

Ep.2.15 - Jennifer Brace

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Jennifer Brace

A Announcer 00:02
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.

E Ed Clemente 00:28
Hello, I'm Ed Clemente. I'm your host today. We're fortunate to have Jennifer Brace with us, she's Global Trends and Futuring Manager for Ford Motor Company. Welcome to the show, Jen.

J Jennifer Brace 00:38
Hi, thanks for having me Ed.

E Ed Clemente 00:40
We have to start out with the coolest title of all time. I would love that title, Global Trends and Futuring, it fits our show perfectly. Why don't you tell people what you do? I think people know what Ford is, but why don't you tell them what you do?

J Jennifer Brace 00:55
Sure. Yeah, so kind of the the shortened version of my title is that I am a futurist. And I know if when people ask me what I do, and I respond that way, I get a look, as in what is that mean, I have never heard that before. Or you know, they think it's a made up title, one of those. Either

way, I do actually have a very cool title. And frankly, I have a very cool job. And what, what I do, what my team does, is we spend a lot of time looking about thinking about and looking into kind of the future, looking at trends, looking at signals that we see happening in the world. We often describe it as we try to keep an eye on what's happening kind of outside, not just in automotive, but particularly outside automotive, because there's all these forces that are happening, whether it's social, technical, economic, environmental, political. And they're the type of things that cause major changes that we're forced to react to whether we want to or not the type of changes that are outside of our control. So we keep an eye on those things. And then we work with teams internally, at Ford to help them strategize and create plans so that they're prepared, regardless of what the future brings. Whether that's, you know, kind of pointing out different trends and signals to them, or it's sometimes exploring different scenarios of what the future could hold, and then talking to them about what their strategies would be, if said future became a reality.

E Ed Clemente 02:14

Yeah, and I think that's, you know, it's a great definition because a lot of times people think necessarily futures are like the Jetsons, you know, they're kind of predicting, but they're really not, they're trying to give you a lot of options, just so you can try to pick the best that are fit your sorta, whatever your vision is, for your organization, kind of.

J Jennifer Brace 02:34

Yeah, and often what we find is, a lot of people assume that the future is a lot like today, maybe just with more technology, right? And, and they kind of forget about all the other things that have major impacts, you know, I'll be honest with you, like COVID made our job a lot easier. Because it brought so much change so quickly, that when we, you know, went to teams, and we said, well, what if the future isn't a lot like today? What if it's really different? What if major events happen? What if something unexpected happens? How might you be prepared? So yeah, COVID actually helped us out quite a bit in terms of getting teams to, to kind of come along on the journey when it comes to exploring different potential futures.

E Ed Clemente 03:15

Yeah, it's like a two-sided coin for a lot of HR people in some ways, it helped improve, you know, a lot of what is the most important things we should be focusing on? But at the same time, okay, do we still need the interaction? How are we gonna do the hybrid, you know, format in the future? It's still not going to be decided for awhile, I think it'd be a couple of years before it settles out, probably.

J Jennifer Brace 03:37

Yeah. Yeah, I agree. I think, certainly, we've seen a lot of change, right? We've seen all different types of working models. And we've seen, you know, we've seen a great kind of exit of the workforce and all kinds of different areas and kind of workers also demanding more things. And we, you're right, that we're kind of watching to see how does it really settle out? Because it has

changed the perception of what is possible, and how work needs to get done and what's necessary to make it happen. So I agree that I think we're, we're still kind of in the midst of some of this change. And I'll be curious to continue watching, we're certainly tracking it closely.

E

Ed Clemente 04:16

Yeah, for work literally, as well as just curiosity-wise, you kind of [You got it, you got it.] And you know, you've got the perfect job description, in my opinion, to be a futurist. Because to me, and I'm gonna let you walk through where you've been, and I want to drill down on that a little bit, but how it got to this point, but I think, you know, I think you and I said early on a call like, I think of myself as more of a generalist. And then if you look at your career, you've you're not you've been in automotive, but I think it's pretty fascinating all the places you've been and worked. Let's start out you grew up in Michigan though anyway, right?

J

Jennifer Brace 04:50

Yeah, yep, ye, I'm a Michigan native, so born and raised. And I went to school at the University of Michigan for engineering, so I did a degree in Mechanical Engineer and then right out of there and actually, during school, I had interned at Ford and it gave me kind of the opportunity to really kind of see several different parts of the company. And it gave me a good understanding of maybe how broad of a career you might be able to have at a place like Ford, because there are so many little groups and niches that you could fit into. So I was excited when I got the opportunity to work there. After I graduated, I still did go back and get my master's in Engineering Management, also at University of Michigan. And so I started an engineering and what they do really well is they bring in new engineers, and we do a three year rotation program. So I got exposure to several different areas, including like I did a rotated and spent six months doing crash, which I thought was really cool. [What is crash?] Crash, like vehicle crashing, so getting to, like crash the vehicle, and, you know, watch the crash testing. No, like, actually watch the dummies in slow motion and see, you know, paint their skin and their faces and see where what touches in the vehicle and all that kind of stuff. I got to do that, I got to work in kind of like switches, working on the switches in the vehicle in terms of how do they feel, how do they sound, I got to get some exposure to that. I got to work in the chimes or even literally like the sounds, the audio that the vehicle plays. I got to launch a convertible Mustang in 2005. So I got to see a lot of different things. And then where I settled, was kind of a new group that was starting. And it was at the time it was called HMI, which stood for human machine interface. And what we were doing was trying to figure out how all the the kind of bits and pieces in the vehicle would work together, really specifically on the touchscreen in the car. So this was kind of bringing, it was early in the days of bringing like navigation and radio and phone all into one screen. And then trying to understand what is the logic, how do people figure it out.

E

Ed Clemente 06:58

I've had three Ford vehicles, so I know.



J Jennifer Brace 07:02

Exactly. Yeah, there's a lot of there's a lot of learning along the way. But yeah, early days of Sync, exactly. So I spent a lot of time there, really kind of trying to understand and learning about our system, and also trying to understand how people work and how they're going to interact with this and what's going to really resonate with them. So getting to do a lot of research and user studies and things like that, and trying to understand that kind of like the mental logic that they're going through, and they're trying to find things in their screen. So had a great time there. Following that I had an opportunity to kind of stay on that technology in-vehicle technology track, but do it from the marketing side. So I had I had to had some exposure to that group when I was an engineering and then got an opportunity and I figured, okay, well, let's, let's look at that part of the business. So I worked in marketing for a couple of years, also enjoyed my time there and really got to see a very different different aspect of how things worked at again, such a big company. And following that I had a really unexpected opportunity come my way. I was I was interested in potentially doing some maybe advanced engineering work and they said, well, we're setting up a lab, we're expanding our lab out in Palo Alto, would you be interested, and that's out in California, would you be interested in leading up a team? And I thought, huh, well, California was never really on my roadmap, but it was a type of opportunity that I knew I would regret if I didn't take it. So, so I moved out to California in 2015 to our Silicon Valley lab, at the time, there were about 15 people in the lab, so it was really small, but I got to see it grow to over 300 employees while I was there, which was cool in it. Because it was out in California too, and there was a lot of, there were really only about 20% of the employees were like me where they were transplant from Dearborn or from another Ford facility around the world, and the rest of the new hires. So it actually got to develop kind of its own culture, if you will, because there was so much, so many people that didn't know what the rest of Ford did and how they worked. So we got to kind of build up our own culture, which was great. And out there was leading up a user research team. So we were helping the teams if they needed to understand more about how the customer understood a product or technology, like my team would figure out how do we get more information and how do we get data on it? So early days, it was kind of looking at like autonomous vehicles, but this would have been like 2015 2016, so still pretty early, but we were still getting to see kind of the Google cars at the time driving around and things like that. And, and, you know, it was just it was a really great kind of learning experience for me. While I was out there, I also got an opportunity then to move over to our mobility team. And this was kind of looking at more innovation, mobility So I stuck actually in the autonomous vehicle space and I was looking at, you know, what does entertainment look like in the vehicle? When it when you don't have to drive, for example, and getting to kind of do some explorations there. So kind of staying, I guess even then I was staying a little bit in this kind of future space. And then, yeah, and then I did I got the opportunity to join the the Trends and Futuring team work for Sheryl Connelly, who is our Chief Futurist, who I had looked up to for years,

E Ed Clemente 10:30

She's quite a celebrity in her own right, I've seen her on several panels.

J Jennifer Brace 10:34

Absolutely. Absolutely, she's well known within the Ford community and outside. She's been our Chief Futurist for I think, 15 years. So she, she made me an offer to join her team, and it was something that I had always thought was like, the coolest job in the company. So I had to

was something that I had always thought was like, the coolest job in the company. So I had to do it. And that actually brought me back to Michigan, interestingly enough, right when COVID hit, right, as things were shutting down, it was actually the week, the week everything shut down in March, was the week I was supposed to close on the new house in Michigan. And we couldn't fly because everything hit the fan. So it was kind of a crazy time, but we made it work, and made it back to Michigan, so. So yeah, it's good to kind of go full circle and make it back back home.

E

Ed Clemente 11:22

Well, I tell you, anyone that listens to the podcast, and hopefully you'll get a chance to talk a little bit more about opportunities for youth. But it really shows you how in today's world, the path is not going to always be that clear, right? And you can be a generalist in one organization, which is kind of hard to see like, that's true, but really you have been. And that's perfect credentials, I think to be a futurist, too. I don't know what Cheryl did before, but I mean, I'm sure she had a similar path, I'm guessing, because no one goes into college to be a futurist that I know of?

J

Jennifer Brace 11:57

No, not that I know of either. To my knowledge, there are not degrees for it, not yet. But yeah, you're right, so I like to like to say that we know a little bit about a lot as a futurist, and trying to, I think some of the main parts of being good at it is, of course, keeping kind of an open mind, having some creativity to imagine what the future could be like. And also just having curiosity, like being curious about things and wanting to kind of dive into it and explore more. And then of course, build out like, what, what might that mean? How do you tie it back? Being able to kind of connect those dots back to like, why do people why should people at Ford care?

E

Ed Clemente 12:38

Well, you even mentioned something to me about this sort of what points of like, almost like benchmarks you look at for futures and trends globally, right? And that kind of is your question anyway, but I think, could you touch on a few of those or whatever you, I don't know what they were, like, 12 points, I forgot what you said.

J

Jennifer Brace 12:55

Well, we use, we use like five main categories, we call them steep. So social, technological, economic, environmental, and political. And we pick, those are very, very broad on purpose, right. And usually, you'll find there's a ton of overlaps, because something that happens in one sector usually bleeds into all the others. But we kind of use those as our big categories that we look at. And then we do the work in different ways. So I talked a little bit about sometimes what we'll do is we'll actually build out scenarios for what the future could look like. But the other thing that we do is we run an annual trend survey as well, to understand kind of what we see happening in the world. How are people feeling about things, we kind of change the questions up every year, depending on what what is interesting at the time. But it is a consumer-based survey, where we are looking to get some consumer sentiment. So certainly the last couple of

years COVID has been one of the top of mind things. And I should point out to anyone can get these results, this is something that we do share publicly, you can go to fordtrends.com to find our latest and greatest and we do update it every year. So if you go there today, you could see something different six months from now.

E

Ed Clemente 14:10

I'm going to look it up.

J

Jennifer Brace 14:14

But yeah, we always do some interesting things. One of the early questions we asked this year was talking about preparedness, and do you feel prepared for the future? And we ask people that about themselves, about businesses and about governments. And kind of, maybe not terribly surprising, but people did kind of put themselves first in terms of well, I feel most prepared for the for the future compared to businesses, were actually second I feel businesses are prepared for the future versus governments were third. And they thought the governments were I guess you would say the least prepared of the three for the future, which is interesting, as we do see kind of the power of businesses continuing to increase. And that's been kind of just an interesting theme. To understand the power of like, do people put their trust, how do people put their trust in business versus government? And, and how do we see that kind of sentiment shifting?

E

Ed Clemente 15:10

You know, it's funny too, because you probably don't know the history of the podcast, but originally, I talked with the Governor by doing this podcast to sort of, you know, I kind of told her, we should be focusing on something else besides COVID, right? So it started out, what are we doing to pull ourselves out economic turnaround, those kinds of things. But the thing that's probably more interesting to fit in with your scenario, is that we had a question that was a regular question about how did you pivot during COVID? You know, we've, so we're doing the show a little over a year now. And that question got eliminated, you could almost see like a sort of like a fulcrum, where it sort of changed that we didn't even need to ask that question. And people talk about it so small now, it seems like, you know, it was even not even a real question before, but I mean, I know it is still. But it does show you that actual sort of sort of emotional shift almost about what is making you more nervous today, maybe than before?

J

Jennifer Brace 16:09

Absolutely. Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah, I know it in COVI's become kind of like ambient noise it almost feels like in the background for us.

E

Ed Clemente 16:17

Yeah. So let's kind of stick in that vein a little bit. But as you do these trends, I know that it's helpful for Michigan too because I know you're based here. And even though you're a global

helpful for Michigan too because I know you're based here. And even though you're a global corporation, obviously, but I know there's a lot of value added for being here, too. [Oh, yeah.] We talked about that a little bit before, but I didn't know if you wanted to express that.

J Jennifer Brace 16:37

Yeah, well, certainly, I believe I know, Ed you are very familiar with the fact that we are putting a lot of investment into the city of Detroit. We are redoing the the train station and some buildings that are surrounding that to build a campus. We've actually partnered, Google has partnered with us on that, and there will be some startup space there. They're putting, they're adding kind of training and other initiatives for people in the city to kind of learn skills and get, get ready for kind of tech jobs and really trying to build up that space in the city. So we are really excited to see that. And that will only feed into what we're doing when it comes to electrification or electric vehicles. And of course, our autonomous vehicles that I mentioned earlier. So we are seeing a lot of energy around that. Really, I'm really just looking forward to seeing it kind of open and seeing kind of the beauty of of the train station come back to life, as it's been this kind of symbol, you know, kind of urban blight for so many years that it's I'm it's I'm excited to see it open up next year.

A Announcer 17:40

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E Ed Clemente 17:57

Now, so I didn't have to ask you my one question, which is usually what are future trends, because it's already been talking about? But I do have a question about and you touched on this a little bit. But if you were doing a mini career day, or what would you go back and talk to your 18 year old self or even you know, if you did a commencement, whatever, what would you tell people today.

J Jennifer Brace 18:19

So when I kind of think back amongst about my career, I always had a plan. I'm a planner, by nature, I always kind of have have a plan, an idea of where I'm going, have a vision of what I want to be. And what I found is every time I kind of throw that plan out the window and follow what is interesting, and an opportunity that comes my way, it has worked out. So I would say have a plan, it's really good to have an idea or a direction on where you're going, but don't be so tied to it that you're closed up from opportunities coming your way. Because often those are the most, most interesting, beneficial, the best learning experiences, at least in my case that's how it's been. And that's why that's why I have such a cool title as a futurist.

E Ed Clemente 19:07

Yeah. And the, you know, those two words, sort of like being open minded, and being a planner, sometimes really conflict with each other. So I imagine it gave you a lot of personal grief at times, like, well, I wanted to be working in the engineering field only, right?

J Jennifer Brace 19:22

Yep, or if I leave this field, am I ever gonna be able to come back? What if I don't like it? What if this? Yep, all of those questions constantly going on in my head. But as I look back again, like the times when I've taken the chance, and I've kind of gone with what I felt was, frankly, just kind of a really interesting opportunity, it has done nothing but propel my career.

E Ed Clemente 19:45

Anyway, so let's get to your last question. And that is, what do you like, personally, you've moved, you've lived in California and you've lived in a nice part of California. What do you like best about Michigan though?

J Jennifer Brace 19:59

My favorite part is the people. It really is, I love the people here. I missed kind of the Michigan welcomeness that you get from people and the friendliness that you kind of get everywhere. I definitely miss that when I was out on the West Coast. It, yeah, it's just it's very welcoming. It's, you know, I know my neighbors, I know the community, which I didn't really have out there. So I think that was my number one thing. California was definitely winning on the weather side, generally speaking, but, but that's okay, it's totally worth it for the people here.

E Ed Clemente 20:35

We do appreciate your summers more too.

J Jennifer Brace 20:39

We do we do, and you see a lot more people outside. As soon as you get a little sunshine here, everyone comes out of hibernation. It's wonderful.

E Ed Clemente 20:46

Yeah, I know. I noticed it because I hike a lot and I've been seeing more and more people on sunny days.

J Jennifer Brace 20:51

Yeah, no, you're not by yourself anymore.

E

Ed Clemente 20:52

No, no, I used to have fun trails by myself. Well, anyway, I really do appreciate Jen you taking time. It's like it goes by fast like I told you. And I think a lot of people really don't really realize, like all the interesting things Ford is doing, but it's not by accident. You know, I actually I had an opportunity to drive a newer Ford car 2021. And I first time I had Lane Assist, and that sort of threw me off at first because you know, you're when you drive by yourself, you're always grabbing stuff in your car and like you better pay attention, you need a cup of coffee. You know, like yes, so you start getting that so it's a brave new world. All of a sudden, Aldous Huxley would be happy. The I just want to thank again, our guest Jennifer Brace, Global Trends and Futuring Manager for Ford Motor Company. Thanks again Jen, you were wonderful. I appreciate you doing the show today.

J

Jennifer Brace 21:48

Thanks. It was my pleasure.

E

Ed Clemente 21:50

Join us for the next podcast where we meet with west sider, Brittany Hunter, Managing Partner, Atomic Object, where this diverse multi-state custom software company is making a difference.

A

Announcer 22:03

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