

Navigating a Non-Linear Career with Ambika Nigam

[00:00:00] **Elyse:** Ambika, I'm so excited to talk to you. Thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today.

Ambika: Thank you so much for having me here. I'm so thrilled.

Elyse: So you had a super interesting career before you started Zeit, and I really would love to spend some time talking about what you were doing.

You've had so many different careers or career zigzags. Can you just give us a brief overview of what you've done?

Ambika: Yeah, I zigzags is a great way to put it. I kind of consider myself a career mutt. It's another way that I put it. I would say I'm on my fifth career now as an entrepreneur, but I started in finance.

Right after I graduated college. I was an analyst by day and my true passion was actually comedy. So I wanted to do standup comedy at night. And what I learned about myself was that there's a real stark difference in terms of being [00:01:00] a business analyst by day, and then exploring kind of the creative arts by night.

And as it turns out, you have to be really funny to be a comedian. So that also brought that portion of my career to a screeching halt, but it really led me to pursue more creative pastures in my career and what that meant as my next stint was going to Ogilvy and Mather for a marketing strategy role.

And I was really looking for an opportunity that was going to be more collaborative, going to give me exposure to people like designers, brainstorming new ideas. And I was able to join Ogilvy at a time where digital marketing was really born, Twitter, facebook came on the map, and it was really transferrable because having a lot of modeling skills, analytics skills was really relevant to a digital marketing role where analytics was critical for success. So at Ogilvy & Mather for a number of years, had a wonderful experience there and learned a lot about marketing, but got [00:02:00] more curious about how to affect product and in a broader sense, dreaming up new products, new features for companies.

And that's where I stumbled on IDEO. Which happened to be, I was in a Dwayne Reed in New York city and saw a Fast Company on, on the news stand and IDEO was on the cover. And it said, if you want to dream up new ideas, this is the company for you.

And I said, that's it. I got to go to IDEO then. This is my next place. So very similar, cold called my way to IDEO pitched myself. And I said, if you want somebody who can dream up new digital products, then you need someone who has digital marketing skills. You need someone who knows how to understand business modeling, financial modeling and I'm your girl.

So I worked my way into IDEO. And then from IDEO, I did a lot of media work during my time there, new disruptive innovation around media products. And that's what led me to really

kind of want to own my own portfolio of [00:03:00] products and really grow something kind of from a zero to one and see where things kind of break at scale.

And a friend introduced me to someone at Bloomberg media and that's how I ended up heading up product there. And really kind of sinking my teeth into a product management role. And now here I am, as an entrepreneur, but it's really kind of putting all of my skills together from marketing to business modeling and business sensibilities and certainly a lot of product and design.

So that was the zigzag that's kind of led me to career number five.

Elyse: Of course I really do want to dive in. For each of these, how did you get to the next thing? How did you get from finance to advertising? How did you get from advertising to product and what was kind of the thought process behind that?

Ambika: Yeah, It's such an important question that I think in terms, how do you get started? Right. And I think the, the problem that I faced was that I had no sense of my options. And I think [00:04:00] there's no, there's no discovery today. There is no place to really get started.

So that's what I struggled with the most was, where could I go next? And you know, who do you talk to? Job boards, LinkedIn wasn't even really around then, job boards were not helpful and kind of opening up the aperture and exploring where you could go with these really rich skills, right. Business skills, analytical skills.

So, you know, the impetus was really on me to do a lot of that discovery and at the time that meant talking to people that I knew . Starting with family, starting with friends, starting with friends friends, and just learning about what people were doing in different industries to better understand and kind of try on if that role was creative.

So, for me, creativity was the the North star that I was looking for, but I didn't know exactly what roles or companies would deliver on that. My dad worked for big management consulting firm, all of his [00:05:00] career. And he said, we use this great firm Ogilvy and Mather for our PR great firm really interesting, really creative people, you should talk to them. They're really creative people.

So, that was my discovery. It was like, okay, these are creative. And then the more I learned about advertising agency, I think there's probably resonates with you is, it was a creative space, back in the early two thousands, like copywriters designers, people that were making commercials and billboards and all the great teams that go along with it.

So. I basically went on this quest to learn about more about places like advertising agencies and in particular Ogilvy, what are the different verticals within Ogilvy. And that took a lot of work that took about, I would say 10 conversations to 12 conversations. My boyfriend at the time, my now husband, he introduced me to his friends who knew someone who knew someone who worked there.

And I really just tried to understand the different departments of the organization. And that's how I landed [00:06:00] on marketing strategy in particular, which was a new growing

discipline within Ogilvy. And it was really in the wheelhouse of, we're this group of really kind of nerdy, analytical business people who understand the business behind marketing and, and the strategic side of like how you position something, how you take dollars and how you allocate those dollars and work really closely with all of the different groups within the advertising agencies and the clients to present that strategy.

Finding that needle in the haystack was hard. It took a lot of work. But once I identified that it was really clear how to start pitching my experience to say well, here's why digital marketing yields so much in analysis and analytical thinking. And I have that analytical thinking and then I also demonstrated a passion for, you know, some of the more creative pieces of Ogilvy, which were like customer journey mapping and brainstorming new [00:07:00] ideas and channels to market to people. And the combination of those things is how I landed on that bridge and build that bridge for myself, between finance and marketing.

Elyse: Yeah. It sounds like a big part of it was, your father planted this initial seed of, Oh, maybe go be maybe an ad agency. But then it sounds like you talked to a lot of people. You had a lot of conversations, you did a lot of research, you sort of dove in and really try to learn a lot about the industry and what aspects of that industry might be a fit for your skills, but also allow you to kind of branch out a little bit. And I think it was using that, that made it really translatable when you finally had the opportunity to go in and pitch yourself. Does that sound like a correct summary?

Ambika: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. Those conversations, there's, there's a pattern there that I applied the same methodology to subsequent pivots, if you will. But that discovery, [00:08:00] those exploratory conversations were so critical in terms of me learning how to position my transferable skills by better understanding what these individuals were doing within the organization.

And also to just learn whether or not I was interested in what these roles were, if it was a good fit for me or not.

Elyse: And I imagine, like you said, you applied the same process to all of your later transitions. You started to have this thought that you wanted to think more, in terms of product and that led to IDEO and then owning your own products and that led to Bloomberg.

There's sort of an organic growth aspect to this. It was very similar for me too. When I worked in advertising, I had kind of a similar journey where it sort of felt like when you, the only tool you have is a hammer, everything is a nail .

And I was like, I can't just solve business problems by throwing more money at social media or at TV ads for this. I want to like get into the business side. So that's what led me to consulting and eventually to the [00:09:00] FBI.

So. It sounds like you had a lot of help from your immediate circle. You mentioned your father, you mentioned your husband. What other help did you get as you were kind of going through your career and what did your support system think of all of these changes that you were making?

Ambika: Yeah, absolutely. It was very unorthodox. I think at the time moving from a stable job in finance to, a lower, significantly lower paying job in advertising was just not something that people were really doing. And then similarly, making, I would say more of an adjacent move to, to IDEO.

I'm a first-generation I have wonderful parents and a great family. I'm first-generation Indian American, but they were, they're a bit more risk averse. So they're kind of like, well, what are you doing here? Shouldn't you just be kind of graduating in each of these like industries that you're in? You're just hopping around. So they were, ultimately they were supportive. Cause I think they knew that the drive for [00:10:00] me, as you alluded to was personal development. And a sense of personal fulfillment, really just making sure that I was evolving.

And in terms of people that helped me get there, I'll say this. At the end of the day only you can help yourself. And that doesn't mean there aren't tons of people that help you get there, but you have to know who those people can be, how to find them and, and how to cultivate them to help you get there.

So, for me, that meant each stint at, at Oppenheimer, when I was at Ogilvy, like I really developed relationships with my bosses, with my peers to help me self-reflect around like, Hey, like I think I think I'm about ready to kind of move off of marketing and think about like how to affect product a bit more.

What do you think made me good at that? And I basically leveraged people that I worked with to help me self-reflect, to help me better position my strengths, my weaknesses, and believe in [00:11:00] me, and sometimes that meant just helping me tell my story.

Sometimes that actually meant making an introduction to someone who could help me better understand the company like IDEO. So I'd say it was kind of a combination of past colleagues and coworkers as well as really just hustling to get an introduction to someone. Like making every conversation, turn into another conversation, but like, got it. I see what you're trying to do. And you should meet my friend or my friend's friend and, and really expanding my network that way.

Elyse: Yeah.

There's a lot that I want to pick out there. I think that this idea of cultivating relationships and going into conversations, like, I don't want it to make it sound like it's like an ulterior motive, but like with a goal in mind.

You go into these informational interviews . And you know, what you want to get out of it. Being able to ask specific questions and giving [00:12:00] people the opportunity to help you in specific ways is helpful obviously for you, but also for them .

People want to help and you're giving them sort of an easy way to do that.

Ambika: Absolutely. So well said so well said, I think human beings fundamentally want to help one another, but clarity is key. Clarity is the key to that, and being very explicit about

your ask and it's okay if someone says no, but just being really explicit and making it simple for someone to help.

Elyse: There was one other thing that you said that you went into a lower paying job when you made that switch to Ogilvy. And I do want to dive into like the financial implications of this because, I know moving around, sometimes you tend to go into lateral positions rather than promotions.

And especially when you're switching industries. What was that like for you? I mean, was it scary to [00:13:00] you to take a lower, lower pay level?

Ambika: Yeah, of course. Definitely scary for so many reasons. I think number one, just financially .

As as having that security blanket and when you're starting out in your career, you're trying to earn and save a little bit more money. And when you're going in the other direction, that's a concern. And then the second thing is just, I would say like emotionally or from like a motivational standpoint, like there's something about taking a pay cut that just also feels like you're going in the wrong direction sometimes. And I definitely felt both of those. The way that I approached, it was I think, first and foremost, negotiating hard in the conversations, being really upfront and transparent and say, Hey, you know, I'm taking a pay cut here, get this job, but I'm doing this because I am super passionate about this role.

[00:14:00] And I'm super confident about my ability to succeed. And I want to have a clear dialogue and understanding here around what it's, what is going to take to get me back to X and then get me to Y then the next level kind of bigger than the place that I was coming from before. And so really clearly laying out those expectations with a future boss, with HR teams.

And making sure that it can be possible, making sure that you can see that future happen in the next year or two for yourself. So that was one. And then, that became a really big intrinsic motivation for me . To say, I gotta make this work. Now I've set the expectations and I did, I think like I really approach every jobs like the first six months in particular pouring everything into it, to prove to myself and to them that, Hey, I really am kind of a Swiss army knife here that deserves to be paid X. So those were [00:15:00] some of the things that I did to kind of cope and approach it.

Elyse: Yeah, to me, the sort of overarching term that I was thinking of while you were talking about that is value . It's not only understanding the value that this new position or new industry is providing to you as a person, which is, a totally separate thing, but maybe part of what you could consider compensation.

But also in your negotiations and in setting expectations with your managers or the HR teams, it's really about communicating your value. Because you're saying I'm coming into a new industry. I understand that, however, I have very valuable skills that I am applying to this new position.

And again, it goes back to this concept of transferable skills and being able to say like, I have an analytics background and I'm going into digital marketing. That's very powerful. And so I

think being able to do that, [00:16:00] I don't want to assume, but maybe helped, if at least if you were taking a pay cut, maybe it's not as much of a pay cut, or at least gives you some basis to stand upon. When you're saying, listen, I'm taking this now, but in the future, this is how I see myself growing.

Ambika: Absolutely. And then when you can prove that within three to six months and being explicit to say, Hey , can we revisit the salary and comp conversation in six months?

Cause I guarantee you I'm going to deliver on these milestones and once you see that you'll, you know, so yeah, I think people like seeing that confidence, right. People like seeing that confidence in someone. So just not being afraid to to really have those conversations.

Elyse: Yeah. And really understand what makes you valuable and what your super powers are.

So out of all of your career changes and this whole sort of nonlinear path that you followed, what was the most difficult thing for you about changing careers?

Ambika: The most difficult thing I would say was the emotional journey going through it. The self doubt that creeps in [00:17:00] again and again and again. And the key to making these transitions, anybody can do it, it just takes persistence . And you just need one yes. And you have to be comfortable getting a hundred no's to get there.

A lot of the times that I was making these moves, it was even more unorthodox. Now it's obviously being normalized, hopefully more so with Zeit, but it was feeling really alone, feeling dejected every time I got a rejection feeling like, am I doing the right thing here?

Like everyone's telling me no, like can I really do this? can I be a product manager? Can I work at IDEO? They have all these extremely talented designers, like I've never even, I've only had a dozen conversations with the designer. It was that that I think was really tough for me to push through those emotions.

Elyse: I appreciate you sharing that. And I think, especially for women, a lot of the time too, it's one of those things where, it [00:18:00] feels very vulnerable to put yourself out there and to have all those conversations and to understand how you are qualified for something.

Because a lot of times I think we tend to dismiss things out of hand and really putting in sort of the emotional and mental work to understand how you're qualified for something, that it is possible for you to add value even if you haven't been in that industry before and then reaching out to people and actually taking that leap and starting to put yourself out there and have those conversations.

Ambika: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Elyse: So let's talk about Zeit. How did Zeit come to be?

Ambika: Yeah I mean, you know, Zeit is, is really about my personal story and journey and people like yours, you know, who have had the same. So how it came to be was specifically was throughout all these moves that I've made in my career leading up to kind of the most

recent one at Bloomberg media, where I had a [00:19:00] great experience and built a lot, was starting to think about what could happen next in my career. Then I started reflecting on a few things, which was number one, was appalled at the fact that this was now kind of my fourth career move and there was still nothing out there in the world that helps people discover, that helps people understand their options. That helps people see where their skills are transferable. And I was still going to a job board. I was still kind of talking to friends.

It was very manual. And that was really frustrating to me. The second was that, because I've been through this experience so many times, it's important to me to always kind of like pay it back, pay it forward. So throughout my career, I budget time every week to talk to people. How did you get to IDEO? How'd you get into product and just have those conversations through cold calls or friends or whatever. So kind of those two anecdotally that made me realize that, like, this is still a problem. This is still a [00:20:00] problem that exists in spades. So that, coupled with opening up our dashboard in, in Bloomberg and seeing what millennials, gen Zers were reading in terms of Bloomberg media content, which was about career pivots and transitions, and how do you do them and stories of people that have done them. And there were real hard numbers behind this, of like, millions of people that were reading this content. So. Kind of the combination of I've experienced this pain.

It's still out there today. And guess what? There's like real scale behind the number of people that have experienced this problem as well, or are curious about it. So who better to build a platform that can solve it than me? So that was the catalyst for Zeit.

Elyse: Yeah.

Why did you decide that like now was the right time for this? Was it just because of where you were at and because of what you were reading or was there something that made you decide that, now is really the time?

Ambika: Timing is everything, especially for [00:21:00] startups. And there's just a lot of patterns in terms of the way the world is moving.

That points to why this is an important platform, I think the world needs. So number one is when you look at how people are now moving through their career. So there's a huge evolution of the number of jobs that people have. And like, when I think about my dad's generation, I mentioned he had, he worked for one company pretty much his entire life.

Now on average, people will have 15 to 20 jobs over the course of their career. That's astounding to think about that. That means on average, like every 18 to 24 months, somebody is switching jobs, which means every year you're thinking about it, which means every six months you're reflecting on, what am I doing? What should I learn next? This idea of evolution is constant now. And we're in early innings of that. So number one is that cadence is just the future and they're still growing [00:22:00] into a place that is going to help people discover and explore based on moving through 15 to 20 jobs over their careers is an important one.

I think that's a big one. I think the other ideas, just from like a sentiment standpoint, and we've done a ton of research with millennials and gen Z peers, is that this idea of personal

evolution is really important . To say, I want to continually learn new skills. To make sure that I am evolving as a person, as a human being.

So I love my role being in strategic partnerships, but I want to go, I mean, and these are just straight quotes from some of our users, but I really want to learn a little bit more about operations. So I think I'm going to explore that path, or I want to learn a little bit more about user research and go down that path.

So I think that curiosity that drive, that ambition is just part of this generation, the next generation of professionals, if you will. A third and really big trend is like freelance is going to be taking over more of the world. There are going to be more freelancers and they're all [00:23:00] full-time professionals.

And I think that is going to change the composition of work in terms of how we think about hiring someone with no expiration date, but instead of hiring someone with certain skills, That can help us achieve a certain outcome, whether it's six months or 12 months or 18 months. And this is where I think having individuals with eclectic skills or nonlinear career paths are really important.

And organizing and surfacing them in a way to better help companies and individuals match is really critical. So there's that, and that knowledge work is just the fastest growing set of professionals and segment of professionals in the market and the landscape.

The last thing that I'll say is if you look at if you draw like a two by two where on one axis, you have skills and the other axis is roles. I think we are headed towards an upper right quadrant, which is [00:24:00] explosion of new skills and new roles. And that is because of the way knowledge work is changing, because of the way technology is changing, and because of next gen professionals desire to evolve.

That is really what Zeit kind of starts to organize for is like these new roles, these new skills and how we start to talk about them and match around them.

Elyse: Yeah. So what is then the process? Like if somebody comes in to Zeit and says, okay, I'm really interested in exploring these different career paths, what's kind of the process that you use to help people understand, their skill sets and how to translate that into a new career?

Ambika: Yeah. So there's kind of two pieces to it, so there's discovery, and then there's pursuing, and discovery is what you were just talking about is understanding kind of this reflection, if you will, around what my options are and why I should explore them and how I [00:25:00] could explore them.

I like to think of it really as like this map of being able to, and what we do from a product standpoint is we analyze your background. Your background, your education, your interest, your professional experience. And we look at those composite skills and then give you a map to say, here are options.

These are a springboard of different roles that you could move into. And it's based on our analysis, which says here's where Ambika's skills are transferable in the world. And as well as people like Ambika, so people that have had similar experiences and then gone on to do different things. So it's about inspiration. It's about being a springboard for where you could go, stuff that I really wish I had earlier. Like, Oh, if you want to go more creative, you should look into this marketing direction. So that's how we approach discovery. I'm not trying to be [00:26:00] overly precise and be a crystal ball of you should do this thing, but giving people lanes to explore.

And to your question, like kind of thematically connecting the bridges to say, it'd be good if you go down this role of if you're really intrigued about process and how to get in an organization to a team to streamline something, and you want to double down on that experience, then operations is an interesting thread to explore. And here's why. So helping people understand thematically, why certain paths could be really interesting based on their backgrounds and then allowing them to explore it. That's the discovery piece. And we do a lot of analytics there in terms of giving you a transferable skill score to really understand how your experience overlaps with that role.

And then going really deep to say, if you want to move from, let's say customer success to product operations here is why, here is your [00:27:00] skill score, here's how you should position your transferable skills. And here are the gaps that you have, and here are some ways that you might want to address those gaps, as well as connecting you to resources that can help you address those gaps.

Elyse: That's so valuable. It's definitely something I wish I had also. I think what you've done is really put AI behind this really fluid process. And it sounds like you have all these tools to help people identify these things, but really, right, the first step is discovery. The first step is outlining your lanes that you're interested in per se, figuring out what you need to know to kind of determine what's included as you go through what's a day in the life in interior design, what's a day in the life in marketing.

And it guides people through this whole process of discovery and learning about each of these paths. And then as they sort of narrow that down, then you're really giving them educational materials to, help them get more into it and help guide them.

But I think it's good advice, and I think it's a good process, really, when you think [00:28:00] about like the career change process as a whole, and even if somebody is doing this on their own and isn't able to use a tool like Zeit right now. It really is about tracking these different lanes, figuring out where you're interested doing some research and having some initial conversations, following your North star, kind of narrowing that list down and then finally getting to a point where you can pursue it.

Ambika: Exactly. Yeah. Discovery can be a cycle in itself for people to say, actually it's not this path. It's a different one. And then from a pursue standpoint, and that's really where we have members today because they decide they want it choose a path and explore it. And we currently offer a six week program that allows people to really kind of dig deep and pursue that respective path. But we do it in a cohort model. So you have a peer group that you move

through the program with, and to what I was saying earlier about like that emotional journey, that was the hardest part of it for me was to feel like I'm alone.

Am I [00:29:00] stupid for wanting to make this move? And we're really absolving a lot of that by helping people go through this experience together, as well as instantly diversify your network. So now you and I are in a cohort, we have totally different backgrounds. So there's ways that we can help each other, address skill gaps.

There's a ways that we can introduce people to one another and there's ways that we just support each other emotionally. So that's, that's the crux of our community, which ultimately also can double as a network for people.

Elyse: Yeah. And I think that's a really important part of this whole journey.

It's not only networking and emotional support. But it's helping you think outside the box when you're talking to people who are going through the same process, but who come from an entirely different set of perspectives and experiences . They'll come up with ideas that haven't even occurred to you.

Ambika: Absolutely.

Elyse: Yeah. I think what you're doing is amazing and I think it'll help a, really, a lot of people. So I'm excited to see where where Zeit takes you.

[00:30:00] **Ambika:** I appreciate that. Especially coming from you.

Elyse: Oh, thank you. So in our last couple of minutes here I just wanted to ask you a couple of final questions.

What do you think is the main thing that kind of holds people back from making these career transitions?

Ambika: So I would say self-doubt is probably the the biggest. Embarrassment. Fear of putting yourself out there in the world and getting rejected and having to tell friends or family like, Oh yeah, I'm trying to make this move. And it's really hard and I didn't get the job or just having those conversations as human beings that can be hard to do.

There's some other real kind of hard tactical ones like financial freedom. I think there's a lot of people that just can't afford to do this right now because they can't take a pay cut. So just acknowledging that that's a real sense of holding people back as well.

Elyse: Yeah, absolutely. And I know we have talked about this so much today and especially as it relates to transferable skills and [00:31:00] understanding how to approach people and cultivate relationships, but is there any other advice you would have for people who are in the midst of a career change?

Ambika: I would say to be persistent, it only takes one yes. And really think about yourself. As I like to say, two plus two is five. So when you go into every conversation, really think about

that role, really thinking about that organization and how your skills can be uniquely valuable and exponentially impactful.

Then, if it's a customer success or product manager role, like you're up against people who have been doing that job for maybe many years or at least once before. How can your experience approach it through such a more unique lens that it's going to be exponentially valuable to your organization?

[00:32:00] If you can package that, if you can demonstrate that passion and get to the right organization that resonates with it's going to be a slam dunk. So I would really just think about how you are a two plus two is five.

Elyse: Yes, we are more than the sum total of our parts. That is absolutely true. So my final question for you, is what is your definition of success?

Ambika: My definition of success is being able to evolve as a person. Constantly. I wanna put my hand print in the sky. This is kind of how I like to think of it. I want to create something that is unique and original and feeling that the process of getting there and doing that was personally making me push myself in ways that I've learned things about myself that I never thought I could do. That to me is, [00:33:00] is success is being able to do that. And to say that I've done that.

Elyse: That is a great answer. And it has been wonderful having you on the show. I wish you all of the best with Zeit and I am looking forward to interviewing lots of people who have taken advantage of it.

So where can people find you?

Ambika: Yeah. So right now we are our website is live and opened up for memberships and it's at [www dot T H E Z E I T dot co](http://www.thezeit.co).

Elyse: Fabulous. Well, I will put a link in the show notes. Ambika, thank you so much for taking the time to be on the show.

Ambika: Thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed this and I love what you're doing. Keep going. This is so great.