

HRD Forum — Viewpoint

Global Entrepreneurial Talent Management challenges and opportunities for HRD

Out of the Frying Pan ... A Conversation Changing Lives, Changing Careers

We report verbatim a frank conversation in English between three business professionals as they discuss their various experiences of life and career management totalling more than 100 years in China, France, Germany, Ireland, South Korea, the UK, and the USA. All are international managers who have moved between countries and industries. We brought them together in Asia to compare their experiences and provide food-for-thought for industry practitioners and academics alike. The participants were promised anonymity to encourage openness and so names have been changed. All other details are exactly as discussed. We believe this format offers significant insights into vastly differing national, industry and organizational cultures and the practical challenges these present. It demonstrates how people adjust to environmental turbulence and thrive, and reveals the real thought-processes and true motivations behind life-changing professional decisions. This discussion concentrates on the circumstances and decision to change careers.

Patricia: I worked in industry for 16 years, maybe more — international businesses and various quite well-known companies. I was expatriated with one of those and spent three or so years in continental Europe, in marketing and innovation roles. Then I had my first baby and came to Ireland, taking a role as head of innovation with a different manufacturing company operating strict factory hours. After about two years there I was pregnant with my second baby, and decided I needed a change of lifestyle.

Andrew: Most of my career I have lived in the city of my birth, but I had worked away a little bit. I've always wanted to be a lecturer, from my time in college. This was a dream I had actually: teaching. I taught for one year in college while I was doing a Masters, and I thought "I like this, but I don't know anything" so very specifically I decided "This is the job for me, but maybe sometime in the future".

Patricia: I swore I'd never work in education as my parents were teachers. But then I did a short course in innovation leadership at one of the leading business schools in the UK. I was there for about three days, and I watched these guys deliver this course, and I just thought "y'know what, I could do that, and enjoy it". It looked to me like a series of presentations, and I thought "I can do presentations, this is not teaching like in a school. You don't have to manage the classroom or anything". And at about half past three on the Friday, I set off to travel a long way home, and I saw staff walking off the campus. I thought "I could walk out of work at half past three in the afternoon". It was the flexibility I envied. I thought that was all they did.

Andrew: I went into industry and spent about 10 years at my first job. I worked in the US as a result, and all my professional training came from that company. It was very professional in terms of project management, proper training and a good work ethic. I liked that. But after 10 years I changed jobs twice. Jobs became more interesting, I was now bringing my training to new companies and fixing them. That was my new role, but there was a lot of traveling.

I started a family, there were two children. I met this guy I had worked with previously who worked with students. After a chat he said “I’m heading home”, and I said “It’s only four o’clock”, and he then told me about his summer. I said to myself “Do y’know what, my life is completely inflexible, totally inflexible”. In fact, I was in Africa, and I had a very young child at home in the UK who ended up in hospital. I remember thinking “I can’t live like this. I can’t be on the road when I need to be at home”. So I spoke to the guy I had met and he said there was a job going at his higher education place. I interviewed for it, and it was when I was in the interview that I remembered that 20 years before I had said I always wanted to do this job. And now I had the opportunity. In fact, when I took the job, it wasn’t a permanent role. I took it in April and the job was finishing in September. I was so sure I wanted to change that I chucked in a permanent job for this opportunity, on the grounds that it might renew. And here I am 11 years later, still there.

Patricia: This sounds very familiar. I did an interview at a university while I was on maternity leave, just for the interview practice I told myself. I had my baby head on — just thought I’d try and fit back in my suit. They talked me into the job over a series of three interviews. It was the flexibility of the work really, that’s what I was after by that time. That was about 15 years ago.

Georgina: I went the other way, because I never worked in industry, I always worked in the university sector. So it’s almost like I stayed in school, you know, it was like I never really realized there was life outside. Well I did, but for me, I’m not an academic as such, even though I did teach. I’m a lawyer by background, by training, and when I moved to Asia from the US, I actually was teaching English, and I was offered a job to help them develop the international relations office.

But I said I would only do it if I worked until two o’clock in the afternoon. And because I’m a foreigner in my adopted country, they gave me that job. Even though I was on an administrative contract, I actually had kind of academic powers. This is the flexibility that you talk about. So it meant that I saw my kids growing up, and I was around, I was home. But still, I had that privilege being an ex-pat.

I really enjoyed it, I did. I knew what I had and I enjoyed it, and I never thought I would ever change. The university’s international relations were transformed by my work. Then — and this has something to do with culture as well — for administrators at 60, it is decided: “that’s your cycle and thanks very much”. So that’s quite young, I mean now, in a western context. So it was all of a sudden, and because this was a government university, they said to me, the year before I was going to turn 60, “Well you’re healthy so we’ll consider extending your contract, but now you’re going to have to work longer hours for less pay”.

At that point, there were other things going on in my life as well. My husband passed away and my children had grown up so it's not like I have a young family to go home for at two o'clock for any more. The university sector, to be honest, is so slow; so slow at making any decision, so slow at innovating, so slow because there doesn't seem to be any accountability. There isn't the merit-based culture. There are too many stakeholders with differing agendas. I'm the kind of person that likes to do things and move forward and make it happen and whatever, and it was just like I had been worn down. I felt like I'd pretty much given everything I could, given the circumstances. And so when those two issues collided, I started thinking "so what am I going to do for the next 10 years?"

Reality Bites: A New Culture Takes its Toll and Forces Change

Patricia: I had an MBA I'd done part-time. They hired me for my MBA and my industry experience, and I was the last hire before they started to require a PhD, which I didn't have.

Andrew: Yes, actually I was the same. I came in with a Masters but without a PhD, and I was hired for my industry experience. But every time I interviewed for a promotion, it was irrelevant. They basically said "Well that's all industry experience, what have you done in here?" I was hired for my experience but then it doesn't count anymore.

Patricia: That is exactly the same again for me. For any leadership or management role, I would talk about what I'd done in the past and they'd say "Oh yeah, that's not here", and the implication was that here it's different, maybe it's harder, that kind of thing.

Andrew: And the idea was that academics were special. And the academic world is different, it's not the real world. It's its own microcosm, and people behave differently, and whatever you're used to in your professional life, you have to put that to one side, and start thinking differently. I think they're right.

Patricia: I was actually very, very naïve. I took a serious pay cut and deliberately calculated it. My partner and I calculated whether or not we could stand the cut and what the benefits were with the flexibility, summer holidays and things. But I had no idea that I would be on that salary for the next 10 years. I was used to every six months going back to my boss and saying "here's my performance against targets, thank you very much", and I just got used to incremental pay rises, negotiated by me on a regular basis.

Andrew: Same here. I think motivation in work now, as an academic, is completely different. Completely. I had a chat with this guy who introduced me to the university, who was very dissatisfied with the place. He kept looking for someone to say he did a great job, and I kept telling him "No one is going to say that", you either like what you do, or you do something different. No-one's going to pat you on the back.

They announced the introduction of performance appraisals but there's no carrot, and there's no stick. So it's a really interesting chat, but nothing else. So you have to motivate, or figure out how people are motivated, and give them that space.

Patricia: I remember being really shocked when I said “How do you get a pay rise around here?” My boss said “Oh, we get a pay rise automatically every year”. I said “What?” and he said “except you, because you’re on the top of the scale so you’ve got to get a promotion”. And I thought a promotion would be on merit, but it’s not, it’s political. So you have to be there a long time otherwise you simply haven’t got the political network, the reputation, the record.

And then they said “you need to have a PhD”.

Andrew: I had the same again, quite similar. I went for my first permanent job internally, and the guy who was almost guaranteed to get it automatically also applied for it, got the job, and I was still on my temporary contract. So I went for every job going, and it was immediately, “Sorry, no PhD”. And then you say “Well I’m a really great teacher and I do all this work with industry”. The assumption is that everyone can do that, that’s baseline. Don’t come in here telling us you’re great at your job because really, it’s about what else have you done. So within a year I started my PhD, and six months before I got it, I missed another permanent job because I didn’t have it. So I’m thinking “this is insane. This is not merit based at all”. I got the PhD and next time it came up, I got the job. It took me a few years to figure out the formula but once you get it, you get it.

Georgina: I had a friend of 15 years whose husband is the CEO of my company. One day he just sent me a message, so I never went job hunting in industry. He just messaged me and he said “if you’d like a job, come to see me anytime”. He knew my reputation and what I had achieved at the university. So I went to the factory and I met with him for a tough interview. I said “Well, you know I’m actually quite serious about this”, and we never even discussed any conditions, nothing. He just said “Would you like to see your office?”

Andrew: Did you have a fear of leaving?

Because when I speak to most academics, there’s this institutionalized conversation which is “oh, it’s too late for me now, I’ve been in here for too long, who would hire me?” and there’s this feeling of oppression, and that you just have to put up with your life.

Georgina: True, absolutely true. I didn’t know if I would have an option at 60. Originally I started looking at other universities, just because I needed a change.

I earn much more money than I ever did in the university sector. Of course, my hours are horrendous. I travel business class which I never did before. Because I am a director of a company now, the respect I get is totally different to when I was at the university, because I was never considered an academic. But here, I’m a director, the power is totally different. Because things move so fast, because I can make things happen, because I have more power than I ever had. I get the recognition and I get the bonus. So what you’re talking about, I never experienced.

Survive Becomes Thrive

Georgina: To me this is now exciting. And I would never look back. The university keeps coming to ask me “Will you come back?” but they’re too slow, it’s too late.

Patricia: I always intended to leave after a couple of years. I thought I’ll do this for a couple of years — the salary is terrible — I’ll go back into business. And it has just never happened, because you adjust your lifestyle and the benefits have been fantastic for my family life, my personal life. After a few years I’d carved out this international role at the university, it was great and I was doing really well. I’m invested now: got my PhD, teaching awards, a research career and a promotion.

Andrew: I love the idea of the flexibility, and my entire family moved around that flexibility and it changed everyone’s life. My wife got a job where she didn’t have to worry about coming home at a particular time, or leaving at a particular time. So I was now the first point of contact for the kids, which is great. There’s no way I would back out of that. I’m in it for life.

Comment

This conversation raises interesting questions for HR practitioners, general managers and employees themselves. All three contributors — both male and female — refer to their family circumstances and the great extent to which these drove career decisions. In what way should this influence recruitment policy and campaigns? How does this fit with the increasing reluctance, or, in some environments, illegality of discussing family plans and circumstances with job candidates? Does this sensitivity result in candidates being unable to discuss their true motivations/commitment and demonstrate their ability to manage their family lives while working?

Despite significant professional experience, the speakers were still surprised by some differences between reality and their perceptions or expectations of their new career. To what extent could this be avoided in recruitment and induction? Is it realistic that the ‘warts ‘n’ all’ of a job, career, organization or industry be exposed to a potential recruit and what are the disadvantages of focussing only on the selling points (real or imagined)?

What attributes, attitudes and skills are evident from the discussion which help the participants to cope and adjust to unexpected challenges and eventually thrive? How can these be developed in younger people who are likely to experience many unpredictable changes in their working lives?

