ask questions, then ask it to do a search for you on all the open roles that might be out there. Ask it for the criteria of what you would need to be considered for that role. You can also ask it to help you update your resume to make sure that your resume is relevant and tailored for that role as well as cover letters. You could probably put your offer letter in there and see if you think it's a fair offer letter and what feedback should you then go back to negotiate because you should always be negotiating your offer letter. So there's probably a huge amount that you can use day to day, which could be very beneficial in helping you with your job search.
VETO: 12:44	How has it changed the way you think about your own career?
TURNER: 12:48	AI specifically?
VETO: 12:48	Yes.
TURNER: 12:49	Oh. Well, I think when I think about AI in my career trajectory, I kind of think of it as another element of digital transformation, right, one in which is kind of an overarching theme of managing change. So in your career, I think you will find or I have found that every year or two, you're going to be thrown another curveball. So it could be another change in technology, another trend, another customer demographic you need to manage. And so not specific to AI, but just more specifically to how you choose to manage change and how you choose to adopt change is incredibly important. And the pace of change is frequent, and it's fast. And it takes time to learn new trends and new elements of technology. And I think it's important to take time to learn them, to identify and recognize how they can help or harm you and decide how you want to engage. But the trend will continue, right, and the digital disruption will certainly continue, right. And so it's important that you try to keep pace with the new technology and innovation along the way and then make sure you identify the risks and how to make the best practice and make it ethical and make it human. That is the best role that I think an individual can play in that space overall. So I use AI day to day for productivity tools, for collaboration. I'm sure if I was looking for a new job, I would probably use AI to help me with that. But more than anything, I think it helps you accelerate the volume of work and manage the volume of work that you have on a day-to-day basis, which just keeps growing. And so the question is, how do you continue to be a relevant candidate and employee both through learning and adopting the technology and tools, communicating the viability of them, and making sure that you're keeping pace with how quickly business is running today?
VETO: 14:56	That sort of goes into my next question, but I want you to elaborate a little bit more on what you were talking about because there is that fear that AI is taking our jobs or

certain jobs or positions are going to become obsolete because of AI. And so how do you think a young professional can use AI as a strength rather than a competition?

TURNER: 15:19 Sure. I mean, AI is going to be a really important differentiator for new generations getting ready to graduate because you are so digitally native and familiar and comfortable with using all forms of digital technology in such a seamless way that there is so much innovation and ideas that you can bring in to companies to help them advance their own thinking and adoption of both digital and AI capabilities. So I would say there's an immense opportunity out there to adopt and learn the tools and think about the ways that you can contribute to your employers.

VETO: 16:02 Do you think that it's going to become, or maybe it already is, a basic skill?

TURNER: 16:10 Absolutely. Being able to fundamentally use AI for day-to-day productivity is a basic skill today. Granted, I come to you from Silicon Valley, right? So I'm coming to you from one of the most innovative cities in the world where we have robots that deliver lunch and robot dogs and all sorts of things, right? So I'm in a bit of a bubble, but I don't see how I could operate day to day without AI anymore. And I don't necessarily think that AI is going to take all the jobs. We've kind of seen this pendulum swing in Silicon Valley where we went from, "Let's eliminate jobs and roles because AI is going to replace people," to now hiring those roles back because what we've all realized is that AI needs to be managed, right? So someone needs to provide the critical thinking and the strategic direction and guidance for the prompts. Someone needs to iterate with the prompts, and then somebody needs to review the results of the prompts and let it kind of snap into the business operations and the ways of working. So AI can't solve all of our problems, and AI can't do all of our work for us. It's just another tool that you can use to help accelerate what you're doing day to day and help you manage your day-to-day operations.

TURNER: 17:30 And there's a lot you can get out of it by using the right prompts. And the pace at which it's moving is incredible. And so creating videos or content a year ago might have been really difficult, and you could probably string together a whole TV ad or social media ad within an hour right now. And that doesn't mean you replace your social media experts. It means that you can push out 100 ads a day that are highly customized to your audience as opposed to developing and putting out one to two ads, right? So that only benefits your end consumer and creates the experience that you want to have for the customer today.

VETO: 18:11 I love that you said that you are in a sort of AI bubble because you are experiencing it at a different level than maybe most of the rest of the country. And so from someone personally who doesn't frequently use AI that much, hearing in the news about its rapid growth is concerning from outside looking in, and hearing a lot of folks raise the red flag about the concerns about the rapid growth of AI can be frightening for some people who aren't familiar with it too much, or even young professionals that need to get a job when they graduate. Does any of it make you pause?

TURNER: 19:06 Oh, of course, right? With any new technology, you have to have the right infrastructure, policies, compliance, regulations, and rules, right? So we need to make sure that our infrastructure can keep up with the pace of innovation. And right now, I think we're trying to figure that out, right? I don't have the answer. It's just in the news this week that the CEOs of various enterprises in the AI space are saying we probably do need to slow the pace of innovation so that regulatory can keep up. And I think that's a really healthy debate and conversation to have for any new and evolving technology, right? And so this is a good time to have a conversation and a healthy debate about what should regulations look like to prevent harm. Now, at the same time, that doesn't mean turn off ChatGPT, right? Those are two very separate and distinct conversations. I think you have the way you or I might operate or use ChatGPT on a day-to-day basis, like to plan trips and help write emails and help me finish my business case. That's very different from what we're talking about at the regulatory or legislative level, which is more about innovation like enabling AI to autonomously create the next generation of AI. Right? That is a little bit scary. And that probably should be regulated a bit more. And so I think two distinct conversations on adopting and learning AI as it's available today for public consumption, right, is important, right, and critical to stay pace with the job market and what employers will be looking for, separate from having much more strategic and blue-sky conversations on what should we allow AI to do, right, when it comes to kind of owning the orders of operations, right. So we can control the human element is incredibly important and need to retain that and keep that intact so that we can harness the power but not lose control of what we're doing.

VETO: 21:18

I love, too, that we're learning a lot about the AI development lingo like AI agents and things like that, where you're like, "Oh, this is all--" it's very Terminator-esque to me.

TURNER: 21:28

It's not as intimidating as it seems. It really, really isn't. It's actually easier than using the Google search bar because you can go in, and you can just have a conversation with it like you would a friend. You just say, "Hey, I'm looking for this." And they'll be like, "What color are you looking for?" And you're like, "I want purple." "Oh, what size do you want?" "I want a size 10." So it's actually-- once you kind of start identifying different tools for different purposes, there's a lot of benefit of using the tools, right. But I think it's-- I can imagine it is very intimidating, right. And there's a lot of interesting conversations and debates happening right now, all of which are incredibly important.

VETO: 22:13

Finally, I asked an AI platform, if it had the opportunity to ask you one question, what would it be, and this is the question: what do you think humans are going to be uniquely valuable for in a world where AI can increasingly do the things we currently consider skilled work? And how should people start developing those qualities now?

TURNER: 22:38

I mean, I would say that the general skill sets that you learn in undergraduate or MBA like corporate strategy, collaboration, leadership, the human element of ethics, those are never going to go away, right? I think what's important is being able to direct ChatGPT to use the functions and functionality that can help you day to day. So it's just like using PowerPoint, right? You use PowerPoint to summarize your thoughts and ideas and articulate it, right? Think of AI as a very similar tool, right? It can help you summarize thoughts and ideas. It can help you get large amounts of industry research consolidated for you in an hour, right? So think of all the ways that you can use AI to your benefit.

TURNER: 23:27

But what AI can't do is it can't lead a company, right? It can't choose the acquisition or the company we're going to acquire. It can't tell the CEO," You're going to do a great job, and let's build our strategy together." Right? It's a tool that might be able to give you insights into the industry to help inform the strategy, but ultimately, you need to be directing that strategy. So focus on the skills related to leadership and collaboration and relationship building and responsibility and oversight and management, and those are the critical skill sets that remain important. And that's exactly the same from when I was an undergrad, right? It's the same skill sets. It's just a matter of how you use technology and enable technology to help you be more successful. So that's kind of how I view this.

TURNER: 24:17 And it's always scary whenever a brand-new technology comes out, like when the computers came out for the first time or the internet came out for the first time. It's all new, right, and it's unknown, and it's scary. But what's most important in my mind is figuring out what it means and how to use it, right? And once you're educated, then please do take a point of view on how we harness the power and how we regulate the power, right? But it's going to continue to evolve. I think AI is kind of here to stay for a while. And so figuring out how to use it is important. And then we'll be on to the next trend in digital and technology in 10 more years. Something new will come, and we'll go through the same curve.

VETO: 25:00 Brita, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today. It was great meeting you.

TURNER: 25:04 Great. Thank you. I really appreciate it. It's such a treat to be back on campus and meeting students and sharing a little bit about what I see and hear on a day-to-day basis. So thank you.

VETO: 25:15 Thank you.

VETO: 25:17 That was Brita Turner from the class of 2004 talking with us about using AI as a tool in one's career journey. And in case you were curious about why the AI asked its question, it said, "Because we're spending so much time asking, 'What can AI do?' But the more important question may be, 'What should humans be doing?'" This podcast is brought to you by IlLUminate, the Lehigh Business Blog. To hear more podcasts featuring Lehigh Business thought leaders or to follow us on social media, please visit business.lehigh.edu/news. This is Stephanie Veto, host of the IlLUminate podcast. Thanks for listening. [music]