MIT HR Podcast Series: Career Journeys at the Institute

Sarah Hendrick

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Michele King Harrington (00:05):

Welcome listeners, welcome MIT colleagues to our career podcast today. My name is Michelle King Harrington. I work in Human Resources doing career development with MIT employees and staff, and I'm joined today by Sarah Hendrick. I'm going to hand it over to her to introduce herself and to talk about her career journey at MIT. Welcome, Sarah.

Sarah Hendrick (00:26):

Thank you, Michelle. It's really great to be here. And hello to all who are listening. So I am Sarah Hendrick. I have been at MIT for 24 years now, so one year short of being inducted into the Quarter Century Club, I guess next year, hopefully. But yes, I'm currently in a role in resource development in the Office of Resource Development as Senior Director of Data Management and Governance. Prior to that, I spent really the 24 years in the Alumni Association where I served in a variety of roles.

Michele King Harrington (01:15):

Thank you. And congratulations, Sarah. That's wonderful that you've been at MIT so long. So you've hung your hat here for a while, obviously been happy. So can you talk a little bit about some of those roles that you've had in the Alumni association and sort of your trajectory as you progress through this almost quarter of a century?

Sarah Hendrick (01:34):

Yes, yes, sure. Happy to. Yeah, so I joined the Alumni Association in 1998. I was hired to be the administrative assistant to the then-director of Alumni Relations, and served in that role for about two years and stayed with that same team in Alumni Relations, but in more of an individual contributor role, really supporting the whole team and some key projects having to do with engaging alumni in various initiatives of the association and putting on events for our Cardinal and Gray alumni who are our alums who have celebrated their 50th reunion. So that was really a great set of years doing that. Following those two roles, I transitioned into a role supporting our boards and committees, our alumni boards and committees really focused on getting, identifying alums who could serve on a number of boards, not just within the Alumni Association, but across the institute.

(02:59):

So identifying alums who would be good candidates to serve on visiting committees for the various departments, labs, and centers at MIT. And I also manage the election of recent grads to serve on the MIT corporation. And that really was a really fulfilling role, which allowed me to have such a better understanding beyond the alumni association of how MIT works and how important alumni [are], the role of alums, the role alums can play in the life of the Institute and in the governance of the Institute. So I served in that role for about six years and then transitioned into more of an operational role overseeing the philanthropic gift processing and alumni records, which was my most recent role prior to my current role in resource development.

Michele King Harrington (04:06):

Wow. I'm impressed, Sarah. You have great subject matter expertise in the area of alumni relations, and I used to work with students and helping them in the area of career development, and I was always so impressed at what a great resource the whole alumni network is for students at MIT. So obviously with this career story and trajectory that you've had, there have been skills and strengths that you've developed and leveraged to be successful. And in my work with individuals, they are always concerned about building their skills and focusing on their strengths. And what would you say you've done and what would be the skills and strengths that really kind of stand out to you that have helped you?

Sarah Hendrick (04:53):

Yes, thank you for that. So many. I think having been here at MIT for the amount of time that I've been, there have been so many opportunities for formal skill building, but I would sort of pause and really reflect on the skills that I believe I was able to hone just by observing my colleagues. I think, quite frankly, as in my role as the administrative assistant to the Director of Alumni Relations, so much of what I learned and what I continue to use today are really some of those foundational skills that I learned from my then-supervisor and immediate colleagues, consistency, how to present your work, listening, there's just a whole host of skills that I can attribute to just the observation of some of my more seasoned colleagues at the time

Michele King Harrington (06:01):

That sort of observing colleagues. It's not something maybe that we jump to right away, but there's so much to be learned from just our colleagues or our managers or even direct reports. So what would you say is unique about working in higher education? And obviously you've been here for a while, so you like this environment, but what is unique about a place like MIT that's a research and higher education environment?

Sarah Hendrick (06:30):

So I would say my first real job has been my positions at MIT. So I don't really have anything to compare it with. I will say that what attracted me to seeking employment at MIT was in fact that it was a higher ed setting. It was a setting that I felt that I could thrive in, and I really, really respected the core mission of MIT. It sounds cliche to say, but just early on it, it felt like a place where amazing things were happening. And even though I didn't go to MIT, I'm not really kind of a techie or certainly wasn't as great

in math as perhaps I should have been or science in general, but I really found it inspiring the things that were being done. So to me, it's just become home. And the reason why I chose I've chosen to stay is because that mission continues to inspire me. And whenever I'm onboarding a new staff member or meeting new colleagues, I think one of the things that we talk a lot about is that knowing that we, in the work that we're doing, playing a small part in helping furthering that mission. So regardless of the roles that we play at MIT, I feel that we're fueling that mission in our own way. So that has been sort of the most attractive thing to me.

Michele King Harrington (08:15):

Thank you, Sarah. Yes, and I think it's nice to think we're a part of that in some small way or large way, whatever it may be. So in talking about your career story and your progression and trajectory within the Alumni Association, it would seem a lot of your roles were maybe on that vertical, each move that you made, and maybe not all of them, but what were some key moments or epiphany moments that sort of influenced that direction? And I know you mentioned working with graduate students, but what sort of things just prompted the moves?

Sarah Hendrick (08:52):

Yes. So I would say early on, the positions I've held were really not ones that I sought out myself. I think it was sort of a combination of the needs of the organization at the time to have someone in a certain position to accomplish certain initiatives. And really, quite frankly, it's been that I've had some amazing managers who saw many times in me something that perhaps I didn't see in myself. And so I will say every role that I've had for the past 24 years has been a little bit out of my comfort zone. And I've really had to have faith in what my manager saw in me and be uncomfortable, quite frankly, in terms of taking a little bit more, a little bit more responsibility in some cases, a lot more responsibility than I was comfortable with. But I'm glad that they did push me in those directions.

(10:10):

And so I feel fortunate that in many cases, my progression, my career progression has come to really be opportunities that perhaps were shaped by the needs of the organization, but also with others who really wanted to see me grow and develop into more senior roles. Some of my more recent roles have been more intentional and coming more from a place where I sort of sought them out in terms of I really would like to try to move into the Director of the Office of Records, overseeing donation processing and alumni records was probably, I would say the first intentional move I made. It was a lateral move, but it was because I really wanted, having spent six years as overseeing sort of the election of a recent grads to the Corporation and supporting the alumni nominations to boards and committees, I really wanted to maybe hone some new skills in terms of process and project management and overseeing a larger team. And when that position became available, I thought, why not? Maybe that could be a good fit for me.

Michele King Harrington (11:49):

Great. Thanks, Sarah. I love that sort of theme. And we have heard that where a manager saw something in, you saw a potential and pushed you out of your comfort zone. And I think, you know, as a

manager, you potentially have done that too for your direct reports. And I love that phrase too, sort of mature professionally and maybe that level of confidence and competence maybe that comes with intentionally seeking out your next move. So how would you mentor your direct reports when it comes to their careers? Would you have any particular things, words of wisdom that you impart to them?

Sarah Hendrick (12:27):

I don't know if I have words of wisdom. I'm still learning myself, I feel, but certainly I've had them with direct reports, and I think it's really having them sort of learn how to be intentional themselves. So that is something that I've carried into my conversations with direct reports really, that they should be sort of willing and participants in that conversation, thinking about their skill sets, or skill sets that perhaps they do not have yet but would like to acquire. But really, I think the main point is in all my conversations, it's really letting people know that they need to be introspective about what they want to do and how can we get them there.

Michele King Harrington (13:24):

I love that, Sarah. So how do you think MIT has evolved over your career tenure, and what more can we do as an Institute to support employees in building sustainable careers, which we hope in turn will help with retention?

Sarah Hendrick (13:39):

Yes, and well, that question is, it's very pertinent, but it's also very tricky in the current landscape. Correct? Like with remote work and just I think the world of work evolving in the way that it is now. I really feel that there's so many opportunities again afforded by central HR within our own DLCs, where I know, at least from where I sit, there's always sessions being offered. And I really always advise people to take advantage of those opportunities. But beyond that, I think of the first year of the pandemic, there was no conferences happening, at least for me, or traveling to conferences or seminars or attending in-person workshops. And I really turn to the things that I'm sure many of our listeners have turned to podcasts such as this LinkedIn Learning, and really just thinking beyond the conventional ways of learning. Again, whether it, depending on the role, I understand there is a very formal set of trainings people can look to, but I think there are ways that we can think about acquiring certain skill sets that are beyond those formal venues.

Michele King Harrington (15:22):

Thank you, Sarah. And you've shared a wealth of information here for our listeners. And I'm just curious as we sort of round this out, what tactical things would you say you've done sort of under that umbrella of career development that have helped you, let's say formal networking, informational interviewing, some of which are a little more challenging now given our way of working, but at the same time they can be done virtually. So anything in that space that you did that really helped you maybe that you can share?

Sarah Hendrick (15:55):

So during the early on in the pandemic, I took a coaching coaching skills workshop. That workshop was so helpful because it really allowed me to think beyond just managing my direct reports, but really helping exactly what it says, like coach them and bringing them in to actually be part of the solution and even bring forth their thinking.

Michele King Harrington (16:28):

Oh, wonderful. Well, thank you for joining us today, Sarah. I really appreciate all that you've had to say on the career topic of your career journey at MIT. And so glad that you're still here and hanging your hat here for a while so we can take advantage of your great expertise. Thanks again for joining us.

Sarah Hendrick (16:49):

Thank you, Michelle.

Announcer (16:55):

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