MIT HR Podcast Series: Career Journeys at the Institute

Rita Sahu

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Michele King Harrington (00:05):

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 labs and centers at MIT. And these staff will share their very interesting career stories. Today I'm joined by Rita Sahu and I will have her introduce herself, who she is, where she works, what she does. So Rita, welcome today. Can you please tell us about your career journey at MIT as you sort of tell us where you fit in right now? Thank you.

Rita Sahu (00:41):

Wonderful. Thank you so much, Michelle, and thanks for having me here. I am Rita Sahu. I've been a part of MIT for many, many, many years, and my career has spanned not only being a staff member at MIT, but I really began as an undergrad some years back and I went on to do my graduate work both in engineering. After that I went away a little bit and worked in industries, including at Bose Corporation. I was very inspired by Professor Amar Bose, who was a fantastic professor at MIT. But then I began to miss campus life. I missed my faculty mentors and I came back to MIT in 2008 and began with OpenCourseWare. And from there on the rest is history. I ended up managing a variety of residential and global educational projects. Did a little bit of work around research that has to do with education. I went away in 2017 while still staying connected to MIT because I wanted to explore the world of startups.

(02:04):

Many graduate MIT students do that and I wanted to be a part of that. It was a very different feel, but I was very happy to try that and I can speak more to that shortly. And in 2019, I came back because I was asked to lead some projects and I ended up pitching a project that had to do with wellbeing for students on our campus. That's the work I'm doing right now. It has grown from just a pitch to an actual project and I'm happy to be working with a fantastic group of people across campus. And this is how my career has evolved at MIT. In summary, it has spanned not only engineering, but technology, education and wellbeing.

Michele King Harrington (03:02):

Wonderful. Thank you Rita. And you come with a unique perspective having lived the student experience and now branching off into wellbeing at MIT and how that is evolving in a very positive direction. So your current role in open learning, what is that?

Rita Sahu (03:19):

Here? Absolutely. Essentially, in short, it's about thinking about the real world, but bringing in a layer to it, which is technology. The thread there is my startup, which had to do with helping seniors in our communities stay mentally active and socially connected because there's a rising loneliness in our communities, it's actually a critical issue and impacts health ties in with wellbeing. And that stayed with me. And as a result of that, I pitched what wellbeing means to students. And my role is I am with open learning. There is a group with an open learning called Mightily, which has to do with research projects. So this sits in that group and I'm helping manage, I pitched it as an active program director. I'm a Senior Project Manager for the work that is involved to run it. And that is what has brought me in a way back to my student life. It's full circle.

Michele King Harrington (04:32):

It has Rita, what an interesting intersection with the technology and the wellbeing. Who would ever have thought that they would sort of intersect in that way? And that sounds like really exciting work. I'm just curious, what was your undergraduate degree, was it engineering specifically?

Rita Sahu (04:49):

I did mechanical engineering and I stayed on to do mechanical engineering for my graduate work as well.

Michele King Harrington (04:57):

Wow, wonderful. Thank you. So what were some key moments that have influenced your career direction?

Rita Sahu (05:03):

Yeah, absolutely. I think one key moment was when I applied for the PhD program and I was lucky enough to get into the PhD program at MIT, but I decided to go and work in industries so much to my dad's dismay to this day. But I think that was significant because I learned about the real world and how real world impacts research and vice versa. And that has in a way shaped my career trajectory. Now, if I had stayed on to do my PhD, I think I would have been very happy as well, but it would definitely have taken me in a direction, I think perhaps more focused on academia. So that was one of the pivotal moments. The second pivotal moment was when I decided to do the startup and interacted with more than a hundred seniors in the community that I live in.

(06:09):

And actually sat and listened to how they were impacted by the rising loneliness in our communities and how the product that I had helped build could perhaps help them. So because that led me to where I am today, and in a way I always wanted to give back to MIT in some way, shape or form, and life works in interesting ways. So those two I think are some of my pivotal moments, but I'm also excited about those

moments. I'm not saying they were perhaps the best decisions, but for me they were very good decisions because I thought about them myself, and I decided to take a risk and see where life takes me.

Michele King Harrington (07:01):

Okay, wonderful. And taking a risk. It's interesting as you say there, if you had stayed at MIT and continued directly with your graduate work, you may have ended up down an academic route. And so being in a startup, I'm sure was an eye-opening experience and sort of led you to that project around loneliness and wellbeing. So it's really interesting. And then to come back and just give back to MIT in that way and be involved, that's really wonderful and those are very impactful, pivotal moments. So what would you say are skills and strengths that you've developed and leveraged just over the years to be successful or happy, engaged, motivated in your career?

Rita Sahu (07:43):

Yeah, absolutely. I think I have tried to design, if that's the right word, skills and strengths around this phrase, passion meets purpose meets plan. Because I feel like that in a way allows me to think about skills and strengths and has helped me through my projects. So some specific skills have been actually trying to listen to team members understand what their strengths and weaknesses are. It's just not about my skills, but it's about how to work collaboratively. I think most projects are successful because of a team. So understanding team members, understanding a little bit about where they come from, able to translate requirements of projects into implementation. I think that's key. How do you take something from paper to product? Developing a collaborative team environment, because environment has a huge impact on the success of any project. A lack of a collaborative environment can also break projects regardless of how smart team members are.

(08:56):

Also the basic tech skills, skills that have to do with whatever resources you need to shape something. And that in a way has to do with learning. You have to learn about what are some of those specific tools that are important for the project that you're working in and that you do by not only reading journals, but also by listening to people, collaborating with other people as well. And finally seeking out people who can guide you. So that falls under the networking umbrella. So it's a variety of skills, not just resource skills, but human skills, interactive skills, cultural skills. So that's how I've been able to drive projects and initiatives to completion and also focus on a variety of areas, not just one area.

Michele King Harrington (09:56):

Wonderful. Thank you Rita. And I'll just take you up on a point you made there sort of about the environment and you talked about collaboration. So what would you see as sort of, you were at MIT, you left, you came back, so there's obviously some draw or pull here also. So what would you say is sort of unique about working in a place like MIT?

Rita Sahu (10:18):

Oh my gosh, I go back to when I decided to apply to MIT in a way that first gave me a glimpse of what was unique. MIT is perhaps very unique in the way it threads research to real world impact, extremely unique. I mean the amount of information that you get that has happened here in the span of 160 plus years in terms of research on how that has impacted real world is just tremendous. So that's the first thing that stands out. The other unique strength, which I think is a little untapped and that's some of my motivation to stay on and help my community, is how valuable not only faculty members and students are, but also the staffing community. I think in a way they are the vein that makes everything run at MIT. So I think that's very unique. That's a huge, I mean faculty members and students of course are amazing, but also a lot of staff members who are running things behind the scenes.

Michele King Harrington (11:33):

Thank you for just drawing attention to staff and all the wonderful work they do. Paying attention to the staff that are running behind the scenes and making this happen is really important. When you think about how MIT has evolved over your career tenure, what more can we do to support employees in building sustainable careers, do you think? At MIT and in turn, hopefully retaining them?

Rita Sahu (11:57):

Okay. I think that's a great question. In some ways I see a duality there. I think some things have remained the same and some things are shifting. Since my career has evolved, things that have stayed the same, have stayed the same for a reason, and yet I see a lot of movement and motion in listening and sharing. I think the siloed approach to solving problems can work under certain circumstances, but in some ways we have to break away from those silos to collaborate because we don't want to reinvent the wheel, especially within our unique campus. So I feel that's happening more and more and there's a lot of humility that's reflected. Humility has always been one of the strengths at MIT, but I definitely see that being surfaced more and more in terms of how we can retain good employees if we can work on paying attention to the growth of our employees and members. So what makes them excited professionally, allowing them to express that, giving them opportunities to grow. I think we will be able to retain employees for more than perhaps what we might be observing. MIT, we have to remember, attracts very bright and very motivated individuals. So we should not only welcome that, but help nurture that.

Michele King Harrington (13:36):

Great, Rita. Yes, and I think it's really important. That's a recurring theme that has come up with many of you I've been talking to who have been in manager roles or maybe are currently in manager roles, that sort of sense of providing opportunity and growth for their employees or direct reports or just in general for staff across campus to help them stay engaged. And as you say, MIT does attract motivated, engaged, bright and smart individuals. So that's really interesting. Thank you. Rita. So when you think of your early career path and what graduates are now facing, what do you see as some tools to help them navigate these opportunities and challenges?

Rita Sahu (14:17):

Yeah, I think that's a great question and thank you for asking that. I personally am trying to think through what helped me when I was a grad student, and that was a number of years ago. But I think the three things that stand out in general, because it's not just short term but also long term, what helps you keep moving within campus and also beyond is really understanding MIT, understanding the culture of MIT that can help you navigate through things. MIT does provide a lot of resources such as being able to have that awareness and then having this curiosity to learn about MIT. Because sometimes what might have come out from my shares earlier that can help you forge a new path that is closer to your values. And then knowing what is important to you, I think that's critical. And then looking for those professional development tools to grow that further, interacting with your peers, interacting with other students, faculty and staff members who don't have to be with the new peer group, but who could really tell you a lot of interesting things. Taking the time to do that, not being stuck in one building or one room or one office, which is a very normal thing to do by the way, but bringing yourself out of that comfort zone would be helpful.

Michele King Harrington (15:50):

Great. Rita, thank you. And you bring up an important point. There are many important points, but that's sort of slowing down and self-reflection important for you and what it is that you want. So Rita, how would you directly mentor your reports when it comes to their career? Specifically? Anything you want to add to what needs?

Rita Sahu (16:14):

Yeah, absolutely. It's a good idea. Have experienced some of that and that in a way I bring that lesson to when I'm trying to mentor not only students, but staff members on my team. So the first thing is knowing what you want, there has to be a little bit of a conversation because some of us tend not to share that openly. So as a manager, I think it's important to hear that because ideally you want to be at a place where you're not only making a salary, but where you're also content with life. And that will change as you grow family, as your kids grow up, all that will change. But knowing a little bit about yourself and what your values are and how you can use that to forge a career is an important first step as a manager. I think one should be willing to hear that out.

(17:15):

And then these are some of the things that have definitely helped me during my journey. So I try to tell my group members, it is important to know how to build teams because seldom, like I mentioned before, will they be working on their own. So how do you yourself build teams? How do you define a strategy for your life and for your job, not only yourself, but by talking to different people? How do you translate that into a plan of action for your own life, whether it's within a lab, whether it's for a project, whether it's for just managing your life and work, how do you prioritize and proactively identify risks? Because a lot of us sometimes tend to do things that we feel will impress others, but we really have to know what works for us. So these are very fundamental things in a way the rest can follow and in a way fit in. If we know how to manage aspects such as these and then are working and learning to work with cross-functional teams, I think that's key. A lot of us tend to be very siloed. We are just talking to people within our group, but cross-functional performance is actually a very, very critical skill. So becoming

open to learning all the time and then being innovative, bringing your own creative spin to it. Not just doing tasks, but actually feeling like you're part of a system that's making an impact on the world.

Michele King Harrington (19:05):

Yes, and I think so many, developing those people skills can be really important. And I'm going back to your three Ps, Rita, it was passion and the middle one I'm forgetting, and then planning. Yes. And just to sort of round off and think about, and we've really enjoyed this conversation and hearing your career story, and maybe for some of the listeners it might be Rita started in this engineering role and then somehow evolved into her maybe what became your passion with the wellbeing of students and just wellbeing in general. And so maybe you could fill in the gaps there with that P and speak to that passion piece and where you've landed right now and how that feels for you.

Rita Sahu (19:52):

Yeah, thank you Michelle. This was wonderful and thanks for the opportunity. So passion meets purpose meets plan. So those are the pieces. It's very hard to drive something unless there's passion. And that can in a way ride you through the low times as well because you continue to be passionate about it. Purpose, of course, you know, wake up in the morning and it's good to have a purpose, but then you have to have a plan. So I feel that in a way, my journey at MIT has not always had the three Ps in place, but I've always had a very highest esteem for MIT. And if MIT can help not only me, but other employees, figure out the three Ps. I think most of us could be at any given time or sometimes at least be following a path where we are pitching something and then seeing that conversion to a real project. And that should be the story about MIT, where everyone who comes here should have that opportunity at some point to try that out. Will they be successful a hundred percent of the time? Perhaps not, but it's worth trying it out so you know that this is what is unique about our campus and allows us to do, and that leads to better performance as well. I hope I have summarized that. Okay.

Michele King Harrington (21:25):

Yes, you have. I love that. So I'll be rolling out those three Ps to people I talk with in my conversation. So thank you so much, Rita, for joining us today. It's wonderful to get your internal student perspective and also now your staff and startup and all those different pieces that have sort of made up your career story. So thank you.

Rita Sahu (21:49):

Thank you.

Announcer (21:53):

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