

BY EUGENE YIGA

Anna Navarro Schlegel

On The World's Stage

Award-winning author, speaker, and businesswoman Anna Navarro Schlegel is on a mission to connect companies, communities, and cultures around the world

When Anna Navarro Schlegel moved from Barcelona to Silicon Valley, she was only 23 years old. The experience was a shock but one to which she soon adapted.

"I was very young, and you don't know much about businesses at that age," she recalls. "I didn't even know I was in Silicon Valley; to me it felt like living in San Francisco. It was about being brave, naive, and having that energy and grit. That's how I got started."

Public speaking improves with practice

In her first year in California, she started a company focused on globalising products and helping businesses grow outside the United States. Since then, she's become an accomplished professional in the field of globalisation, localisation, and international business, having played an influential role in shaping the expansion strategies of high-profile companies including VMware, NetApp, Cisco, Xerox, and Procore Technologies. But while she was helping organisations adjust to different cultures, she was doing the same in her own life.

"When I first arrived in the United States, I had to adapt and learn how to present myself more confidently," she says. "It's like exercising a muscle; you have to practise speaking up and finding your voice. In the beginning, it may not go smoothly, but with time, you'll learn how to present and speak effectively. I took dozens of classes to help me with this, particularly focusing on how women can adopt powerful postures and communicate with open gestures."

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We all have the right to share our ideas

As someone who believes that the way you present yourself in the first few seconds of meeting someone is crucial, Anna has found Americans to be encouraging and supportive. Part of this might be due to how children are raised.

“My observation, as I’m often asked about this, is the difference between Americans and how I experienced university,” she says. “In Catalonia [the Spanish province of which Barcelona is the capital],

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students mainly take notes and listen to the professor. Occasionally, the professor might ask for our thoughts, which can be intimidating in very large classes. In contrast, American universities encourage students to be more outspoken and opinionated. But we all need to be proud, loud, and express our ideas.”

Technology has the power to connect the world

The desire to share her ideas led Anna to writing her book *Truly Global*. In it, she shares real-world examples and case studies to emphasise the importance of a well-planned globalisation strategy and the need for businesses to adapt to local cultures and preferences to succeed on the world’s stage.

“The future of globalisation is fascinating, and technology plays a significant role in shaping it,” she says. “The development of artificial intelligence, the internet of things, and virtual reality, for instance, have led to a more connected world. These technologies have redefined the way we live and work, and they bring enormous opportunities for businesses. As entrepreneurs and business leaders, it’s our responsibility to stay at the forefront of innovation and leverage these technologies to drive growth and make a positive impact on society.”

People must be the priority

And yet, while many companies might think of their technology as their saving grace, Anna is a strong believer that it must come down to people. In every business or foundation she’s started, the first one or two months are spent assembling the right team and studying who’s in them. It’s about coming up with core values (which of course differ from business to business) and then having the team decide on their unique style.

“In every organisation and every strategy planning session I’ve been involved with, people are always at the top of the list,” she says. “We then assign someone to be the observer of a particular value. For example, Joseph might be the head of optimism, while Silvia is the head of transparency. We don’t choose a lot of values, but we genuinely strive to uphold them.”

Time away from the office can make work better

Of course, while it’s easy to say that being empathetic and community-based is essential in any organisation, upholding those values requires regular commitment. That’s why Anna encourages the idea of quarterly offsite meetings where “everyone can talk to anyone”, regardless of hierarchy. It’s about fostering a sense of openness and transparency.

“Encouraging openness, transparency, and teamwork has always been a priority for me, as well as having regular career conversations with my team members,” she says. “It’s important to understand their aspirations and help them develop professionally. Remember that a company is a group of people working towards a common goal, and these people must feel valued and supported.”

Employees must feel that they matter

Ultimately, as many companies are discovering during what’s been called The Great Resignation, if you don’t prioritise people you risk losing them. But rather than worry about retention numbers, Anna believes it’s more important to be a leader who genuinely cares about the team. That way, you’ll have better success in keeping people from walking out the door. But this isn’t just about “expressing love”. Instead, it’s about making sure they’re working on something interesting and helping them see progression in their careers.

“We constantly check in with employees to ensure they’re in the right job, learning, and not too stressed out,” she says. “So please make an effort to have quarterly career conversations with your team, whether your company has five people or 100 000. And don’t just talk to them about work. Slow down and ask, ‘How are you doing?’ If they start talking about work, encourage them to discuss their personal life, their thoughts about you as a leader, and what you can do better. That’s what being people-first is all about.”

ANNA'S TOP TIPS

Anna's journey has been marked by her commitment to continuous learning and her passion for connecting people and ideas across borders. This has led her to play an active role in various professional organisations, such as Women in Localisation and the Globalisation and Localisation Association (GALA), where she advocates for diversity and inclusion in the industry. Here are her tips for underrepresented people to succeed in their roles.

- **Step out of your comfort zone**

This plays a huge part in personal and professional growth. You have to be brave, and at the same time, have fun with it. It's like a balance of having fun and being a little bit scared. If you're not a little scared, you're not doing something right because, in that case, you're not always pushing a little further. But when you're scared, you want to study and surround yourself with people who have done better than you.

It must come down to people.

- **Network**

When you move to another country, an excellent place to start networking is the consulate or the embassy. I connected with people from Europe who were also in Silicon Valley. Europeans tend to meet there quite a bit. Not everyone is extroverted, so for those who are more introverted, I'd take them with me or encourage them to attend at least one event per week. But as much as networking is essential, you want to network with the right people. You don't have a lot of time to talk to people who won't help you advance. You have to pivot fast, which you learn over time.

- **Find a mentor**

It's a nonstop project; you can't just open a company in Silicon Valley and sit back. It's a constant evolution of having fun, being uncomfortable, and constantly innovating. That's why I was always trying to associate myself with people a little older or who had started other businesses. Connecting with associations and non-profits can help you find mentors. Maybe they don't know they're your mentors, but the more you interact with them, the more they become your mentors.

- **Own your truth**

Throughout my journey, I faced many challenges. People would question where I was from, my accent, or why I was there. Initially, it made me nervous, but I learned not to let it bother me. You need to be secure about yourself, but it takes time to realise that when people criticise you it's usually their problem, not yours.

- **Reframe your obstacles**

Every challenge you face is an opportunity to learn and grow, and with hard work, determination, and the right mindset, you can achieve great things. Keep pushing yourself, stay curious, and don't be afraid to dream big because we all have to take risks, pursue our dreams, and make a positive impact on the world.

TRULY GLOBAL

First published in 2016, Anna's book outlines "the theory and practice of bringing your company to international markets". It's designed as a comprehensive guide for businesses that want to expand their operations worldwide; addresses the challenges and complexities of taking a company global; and offers readers actionable tips into the world of globalisation and localisation.

1. **Foundations of globalisation**

In this section, Anna provides an overview of globalisation, its history, and its role in today's interconnected world. She discusses the various aspects of globalisation, such as the cultural, linguistic, and technological considerations that businesses should consider when entering new markets.

2. **Building a globalisation strategy**

This part explores the process of crafting an effective globalisation strategy. Anna covers a lot of ground, including creating a business case for globalisation, understanding the target markets, and assessing how ready a company is to expand worldwide. She also discusses the role of localisation and how it supports a company's international goals.

3. **Implementing globalisation**

In the final section, Anna focuses on the practical aspects of implementing a globalisation strategy. She shares insights on how to build a successful localisation team, manage global content, develop localised products, and navigate international legal and regulatory issues.

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