

Long Life Learning Podcast - Yale School of Management Executive Education
Episode 3—Michael Swiatek
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Kavitha Bindra (00:06)

Hi, I'm Kavitha Bindra from the Yale School of Management. This is Long Life Learning, a podcast where we sit down with thought leaders and innovators to discuss living with inspiration and vitality. This season, we're having conversations about midlife and longevity in ways that inspire purpose and connection in anticipation of our new program, the Experienced Leaders Initiative, also known as ELI.

For our third episode, I'm delighted to welcome to the show Michael Swiatek. Mike is a longtime airline executive who currently serves as Chief Accessibility Officer and Chief Strategy Officer for Abra Group. He has lived in 15 countries over the course of his dynamic, successful career. He is also a member of the advisory board for ELI, and we're delighted to have him here with us today. Mike, welcome to the podcast.

Michael Swiatek (01:05)

Thank you, Kavitha.

Kavitha Bindra (01:06)

So let's start with this. One of the core values we hope to explore in ELI is curiosity as a source of growth and discovery. When do you feel that you first started embracing the power of curiosity or a curiosity mindset in your own life?

Michael Swiatek (01:17)

What a great initial question. Curious is one of the adjectives I would use to describe myself from thousands of choices. What I really love discovering is how something works from a systematic view, whether that's the airline industry or accessibility or leadership. I look for curiosity as something in the teams that I develop, and I think curiosity is one of the attributes that is highly correlated to career success and personal happiness.

I'm a hundred percent certain it started with just some innate curiosity, and I say that for one very clear reason. I will describe myself as a blind, low vision person. I think that's critical because when people hear "blind," they automatically are biased to think a hundred percent total-black blindness. I'm not at that level. I can still see some light, different shading, and even with technology, make out some letters or words on an iPhone.

I didn't even know I was blind, low vision, I wasn't diagnosed until I was 15 years old. I knew there was something that was different. We thought I was just clumsy because I was always bumping into things. And I just learned to navigate, and really to survive, by enhancing other senses and enhancing skills like memorization.

Kavitha Bindra (02:44)

Wonderful. Thank you for sharing that. So something we've talked about and that we share in common is that we've both spent a significant amount of time in my birthplace, New Zealand, and the fact that each of us has lived in a number of different countries. I know it's been a rich and rewarding experience for me, so I'd be curious to hear about how you feel that living around the world has shaped you as an individual and shaped your journey to where you are today.

Michael Swiatek (03:10)

It's shaped that journey in many varied ways and very powerful ways. I started my journey being born in Buffalo, New York, was born into a lower middle class family where we didn't know much about the world. All my grandparents had immigrated from Poland. The big event for me was when I was 15 and we had an exchange student from Mexico, and this is in the late seventies. So someone from Mexico in western New York was very uncommon. I watched how he navigated through the high school and made friends and said, this is fascinating. So probably the luckiest thing ever in my life is I visited his family when I was 16 and said, I want more of this. And that led to being a high school exchange student myself, it led to studying abroad at college, it led to taking a job immediately after graduating in Poland, which was still communist at the time. When I say lived in 15 countries, I've had my own address and stayed in those countries for more than three months. Some—like New Zealand—we moved to New Zealand in January, 1999, and we still have a home there. And we're all dual citizens, US-New Zealand. And as you know, every place has its own culture, its own way of doing things. And if you're open-minded, and then I think this is a key part of the Experienced Leaders Initiative, is that open-mindedness opens a lot of doors, and that can be at any age, it can be at any location in the world. If you have that curiosity, if you have that willingness to learn from a new perspective... the world is just an incredible place because there's so many places to learn from and so many things to do.

Kavitha Bindra (04:47)

I'm just curious what drew you to the airline industry and what's kept you there? What excites you about it?

Michael Swiatek (04:53)

What drew me to the airline industry was a family connection. My father actually worked as a customer service agent for over 20 years. I saw through him how tough the industry was. And quite frankly, I hated the industry. My father would get laid off. He would not be able to always make as much money as the family needed or wanted. He had to change locations. And as I became a young adult, I said, oh my God, I would never work in that industry. What a terrible industry.

And of course, as a young guy in the eighties, I said, I want to work on Wall Street. Unfortunately, I wanted to work on Wall Street for all the wrong reasons, Kavitha, right? I thought it was a cool sounding job. I thought it paid good money. I don't think those are good reasons to choose an industry or a career. And then when I was at school, I realized the people who really want to work on Wall Street—they love Wall Street. They can't wait to go to page 28 of the Wall Street Journal and see who's acquiring who and what's the price earning multiple for this new company. I said, oh my God, I've got a problem. I'm never going to compete with these people in real time.

My vision was enough then with sort of a magnifying glass, I could read things still at that point. So I pull out my magnifying glass and go to the stacks of different industry magazines, and I kept looking at this airline. And there was something from growing up around airlines that made me interested in it. Because it was what I loved, I never felt like I almost needed to be paid above the amount of money to support my family, and I really loved it, and that helped me thrive. So that's how I found my way into the industry.

This is back to the curiosity question. I'm really curious about how things work. So I would read what other people said, this is how the airline industry works. But I wanted to create my own theories, my own systematic way of thinking about it. And that was incredibly powerful in my career. When you powerfully create your own perspective and you believe in it, it gives you something to fight for. It gives you something to really want to get your point across with some passion because you say, no, no, no. I

think this is critical to the industry, and I was able to do that at a relatively early age. That has served my career extremely well to have the courage and the conviction to say, I think the airline industry is dependent on these things. This is how you devise your strategy.

And I think there've been movies written about people who have this child-parent angst. "I'm not going to do what you do, just because that's what you did." I fought against a career that was in my family, and then lo and behold, I wound up in it. The only sad part for me is I could never tell my father that thank you. You gave me the gift of an interest in aviation and airlines that you didn't know you were giving me, and it's really changed my life and it's changed the life of my family.

Kavitha Bindra (07:50)

Yeah, I think most of us probably have seen our life path dictated by that sort of what you call child-parent angst, and I'm curious what I'm imparting to my own children. But sorting through some of that is probably what leads us in certain directions. So thank you for sharing that.

You've had an extraordinary journey to where you are now in your current roles as an airline executive, as a CSO, as an advocate for professionals with disabilities. What are some of the milestones along your personal and professional journey which you'd be willing to share with listeners?

Michael Swiatek (08:28)

Life is a funny thing, right? I remember my grandmother, a conversation I had when I was 19, and somehow that led to me thinking about my life in the future in chapters. And I didn't know how long a chapter should be, but I stumbled upon, well, three years sounded about right or a thousand days. So ever since I was 19, I always started thinking, not what are you going to do in five or 10 years? But I was already thinking what was I going to do when I was 58, 61, 64? And what have been the critical turning points in my chapters? I didn't start working in the airline industry until I was 29 years old. I mean, I would say relatively late to find the industry that you had a passion for. I was fortunate though, that within three years I was managing people, and within eight years, I would say I was a leader.

So being able to get into leadership at a young age was really critical to my development. And then something magical happened. It was after 30 years in the airline industry. I reported to I think something like a dozen different CEOs, all from different countries. And this one, Adrian Neuhauser, he's also my current CEO. He looked across the table and said, "Mike, you're blind low-vision. You probably know more about accessibility than anybody in this company. Why don't you also get involved in accessibility?" And luck is where preparation meets opportunity. My whole life has been preparing me to be a Chief Accessible Officer. My whole life was as a Chief Strategy Officer, but the two merged together at this magical moment where someone finally said, "Why don't you get more involved in this?" And I said, "I would love to. No one's ever given me the time before."

So now I have a double titled role of Chief Strategy Officer and Chief Accessibility Officer. I thought at an early age in terms of chapters in my career, and I'm 61, so I still have another seven or eight to go. And that's really where the ELI program comes in because wow, seven or eight more chapters, I'm still thinking about: What do I want to do in those three year periods. What can I achieve? How can I make this overused phrase, the world a better place. How can I empower other people to continue this journey of lifting the planet up by its bootstraps?

Kavitha Bindra (10:49)

What a remarkable story. And I would love to get your thoughts about why you think this particular opportunity to become the Chief Accessibility Officer presented itself. Do you think something's changed

culturally or was there a particular recognition at your company to start thinking about these issues in a way that required someone of your stature to really think them through?

Michael Swiatek (11:12)

I think that what's been going on in the world. There's a lot of futurists, there's a lot of trendwatchers. Social media. It really has lifted the voices of advocates and activists around the world on issues like accessibility. I call it a golden age of accessibility. The Americans with Disabilities Act went into place over 30 years ago in 1992, well into my life where I was already 30 years old. So to give some context, when we talk about disability and accessibility, Kavitha, there's a lot of different disabilities. There's 1.3 billion people on the planet who are living with a disability, which could be a mobility issue, a visual issue, an auditory issue, a cognitive issue, neurodivergence.

So when you think about all these different disabilities, what are the ways we have to improve lives? Well, five tools: awareness, training, re-engineering processes, digital technology, and hardware. In today's stage, awareness is skyrocketing, right? It's so easy to see on LinkedIn, on Instagram. Posts from people who are living with the lived experiences of accessibility. My voice is so much stronger now that people can see what my life is like. Training—a little bit weaker. We have a lot of room to do on improving training. I think that's a societal issue. Process re-engineering is an ongoing battle to always make things more effective. The other one that we're just in a golden age, though, is digital technology. I can use a smartphone today, take a picture of where I'm standing in an airport, and I get a voice description of that picture that's better than a human being can give me. It gives me details that are amazing. "The departure board behind you says the flight to Los Angeles is at gate six." And then the hardware, which is where we mostly think of accessibility, right? Putting in wider doors, putting in ramps to buildings. This I think has been in a good place for 30 years, but it's a very time-consuming one. You have to wait for a new aircraft to come online for a new building.

But with those five tools, we're making progress on two or three of them, and it's just a magical time, right? I'm in the right place at the right time. I'm a disabled person with leadership experience with a lot of experience in air travel, and it almost feels like it's a calling. It's something even beyond a purpose. I feel like my own concepts of what God is, but I feel like someone has actually poked me on the shoulder and said, Mike, you need to be involved in this issue. So go out there and do it.

Kavitha Bindra (13:45)

Well, I think you're making a huge impact with what you're doing and look forward to hearing more about that as you progress in taking the steps that you've just described. I wanted to shift to more of the intrinsic qualities that have really brought you to this place. Central to a lot of your work are concepts like power of listening, memory and empathy. Why do you feel these traits are essential, particularly in times of transition?

Michael Swiatek (14:13)

Leadership starts with listening. And most of us are bad listeners, and I keep trying to find habits and ways to improve my listening. Being a blind, low-vision person certainly I think has given me more empathy, although it's funny, right? Because empathy is kind of putting yourself in someone else's shoes or seeing the world through someone else's eyes, which I don't really see. I always try to, rather than say see, I say experience. But I'm a big believer in things like empathy and listening.

I think each individual should spend a little bit of time of asking themselves, what does make them tick? Who are they? How would they describe themselves? When I interview people, when I build teams, I'm always fascinated to hear, "Tell me about yourself using three or four adjectives." What comes out of

people is amazing. And we can work with everybody. We can build things together better when we have different backgrounds and beliefs. I just think the world's a wonderful place no matter what age you're in, no matter where you are. If you give yourself the ability to think and to be yourself and be genuine and be authentic, and give yourself that freedom, and be a little more of a risk taker and be proactive and get used to people telling you "No." We just keep trying, fighting on and using empathy and listening.

Kavitha Bindra (15:32)

I love that interview question—the three or four adjectives. And it's interesting, my daughter, who's now a freshman in high school, when she was applying to high schools, which I didn't realize was a thing, but apparently it is. One of her essay questions, was to describe herself using three or four words, and it gave me a window into who she is and who she's growing to be. Just reading what she wrote, it was completely surprising to me and gave me a whole new, I think, perspective and insight into who this amazing young woman is, so I do really like that question. And I think it can be used in a variety of settings when you're trying to get to know your own child or as you said, someone that you're looking to work with.

So shifting gears a little bit, you referenced the idea that for you life is like a series of chapters. You're entering a new chapter. I'd like to hear about how you would characterize your personal relationship to the idea of longevity and what that looks like as a chapter or series of chapters.

Michael Swiatek (16:38)

Longevity is a frightening word. Because what comes to mind for me? Well, how long am I going to be on this planet? The great news is we're living longer and we're not just living longer, but we're living ideally healthier lives, longer. My perspective also, Kavitha, is a little bit different. I've already lost one of my senses. I see far too many people who, "Well, I'm getting older and I can't do what I used to do either in terms of seeing or hearing or moving, so I'm going to give up." I really hate when I see people giving up because life is so much more complicated than a single sense.

Longevity—I do know that I want to make every day as joyful and impactful and leave behind not a legacy for myself, but leave behind that I've played my part in society. I've inspired people, I've empowered people, I've coached people. I think that's what a leader does. I'm lucky to be a leader. I want to see that in the lives of my children. I want to see that in the lives of people, whether I interact with them for five minutes or five years. That I've given them something that 20, 50, a hundred years from now, their grandchildren may be doing things differently because of the little flap of the wings of my butterfly. I really do believe in that.

So longevity? I think I will be healthy for another 20, 30 years. I think I will be able to continue to build on three-year chapters for another 20 or 30 years. And for a 61-year-old to say that—that's pretty amazing.

Kavitha Bindra (18:15)

Something we discussed with Mark Freedman in our first episode was the notion that changemaking doesn't mean having to totally reinvent yourself when you can draw on decades of acquired knowledge and experience. I feel like that's something you fully embrace by taking on opportunities like advising, board service... How do you continue to evolve your professional and personal identity, and what would be your advice to others looking to do?

Michael Swiatek (18:41)

I think it's at least two components. One is that just preparation. So when opportunity comes, you get the luck. And what we really want in life are opportunities to choose from. The other one is we need purpose and goals in our lives. We need experience and unique perspectives. We need a social network. And then critically, we need some self-awareness and we need a reputation. I hate when I see on a job application, "Oh, you need 10 years of experience." Well, doesn't somebody break that mold by getting experience without having experience? And we could talk about imposter syndrome and fake it till you make it. I'm very passionate that we can make ourselves better if we focus on some of these elements like acquiring skills, knowing what our personality is and trying new things. If we don't open our mouths, if we don't try, there's going to be a lot less opportunities in the future for you than if you take that risk, you be proactive.

Kavitha Bindra (19:34)

Well, we're really fortunate that we now have the benefit of your guidance. So as you noted, you're a member of the ELI Advisory Board and we're thrilled to have you as a part of this group. I'd love to hear a little bit more about what excites and energizes you about this partnership with the Yale School of Management, and what do you hope that ELI Fellows will get out of the experience?

Michael Swiatek (19:56)

We're in this new understanding of life. People are living longer? People are staying healthier longer. So typically, we thought about retiring in our early sixties, but we have more to give. So that's what excites me. It's a new chapter. And there are much smarter people than me who've written different phases of life. Shakespeare wrote about seven phases of life. Mark Freedman, who's part of ELI, he's written this book called *The Big Shift*. David Brooks, who's associated with the University of Chicago, has written *How to Know Somebody*.

But we're all coming at this time where we recognize life doesn't end when you retire. We shouldn't even think in terms of retirement. Just think in terms of what do I want to do next?

And I think that Yale is on the front of this to say, there is another big chapter in your life out there. And as a 61-year-old, I'm right in that sweet spot of where it used to change. And I know individuals who are asking themselves now, "Well, I've been airline strategists for 30 years. What can I do next?" It might be coaching young people. It might be running a nonprofit organization or NGO. It might be writing a book. It might be writing your memoir. It might be becoming a leader in your church group or social group. But these next chapters—if I can also play a small part in helping other people figure out what their next chapters are, that's what excites me about ELI.

All of us need help on exploration. We shouldn't try to do it ourselves. So Yale can help us explore that within ourselves. What's going to make us tick into the next 10, 20 years? Take advantage of it. And I really applaud you, Kavitha, and the whole Yale School of Management for taking the risk to go out into this endeavor because it is untrodden soil to help people. And you don't have to be 60, right? You could also be doing this at 40 or 50. You could be doing it at 80 or 90.

Kavitha Bindra (21:56)

Yeah, I don't think it's an age group. It's a mindset. So I think that's really well put. What are a few stories you can share with us about individuals whom you feel are thriving in their third act of life?

Michael Swiatek (22:09)

I've known a lot of individuals who've been lucky enough to do that big pivot of changing an industry. Now I'm going to work in academia, or I'm going to work in the pharmaceutical industry, or I'm going to

work in a nonprofit. So I think that's sort of the big pivot is you're doing this with the skills you've acquired maybe in one industry or function, but broadening those to somewhere else. And probably in a lot of cases, places where society needs volunteers.

I've known individuals doing this. People in industry have tried becoming a startup entrepreneur. I've seen people switch from government to industry. Even as hard to imagine, I know someone who was incarcerated recently. Never expected that in her life, but came out with a whole different opinion of, "Was I really spending all my time just worried about business and about finance? Isn't life a lot broader than that?"

I know people who've acquired a disability at a later age and say, "Oh my God, have I done everything in my life I wanted to?" It could happen at 30 or 70. And as you said, it's not an age group. It's a mindset. And a lot of it's driven by a life experience that says, "Have I been focused on the right principles and goals? What does bring me meaning in life and purpose in life?" And purpose in life is a tough one, right? There's little p and big P. We're not all going to be Mother Teresa. We're not all going to be Steve Jobs. But I think we all have the power to change lives and I hope everyone enjoys doing that. I hope everybody enjoys finding something they're passionate about that can help change somebody else's life in a positive way.

None of us are know-it-alls. And when you talked about learning about your daughter through these "describe yourself" questions... We need to be careful in pushing our own personalities and beliefs on people too much. But I think we also need to be bold enough to share our personalities and personalities enough to inspire people. Everybody out there is looking for, whether they know it or not, "How do I find more meaning in my life and how do I do that next chapter that helps me fulfill that promise?"

Kavitha Bindra (24:27)

Thank you, Mike. What a beautiful answer. I love your framing around the big pivot. I'm curious whether there are certain conditions you think need to arise to allow people to feel confidence in making that big pivot, whether that happens when you're 30 or 70. It's pretty easy for us, I think especially in those early chapters in life, to sort of take a path that leads you naturally from one place to another, or you're molded by certain expectations to follow a certain path. But do you think there are certain conditions that allow you to perhaps break out of those expectations and create the conditions for a big pivot?

Michael Swiatek (25:03)

I love Carol Dweck and Mary Murphy's work on the growth mindset. If you haven't read those books, I say read 'em, because that's a big contributor, I think, to your willingness to try something new. I think financial security helps, but I also think, and I've read a lot of literature, how much money do you need to really be happy? And it's less than what we typically think of. So I think we rely on society too much thinking of financial, that I have to have a certain amount of money in the bank before I can pivot or before I can do something new.

But I think the real risk in life, Kavitha, is the risk of not moving. Of not trying to do something new. Of not trying to change and to learn. Most of us will fall on our feet okay. My wife's been the big encourager for me on that subject. Because yeah, as a blind, low vision person, I'm worried. "Oh my God, is there going to be a day where no one's going to want to hire me?" And she's like, "Mike, just do what you want to do. Take the chance." At 48, I did leave the airline industry, and for a couple of years I tried building my own company where I was mortgaging the house to fund the company. She said, "You'll land on your feet." We need that encouragement. We need those support groups. But I also want to stress that, yeah, the world is not equal in terms of financial capabilities. And for a lot of people, this is a very

privileged spot to be able to think about. Because if I went back a 200 years as a blind, low vision person? I may have not even survived for this long.

Comes back to the golden age of not only accessibility, but life. We're living in a planet where I think there's an abundance of economic opportunity and an abundance of places to learn from and things to do, and that's what progress is. So this is a step in that journey. ELI is a step in that journey. I think it's at the right time. I think it will resonate with a lot of people, but if you're not interested and you're worried that I don't have the time to do it or the financial capability to do it, I would encourage people, take a little bit more risk, be proactive, see where it goes.

Kavitha Bindra (27:06)

Thank you so much for that. Mike. We've talked about how you've lived in multiple places and just curious about where your work and travels have been taking you lately and whether you have any travel recommendations for listeners.

Michael Swiatek (27:22)

Travel recommendations? Oh my God. See the world. My biggest travel recommendation is this, though. What I've come to understand is travel is not just about place, it's also about time. Meaning: you can't go to New Zealand in 1980 anymore, Kavitha. I worked in Poland at a time when Poland was under a communist political regime. I studied in Spain in 1983 when it was just coming out of a dictatorship.

Figure out what your interests are and go explore the world. And as an airline guy, yeah, that's a good marketing for my company. Where I'm traveling recently? I travel a lot to Bogota, Columbia, to Sao Paulo, Brazil, to Madrid, Spain. I'm extremely fortunate to still have a home in New Zealand and a place in Miami and a place in Michigan. I experience the world not through seeing it, but by listening to it and tasting it and touching it and feeling it. I mean, it's still exciting for me to travel and go to new places and hear different opinions and perspectives.

Kavitha Bindra (28:26)

Finally, I'd love to ask what books, videos, and other resources should listeners check out next if they want to find out more about what we've discussed? I know you've referenced several in our discussion, but if there are any others that you would recommend to the listeners.

Michael Swiatek (28:41)

Well, I wish I had one of my own to recommend, but I don't.

Kavitha Bindra (28:43)

That's coming, that's forthcoming. I'm sure.

Michael Swiatek (28:47)

Maybe coming. But things that I read? One that comes to mind is a book called *Vision* by David Tattle. And David Tattle is a recently retired appellate court justice in the US. He has the same eye disease that I've been battling with from birth. So if you want to learn a little bit about how a person with a disability, particularly blind, low-vision, has navigated an amazing career of appellate court justice, David Tattle's book called *Vision*.

For the airline Industry... This one's a bit outdated, but there's a book called *Hard Landing*. The industry hasn't changed that much in the 30 years since it's been written. I'll recommend your own Mark Freedman's book. *The Big Shift*. I read that recently and it's right in line in what we talked about today. I love *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the inspirational book. If you haven't read it, and you want to think about purpose and meaning in life and different chapters. I love Robert Waldinger. He runs this Harvard longitudinal study from the class of like 1926 called *The Good Life*, and what are the findings they've found tracking people's lives. What makes you happy?

And I could go on and on Kavitha. I'm an avid listener of audio books. I try to have a habit of listening to a book every week. I also listen to a lot of podcasts. I'm always exploring and amazed at what I can learn at zero cost through this technology we have nowadays and ideas that spur me on.

Kavitha Bindra (30:18)

Wonderful. Thank you so much for the gift of your time today and really looking forward to keeping the conversation going, and thank you so much, Michael.

Michael Swiatek (30:26)

No, thank you. Kavitha in this together, and I think we have a great opportunity, a bit of a new chapter for both of us. And the Yale Experienced Leaders Initiative. I think it's really onto something and people should check it out.

Kavitha Bindra (30:42)

Absolutely. Thank you again.

Michael Swiatek (30:44)

Cheers.

Kavitha Bindra (30:49)

Long Life Learning is a production of Yale School of Management Executive Education. The podcast is produced by Rebecca Barry, and was co-founded by Tracy Sheerin, Kristen Sorek West, Kelly Jessup, and me, Kavitha Bindra. Special thanks to the Yale SOM Media Team for their tech expertise and use of their studio, especially Froilan Cruz, Abrahamian Texidor Sr., Jessica Rogers, Donny Bristol, and Enoc Reyes. This podcast would not have been possible without help from Ben Mattison, Joanne Legler, and many others. Our theme song is "How It's All Connected" by Yan Perchuk.