

WORK RULES!

How **Christina Seargeant** earned her place
in an HR tech empire

by Stacey McLachlan

It's hard to believe that just seven years ago, it didn't even occur to Christina Seargeant that HR was a career option. "HR wasn't even on my radar," says Seargeant, who today is a senior HR business partner at Workday, a software company specializing in cloud-based management for finances and employees.

But springboarding from her BCom degree into the tech world offered endless potential and possibility—and she found herself, after graduating in 2011, on a career path she had never imagined. "Not enough BCom students are thinking about HR, and not enough HR students are thinking about tech, even though it's Victoria's largest industry," says Seargeant.

Because start-ups so often need to fill so many entry-level positions—junior product managers, HR and executive assistants alike—with young, hungry workers, Seargeant believes that BCom students and tech are a perfect match. "Business students just have that hustle, and I think it can be a strong pairing." Not to mention the attractive advancement factor: "The career mobility in this sector is practically infinite."

Having tried her hand at a tech customer service position with AbeBooks after graduating, Seargeant jumped at the chance to explore the industry in a deeper way when an executive assistant role at a young tech company in town, MediaCore, opened up. "I thought, 'How great, I get to be a generalist,'" says Seargeant. "I came

out of the BCom with an entrepreneurship specialization, which means I'm not deeply specialized but feel like I'm open to taking on anything."

At MediaCore, Seargeant was a Jane-of-all-trades. From her perspective assisting in the CEO's office, she was able to see from the senior level what a start-up looked like, and offer support. "The entrepreneurship program at Gustavson gave me great insight not just into how to be an entrepreneur, but how to support one," she says. "It was so valuable to have in my toolkit."

Though there were only eight staff at MediaCore when Seargeant first joined the team, she quickly identified the people side of the business as a passion, and CEO Stuart Bowness encouraged her to develop that skill set. "The more I learned about that side of the house, the more I started to feel like a professional," says Seargeant. She pursued her professional HR designation while building MediaCore's HR protocols from scratch.

It certainly wasn't easy. "I would say that there was a lot of trial by fire," laughs Seargeant. "At MediaCore I was learning HR from the ground up, running faster than my feet could carry me, and making mistakes along the way—but that environment was a wonderful opportunity to fail fast and iterate as I went." Working for Amazon previously and knowing what they had for their HR setup gave her a head start, but she also reached out to community mentors, and followed

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an HR checklist. From Seargeant's perspective, putting an HR mindset in place early on in the development of a business "is never a bad idea. When you start off even trying to put things in place, it's an opportunity to show your team that employees are put first, and there's someone thinking about their advancement, which is reassuring, no matter the size of the company or the resources."

Over the course of her seven-year career, Seargeant has become a leader in her field, winning the 2016 CHRP Rising Star award, taking on

a role as leader of the Victoria chapter of Ladies Learning Code and volunteering on the board of VIATEC. But the accomplishment she's most proud of is a grassroots project: PeopleOps, her start-up HR networking group.

"After joining MediaCore, I found myself wildly unprepared to be building an HR program from scratch, and I thought 'but there's got to be other start-ups going through the same things.'" So she went out and found them: she sent out an email to HR professionals, administrators and office managers, inviting them to meet up. This gesture of community spawned a monthly meetup for shop talk and professional development, along with a Slack channel where Victoria's HR people share intel and questions daily.

In the summer of 2016, MediaCore had grown to 30 employees and raised another round of funding, and Workday came knocking at their door. "The work I did at MediaCore helped us mature the company from a people practice standpoint, which I think did lend well towards our acquisition," Seargeant says. "The biggest thing I am proud of, however, is the culture we collectively built at MediaCore, and how that stood out to the Workday team." From the dust of the acquisition, Seargeant emerged as the HR partner of Workday Canada, with 200 people to consider.

It's certainly different from those scrappy early learning-HR-on-the-fly days. "Now that I'm in an environment that has a lot of that groundwork already polished and in place, it allows me to take my business partnership to a whole other level," says Seargeant. But while the responsibilities have grown—with Seargeant ensuring all her employees have the tools and resources they need for career success, developing and implementing HR initiatives for recruitment, onboarding, training, development, performance management and policy development—there's plenty that has stayed the same . . . and she wouldn't have it any other way. "What keeps me engaged about HR is that I get different challenges all the time," she explains. "Ultimately the things that cross my desk are different every single day." ■

TIPS for START-UP HR

Christina Seargeant shares her tips for creating an HR program from scratch

1

Put people in the forefront of your business priorities.

"Too often, HR programs and initiatives are shelved and considered too late," says Seargeant. "Even if you don't have a fully polished HR department or policy manual, there are things you can do to demonstrate that you care and value your employees."

2

Create a solid employer brand.

When it comes to recruitment, always question what would make a candidate leave their current job, doing the same work, to come work for your organization, suggests Seargeant. "Think about your value proposition as an employer and how you can build a solid employer brand in your community."

3

Ask for help.

Don't be shy about reaching out to other companies—be they fellow start-ups or more established tech companies—to collect intel and advice about their HR practices. "Someone who knows the space and can guide you to understand priorities," Seargeant notes.