# MIT HR Podcast Series: Career Journeys at the Institute

## Robin Elices

*Executive Director*, Office of the Executive Vice President and Treasurer

**Michele King Harrington** (00:04):

Welcome listeners and MIT colleagues. Today I'm joined by Robin Elices. My name is Michele King Harrington and I do career development with staff at MIT. And we are going to hear from Robin today about her career story at MIT. Welcome Robin.

**Robin Elices** (00:20):

Thank you, Michelle. Yes. I'm the executive director in the office of the Executive Vice President and Treasurer at MIT. And I relocated from Michigan in 1987, where I worked for about eight years at the University of Michigan at the hospital and also the medical school. And when I first moved to Boston, I did a brief stint at the Brigham and Women's Hospital and joined MIT about a year later in 1988.

So since I've been at MIT, I've made a series of lateral moves. I began as the administrative officer in a small research lab called the Center for Environmental Health Sciences, and then I progressively went to larger and larger environments. I was at the Magnet Laboratory as the AO and then Earth Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences EAPs. I then went to the administrative services organization, which was basically combined shared services for chemical engineering and material science and engineering.

(01:32):

And I was in that role for about eight years before going to the Energy Initiative when it started up where I worked for about a year. So all of those opportunities and experiences were on the academic and research side of the house. And then at some point I transferred to the Vice President for Finance office. And what had happened there was the executive vice President Treasurer reached out to me at just the right moment when I was in a role where I wasn't that happy. And while I never would've expected myself to move to the administrative side of the house at MIT, it was just the moment in time. And that was about 14 years ago. And so I was in the VPF area for about four years before finally landing in the EVPT office where I've been for the last 10 years.

**Michele King Harrington** (02:33):

Thank you, Robin. You've had quite the career journey at MIT, and I love that you took advantage of a serendipitous opportunity. I think that's great. And we call that in the career development world, that *planned happenstance* where you're ready for an opportunity when it comes along. So I'd love to hear about what are some key moments that sort of influenced your career direction?

**Robin Elices** (02:54):

So I think it was that moment in March of 2008 when I made that decision to move from the academic and research departments, labs and centers over to the administrative areas because I felt so connected to the mission of MIT when I was working in the research labs and the academic units. So I never thought I would enjoy working on the admin side, but it was just that serendipitous moment as you pointed out that caused me to make that transition and it really changed my life.

**Michele King Harrington** (03:30):

Great, thank you. So what would you say in terms of skills and strengths did you develop and or leverage to be successful? When I work with individuals, they're always thinking about their skills and strengths and how they can develop those. And I'd love to hear from your perspective what you did.

**Robin Elices** (03:49):

So I think one of my strengths is that I've become resilient over the years. I'm able to bounce back. So I was lucky enough to be able to have an opportunity to make mistakes early on in a less visible environment. So those experiences teach you to be resilient. And I think working at MIT really requires that resilience. I think another strength, though at one time I thought it was a weakness, is that I am a bit shy and quiet, but I listen closely. And so I hope to make others feel that I'm really there for them and in the moment.

**Michele King Harrington** (04:34):

Great. So can you talk a little bit more about the resilience and maybe some of the challenges that might have come up for you?

**Robin Elices** (04:42):

Well, I mean, one obvious challenge has been the pandemic …

**Michele King Harrington** (04:46):

Yes.

**Robin Elices** (04:47):

Which we've all had to live through. And in the role I'm in, early on in the pandemic, I was sort of on the crisis management team. So I was leading a group that had to do with business continuity. And obviously that was a challenge for all of us to have to be linked to that computer 24/7 at home, isolated, but with so much responsibility.

**Michele King Harrington** (05:17):

Okay, great. Thanks. Robin. What about your observations around the topic of professional development and learning and how have these affected your career in a positive way?

**Robin Elices** (05:31):

So for me, work is really all about the connections about the people that we work with rather than about taking specific courses or training. So for me, I find that I learn best from experience and through working closely with others.

**Michele King Harrington** (05:53):

Great. How do you think MIT has evolved over your career tenure, and what more could we do as an Institute to support employees in building sustainable careers, which in turn would help MIT to retain staff and employees?

**Robin Elices** (06:10):

So since I first started at MIT, the expectations here have continued to grow with technology, we can produce more and we're all expected to be available all of the time. Now it's very difficult for people to be able to turn off, to walk away, even from one day we can always be reached, and I'm not really sure this is healthy, but I don't know how to change this at MIT. So I feel like this needing to be available 24/7 can really lead to burnout and the job becomes all consuming. And when this happens, I feel like the joy in working can be lost and it's difficult to remain committed. So I'd love to try to find a way for people to work in a more sustainable pace.

I think that people remain with an employer, if not in the same job, at the same organization because they appreciate those around them. We all form connections and these deep connections I feel build loyalty and dedication. And without these connections, it's easy for people to be recruited away for more money or promise of career potential. So for me, I feel like really working with people and managing people, it's an everyday promise to be kind to those around us to be aware of others' needs to listen to try to live in the moment and really be present.

**Michele King Harrington** (07:56):

Great. I love that, Robin. Thank you. The joys and downfalls I guess of technology. They can help us, but they can also be somewhat of a hindrance. So I guess we're working that out with our new ways of working just for everybody. It's all a learning curve. And so in your career you have been a manager and many employees that I meet with aspire to be managers or have good or bad stories about their managers. So I'd love to know how do you now mentor your direct reports when it comes to their careers?

**Robin Elices** (08:30):

So I think managing people can be both joyful and burdensome at the same time, depending on the situation and the people you're managing. So in most of my positions over the years, I've managed teams of people, but as an individual contributor, one can be relieved of the responsibility for overseeing and guiding the work of others. So I think though I've managed people most of my career, it can really be freeing to not have to be responsible for managing others. So I think that I would encourage people to be open-minded to both individual contributor roles as well as management roles. And as I said before, I think the key thing in managing people is to really be there to support people, to

try to bring out the best in people, to try to not force people to do things that they may inherently not be good at, but to try to find those things that individuals are good at and maximize those.

**Michele King Harrington** (09:41):

That's wonderful. So bringing out the best in people, which I think is challenging for any manager to have to be able to do that and to really zone in and try to capitalize and leverage on people's strengths and skills. So if I were contemplating taking on a manager role, what would be some of the top three things you might say to me in terms of advice?

**Robin Elices** (10:05):

Well, now that's a difficult question. I think the most important thing in managing people is to treat people with a sense of kindness, to be approachable, to make people feel that you are always there if they need advice, if they need help to never feel stupid. There are never any stupid questions. I've had bosses that have made me feel stupid and it's not a pleasant situation. So I think really in managing people, you have to try to put the other first, try to resist micromanaging, try to resist being a perfectionist and have a handle on what matters and what doesn't. And as I said, it's that daily promise to be there for others to listen and to treat people with a sense of care.

**Michele King Harrington** (11:03):

Yeah, I think that's really important. And I hope that we've become a kinder work environment since Covid and realizing that people have just lives outside of their work and work life balance and appreciating that as a manager. And so you bring great perspective having been an individual contributor, roles and manager roles. So thank you for that.

Robin, for any of our listeners who are aspiring to be managers, and there are lots of them because I meet with them a lot, any career wisdom when you think about sort of specific career development strategies or wisdom in terms of networking, informational interviewing, any of those strategies that you would recommend to listeners?

**Robin Elices** (11:46):

Well, the one thing that has worked for me over the years is I never really had a hierarchical approach to my career. I never really had a long-term goal and I never really made moves for money. I made position changes because I was bored in a certain role and I needed the challenge. So I made a series of lateral moves over the years where the classification might have been the same, but it was in a larger environment or a slightly different environment where I was able to learn a new skill. Maybe for a while, I worked in a lab that was in the vice president for a research area, and then I worked in a department that was in the School of Science. Then I worked in a department that was in the School of Engineering and then came to the administrative side of the house. So I think moving a across the institute can really be helpful in broadening your skillset and deepening your knowledge so that over time you do become more valuable. I think to the Institute, I would also encourage people to be open to moving back and forth between the academic side of the house and the administrative side of the house, because I think having those dual perspectives can really be unifying for MIT.

**Michele King Harrington** (13:21):

Thank you, Robin. You put that so eloquently broadening and deepening and valuable to the Institute. I think that's wonderful. And I do recommend to people to think about lateral moves. I think sometimes people early in their career or any time think vertical is the way it needs to be. And as you say, in a place as diverse and big as MIT with so much interesting work going on, making moves back and forth across DLCs can be really [good], because it's very different working on the faculty side as opposed to the administrative side. So thank you for providing that insight. Is there anything else you'd like to add? Any other things that you've done here at MIT that might be helpful to our listeners?

**Robin Elices** (14:04):

Well, I think the other thing I might offer is that opportunities present themselves in interesting ways and opportunities to serve on a committee, to serve on a working group, a project of some kind. All of these experiences allow you to meet other people. The Leader to Leader program is really wonderful from that point of view in terms of making those connections with others. So I would encourage people to take advantage of those opportunities as they present themselves and even expressed to their managers a desire to get involved in things, perhaps outside of the scope of their routine responsibilities, so as to broaden their viewpoint and understanding of MIT.

**Michele King Harrington** (14:56):

Robin, you've provided wonderful insight today and thank you so much for sharing your career story and your journey. We really appreciate it. And I think all listeners will be very well informed after today. Anything else you want to add?

**Robin Elices** (15:11):

Thank you, Michelle. This has been wonderful to share my career journey. And I guess the one thing I would say in closing is that I've been in MIT for 34 years now and I really love the place. I think it's going to be very difficult for me to retire at some point though. I know I need to. And so I would encourage others, even if you experience things that are frustrating, that are difficult, develop those resilient skills and resilient leadership and kind of stick with it and see it through because you never know where the journey can take you.

**Michele King Harrington** (15:51):

Great. Thank you Robin and you're probably not the only one that might find it hard to retire from MIT.

**Announcer** (16:01):

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