



Karina Montilla Edmonds

Global Senior Vice President, Head of Academies and University Alliances

SAP

Continually seek the path for greatest growth

Karina Montilla Edmonds has moved from industry to academia, to government, and then back to academia and industry—and every job has been the best job she’s ever had. With each move, she sought the optimal path for growth.

Her first job after graduating as an aeronautical engineer was at Northrop Grumman. She then spent five years at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), which Caltech managed, as director of technology transfer.

worked for Secretary Steven Chu, who she describes as “a scientist who recognized the value of moving technologies to the marketplace, both as an inventor and entrepreneur.” Also, she notes, “we had a historic administration, which for me was quite appealing and an experience I wanted to share with my family. And as a naturalized citizen, I feel this country has given so much to me. This (job) was my opportunity to serve in a small way. For all those reasons, I took the job.”

Montilla Edmonds did encounter challenges at DOE. There was a negative perception of technology transfer, which some at DOE regarded as “corporate welfare.” Furthermore, there was a much different relationship among the DOE labs than what JPL enjoyed with NASA. “There were people within DOE that didn’t feel like the labs were part of DOE because they were contractor managed,” says Edmonds. “NASA loves JPL as part of their lab system, so this was very different than my previous experience.”

Funding was also a challenge; her budget wasn’t as large as expected. She chose not to renew after the first three appointments. “I had done as much as I could with the resources I’d been given, and so it was time to move on,” she says.

Despite the challenges, Montilla Edmonds regards her move to DOE as the most significant growth point in her career. “Going from academia into government, into this very highly visible role, was a pretty big leap,” she says.

From DOE, Montilla Edmonds returned to Caltech as executive director for corporate partnerships. After several years, she recognized the environment was no longer a perfect fit. While interviewing for a position at a different academic institution, she was contacted by Google, connected by a colleague

she worked with in Google’s university relations division. The potential for professional growth was again the key to taking on the new role.

After three years as Google’s university lead for Google Cloud, a new opportunity appeared on the horizon. SAP, one of the largest software companies in the world, engaged Montilla Edmonds as its senior vice president and global head of academies and university alliances, reporting directly to the CEO, Christian Klein.

SAP’s mission of helping the world run better was a strong appeal. Montilla Edmonds says she helps improve people’s

lives while influencing the company’s direction as a member of its corporate and social responsibility board. “The growth opportunity is significantly bigger than my opportunities at Google were at that time,” she says.

In industry, Montilla Edmonds notes, there is more focus on return on investment than in academia or government. And industry is focused on outcomes and ROI. “Industry moves much faster. Programs get killed if they’re not working properly, and we change direction at a much faster pace. Government

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programs last a lot longer and have the potential for greatest impact. Ultimately Industry tends to be a little more agile.”

Montilla Edmonds says she is pleasantly surprised by how much industry wants to work with academia to ensure a diverse talent pipeline. She says that SAP is very interested in working with universities that have a diverse student body. “I don’t think that has generally been the case in industry.”

Building relationships and networking have always been her most transferrable skills. “I think the underlying thread is creating and building trust. When I joined JPL, the trust was broken between management and the researchers.” Her empathetic leadership style leads with inclusivity and team building to solve problems.

That style crystalized at Google. The team there discovered through research that a high level of emotional security—psychological safety—is needed for creativity to thrive. “That’s when it really hit me,” says Montilla Edmonds . “You have a more effective team when you build trust.”

Her career advice:

- **Develop your network.** Montilla-Edmonds can trace each opportunity on her career path to professional colleagues who recommended her. Build social capital wherever you are.
- **Take risks and stay curious.** “Do not be afraid to do something different... whether it’s going to a different city or going to a different university or company.” [There is no such thing as failure, you either win or you learn. The lesson learned often provides a greater growth experience.]
- **Weigh the value of your knowledge and what you bring to the table.** “You want to be at a place where you can bring your full self because (otherwise) you can’t bring your ‘A’ game.” (quote attributed to Prof. Sylvester James Gates, Jr.)
- **Learn to be comfortable in uncomfortable situations.** “It’s in the place of discomfort where we grow the most.”

Montilla Edmonds continues to have a special tie to the academic community. “Part of the reason I got my PhD was because I wanted to be a faculty member. I’ve always enjoyed working with faculty and researchers, and I enjoy being able to do that from the industry side,” she says. “That’s what enables me to have good relationships with faculty, because I have a deep understanding of their objectives and know what’s meaningful for them, what is helpful, and most importantly how to get out of their way.”



After more than a year of working from home, Karina finally met some of her team in person at SAP’s new, state-of-the-art, Engineering Academy in San Ramon, CA.