



Helen Lea

Head of human resources, Australasia
British American Tobacco

Education

I completed a Masters in Organisational Psychology at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Before that I did a Bachelor of Arts in psychology and law, and an Honours degree in organisational psychology.

First job

I started out working in the financial services industry for Wesbank in Johannesburg. I completed my psychology internship there while working in HR development roles. I was there for five years, and from there I went to British American Tobacco's (BAT) South African subsidiary, then called United Tobacco. I was an HR manager there for nine months and then I became HR director of the South African company.

I joined BAT because I wanted to broaden my experience base in an organisation with a manufacturing side. My original plan was to get that experience and move on but that was 12 years ago. From HR director I moved into marketing for a few years before moving back into HR in the Kuala Lumpur office of our Asia Pacific region. I moved to the United Kingdom global head office for four years and came to Sydney about three years ago for this role.

Why HR?

I was qualified as an organisational psychologist so business and people were obviously the career for me. When I did my internship I was lucky to be working with a group of HR professionals, who were doing sophisticated work that is still relevant today. Also, I felt I could really make a difference by working in HR in South Africa at that time—organisations were a microcosm that mirrored the broader social issues and challenges.

I chose to stay in HR (after working in marketing) because I think people and brands essentially make an organisation like ours. The impact we have on people can have a direct outcome on an organisation's performance.

Current duties

As head of HR for Australasia, I have HR responsibility for seven business units. My role is more of a leadership and executive one than a day-to-day HR role, so it's about being part of the leadership of the area; being able to help influence the way in which people work; and being able to shape the organisation's culture.

We're fortunate enough to be able to do valued-added work rather than having to 'struggle with the basics'. We have a receptive audience in the leadership team and a clearly defined business agenda we're able to support.

Challenges

Being part of a multi-national organisation with a multi-country role is a challenge—

ensuring relevance to each context is important. In our area, we work from well-developed markets, such as Australia and New Zealand, to the developing Solomon Islands and Samoa.

There are, of course, challenges around working in the tobacco industry, because our product is controversial. But, by the same token, this promotes a real sense of loyalty and camaraderie within the organisation.

Lessons

I think that in this position, and in any similar leadership role, you have to listen. In a world where we're dealing with many different countries and businesses, and we're all trying to achieve the best outcomes, you really have to listen to what the line managers are trying to achieve.

Pragmatism is also important. A lot of people enter an HR career with a very rosy picture of what they want to achieve for people, but you achieve more by being pragmatic and working within the realities of a business.

I'm a working mum with two children and I've worked all over the world, so brutal prioritisation is a must. I frequently fail but I have become better at understanding what really matters in work and life.

Professional development

I belong to a network group of HR directors in Sydney and we meet every couple of months. When you haven't grown up in a country and been to university there, it's particularly important

to quickly set up a network.

I'm also involved in a couple of women-in-leadership organisations.

10-year plan

My children will be moving on in 10 years or so, and I'd like to feel they're set up for success—whatever that will mean to them. Professionally, I'd like to still feel that I'm growing and learning, whatever that will mean by that time. I'm fortunate enough to work for an organisation that has fabulous opportunities to explore other countries. So far with BAT I've lived in four countries and visited more than 35, and that broadening of horizons is a very valuable gift that I'd like to continue enjoying for some time.

Lea will be speaking at the 2007 AHRI National Conference on the topic of 'Addressing the talent challenge in a controversial industry'.

Helen Lea spoke with Bridget Cull.

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