MIT HR Podcast Series: Career Journeys at the Institute

Rachel Hutton

Director of Operations, Executive Education, MIT Sloan School of Management

Michele King Harrington (00:04):

Welcome listeners and MIT colleagues. My name is Michelle King Harrington. I work in Human Resources and assist staff with their career development at MIT. Today you're tuned in listening to our Career Connect podcast where we will hear from a diverse cross-section of MIT staff who represent many department centers and labs across MIT. Today I'm joined by Rachel Hutton and I will have her introduce herself to you today. [Tell us] who you are, where you work, what you do, and as part of that, maybe you could tell us about your career journey at MIT and how that's evolved. Thank you. And welcome.

Rachel Hutton (00:38):

Thank you and thanks for having me. So I'm Rachel Hutton and I'm Director of Operations at MIT Sloan Executive Education. So for those of you that don't know, Exec Ed is a non-degree program within the business school. We engage with individuals and organizations to meet their goals. When we foster professional development by access to world renowned faculty participating in networking and applied learning, that really drives impact.

Michele King Harrington (01:09):

Great. Thanks Rachel. So can you sort of tell us how you started at MIT, what brought you here and the steps to where you currently are? Thank you.

Rachel Hutton (01:20):

Of course. So back in 2006 as a fresh college graduate, I applied to jobs in this city hoping to move from the woods of New Hampshire to a more urban environment. I was hired as an administrative assistant for the Lab for Manufacturing and Productivity, which I think has since been absorbed by the School of Engineering. Okay. And there I supported a team of faculty, postdocs and students. During my time there, I had a unique opportunity to travel, to run a session for a conference and staff, a trade show. And I also had the opportunity to plan a 500-plus manufacturing conference locally in Boston. And it was really at that point that I felt I really wanted to dive into events and I took a leap of faith and took a contract job in Institute Events, helping plan MIT's 150th celebration in addition to organizing the campus tours, managing the student tour guides and arranging special visits for dignitaries and heads of state.

(02:30):

This was a really team oriented role where I learned from some of the best event planners at MIT. Shortly after a year there, a coordinator role in Exec Ed popped up. It's been a perfect place for me to grow over the last 11 years. I came in as a program coordinator there and moved up along the way to become an Assistant Director, then an Associate Director, and now I currently serve as Director of Operations. So when looking back at my career trajectory, I feel lucky and supported by so many people along the way. It's been over 16 years now and I still feel challenged every day.

Michele King Harrington (03:12):

Wow, that sounds like a great career trajectory, Rachel, that sort of admin to coordinator to assistant director. So were there other key people who impacted your career development, would you say?

Rachel Hutton (03:25):

I really need to thank my supervisors who have pushed me along the way and pushed me out of my comfort zone, and that's led me to challenge myself.

Michele King Harrington (03:35):

Wow. There are some great things there Rachel. And thank you for bringing up that really important point about relationships and it's a theme that comes up a lot at MIT as I talk to different people in these sessions. So what about some key moments that influenced your career direction?

Rachel Hutton (03:53):

So during college I really thought that I wanted to go into television or radio. That's kind of where my head was at majoring in communication. But I spent time working at New Hampshire Public Television and Clear Channel Communications during college and I realized what I enjoyed most about it was the energy, the pressure, and the production of it all. So a family friend who was an event planner in Boston at the time had offered me an opportunity to come shadow her at a big event at the CYCLORAMA in Boston. And so I followed her around all night helping her prep for the silent auction, the fashion runway show, and the food event. And I was just in awe of the whole thing. I realized that night that was what I wanted to do. I wanted to orchestrate events. So now when coming into MIT as an admin, I had really no idea how I was going to transition into doing that type of work, but I kept expressing what I was passionate about and was given those opportunities. First there was that RFID conference in Orlando that I worked on, and then there was that large manufacturing conference for a 500-plus with accompanying persons program. And those moments for me really cemented what I wanted to do.

Michele King Harrington (05:13):

That's great, Rachel. It's funny, some of those words you use there, the energy and production, those pieces I could definitely relate to, but I always think about events, that pressure piece and that minor detail oriented piece just is I don't know, mind-blowing In some ways I would probably be feeling, oh my goodness, this is such pressure. If one little thing goes wrong, the whole thing can fall apart. But I think it's wonderful that you had an idea in college or that there was that sort of pivotal moment or epiphany

moment where you realize in shadowing someone. And I think that's wonderful sort of thinking about it from the career development side of things that you were able to shadow someone and really see this is something that really resonates with me or I want to go after or where my passions lie. So I love that. So it's great that it sort of all evolved for you at MIT. So what would you say are some skills and strengths did you develop and or leverage do you think, to be successful?

Rachel Hutton (06:14):

Well, early in my career I had realized that I wanted to orchestrate events, but after I moved over to Executive Education at Sloan and been a coordinator for a year, a position opened up to manage a team of seven coordinators. And I thought to myself, is this something that I really want to do? Would I be good at it? And in the end, I decided to apply and was hired into that role. And I have to say that that was probably one of the most challenging transitions in my career. I had to manage folks who had been here longer than I had and transition from being a peer to being their manager. And it took me a long time to grow thicker skin and to project the confidence of a seasoned professional right in that role. But something I stayed true to was who I was and I wanted to be my authentic self.

(07:12):

For me, I was always the quieter person in the room. I tend to listen more, ask questions, think carefully about my answers. I'm methodical and very intentional and I support and develop others. So as a new manager, I know many people were questioning how is she going to have those difficult conversations? Will she be able to command a room? Is she going to make decisions and move us forward? And over time, I leveraged these strengths and other people started seeing me as somebody that was trustworthy, someone that cared deeply about the work and the people. And I think I gained my influence by the relationships that I had built and not by being the loudest voice in the room.

Michele King Harrington (08:00):

Okay, that's great Rachel. So I suppose it sounds like that leap when you think about it in terms of career from individual contributor to manager, sort of has those just those challenging pieces. So what would you say to me as I contemplate taking on a new manager role?

Rachel Hutton (08:25):

Well, I think that you need to be bold in a way that's authentic to you. You have to be clear, communicate and be transparent about your goals and what you're trying to achieve. You're going to make mistakes and you don't have to be an expert in all of the things and take time to develop those relationships and cultivate them.

Michele King Harrington (08:49):

Okay. And it's interesting, that's a theme that's come up so much in these conversations, the relationship piece, how important it is to build them and nurture them and just to get out of your comfort zone to meet those people that maybe can help you. So thanks for that, Rachel. And we'll sort

of revisit that management piece again in the moment. So what would you say is unique about working in higher education and in a research institution like MIT?

Rachel Hutton (09:16):

So working in higher ed really provides you the opportunity to explore, experiment, and learn in a safe environment. I've never been put in a tough spot where I have to solve a problem in isolation or have felt unsupported. One of the best things about MIT is the people and there always are others that are willing to help out. I know we joke about there's always a committee for everything here, but honestly you're always part of a team and that's so great about it. One example of that is I was asked to help Sloan reopening the dining when they brought the students back to campus after the shutdown. And we formed a team including the dining restaurant associates, IT faculty, facilities team, and others to make the transition smooth. And I met so many people just working on that team that I wouldn't have in my day to day. And MIT gives you the opportunity to work on things outside of what falls in your job description.

Michele King Harrington (10:22):

And I think that speaks to just sort of collaboration and just the collegial environment that we're in. So great. What about your observations about how professional development, education and learning have affected your career?

Rachel Hutton (10:37):

So I'm a huge supporter of professional development. I mean, we work in higher ed and I specifically work in a development department that develops leaders in the world. So my interest in this really all started when I became a manager and went through that really difficult transition of managing my former peers. So I did dove headfirst into those HR courses and I wanted a toolkit. There's so many courses that HR offers, which is wonderful. And in addition, I've participated in a lot of the Managers Round Tables that central HR has and that Sloan does as well. And I think what's best about these internal offerings at MIT is the chance to connect with others across the Institute. Sometimes it's helpful to have somebody to talk to outside of your department. So as I mentioned, my department is really supportive of development. So many of us have been exposed to professional organizations gatherings.

(11:37):

Ours in Exec Ed is Unicon and it's really important to make time for those things. Attend a leadership conference, do a 360, join a committee, participate in an Employee Resource Group, get that certificate that you want. MIT a great place to learn even as a staff member. And I find it helpful to be exposed to new content, new ideas, new people over the years. So I stay curious and engaged and I consider myself a lifelong learner. There's always something new that you have to push yourself to do. I'm always applying what I learn and bringing it back to my team and I encourage my team to do the same.

Michele King Harrington (12:21):

Curious and engaged. I love that, Rachel. I think as long as we're doing that, we are lifelong learners. And I agree with you, the Employee Resource Groups, HR learnings, and I'm glad that you have taken advantage of a lot of those management courses that are offered, the Managers Round Table and Essentials of Management. Those are all wonderful. Not to mention the hiring courses and so many courses. And I do encourage employees also to take advantage of our generous tuition assistance to take advantage and do more courses outside of MIT or internal to MIT. So it is really important and I'm definitely a big advocate for professional organizations. I think it can be a great way to build your network to find out what other schools are doing and just to sort of expand that whole area of best practices in your field. So how do you think m MIT has evolved over your career tenure and what more could we do as an Institute to support employees in building sustainable careers?

Rachel Hutton (13:23):

One thing I've been really excited about is creating a pathway for folks on my operations team. So a couple years after I started in Exec Ed, I became the lead for the entire ops team. It was very flat, there were all coordinators. And what I did first was create a role on managing the classroom space, technology, and projects. And then a little bit after that we created a digital role and then we had two assistant directors. And then after a couple years, I promoted those two into associate director roles. Soon after we identified a need for folks to take on what we called steady programs off of the program director portfolio to free them up to work on more complex engagements. So this new assistant director role was born from that, and now I have five people in that role. So, and I've even transitioned some of those folks to now manage program coordinators. So I think as a manager, we need to feel empowered to ask for what we need from the business. And the crazy thing is that we might get it right. And I think things like that make us retain folks. There are plenty of high performers within our departments that get stuck and we need to create more opportunity and bring them along with the business. We want people to come here and move around.

Michele King Harrington (14:50):

That is exciting to think about that. So thank you for raising all those things. So which part of your job do you still find challenging?

Rachel Hutton (14:59):

So I think that the thing is, is that people really crave impact and you want to be engaged and utilized. And if I'm personally coasting along, I'm not very content. So one of the things in my role is that I really appreciate is the variability of the work. And what I find challenging every day is that I don't really know what I'm walking into. I could be dealing with a personnel matter one day. I could be troubleshooting technology, looking for a new venue to host a program, hiring, onboarding, scheduling, upcoming courses with faculty. It's never ending. And I never know when I'm walking into the number of things that I have to prioritize sometimes feels like overwhelming and I might not get it done. But then I step back and I realize the impact that my little piece has in this puzzle and I feel proud of the impact. And my team is the best. They're a brilliant team of event professionals and they continue to raise the bar each day. And when you're surrounded by colleagues that rise to the challenge every day, you tend to do the same.

Michele King Harrington (16:10):

So Rachel, you're never going to get bored in that job it sounds like.

Rachel Hutton (16:13):

No, I don't think so. There's always something new and we're always ahead of the curve trying out new technology and sort of this experimentation.

Michele King Harrington (16:22):

That's great. So we've had a great conversation here and I know I just want to sort of end it here with one question. I know we've raised some of these things already around mentoring your direct reports when it comes to their careers. And I know you mentioned different things, shadowing and relationship building and professional development and learning and curiosity. All of these great things. Is there anything else that you'd like to add or in particular that you have seen worked with your direct reports and those who are on your team?

Rachel Hutton (16:57):

Sure. I tell them they have to be in charge of their own development. They have to drive it and no one's going to drive it for them. So as a supervisor or a mentor, I tend to ask questions and refer them to resources and make those connections for them. There's no perfect path you have to keep doing to find the meaning in your work. Try a lot of things and see what resonates with you. Say yes to the things that put you out of your comfort zone. So say yes to being on that hiring committee or taking on that project that seems daunting. Meet for coffee with someone that you don't know to build a connection. So trying all those things just exposes you to more and you never know where you'll end up.

Michele King Harrington (17:42):

Yes, that's the exciting part. It can end up in any and many different directions. So thank you Rachel. I appreciate all the time you spent telling us about your story and all these great tips and strategies and resources that you've highlighted that are here at MIT. So thanks again.

Rachel Hutton (18:04):

Thanks, Michele.

Announcer (18:07):

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