

MEET THE HR INFLUENCERS:

Melissa Sonberg, CHRE, ICD.D





DRIVING TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

By Lisa Gordon

Throughout her 30-year career, Melissa Sonberg has been a driving force for transformative change. Never one to shy away from a challenge, her career path has immersed her in the corporate, non-profit and academic sectors, touching on many aspects of human resources along the way.

Today, Sonberg is executive in residence/adjunct professor at McGill University's Desautels Faculty of Management. She is happiest working in the trenches of innovation, where new ideas are formed and cultivated. Although Sonberg thrives on rolling up her sleeves and building solutions, she freely admits that once that framework has been built, she's happy to let someone else maintain it. For her, it's all about conquering a challenge.

HR Professional caught up with Sonberg recently to discuss her career highlights, her current work at McGill and how some long-ago advice has always inspired her to "just do good work."

When did you decide you wanted a career in human resources?

Melissa Sonberg: HR chose me, rather than the other way around. When I did my master's degree in health administration, I had to do an organizational internship at Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal. I had a couple of weeks

in almost every department, and the department that was the most fun and where I felt the most connected was human resources.

What was your first HR job?

MS: Conveniently, that internship turned into my first human resources job, as an HR generalist for the Montreal Neurological Hospital. I did everything from recruitment to managing payroll and benefits, supporting labour relations and dealing with all kinds of people problems. There were a few hundred employees and I had to do everything pretty much on my own, although I had access to the resources of the greater McGill University Health Network for specialized services.

Tell me about your current job. What are your main areas of responsibility?

MS: I joined the McGill faculty last year after 30 years in organizational life – 15 of which were spent with AIMIA, the public company that developed from Air Canada's Aeroplan frequent flyer program. The company grew internationally and by the time I left, it was running loyalty programs and services in 23 countries. Turning 50 triggered a decision to look for my next set of challenges. McGill was incredibly welcoming; I'm now attached to the

IN A NUTSHELL

First job: I was a lifeguard at an apartment building pool when I was 15.

Childhood ambition: I wanted to be a doctor. That lasted well into my undergrad degree and is one of the reasons I did the master's in health administration.

Best boss and why: I had some really great bosses, but I'd have to say my last boss at AIMIA, Group CEO Rupert Duchesne, was probably my best for a couple of reasons. First, he had intellectual horsepower to the max and constantly challenged my thinking. He was also one of the most humane leaders I've worked with – he cared as much about the people as the profit.

Current source of inspiration: I have two daughters, aged 18 and 21. They inspire me for so many reasons. They are strong young women who have clear views of the world; they give me a fresh new perspective.

Best piece of advice you ever got: This goes back to very early in my career. I was flailing around trying to get a handle on how to implement a new mandate. My boss said, "Just do good work." So, focus on doing the best work you can do and stop being paralyzed about how to do it.

Favourite music: Classic rock going back to the early 1970s. Carole King is a favourite.



Last book you read: Hillary Rodham Clinton's *Hard Choices*. It was a good description of a tough job in a tough environment.

How you spend your time away from work: My primary activity is helping to support human rights education and development through my work chairing the board at EQUITAS-International Centre for Human Rights Education. I'm very involved in supporting their efforts. And, I also like to travel with my husband and kids.

organizational behaviour department. There's a component of my work that is traditional teaching, but I also participate in organizational change initiatives, such as faculty visioning exercises and setting strategic priorities. The third part of my role is to be a conduit between the university and the local, national and global business communities. I am basically here to be a professional resource to students and faculty.

What do you love about your job?

MS: The first thing I love is that I don't actually have a job in the traditional sense – I have a portfolio of interests. I have a wonderful position at McGill, where my experience and expertise are being well leveraged to help students see the world through a different perspective. This role also pushes me to keep learning myself, and I have a lot more control over what I do, so that I have variety and complexity on my own terms.

What are the challenges you experience in your job?

MS: I'm a very community-oriented person, and very loyal to my group of people. So, being a free agent all of a sudden was very challenging – where do I belong and who are my people? There wasn't an obvious answer. Fortunately, I now have several organizations in which I feel at home. Another challenge is that in the university environment, we're under constant budgetary pressure. It's always a challenge to make tough decisions when there are a lot of competing demands for scarce resources. The last challenge would be having an impact in the limited time I do have with the students.

What's key to leading HR during a difficult time for a client organization?

MS: I've had both good times and bad times in my career. It's interesting how some of the key leadership attributes are the same during both. From a leadership perspective, the challenge is always

to focus on the bigger picture. You may feel you're playing tennis with one racket against a hundred opponents who are all lobbing balls at you, but focusing on the overall outcome will always get you through. Also, be a source of calm amidst the chaos. People will look to you to stay above the fray and provide a sense of direction and optimism for the future. And, finally, get things done! Say what you're going to do, and do it.

What skills are important for success in HR?

MS: Clearly, HR exists as a service to the greater enterprise. Knowing the business of the business – the intricacies of how that business works – is a given. For HR in particular, you need the ability to know your function at a level where you can engage, inspire and challenge in the best way possible. You also need good listening skills and integrity. We have to deal with humanity at its best and worst, and we must get the right things done.

What tips do you have for new grads or those in entry-level HR jobs who want to move up the ladder?

MS: Do your homework and know what opportunities are open to you. Once you know those parts of the puzzle, get out of your comfort zone! Move into a line job or a supervisory role to understand the challenges of management, so you can be a better adviser.

What's the future of HR?

MS: To me, HR should not be isolated. There are too many articles about how to get HR to the table. Let's get over that; HR is at the table! The real question is how does HR become more effective? Essentially, the things that make each business unique are the people who show up to work every morning and go home every afternoon. Organizations need to understand how to leverage that uniqueness as a competitive advantage and deploy it in support of the enterprise goal. ■