

Ep.23 - Natalie Chmiko

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SPEAKERS

Announcer, Ed Clemente, Natalie Chmiko

- A** Announcer 00:01
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
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity brought to you by the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. Hello, my name is Ed Clemente. I'm your host today for the podcast. And we're very fortunate to have Natalie Chmiko, the Vice President for Pure Michigan Business Connect and International Trade at the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. And for an added bonus, she also has to work with Industry 4.0, and we'll hear more about that at the end. Welcome, Natalie.
- N** Natalie Chmiko 00:55
Yeah, thanks for having me Ed.

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Ed Clemente 00:57

Oh, no, it's great to have you on. I know, we did a little pre call. It's very fascinating, everything that you do there. And so let's, why don't you because let's say you're you're somewhere and someone has never heard about what you kind of do? What would you tell people quickly about what you do at the MEDC?

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Natalie Chmiko 01:17

Yeah, so really kind of to boil it down to the very simplest level, my job is to really accelerate small business growth within the state of Michigan. So we have a ton of incredible programs and services that really help these small businesses, find new sales opportunities, both domestically and internationally, really helping diversify their revenue streams and grow jobs within the state. And we're always trying to find new ways to remove any barriers for growth, and help businesses prepare for the future. And with that, you mentioned the industry 4.0 project that we've been leading, which is really been launched to help companies navigate new technologies for their manufacturing business, really merging the physical and the digital technologies. And with all of you know, the small business, you know, success rate, and how dismal kind of that looks, it's such a rewarding job to really help those small businesses succeed.

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Ed Clemente 02:16

You know, I'll wayfair back to a couple of those things further down. But can you touch a little bit too, you do a lot with international business too, right. international trade. Right, so how did like, first of all, let me ask you the basic question, is what my mom would tell me to ask, but what do you speak other languages?

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Natalie Chmiko 02:37

Yeah. So first of all, I'll start with I studied international business, at Saginaw Valley State. And then before joining MEDC, I worked at Saginaw Future and really got a sense of economic development and what that meant for our community. And then, when I saw that MEDC, had this International Trade position open, I really jumped at the opportunity to combine those international business background with the economic development side of things. And I will tell you a little bit of a story. So you know, my really my passion for international, for me, started at the age of 12 when I participated in this program, called People, The People, Student Ambassadors, and I got to travel with this cohort of kids that I didn't know without my parents, we traveled around the UK for three weeks. (it) really pushed me completely out of my comfort zone, in the best way possible. And I remember, I

remember my mom telling her friends that I came back and just a completely different person, I returned independent and mature and confident. And since then, I've done several longer stints abroad, including a spring break study abroad to China, a five month study abroad in Taipei, Taiwan, and another five month internship in Kolkata, India. So with each of these experience, I just feel like I've gained so many new perspectives and grew as a person. But to go back to your question on the language skills. So while I was in Taiwan, I spent about six hours a week learning Mandarin Chinese. So that coupled with being immersed in the language during my time there, I was really able to pick up some of those basic Chinese phrases. But I will say 10 years later of not practicing it, my Chinese is practically completely gone. So the one Chinese phrase I will always remember is Thai guila, which means that's too expensive. So it just goes to show you that I've done a good portion of my time mastering the art of bargaining while shopping at their their night markets there. So

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Ed Clemente 04:50

it's always nice to know where to get food too, shopping and food. I'm going to just a couple things when you're on, this is just more for the audience's sake, but in Taiwan, you're t(here, you were in Taipei you said, or no?. (Yes, Taipei) Okay, so do they speak Mandarin predominantly, or do they speak Cantonese in Taiwan?

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Natalie Chmiko 05:13

Yeah, they speak Mandarin Chinese.

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Ed Clemente 05:15

So that's mainly what you learned was just Mandarin. Okay. Yeah. And let's talk about a more esoteric language. Bangladeshi, right. Do you still have a chance to talk with anybody with that language? Or no,

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Natalie Chmiko 05:30

No, and that was one I didn't really pick up unfortunately, they English is one of their, you know, national languages, so I got lucky there. I picked up a couple of phrases, but mostly just to hail a taxi and and get around the city. But that's about it.

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Ed Clemente 05:47

Yeah. In fact, I asked you if you were close to her Mother Teresa was, and ah, I forgot if you

said you were close. (Yeah) there are no, yeah. (In Kolkata.) Yeah. Right. Yeah, no, it's a pretty amazing. So it is to paraphrase Mark Twain, it's sort of hard to be prejudiced when you travel a lot. And I'm sure that's the bug you got at 12 years old, right?

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Natalie Chmiko 06:10

Yes. It just gives you I mean, just tremendous perspective. And you just, I don't know, it just forever changed me. And I will always be an advocate for having people travel, especially while they're young. It just changes your whole outlook on life.

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Ed Clemente 06:28

Yeah, a similar experience when I went to India too. So anyway, so let's get a little bit to the job. Because you have three titles. Let's go, let's start out, I think probably a Pure Michigan Business Connect, if you like?

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Natalie Chmiko 06:42

Sure. So, Pure Michigan Business Connect really works to connect purchasers we look to identify purchasing needs, and connect them with Michigan suppliers. So we do that through custom research, as well as matchmaking initiatives, both in-person and virtual, to really help create new opportunities or find new opportunities for the Michigan suppliers.

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Ed Clemente 07:10

And I know you, this is some of the stuff you had told me a little bit, but is that where you sort of use the analogy of like speed dating kind of things and matching people up?

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Natalie Chmiko 07:21

Yeah, kind of. So we, we typically do like, I think 20 minute meetings for the purchaser, and they the purchasers have kind of pre selected who they want to meet with. So it really is a focused discussion. And obviously, they can have follow up meetings after but it's really intended to be, you know, a quick, you know, pitch of, of the company and what they can offer, and then they'll go into, you know, more details on, you know, contract negotiations and things like that at a later time.

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Ed Clemente 07:52

And you You said you do this internationally, even though this is different than international trade, right? Do you help them? Or is that separate totally from the international trade part?

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Natalie Chmiko 08:02

Yeah, I mean, definitely related. So on the international side, we work with the Michigan company directly, and we try and find out what their target market is we can help them identify target markets and then we have a network of in-market representatives that really, they do this full time. And they they actually do matchmaking for, for the company. So they'll set up, they'll provide a list, they'll do their research, they'll provide a list of companies that might be a good fit for, you know, sales opportunities, or maybe a distributor model. And then you know, the Michigan company will review and kind of say who they want to meet with. And really what it what happens is it creates kind of a warm lead for the Michigan company, when they arrive in country or when they take a virtual meeting, they're able to kind of have an 'in' already with the company and they they start off on the right foot and are able to kind of accelerate what would normally be a super long process of trying to identify these companies, the right representatives, it takes some of that, that pain out of it.

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Ed Clemente 09:11

So, you don't have to give a specific company, but could you give like a real world example of like something you might have done that, you know, just like how you some product that was able to go international? Because it's something we did at Pure Michigan?

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Natalie Chmiko 09:27

Yeah. So I'm on the international trade side. So we'll let's say we work with a company. We help them identify through some custom market research. We help them identify what markets are a good potential for them. And then from there, we will introduce them to our International Trade Office. They'll they'll set up those matchmaking meetings on behalf of them depending on what they're looking for. Like I said it could be could be sales, it could be a distributor, it could be an agent, a sales agent, it really depends what the what the company is looking for. And you know, the ultimate model is where when they travel there, then they're able to utilize our international trade STEP grant, (State Trade Expansion Program) Grant, which offsets the cost of their travel, and in country expenditures by 75%.

So really, what we like to see is a company who will kind of stack these resources to really make them most successful when they're in market.

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Announcer 10:32

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Ed Clemente 10:48

So I know you guess we've sort of morphed into the international side of things. But I remember you told me in our conversation prior that you have like 90 different marketing consultants you work with, is that correct?

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Natalie Chmiko 11:01

Yeah, it actually has expanded even further. It's over, we're over 100 markets now, which is awesome, an awesome resource. And it's completely free for Michigan companies to utilize. It's like I said, tremendously valuable, not just because of the matchmaking meetings, but because the people we work with in-market are locals and they have the language skills, they are in the same time zone, it really gets a company's foot in the door in those international markets, so that it just accelerates everything for them.

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Ed Clemente 11:33

You might have said this, but I think it's good to highlight it again, if you did, but you also help them with tech assistance. They know you and I talk about them how to design a web page or things like that.

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Natalie Chmiko 11:43

Yeah, absolutely. So we do search engine optimization, we help them develop kind of micro sites that are translated in various markets, just to help them get some more online traction. We also help them with things like legal training. So obviously going international, there's a lot of, you know, regulations that have to be complied with. And so making sure that they're prepared and understand, you know, the risks that they're taking, but also how to protect themselves and their intellectual property as well.



Ed Clemente 12:16

Right, yeah. So anyone that's out there listening to this podcast, they should contact you if they're thinking of putting a footprint somewhere in another country or something like that. Right?



Natalie Chmiko 12:27

Yeah, it's not even more so it's not even about, you know, setting up an office necessarily, it's just how can we build upon your sales domestically by going internationally? So most of the people, most of the companies we work with, it's not like they're setting up a manufacturing facility anywhere. It's that they're they're setting up a sales network that can promote their product internationally?



Ed Clemente 12:51

Like, what would you recommend some small business person that might be listening right now? Is there just go to what website? Or is would you recommend they go?



Natalie Chmiko 13:00

Yeah, so for the trade side, I would go to michiganbusiness.org/export, and fill out our just really brief intake form, and we will get you connected to one of our team members to really consult with you and determine what's the next step for you and your business.



Ed Clemente 13:17

And, like, how would you direct people for all three programs, actually, the one we've talked about with PMBC? And then also the International Trade? And also probably Industry 4.0?



Natalie Chmiko 13:29

Yeah, so the best place to go is just our website, michiganbusiness.org. You can do /PMBC, /Export, as well as /industry4-0, but you can just search our website and look for those three programs and click to get engaged,



Ed Clemente 13:46

Now that we've mentioned industry 4.0, let's talk a little bit about it. I know you've got a

couple of partners you work with on that, right?

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Natalie Chmiko 13:54

Yes, absolutely. So we launched a statewide initiative, which is focused entirely on manufacturers to prepare 50% of all Michigan manufacturers, or about 6200 businesses to be ready to adapt industry 4.0 technologies by 2025. So we're working really closely with Automation Alley, and they provide education and awareness and they really act as the Industry 4.0 Knowledge Center for the state of Michigan. And also we work with the Michigan Manufacturing Technology Center. And they host technology roadshows, course trainings and also they do a really in depth technology assessment for businesses to help them evaluate, you know, what technologies will be best for their business in the future for you know, optimal profitability and efficiency.

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Ed Clemente 14:49

Yes, I know we've had Tom Kelly on from Automation Alley, and I know that did you mention all your partners I can't though did you say MMTC? (Yes, I did.) Good. Good. I was looking at my notes. Thank you, and they're in Plymouth, correct? (Yeah.) So is there, maybe you've already answered this question, but is there certain, like specific sort of industries you're focusing on? Or you're really focusing more on segments, like small business medium sized business? Or, like, how do you guys break it out? If you target, sort of industries? Let's start with Industry 4.0, you're mainly focusing on sort of tier two, tier three, or?

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Natalie Chmiko 15:34

Yeah, so for the Industry 4.0 initiative, we're really focused on small and medium sized manufacturers only. Really, like I said, trying to get them prepared for the future of manufacturing and the technologies needed for that. For the other programs, trade and PMBC, really, the great thing about these programs is that they're industry agnostic, meaning, you know, we can support companies, no matter what industry, they're in, to either find local suppliers or increase their international revenue.

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Ed Clemente 16:06

Yeah. And I would imagine, if you're going to sort of the Industry 4.0, it actually opens up opportunities for them to make a lot of different things they traditionally probably weren't focused on, right. So they can actually open up their sort of portfolio of new opportunities as well for manufacturing, right?

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Natalie Chmiko 16:23

Absolutely, and really, it's, you know, assessing their current model of, you know, how they're working and, and thinking into the future of like, what is what is this industry going to look like? 10, 15 years, 30 years down the road? And how can we make that shift? It's just like, the other industrial revolutions, when you think about, like, the assembly line completely altered how we did, you know, manufacturing, and then, you know, computers and electronics? And now it's really how can those computers and a lot of electronics work with the physical side of things? So it's, it's all about, you know, getting companies to think about their culture in a different way, and think about, you know, their future and and how this industry is making a huge shift right now.

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Ed Clemente 17:10

In fact, I read an article. I don't know how long ago, but talked about how China wants to focus more on manufacturing versus technology, you know, and the sort of like the Tencents, Alibabas, they said, they want to get away from that a little bit and more back to manufacturing, it sounds like, and I think they're probably having some slippage, as well. So it's good that we want to sort of double down on this, especially at this time.

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Natalie Chmiko 17:37

Yeah, I mean, Ed, when you think about like the Michigan economy and even the US economy, I mean, we are built on manufacturing, it is literally like our backbone. And so we need to make sure that these companies are prepared. And, you know, otherwise, it's a significant threat of you know, that, that some of these technologies can be disrupting what we've known for a long time and how the manufacturing industry has run.

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Ed Clemente 18:06

In my, one of my many previous jobs. I was the President of a Chamber of Commerce, and I used to do retention visits with the MEDC. And I was always amazed at how much how many things sort of are made still in our state. And I know, there's been some leakage, but in general, we're still probably one of the better states i would imagine in the country for manufacturing. Right?

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Natalie Chmiko 18:29

Absolutely. I think we have the fifth largest manufacturing workforce in the country. So absolutely, it is. It is I think, our number one, you know, industry in the state.

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Ed Clemente 18:40

Well, the hard part's over. I got a quick question for you, if you were, this is advice for either people, mid career younger people, whatever you're comfortable with, but just from all your experiences globally, what would you like, if you could go back and talk to yourself before you picked a major in college, or I know you might have not changed anything, but what would you tell someone younger, or someone mid career to go into now?

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Natalie Chmiko 19:05

Yeah, I mean, I would give maybe two pieces of advice. The first one, which is probably not a surprise to you, which is just travel abroad and explore the world. As I mentioned, it, you know, significantly changed my perspective and my trajectory, and just about everything, and just kind of made me a better person overall, and a better professional. And the second piece of advice I would say, is really just be your biggest cheerleader every day. I know it sounds really cheesy, but I really believe that you you have to believe in yourself in order to be successful in life, and most people are their worst, you know, their own worst critic. And you just have to let go of all that self doubt and give yourself credit for the skills and the strengths that you have. And I really believe nothing can stop you. Once you've once you've realized that.

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Ed Clemente 19:55

Yeah, the real challenge is figuring out what you're really good at sometimes. You have to cut through a lot of other stuff to kind of figure out what you're happy about, as well as good at right? (Absolutely) Yeah, so the last question is pretty simple, but you don't have to give any trade secrets out here, but what do you like best about living in Michigan?

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Natalie Chmiko 20:17

I mean, what is not to love? I absolutely love all of the endless outdoor activities. So my husband and I like to go kayaking, biking, camping, hiking, wherever we can get outside. We particularly love exploring all of the plethora of waterfalls in the Upper Peninsula. We like to float down the Looking Glass River, that's a bit closer to home to us in Lansing, or just kind of taking the views up and kind of that Leelanau Peninsula area. So I mean, we just love to explore and I couldn't think of a better state for outdoor activities.

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Ed Clemente 20:56

Well, that was a good answer. Once again, it's been a pleasure, Natalie, but I want to thank Natalie Chmiko the Vice President for Pure Michigan Business Connect and International Trade at the MEDC, she's also involved with Industry 4.0, but thanks again, Natalie for doing this today.



Natalie Chmiko 21:13

Yeah, absolutely. Thanks for having me Ed.



Announcer 21:17

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