



Meet the HR Influencers:

Zabeen Hirji, MBA, MSM

WORKING WITH PASSION AND PURPOSE

By Lisa Gordon



As she comes up on her 40th anniversary at RBC, Zabeen Hirji continues to be energized and inspired by doing what she loves.

As the bank's chief human resources officer – a role she has held since 2007 – Hirji is responsible for overseeing the development of strategies, programs and policies that affect 80,000 employees in 38 countries.

She believes HR can play a pivotal role in building an organization that leads with both passion and purpose. In a constantly changing industry, she says, human resources professionals must concentrate on delivering today while simultaneously planning for tomorrow.

HR Professional sat down with Hirji to discuss the human resources function within purpose-driven organizations and how one of her greatest sources of satisfaction comes from inspiring and emboldening others to reach for the top.

WHEN DID YOU DECIDE YOU WANTED A CAREER IN HUMAN RESOURCES?

Zabeen Hirji: I joined RBC in Vancouver in 1977 as a teller. I

held numerous roles in retail banking, operations and credit cards before moving into HR in 1997. At that point, my career path had been working in different businesses in line leadership roles. I thought I would be in HR for a few years and then I would move into another role. But I discovered that this really was my sweet spot, where I had the opportunity to impact our business performance but, more importantly, the success of employees. That clinched it for me. People often say they love what they do, but for me this is about doing what I love. There is a passion and purpose behind it.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST HR JOB?

ZH: My title was vice president of workplace effectiveness, and it covered the employee lifecycle processes: employee engagement, career management, recruitment, diversity, performance management. Today, we'd probably call it employee experience.



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TELL ME ABOUT YOUR CURRENT JOB. WHAT ARE YOUR MAIN AREAS OF RESPONSIBILITY?

ZH: It includes all aspects of human resources including leadership, talent management, employee experience and something we call thriving in the new world of work – which is about new ways of working in the changing financial services industry. What does that mean to culture, agility and innovation? How do you infuse that and create a culture of always learning? It’s about building a purpose-driven organization and how that can provide both direction and a “north star,” inspiring people to align with our purpose.

WHAT DO YOU LOVE ABOUT YOUR JOB?

ZH: Enabling our employees to unlock their potential and succeed

is one of the things that really matters to me. The fact that there is always change, and big change, means having a keen awareness of what’s happening externally and bringing it into our company and taking action. At a personal level, I am learning every day, including from our millennial employees across the bank. There is always challenge and stimulation from applying that learning.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES YOU EXPERIENCE IN YOUR JOB?

ZH: When there is such rapid change in a dynamic environment, you have to deliver for today and build for the future at the same time. It can be difficult to ensure you make that time for future planning. You have to strike that balance.



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WHAT’S KEY TO LEADING HR DURING A DIFFICULT TIME FOR A CLIENT ORGANIZATION?

ZH: During difficult times you need to step up engagement and communication, and increase transparency. It’s really important to have those conversations where you’re clear on the challenges and give people a chance to engage, ask questions and have a voice in making the change. At the same time, you have to create confidence in people that we have a strategy and a path forward. Focus positively on the future.

WHAT SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT FOR SUCCESS IN HR?

ZH: I will focus on the future-oriented skills. We’ve talked about employee experience and the new world of work. For HR, it’s about putting employees at the centre of the practices and the programs we’re designing – how do you

simplify, make it compelling, embed advice? Next, we talk a lot about being a strategic business partner, but even more important today is to spend the time with and in the business, on an ongoing basis. And spend time with our client-facing employees so we can understand and design with them in mind. People analytics are important, to understand how to use data to solve problems. Also, what are the trends we’re seeing out there around talent practices and how can we bring them into our organization, to shape the future?

WHAT TIPS DO YOU HAVE FOR NEW GRADS OR THOSE IN ENTRY-LEVEL HR JOBS WHO WANT TO MOVE UP THE LADDER?

ZH: Get some business education: financial management, technology, marketing, operations. Get that business grounding. Then, early in



your career, look for opportunities to work in a business role. I think that builds your business acumen and allows you to provide advice and develop solutions, and it builds a different sort of relationship and trust with your business partners. And, even within HR, do different jobs. Move around horizontally and build a breadth of experiences. Over time, that will pay off. Finally, push yourself outside your comfort zone. Look to get involved in new opportunities; it helps you to build confidence and resiliency.

THE HR FIELD HAS BEEN EVOLVING. WHAT CHANGES EXCITE YOU THE MOST?

ZH: The fusion of different parts of the organization – it's not a solid line between HR and the business. You're really working dynamically as partners, co-creating and moving faster to try things in a new partnership model with joint ownership and accountability.

WHAT'S THE FUTURE OF HR?

ZH: It is about being very integrated with the other parts of the organization. Talent and culture aren't things you do off to the side. They're part of day-to-day business, so HR will need to be comfortable working that way. Also, it will be about bringing the voice of the employee into our work, real-time and dynamically.

IN A NUTSHELL:

First job: Part-time at McDonald's in Vancouver for \$2.10 an hour

Childhood ambition: To be a teacher or an entrepreneur like my father

Best boss and why: I don't have a single example – the best bosses I've had have been people who have stretched me and pulled me outside my comfort zone

Current source of inspiration: My community engagement. I'm very active in the youth and diversity and inclusion space at a macro policy and programmatic level, but also at a grassroots level where I can talk to people about their careers and ambitions. I love to encourage them to take that next step to achieve their dreams. When I have a moment like that, that's satisfaction money can't buy.

Best piece of advice ever received: When I was about 10 or 11, my father told me to never limit my ambition just because I was a girl

Favourite music: I don't have one genre of favourite music. It runs the gamut from Baroque to today's Top 40.

Last book read: I'll share my "go-to" book. I read and re-read this one when I need to – it's Arianna Huffington's *Thrive*. As a woman professional I've found it to be really important because it's focused on self-care. It's so easy to put yourself last when you're busy and you're a mom with all kinds of family responsibilities. It also reminds you to stay connected with the people and causes that matter to you.