



Candid Compliance Conversations

Featuring Shanti Atkins

ABOUT SHANTI

Shanti is a seasoned entrepreneur and business executive with more than 15 years of experience building innovative, fast-growth organizations. She is the founder of NAVEX Global, the world's largest ethics and compliance software and services company, with more than 13,000 customers around the globe.

Shanti has unique expertise in building and investing in disruptive technologies that transform the way we think, communicate and behave in the workplace. She has advised some of the world's leading brands on how to build exceptional cultures and in 2014 was named one of the 100 Most Influential People in Business Ethics.

Along with advising and growing businesses, Shanti has been a featured expert for a wide range of media outlets, including The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, CNN and The Huffington Post.

Q&A

What has been the greatest challenge of your career?

Being involved with an industry like compliance – that's growing and changing so rapidly – is a challenge in itself. Your job and the requirements for that job, like domain expertise and business expertise, change substantially every six to twelve months. You're constantly having to learn new things from scratch. You have to be able to consistently meet the demands of a very steep learning curve while at the same time project confidence to investors and to clients. You have to be an expert on a moving target. This is probably what I love most about fast-growth companies in a relatively new industry like compliance, but it's also probably one of the biggest challenges.

How do you keep up with the growth and change in the compliance industry?

I think you have to make a commitment to continue with self-education in a way that's actually quite regimented. It's one thing to say, "Oh, I'm going to learn more about X, Y, and Z" or "I'm going to try and read more on this topic." It's another thing to actually execute on that. So I'm a big believer that a minimum of an hour in your calendar each week should be dedicated to pure personal education. For me, I split that hour by focusing half on subject matter expertise in new areas that I feel like I need to fine tune my learning or acquire new knowledge. The other half is related to broader business skills and gaining a better understanding of emerging markets and business growth. That's a really specific, tactical answer but I actually think it's a great discipline to get into – to actually calendar your educational time.

Are there any necessary skills or experiences that you think professionals need to be successful in compliance?

There are two. One is a little old school, and the other is more practical and leading edge. First, I calendar into my weekly schedule a minimum of 30 minutes – often it'll be longer than that – where I pause to think about managing connections and relationships, both within the companies I work and with the new people I meet. It can be difficult to connect regularly to that network of contacts and continue to grow them, especially if you're just starting out or a mid-level person in compliance in a large organization. You're probably not being compensated for that. No one is going to give you a pat on the back for doing that. It doesn't cross anything off an official to-do list, but in the bigger picture it's incredibly important to your work and to you as a compliance professional.

Compliance professionals also need to possess the ability to process quantitative data while also having the ability to qualitatively pull different components together. They need to be able to piece together the puzzle of risk and behavior to actually drive better business returns. I think a lot of that comes down to understanding how to manage relationships and connect with people in ways that aren't defined for you in a linear org chart. The skill comes in nurturing those connections, having a desire and willingness to learn about domains outside your own, and then being proactive to connect those pieces together.

For those in the early stages of their careers, what advice would you give them to prepare for interviews and next steps in their careers?

I think in terms of interviewing, I continue to be really surprised by how most people are not as prepared as they could be for an interview. The access to information that's available today through LinkedIn, basic Google searches, and working your network are pretty extraordinary compared to what it was even five or 10 years ago. You should walk into an interview knowing a lot about the person who's interviewing you. The more I talk with fellow business people about how they think and feel about recruiting and interviewing, the more I see that this expectation is normal. So do more homework than you think you have to.

Determine what it is that makes you passionate about your work and what gives you a broader sense of purpose beyond just having a job and collecting a paycheck.

Whether you are preparing for an interview or just getting your grounding in the field, determine what it is that makes you passionate about your work and what gives you a broader sense of purpose beyond just having a job and collecting a paycheck. A lot of people aren't prepared to answer that question, and I think that's unfortunate for two reasons. First and foremost, it's not good to not have a response to an interviewer when they ask you that – how you personally connect to the “why” of the business. Second, I think that's a really important question to ask yourself when you're starting your career or managing your career. What about this particular opportunity, beyond the typical things that you expect when you look at a job, is going to really fulfill something broader for you and paint a larger picture of a career story? Really questioning how you can be passionate about a business will help you figure out where you want to work and what positions you want to pursue in the first place.

For those deeper into their careers, what advice would you give them if they are trying to make their mark on the industry and ensure their careers continue to progress?

I think the most fascinating thing about this space is that when you take a broad view of what it includes – the truly broad definition of GRC – there are many domains of GRC that still are not connected in many organizations. By connected I mean deeply connected from a technical perspective, and even from a relationship-management, budget-management, and people-management perspective. I think one of the best ways to make your mark is to figure out – in the domain that you



serve in GRC – what some of the adjacencies are that live in a silo next to you. What could you learn about those adjacencies that will actually help you make connections in the organization you currently work at, or maybe in a future position? The ability to integrate these functions and have them truly be centers of business excellence versus cost, which is often how compliance is viewed, is a very effective path to influence. This is where you land on the cutting edge of being a forward-thinking compliance professional.

The beauty of a young industry, and one that still is relatively siloed and needs to become more integrated, is the opportunity to become an expert because there aren't people who've been in the field for dozens and dozens of years. There aren't people who've "been there done that" and there's not a playbook on everything. I always think it's a wonderful opportunity whether you're young, middle-aged or older to be able to become an expert in something that's relatively new. It's something that you can really take command of yourself and build a unique, competitive skill set.

What is one thing you wish someone would have told you when you were just starting out in your career?

Expand your view of your job. People tend to be very traditional in how they view hierarchies and power structures inside organizations. Most people understand the value of having a good relationship with their boss. However, the savviest people recognize that the way to advance in their careers is to build that incredibly strong, effective relationship with their manager, while also making their managers look good. So in addition to my boss being a servant leader and a great manager to me, I've got to figure out how they are being assessed day-to-day. What are their key goals and how can I help them get there? It's a very traditional view of understanding leadership power structures inside an organization – but it is reality. The key is to not stop there.

The savviest people recognize that the way to advance in their careers is to build that incredibly strong, effective relationship with their manager, while also making their managers look good.

The next step is to understand the higher-level governance and decision-making constructs that surround the organization, and that means understanding who's on the board and who the investors are and how the broader business model works. I started out my corporate career as a lawyer, and I still laugh at how naive I was at 23 not really understanding what truly made a law firm tick and what made it, on a 30,000-foot perspective, successful. I was focused on, "Well, I have to bill this many hours;" and "This is my managing partner;" and "This is how he expects me to do work;" and "These are the goals that have been put in front of me."

We're in our little siloes and don't really understand how we fit into the broader themes, growth trajectories and business models surrounding our organization. I think getting a more holistic perspective is incredibly important, and this applies in every organization. Learn how your company is financed. Is it publicly traded? Is it private-equity owned? Does it have a VC backer? Is it privately owned by a family? What are the goals of those stakeholders? What are the long-term goals for the business, and what are projected milestones for how it is trying to get there? Who's on the board? What's the long-term strategic vision for the company? It's really important to see things from that macro perspective in addition to the role you play day-to-day and week-to-week. The details and your to-do list matter, but always stay connected to the bigger picture.