

## Something Extra EP 061 – Bhavani Amirthalingam

**Lisa Nichols:** I'm very excited to have Bhavani Amirthalingam on the show today, Bhavani is the SVP Chief Digital Information Officer at Ameren here in St. Louis and brings over 20 years of experience, building leadership teams driving change and leading innovation. Bhavani, I am so excited to have you on the show today. I remember the first time I met you, we were sitting in your office and I loved your story and I said, You have to come and be on the podcast. It was probably at least a year ago. So thank you so much for making the time. I know you're incredibly busy.

**Bhavani Amirthalingam:** Oh, it's a pleasure Lisa. I do remember that compilation that I think it was very fun. I'm looking forward to it. Thank you for having me.

**Nichols:** Absolutely. Well, let's just dive right on in. So talk to me a little bit about how you grew up. And then we'll go over some other things.

**Amirthalingam:** I was born and raised in India. So I grew up born in Bangalore. Spent the first 10 years of my life there and then I moved to a place called Chennai. I think I was probably 12 years old when computers first showed up in school and there was something you got to do for an hour, a few weeks in. I really enjoyed it and I learned that you could actually show up to school on a Saturday, and you had the entire day, you could work on computers do what you wanted. And so I started doing that, and my mom was like... What are you doing on a Saturday? And my dad went there are a lot worse things she could be doing let go.

So it started as a hobby, quite honestly, and I went on to go do a Bachelor's in Computer Science, and I worked every summer my Bachelors and I realized what I really loved was going in and solving business problems using technology and then decided to go pursue an MBA with a focus around information management, and then got into the consulting space, which was fabulous, and got to work very large customers, very complex environments. And then there was an opportunity out East here at Sony that actually brought me to the US. Yeah, yeah, so I was really 23 years old. Landed in New York it and it's been such a fun, but crazy ride since then.

**Nichols:** You have had just an illustrious career, you really have because you started at Sony, is that when you were recruited by Schneider then you were recruited? No, you were created by worldwide technology right here in St. Louis right?

**Amirthalingam:** I actually met my husband and I was out to East. He was moving to St. Louis to finish up school. And you know how long distance is a painful... And I said, "Oh I'm going to pick up and move and start looking for opportunities. And that's when I ran into the opportunity at WWT. I actually interviewed on a Sunday at world-wide and one it was just such a fabulous experience, great environment fabulous culture. There was something very magical when you go through that experience and I started back in 1999

**Nichols:** What was your role? What did you start as?

**Amirthalingam:** Yeah, sure, it's right before the dot com boom. And I started really in the e-commerce space, for worldwide and it's a technology company, so I just caught an opportunity to do a myriad of different things, no day or no week or month is the same with the amount of change that just happens in the tech space. But also the fact that they were a high growth environment, and I was there at 15 years at world-wide. 10 years, the top line through 25% year over year in the bottom line, grew like 29% YOY.

So you just see it's a different place, literally every year. And the opportunities that come to you are fabulous and type of environment, great people, some fabulous mentors, and sponsors, that I had Jim Kavanagh and it's still to this day, and just learned a lot about being entrepreneurial, taking smart risk being courageous working hard, integrity, humility, learn a lot. So, I very thankful and grateful for all the opportunities quite frankly, I've had so far.

**Nichols:** So you said the word entrepreneurial, talk about that. I mean, is that important to be entrepreneurial, within an organization? because sometimes people think entrepreneur, starting something, outside.

**Amirthalingam:** I think it's an absolutely key piece for success. And in general, treat what you're doing, like it is your own and learn to take smart risk, with what you're trying to do and accomplish whether you're part of an organization or you're of going and doing something on your own. I think just that spirit of venturing into something that you may not have it all figured out, but, knowing how to check and adjust and along the way, right, I think it's really important.

**Nichols:** So you were at worldwide for 15 years and then you were recruited away from worldwide to Schneider to be the CIO. And I think when I first met you, you were at Schneider. So talk about that journey, how did that come about? You probably weren't even looking were you?

**Amirthalingam:** No, I was not. The interesting part was, I think, when Schneider reached out worldwide, we worked with APC as a partner and I didn't even think about APC as being Schneider but it's one of the Schneider companies and they are 30 billion 100 countries, large global organization. And when they reached out, it was a neat opportunity it was the right point of time in my life and career, in terms of being able to just get on the road. It was a lot of travel with the nature of the opportunity in the automatic and perimeter also just globally. And I loved it.

I learned so much going through and again I have been so fortunate with all the sponsorship, mentors, I've had a fantastic mentor, who is the CEO for the North American operations that has always continued raised the bar. And when people put more faith in you, then you will know it really helps you push yourself. She's has been a fantastic role model in so many different ways...

**Nichols:** That's really interesting because you definitely don't want to disappoint. And I'm thinking in one of our conversations I'll never forget what you said. Bhavani, you said I've never really worked to build my resume. And you said what I've done in every opportunity that I've been given is to focus on bringing value and when I've done that, my resume is built itself and I just think that is such awesome advice because it really is, it's the value that you bring, and then your resume just continues to build and then people come looking for you.

**Amirthalingam:** I'm a big believer of it. I think you focus on the outcome you focus on... And not the optics and then everything else follows from there. I remember my dad when I was very young. Would say make yourself useful whatever you are, whatever you do. And I think that at its just taking that mindset to what you do, do what you're doing with passion, with integrity, with humility because no, but no single person makes anything happen at as well. And so really just approaching it with a spirit of teamwork, and work ethic is really important to work really, nothing comes easy, in life, so...

**Nichols:** Great words of advice, great words of advice. So from Schneider then someone did come looking for you. And so your latest role has been as the Chief Digital Innovation Officer for Ameren. And you've been there for about 18 months, and I know that you have done a lot since

you've been there, but can you just talk about your first 90 days? Say there's a leader out there right now and they are looking at possibly that next step for them? What are the things that you're trying to do besides just get your arms around that particular organization?

**Amirthalingam:** So I think you learn through different experiences in your career. And do I look back at my Schneider and my world-wide experiences. The thing I learned at worldwide was insane focus on the customer, just customer centricity, and focusing on the customer. And then you shift it to Schneider. One of the things I learned was if you're trying to go in and optimize transform a certain function or a certain area or a certain product, go see where the work is actually being done. And I think that was a role that I had there that was so important to be able to drive the change and transformation.

At worldwide, it was a lot of create and innovate, and learned a lot doing that and being entrepreneurial and Schneider was a lot about driving change and transformation at scale and I felt like here I had the opportunity at Ameren to bring the tax spirit it and the change and transformation that I was engaged with Schneider in the energy space in the Ameren. So one of the things that in my 90 days was a go engage with the different functions and segments, understand how things are done. I went and did some ride along with the electric and gas in the field co-workers. You actually understand the type of systems they're using what they have, what they have to go through when a to the customer care center, and then actually took some calls along with our customer care center. So you actually understand what does the customer experience feel like? It's the same with your own team. I'll tell the one thing that's been so humbling about Ameren is just the people, it's an amazing organization.

I've been in a lot of places, but when I look at the people there, people are very smart, very hard-working, but extremely humble, and so a very service-minded organization, right? And so I really wanted to make sure I can get to know the teams within my digital organization but also within the extended Ameren an organization. So and then you're not going to get it all done yourself. You've got to build partnerships and so I made sure I met with different partners on that as a...

**Nichols:** Because technology partners is one of your partners and I remember you coming out here, it's writing with our team, and I know that you've done a lot while you've been there and you've built an amazing team. What's something that you're most proud of in this 18 months that you've done now at Ameren?

**Amirthalingam:** I think if I think about the changes that we're putting in place, I go back to transforming customer experience. At the end of the day, we're here to protect the critical infrastructure and provide safe, secure, power to our customers and so I think about what is the customer experience and customer affordability, making sure we're providing absolutely great product and services at very affordable rates for customers. So I'd say from a customer experience standpoint, we've done a variety of things around transforming the web experience for our customers, the mobile experience, looking at key moments of our customer journey, whether it's outage, it's service orders with people that are trying to move in and out. As well as billing and payments.

How do you digitize those? And I think about just consumerization on of customer expectations, they have certain expectations based on the experience they see when they go to Amazon or they go and order pizza online and they want to make sure they are able to engage with their utility with the same with the same level of ease right? And so we took the key moments of the journey, customer journeys, and then focused on that. And then I get very focused on customer experience and then the things that we focus on from a customer affordability perspective, is how do we continue to invest in technology for our customers that continue to help keep our rates? We have one of the lowest rates in the countries, how do we compute to keep rates affordable for our customers, while we could new to make these investments. It has been a huge focus as well.

**Nichols:** Well, we're going to take a quick break and then we'll be back with Bhavani Amirthalingam.

**Nichols:** So Bhavani, you've had an amazing career as you've said, you've been so blessed but you've been in a career that has traditionally been male dominated. But I just look at St. Louis and I think about St. Louis there are so many women leaders now in technology in Saint Louis. Obviously you're one of those... What are some of the challenges that you feel like you've had to overcome? But what would you tell young girls? We need more people in STEM, do we not? And certainly we need more women. How can we all help?

**Amirthalingam:** I think that's a great question. There's so much to STEM. And sometimes, I think folks can think of it and say, If I don't like math, I'm not going to go to STEM and I don't think that's necessarily the case, and there's so much to doing science that may not actually have to do with your math skills or your computer skills. Medicine, biology, research, I think about even the technology world to make a good technology product come to life. Well, you

need technologists you user experience for you need folks with you need the left and the right in exactly in folks that can actually market the product.

So I do think there's so many different aspects to making STEM come live... And I actually like STEAM more than STEM. Put the arts in there. And I think in terms of encouraging girls to take on, I think part of it is just, there shouldn't be a stigma to it or a fear, I don't think there is a boys are better at it. Girls are better at this. Anyone should be able to go to any of it. I think just having that mindset and being able to encourage girls to go in and do that early on, very early on, I think it's huge man orl women. I do think you set your ceiling.

So if you don't want to have one and you want to be bold, you want to be courageous, you can go pursue anything that you really want to go to. And so I think from that standpoint, it's about encouraging girls to be brave, I think about just good leaders in general, it's being courageous, having the curiosity to go learn and being compassionate. I just think if you bring those elements and I do think getting girls into that mold really early on goes a long way.

**Nichols:** That's your three C's right? So curiosity, courage, and compassionate. So dive into the compassionate piece, why is that important?

**Amirthalingam:** I think it's extremely important, the most important things don't get accomplished by a single individual, and it's about a team coming together, and it's approaching a situation or a problem, when you bring critical thinking to it, you bring curiosity to how to solve this problem, to it, you have to bring courage to it, you have to bring compassion to what is the problem you're trying to solve, who else is engaged with you. I think that he is more important today than it has ever been where we have so much technology, coming at us. I think the human factor and compassion by far is an extremely important attribute, I think as the world get used to change.

**Nichols:** That's really a great point because we both know change is hard and having compassion for your people.

**Amirthalingam:** To embrace that change, absolutely no understanding that people go through the change curve at the different ways. Exactly, the pace can be different. Sometimes say it's the change on you can feel like it's crazy when you first start going. I can't believe this. And then it moves from being crazy to... Like, this is dangerous. So, work has actually shifted and... And then it goes from there to being obvious, and people take different paths to get there. Some

people can get there to the end state very quickly. And I think just being compassionate and patient not everyone's already there, right? And being able to do that together.

**Nichols:** those are such great points and not to take on your ears Bhavani. But I will say the very first time I met you. You are an approachable you're just a kind person.

And I know we just had a conversation a few weeks ago and I was telling you about something going on personally in our life that's been difficult and you're like, "Well my husband is a doctor. Or any time you would want him to if he can help and you're just a very kind person, so I can definitely see that. I love that you brought that out.

So there's so many emerging technologies out there. What do you see as those things coming down the pike that maybe will change the utility industry? What are those technologies?

**Amirthalingam:** Yeah, no I absolutely, I could talk about it for hours, you know, It's a very passionate topic now, I think I... There's so much change happening right now in the energy space and quite frankly it's happening across industries but when you take it and related to the energy space and the utility you've got the convergence of IT and IOT happening so it really... You have devices going on traditional devices going on to the grid that are now connected devices you have smart meters being implemented that are sending data in a volume and velocity that we've never seen before. And so you talk about big data, about the analytics you can draw on it to be able to drive the right customer experience to drive good optimization.

How do you leverage data that's coming from a lot of the connected assets, in leverage AI leverage machine learning and is one of many things that you can do as it relates to emerging technologies and the grid. I think about the communication infrastructure that is actually needed to be able to support this volume and velocity of interactions as well, as the grid self. Itself being connected. And so really making sure you've got investing in that, communication infrastructure for utilities as they continue to expand is a key element of the grid of the future, as well.

**Nichols:** Okay, well, one thing's for sure there's going to be changed coming, right? That's one thing we can be sure of the technology. So this is something extra. What do you believe, Bhavani is something extra that every leader needs?

**Amirthalingam:** I go back to my three Cs. And yeah, I feel like if you keep those three top of mind, you can really approach any problem. And I think about them again in the context of

curiosity to learn, especially the technology world, things are changing every minute, forget every day. And so is understanding... Having the curiosity to learn because nothing stays the same. And so I think that's so important.

The curiosity to learn the technology, but the business the industry customers is so much to go do. I think the second piece is life comes at you in so many different ways, personally and professionally, and so a lot of times there are very difficult situations that you're in and you have to have the courage to navigate it in courage to navigate difficult situations and courage to take on opportunities and I think, so courage to me is how can you get yourself to be a little uncomfortable, And I already talked a lot about compassion. And I do think they go hand-in-hand, if you approach any tough situation. When you're trying to do the right thing and it can be really difficult, but if you approach it with compassion, I think you can really do it the right way.

**Nichols:** Well, I couldn't agree with you more, because organizations are made up of humans, and we need to give each other a little bit more grace, and compassion for sure. So talk to me a little bit... Is there something coming up that you want our listeners to know about or... I mean, I know you're always looking for great people, right? To join your team. So if you're technologist, out there, Ameren would be a great place because Bhavani is leading the charge there and is doing a fantastic job. Is there anything that you want our listeners to know about?

**Amirthalingam:** You know, I think I mentioned this earlier. I am so blessed to be the organization, I am at, it's just a fabulous... I've never felt closer to the customer in the community that I live in, than today. And the co-workers at Ameren and the leadership at Ameren. I think about just fabulous leaders that humble, smart. And that transcends throughout the organization, it's a great place to be, it's a fantastic time for the industry and what we're going through and so anyone that looks at it and says, they want to do some really cool things and work with some very neat people, you know while doing that? I think Ameren is the place to be.

**Nichols:** Very good. Well, hopefully, you're going to have some people reaching out to you and, and talking about possibly joining the team. Well Bhavani, this has just been so much fun for me, I've loved it and I do think that we probably could sit here for a few more hours and talk, but thank you so much for making the time and I know how incredibly busy you are, so thank you.

**Amirthalingam:** Thanks for having me Lisa.

