

Business Better (Season 2, Episode 28): Conversations with Women in Finance, with Special Guest Natasha Holiday from RBC Capital Markets

Speakers: Emilie Ninan and Natasha Holiday

Steve Burkhart:

Welcome to Business Better, a podcast designed to help businesses navigate the new normal. I'm your host, Steve Burkhart. After a long career at global consumer products company BIC – where I served as Vice President of Administration, General Counsel, and Secretary – I'm now Of Counsel in the Litigation Department at Ballard Spahr, a law firm with clients across industries and throughout the country.

This episode is part of our Women in Finance series, and features an interview with Natasha Holiday, Managing Director at RBC Capital Markets with a focus in U.S. public infrastructure finance. Ms. Holiday talks about her career journey into finance, the current state of the market, and navigating the opportunities and challenges that come with integrating family life with a hybrid work environment in a post-George Floyd world. Speaking with Ms. Holiday is my Ballard Spahr colleague Emilie Ninan, a Partner in our Wilmington, Delaware and Washington, DC offices; and co-chair of Ballard Spahr's Finance department. So now let's join Emilie and her guest Natasha Holiday.

Emilie Ninan:

Natasha, thank you for joining me for this conversation today. I wanted to start by talking about your current position. You're a managing director at RBC Capital Markets with an expertise in public infrastructure. Can you talk a little bit about what your responsibilities are in that role?

Natasha Holiday:

First Emilie, just thank you for inviting me to have this conversation with you. I appreciate our ability to have this conversation. And hopefully there'll be some good shared learnings between the two of us. I sit in the New York office of RBC Capital Markets and I co-lead our large issuer practice. I have direct responsibility over Northeast large issuer practice. And then in addition to that, from a strategy and resource perspective, I lead the Transportation Midwest Public Power & Utilities practices as well.

Emilie Ninan:

We're going to talk a little bit more about your day to day a little later, but now looking back from where you grew up in Cleveland and then went to college as a history and political science major in Cincinnati, how did you find your way to finance in New York and what were the different stops you made before getting to where you are today?

Natasha Holiday:

Yeah, absolutely. If you had asked me in college, if I would be an investment banker, I literally would've laughed at you. That was nowhere on the radar. Nowhere really in the stars aligning for me. But I had an interest in poli sci and history. I had passion around government and politics and public service, but then I also had this really interesting experience growing up with a single mom who delivered newspapers for a living. And on the weekends, I would go out with her in this much more affluent neighborhood. And I saw the impact of what infrastructure looked like between the neighborhood I grew up in and the neighborhood we delivered these newspapers to. It was just a pin in my head around the role that infrastructure played in quality of life. I didn't really know what to do with that, but as I got older and had an interest in public service, I was really

interested in economic development. I knew what I didn't want to do in economic development, but I didn't really know exactly what it was that I wanted to do.

And when I started to have these conversations around infrastructure and how it could be a catalyst for redevelopment in cities like Cleveland, I was at the Kennedy School and a professor said, "What about public finance?" And he described it and I said, "Oh, that's exactly what I want to do." And he said, "Well, great. You want to be a banker?" And I said, "No, no, no, no, no, I don't want to be a banker." But I spent a tremendous amount of time reaching out to people who were in the industry and clients who worked in the industry and truly fell in love with it and felt that it married my two interests, this passion around infrastructure and the way it impacts communities and my passion for government.

Emilie Ninan:

Wow. It's so interesting to hear what a difference a professor can make.

Natasha Holiday:

Absolutely.

Emilie Ninan:

I saw that you had interned on the Hill to begin with. That was before you-

Natasha Holiday:

Oh yeah, that was before. The first part of my career was actually in government. How I made it to New York City, actually I took an entry level fellowship position in the Bloomberg administration and I wrote immigration policy for the city. So language access policies, so that individuals who had limited English speaking capabilities could still receive public benefits and public services in their native tongue. And then I also worked on some economic development projects while in the Bloomberg administration. My early days were all focused on government. If I hadn't had a successful career in public finance, I probably would be in politics. My love, I love politics. And actually I ran for office in New York, in Brooklyn in 2010. I lost by, I think it's like 60 votes. I had the second closest race in New York State that year. I missed an apartment building, but-

Emilie Ninan:

It's really close.

Natasha Holiday:

But yeah, my passion has always been government-focused and people-centered.

Emilie Ninan:

It's not too late. You can still run.

Natasha Holiday:

Maybe in the next chapter.

Emilie Ninan:

In the last 10 years at RBC, you've advanced from vice president to director to managing director, while at the same time raising two sons who I believe are now six and eight, that cannot have been easy. Do you have any advice for those in a similar position trying to succeed at home and at work at the same time?

Natasha Holiday:

First, just give yourself lots of grace. There's no manual to being a parent, right Emilie? We're all trying to figure out how to be our best selves in all the spaces that we occupy. But I think for me, one of the things that was really helpful as I was becoming a parent was removing the question marks from my managers and my colleagues. And so I just remember finding out that we were pregnant and we had had trouble getting pregnant to start with, going to fertility doctors, et cetera, et cetera. So it was a super happy time but when you made the conscious decision to yourself that I want to continue to work, I think that there's question marks that are in your colleague and your manager's minds. And I think the one piece of advice I would give is just remove the question marks.

I remember going in saying, "Hey guys, I'm pregnant and I'm going to come back. And here are the things that I've been working on and here's who's going to cover my work while I'm away. And this is how I want to do my maternity leave." Just being really prescriptive about what I needed to be successful. And I found that that was very helpful. The last woman in our group, particularly in the New York office that had had children, I think her youngest, when I was pregnant, was eight. A lot of the male managers, and at the time all I had was male managers, hadn't had that experience themselves to try to manage a woman who had a desire to continue to work, but also desire to have a family.

Emilie Ninan:

It sounds like it was well received, your conversation with them and laying it out like that, what you needed.

Natasha Holiday:

Yeah, it was. And I don't take that for granted. I know that that's not everyone's experience or everyone's situation. But I still think honesty is one of the best policies for a whole host of reasons, because it allows you to know how to best navigate for yourself in your professional environment. And I think you also will be surprised how people will adjust and how people will support you or how people... You'll know how people won't support you either. And then you have to make other choices and other accommodations to continue advancing your career. I've always found that being straightforward around direction where I'm going in my career, what my desires are, how can you help me be my best self? Has been a really good approach in policy.

Emilie Ninan:

Yeah. That's great to hear. Did you have a defined maternity leave policy? So you had the same leave with both your sons or is it something that you tailored?

Natasha Holiday:

Yes, that's a great question. When I went on leave, it was a three-month maternity leave policy. Not a very long period of time. I think my first pregnancy, I took the full three months, but I actually factored in an intermittent leave policy, which allowed me to stretch it out a little bit that I personally was okay with participating or putting a couple hours in here or there, if I could stretch out my maternity leave longer. And a lot of women never even know that that's an option for them. Right now, our maternity leave is four months. I think our leadership is working towards extending the policy even longer.

My second pregnancy was a little different. I was, like you said, rising in my career here. I knew that I wanted to stay in the business. And I had two senior leaders who had shared with me actually in confidence that they were probably going to be transitioning out, retiring later that year. That caused me to probably step in a little more while I was on leave than I would have under a normal circumstance just to create more continuity. And I don't think I really ever got that time back, but at the time that was what I felt like I needed to do to be able to do both, to take the career in and motherhood in the direction I wanted to go.

Emilie Ninan:

And what did you do for childcare?

Natasha Holiday:

Oh, I had a nanny. I had a nanny. Again, we know that not all women can afford care, but the best advice that I've ever been given is "Hire as much help as you can afford." Whatever that is, wherever you're operating on the spectrum of resources. And just also acknowledging that the kind of care you need changes over time. When my kids were small, we needed a nanny. Now that my kids are fully in school and I'm working and my husband is working and we're both in demanding fields, we don't need a nanny, we need a house manager. We need someone who can help us with laundry, who can help us with errands, who can pick up the kids and who can help us with dinner. And so, again, being honest with yourself around what you need to be your best self in the spaces that you occupy is something that is really thematic in my life. And it's how we try to always optimize for what's right for that moment.

Emilie Ninan:

I only have one daughter, but I remember what a juggle it was for my husband and I just with one. I always admire people who can do multiple kids. And I remember how difficult it was to find somebody who could take care of that after school till dinner time, 4:00 to 7:00 timeframe, and take her to whatever after school activity she had or anything like that. I'm hoping it's getting easier for people to find...

Natasha Holiday:

I don't think so, but that's why I said we had to morph it. It wasn't just after school, what we needed. Because we both work. It's like "Actually, no, what we really need is someone to help with the grocery shopping and help with keeping the house clean. And then we also need them to just pick up the kids and move them around." And so we just locked into a higher cost structure, but it gives us more lift as a couple and as a family.

Emilie Ninan:

And I think it's so important for women not to feel like they have to do everything themselves, to let go of that guilt. You called it, give yourself grace, but just not to feel guilty that you're not doing everything yourself.

Natasha Holiday:

Oh, yeah. We can't do everything ourselves.

Emilie Ninan:

Natasha, back in 2012 you and your husband established "The Holiday Party", which benefits non-profits in New York. Where did that idea come from and what's the mission?

Natasha Holiday:

Yes, so The Holiday Party is play on our last name, which is Holiday. My husband and I, we've been together for seventeen years, and we always go away for one weekend to do a planning exercise for life, for he and I. And so, we do everything. We do our finances, we do our yearly goals, but then we do this ten year outlook. Where we look out ten years over our life and say "ok, from a professional standpoint, from a civic engagement standpoint, from family planning standpoint, who we want to spend time, what does that time horizon look like, what vacations do we want to go on?" All that kind of stuff. We put it on paper.

And one of the things that we had noted is that we have built these amazing friendships and networks. And my husband is a technologist, and he owns his own venture capital firm. At the time when we started this, he didn't. He wasn't in venture. But we said "what if we brought everyone together and we were able to introduce people to non-profits that really spoke to our values and we're having impact in the community?" And so the vision was really big tent. It was that we're stronger together, and in many ways it was like an in-person crowd funding effort. And that was the birth of The Holiday Party, which has probably raised \$250,000 pre-covid for New York City non-profits. And we say it's big tent because we set a suggested donation but we don't mandate it. We have people who give a dollar, we have people who give \$10,000. We just want everybody to be in one room for a great cause and to meet each other, to learn about the non-profit, and to share our talents

and our experiences in the network. I think our first year we had maybe 60 people, and in our last year in 2019, pre-covid, there was 450 people that showed up. It's really become a great event but also just an opportunity to bring amazing people together for amazing impactful cause. And we're really excited to bring it back. We're not going to bring it back this year, but our plan is to bring it back for 2023.

Emilie Ninan:

Well, share with us a little bit about what the last couple years have been like for you, the COVID years. How long were you home before returning to the office? Are you hybrid now or do you have a number of days you guys have mandated?

Natasha Holiday:

Yes, absolutely. Our firm was very early in embracing a hybrid schedule. And I think it was really helpful because they anchored around what they call Three Plus One. So three days in the office working and two days remote working. And there had been some flexibility around which days you were in the office versus which days you would be working from home. That since then has changed a bit depending upon what team you're on. But I think the other thing... You asked, when did I go back?

Emilie, I'm a routine person. I was back in the office labor day of 2020. I'll tell you why. My husband had barricaded himself in our bedroom in a two-bedroom apartment down in Battery Park. My kids were doing remote school in the spring when COVID first hit and they were in preschool and in kindergarten. I'm taking conference calls on a bean bag chair with space curtains behind me. My kids are coming in, they're interrupting me in the midst of conference calls. And I'm like, "Hey guys, this is working mom." And they're like, "We don't know what you're talking about." And I just said, "I can't do this."

Emilie Ninan:

Yeah, I can see-

Natasha Holiday:

"I can't do this." Fortunately at the time I could walk to work. It was about a 10 minute walk from the office. I just started to walk down to the office and it gave me the separation that I needed to be not only a good professional, but a good mom and a good wife.

Emilie Ninan:

Yeah. That's convenient to live so close by. It's been interesting here. It feels like everyone needs a little... Something different, because it's so dependent on what your situation is at home. Whether you have a dedicated office space or you don't. I think it's great that we're able to accommodate or we're trying to accommodate whatever people actually need to work well.

Back in June of 2020, you wrote an open letter on anti-racism and reflected on recent events, including the false accusations against Christian Cooper, the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor. And in that piece, you revealed a personal incident that had happened when you were younger, as well as shared the concerns you live with about your husband and sons going out in the world every day as black men. And again, it's not something easy to write and publish, especially I think it was for a work publication if I recall correctly. Why did you think it was important to do that?

Natasha Holiday:

First, writing is cathartic for me personally. And so I think everyone else in America and around the world, the images and the stillness of those moments during COVID and during those tragic events, I think we were all looking for a way to process. So the writing for me first and foremost was a cathartic effort for me to express my feelings, but I also wanted it to be... It was an opportunity for me to provide, honestly, a level of understanding. I think sometimes individuals are harmed in these tragic situations and we can come up with all these reasons why that happened to that person. I wanted to demystify the notion that racism only impacts a certain type of black person. That the vast majority of all people of color and women have had some

type of experience with racism, with sexism, with misogyny in their lifetime, and we needed to acknowledge it. We needed to give space to it.

And then I also just needed to give cover for other younger professionals who didn't want to show up to work the next day and act like nothing had impacted them and that there was no space for them to be frustrated and to be upset and to be sad and to be angered. As well as for allies to feel the same way, that they didn't have space to deal with the traumatic experiences that we were all having. And so as a senior leader, sharing that story, and really my ask was for us to lean into one another, to check in to one another, to acknowledge that racism still exist and for us to give space, even for our colleagues and for ourselves to grapple with that and not to just act like we have to continue with business as usual. But that was a moment where we all needed to pause and lean into one another.

Emilie Ninan:

And how was that received by your peers and colleagues?

Natasha Holiday:

It was received extremely well. Everyone is in the midst of articulating or structuring their communications corporations, what have you. And I remember writing it and at the time Sandye Taylor was our chief diversity officer and I sent it to her and she gave me a little feedback. And then I reached out to our comms group and then we were able to coordinate the response. And they said, "Okay, Natasha, can we link this with our response? Can we include it with our response?" And from my department leadership, I wanted to make sure that they were okay with it. From a firm leadership perspective, the firm was extremely supportive and it really took on the significant of its own to our community. It went out in the US, then it actually went out globally and then it was released publicly. The amount of people who responded, the space that it gave for people to express how they were feeling and to give permission for allies to lean in and have conversations that we traditionally don't have in the workplace, but are needed in the workplace. It was a helpful piece in that puzzle for our firm.

Emilie Ninan:

I'm sure it was very meaningful, except for the more junior people to see someone like you in leadership, being that transparent and vulnerable really to share that. Thank you for doing that.

Natasha Holiday:

I'll tell you a quick story. I remember receiving an email from a colleague African American male associate, and this is how powerful this was. He sent me a note and he said, "Thank you, Natasha, for writing that. Now I hope my colleagues understand why I don't go out with them socially." And I was just like, "Wow." Because he's trying to protect himself, not only for the potential of what he may experience and what they may see.

When you walk into the office, you walk in, I walk in as Natasha and honestly, black people, women, other racialized groups, other people who have statuses that are not in the majority, oftentimes are just trying to walk in as who they are, not what they look like or the sexual orientation or any of those others or their gender. But when you are faced with racism or sexism or homophobia, that part of you becomes front and center and it's revealed for everyone to see. And so when he said that, I thought that that was... It was a powerful thing that I think can sometimes be overlooked in the daily experiences that a lot of people have as they navigate this world.

Emilie Ninan:

Thank you for sharing that. I know you mentioned your chief diversity officer and that brings to mind, what can companies like yours or law firms like mine do to increase diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace? And not just in the entry level, but in the mid range and higher levels of leadership as well.

Natasha Holiday:

Yeah, absolutely, Emilie. No one wants to hear this, but in corporate culture, we pay for what we believe in and we pay for what we value. When we step back and we think about diversity, equity and inclusion, not from a lens of charity, but really from a lens of cultural competency, I think it changes how we think about our investments in the space and in the practice, in the policies and the procedures. And so cultural competency is the ability to manage and lead diverse teams. And that is going to be as important as any other function or talent that any professional brings to the table because we are in a people business. Our clients are people, our customers are people, our products serve people. So the leaders who best understand people, all different types of people, are going to be the people who are going to be most successful.

And so if we value diversity, equity and inclusion, that means we've got to allocate training for our mid-level people managers. We've got to make D&I a performance factor in our annual reviews. We've got to pay for talent. And then we got to value the professionals and employees who are our culture carriers within our institutions. And we've got to incentivize their pay for the time that they're contributing to ERGs and internal organizations, because those are the reasons why people stay in organizations. When we're recruiting people, those are the reasons why people come to organizations. They come for the people they work with. Oftentimes they leave because of the people they experience. And so we've got to ensure that the people who are culture carriers, that we are incentivizing the time that they're putting in to creating a climate and an environment that's conducive for diverse people to be their best selves at work.

Emilie Ninan:

To be so intentional about it. And I think something you said really struck me, it's their daily experience. And so a lot of times we talk about you see from the top, the DEI is important and you see grassroots efforts, but it's that frozen middle sometimes of the middle managers that people experience every day. You need them to be on board as well.

Natasha Holiday:

That's right. It's not a natural thing, that's the other thing. People have to be trained. And so it's not about just being punitive. It's about really putting in the resources to make mid-level managers more adaptable, more agile, more conscious. And then also there's an accountability factor too to that. And that should be factored in to any people managers' annual reviews.

Emilie Ninan:

I'm a big believer that almost any skill can be learned. And I think this is something, like you said, people could be trained in. Did you see a big shift or difference after the George Floyd murder? How your organization dealt with these issues of diversity inclusion or...

Natasha Holiday:

Yes. No, definitely. I think one of the things... And again, it's about trying to strike the right balance. But I think we've been much more communicative. Really putting our values front and center around our commitment to D&I. I think that opening up the lines of communication was really, really important. The other thing that senior management did is they listened. There were numerous sessions that were held where people were able to share their experiences. And then we shifted to a focus on our policies and procedures. I always say policies and procedures beget behavior and behavior shapes culture.

We can desire for people to do the right thing, but we can't wait for it. We've got to ensure that our policies and procedures are pointing people's behavior in the right direction. Once people's behavior conforms, that shapes our culture. And that's one of the things that I think our firm has worked really hard at over the last two years. And we're not done. We've got a lot of work to do, but I think that the equipment is there. Like I said, I think we're really focused right now on our mid-level managers. How can we support them and their growth and development in this area? And then how can we retain our talent, at a time where talent is in high demand, diverse talent who are high performers are in high demand? How do we ensure that we're creating opportunity for growth in their professional development so that they find this as a place they want to continue to grow their careers?

Emilie Ninan:

All the same issues we're dealing with. Man, the war for talent's really been something. Last year, too. Talking now about deal volume, deal volume was pretty high in '20 and '21, despite COVID, but '22 has been quite volatile. We've seen diminished deal flow. Construction costs are. High interest rates are rising. And I think many experts tell us we're heading into a recession. So how are the current marketing conditions affecting your practice and particularly the infrastructure sector? Are you seeing deals getting priced and closed?

Natasha Holiday:

The first half of the year, definitely I think a little bit under paced, but still at a very good pace. Mid-year what we've really seen is the refunding volume is down. And then many states and cities still have cash from the infrastructure bill and from the federal COVID relief efforts. Large issuers are continuing to borrow, but perhaps the pace is slowing down. The market remains fairly active, but with the volatility and uncertainty, particularly around interest rates... I think for instance, the Fed is going to move interest rates. There's just no value. The market is tenuous. The shorter end, you're seeing a lot more cash on the shorter end, but I think we've had almost nearly \$60 billion exit the market this year.

And then in the bond market, that's tremendous. And that starts to potentially create other challenges for issuers who need to access the capital markets as far as really going long with your debt. There's lighter appetite amongst investors on the longer end. Still, decent appetite within the first 10 years of the curve. But most of our issuers are financing long-term infrastructure. And so now you have to look at some different strategies around how to take advantage of the current market dynamics, whether that be put bond structures where you're going to have some refinancing risks or things of that nature. On the other side, specialty practices like healthcare and higher education, which I know you know really well, Emilie, are undergoing significant fundamental changes to their industries. Their fixed costs are rising. And those sectors have really taken some time to reset themselves. And so you have seen a slow down recently in the healthcare and higher education space.

So yeah, I think that the second half of the year will continue to be a tenuous environment. Larger issuers who have big capital plans are going to continue to borrow. They're used to dollar average costing their financing cost over time. But for some of our mid-size borrowers, I think it becomes a lot more of "Do I look for bank loans? Do I look for private placements? Do I look in other parts of the market where I can successfully execute my financing needs with a little less risk and uncertainty?"

Emilie Ninan:

Any thoughts on 2023?

Natasha Holiday:

I think that we'll know a little bit more based on the next two rate increases. And so you saw much more of a steady increase in interest rates in the short-term rates, by the Fed, and then they really ramped it up. What we've seen is that they've ramped it up in part because inflation has not subsided at the pace in which we would like, although we know we've experienced negative growth over three quarters. So that technically is a recession. But unemployment is still at a historic low level. We haven't even reached what's considered normal unemployment, which is between 4 and 5%.

And then if you look on individuals, everyday people's balance sheets, they still have a lot of savings. When a lot of the economic relief came out and people said, "Okay, people will go out and recycle that in the economy or they'll pay off debt." People didn't really pay off debt. They did save though. They did save. And so that's given people a little bit more flexibility in how they're managing their cash flows. For those people though, who are really living paycheck to paycheck, it's really a tough environment. When food costs goes up 8% and you're making X dollars, that starts to really eat into your earnings very, very quickly and not with a lot of safety net there.

Emilie Ninan:

We have to wait and see what the future brings, but thank you for sharing your thoughts. I want to be respectful of your time. I think I'll end with this last question. Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give your younger self?

Natasha Holiday:

I think the biggest thing has been self-care. I'm a mom, a wife, a professional. I'm involved in my community. That's a lot of giving of time, space and energy. And I think that I have been a person that says, "Put your head down and work hard and push through." One of the things I've really had to learn is self-care and figure out what gives me life. What gives me a lift, so exercise and mental breaks. I'm a social person. So time with friends, time with my sons, time with my husband. Our relationship isn't transactional. "Did you take out the trash? Did you pay that bill? Did you do this, did you do that?" And then time for myself. I did some different things this summer. I colored, I really wanted to color this summer. I wanted to do a 500-piece puzzle. I wanted to do some mindless things where I could just lean into opening up a space to think. And so I think self-care and defining what that is for you is probably one of the most important things I would've told my younger self.

The other is to be authentically honest with yourself. I think that the world tells you a lot about what it's supposed to look like. What is it supposed to sound like. How's it supposed to move and operate. And I think that people can see through when you are being your authentic self and when you're trying to fit a mold. And so I think don't be scared to make the wave, not ride it. I've personally found that being authentically honest with myself about who I am and what I want has opened up doors for me. Now, the way you do it is important. But first, just knowing that you got to be authentically honest with yourself has given me clarity in ways that that has really helped propel me and given me happiness. And so I think those were the two things, that if I could tell my younger self, that I would definitely share.

Emilie Ninan:

Well, Natasha, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and this advice. I'm going to work on being authentically honest with myself. I'll let you know how it goes. Thank you so much for this time. And hope we will have a conversation again.

Natasha Holiday:

Great. I hope to see you soon. Thank you so much.

Steve Burkhart:

Thanks again to Emilie Ninan and Natasha Holiday. Make sure to visit our website, www.ballardspahr.com where you can find the latest news and guidance from our attorneys. Subscribe to the show in Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify, or your favorite podcast platform. If you have any questions or suggestions for the show, please email podcast@ballardspahr.com. Stay tuned for a new episode coming soon. Thank you for listening.