

INTREPID PATHWAYS—AMY HENDERSON

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

Formal qualifications

Double degree in Commerce (HRM and IR) and Psychology

Currently studying Masters in Business Administration

Current professional role & responsibilities

I am currently working as an Employee Relations Consultant. In my role I am mainly involved with IR issues, dispute management, investigations into workplace conduct, policy reviews, supporting management with personnel issues, advising and negotiating EBA agreements and assisting the business with Industrial Disputes and protected action.

Current employer - type

Large alumina mining and refining company in the south west region.

Overview of career in the industry

1997-2001 – commenced apprenticeship in mining as a mechanic (first female mechanic to be employed at that mine site and the first female to complete entire mechanical apprenticeship in the company at the time)

2001 – 2002 – contracted to different mining companies as mechanic

2002 – 2006 – studied Psychology and Commerce at Curtin, graduated 2006 with Commerce degree, finished Psychology 2010

2002 – 2005 – Career Counselling for not-for-profit company

2005 – 2006 – Mining Recruiting

2006 – HR Advisor on mine site fly-in-fly-out

2007 – Current – HR Consultant and now ER Consultant at Alcoa Pinjarra

EXPERIENCES WORKING IN THE RESOURCES SECTOR

Was working in the resources industry what you expected it would be when you were studying/training?

Yes, I have always worked around or in the mining industry

If at any time you left the industry and came back, why did you leave, how long were you gone for and what motivated you to return?

I left in 2002 to study my degree. I left the industry because it wasn't offering what I wanted it to, and preferred to take the time to study. I ended up working for a not-for-profit company through which I gained a much more diverse outlook on employment, working with unemployed people and students. I used my previous connections within the mining industry to assist people seeking work.

What is the single most risky step you have ever taken your career? Did you find it paid off? Is there anything you would have done differently?

Probably leaving behind my trade and going back to full-time study. It has most definitely paid off, as I am now in a job I love, getting paid well, in an industry I am most comfortable in, and that I can use all my previous skills and experience in. If I could go back to my apprenticeship, I would have undertaken formal study then. Sometimes I regret the time it took to do my trade (4 years) when I could have been doing my degree, but now that I am in HR I find that the trade allows for so much credibility and a deeper more holistic understanding of the workforce. I think this is invaluable and certainly unique in the HR field.

What would you say have been the most significant 'step changes' in your career pathway, and how have you adapted to these?

Step 1 – starting career – choosing an apprenticeship versus study so I could earn money and buy a house.

Step 2 – commencing my degree full time – the lack of money was difficult to deal with at first, but before long I had a part time job with a company that paid very well.

Step 3 – leaving full time study and working full time instead whilst studying part time. We did this because my husband and I started a business and I needed a full time wage. It made me take the next step into recruiting and move to Perth. I also left the recruiting company and worked for a year up north doing generalist HR. I never would have gotten to that point if not for my mining experience and HR degree (that I was still studying).

Step 4 – I started at Alcoa in 2006 and late 2007 had a baby. This required a decision to slow my career down. I had a good career trajectory, and was set to take the next promotion to HR Manager within a year or two. However, I chose to start a family at this point instead so that I would have more flexibility when returning to work. I knew that I would need to put off the promotion for a few years, but didn't want to leave child-bearing too late in case I had difficulty conceiving. I also didn't want to have to compromise my family time for my job, and figured that it would be easier to maintain work/life balance with a less stressful job with less responsibility and time demand.

If you undertook any additional formal study whilst in the industry, did you find it useful in progressing your career?

The two have gone hand in hand for me. I had a trade qualification when I started studying, which I leveraged to get into career counselling, which again I leveraged to get into recruitment, then HR. The formal study has underpinned my experience, and given that I started my degree 6 years after finishing year 12, the study was very helpful in expediting my career progress.

What have you found most rewarding about the industry and what would you most like to get out of your career in resources in the future?

The money is one of the biggest rewards in mining, lets be honest! The conditions are excellent and I work for a company that provides 3 months paid maternity leave. The people are the most friendly that I have worked with, and I am certainly not a corporate girl and like the heat and dust. The commercial pressure in a mining HR role is much less, and with a workforce of over 2000 employees, there is certainly enough to keep it interesting.

WORKING LIFESTYLE

What are your current work/accommodation arrangements?

I reside in Mandurah and work locally. Alcoa is one of the very few companies where you can work on a mine site but live close to the city.

Do you have a preference for any particular working arrangement? What have your experiences with different types of arrangements been like?

I would like a regional residential role at some point, but most likely for a secondment or contract, and definitely when my children are bigger.

Like I mentioned before, there have been promotional opportunities that I have had to pass up. I like being busy and have a lot of things on my plate, but there comes a point after having a baby when you realise you can't maintain that pace anymore. At the end of a long day, the time is no longer mine or the company's, but is my little boy's at home waiting for me. I think this is a good balance, but at times, I get ambitious and look for alternative jobs, or feel like packing it all in and being a stay-at-home mum. The balance is simply a see-saw between the two opposing desires. So yes and no, I have found balance, and it is right for me, but it changes as the needs of my family change, and I have to adapt to that.

Has your employer been open to negotiating changes to your role or roster to accommodate non-work interests or responsibilities?

My employer, and in particular my boss, has been very open to changes in my work pattern. I did negotiate a "flexi-day" upon my return to full time work which I have had to sacrifice due to a change in structure, however, there is general flexibility around start and finish times.

BEING FEMALE IN THE INDUSTRY

What challenges have you experienced by virtue of working in an industry that is predominantly male? Do you feel you have had to adapt to 'fit' the industry?

I actually prefer working in a male-dominated industry. However, it certainly does have its drawbacks. I am not a corporate type, so it suits me to come to work without make-up and in jeans, (yes - I can actually hear you cringing). The company is very male dominated, and even though I am in HR which is predominantly female, the managers are mostly men. Dealing with them can be difficult, sometimes just because they can be so loud and dominating. I have seen the tendency to overlook and override women, which is frustrating. I see the top-level executives being promoted and they are mostly men. I see good women leave the workforce to have children, or forego promotional opportunities to raise their families, and rarely see the men make this sacrifice (but some do).

I don't think I have had to adapt much to fit into the mining industry. I naturally get along well with men, and having a trade background helps with credibility. I recognise that you need to "earn your stripes" a bit more than men do, but this is overcome with time.

It is hard to determine how much growth I have experienced in the mining industry as I have spent the majority of my career in it. I think the key benefits it has given me are the ability to think on different planes (namely the testosterone plane), a more black-and-white perspective of issues. It also makes you quantify your work more, as I deal mainly with engineers who need facts and stats.

Do you feel that you faced any obstacles or discrimination by virtue of your gender in your career and if so, how did you address these issues in order to continue to progress?

When I started my apprenticeship in 1997, discrimination, when it occurred, tended to be more overt.

However, these days in the professional arena, discrimination comes in more subtle forms when you are not listened to or responded to, others with less experience are promoted over you, or you are told you don't have the experience when you have returned from maternity leave. My performance rating is always 'average', even though I am told that I am a top performer. This is due to my time out to have a baby, and my part-time work on return. I know that to progress in the company I need to work full time and not let my home life compromise my work. I am not prepared to make that sacrifice.

Therefore, I haven't really addressed these issues. I refuse to work 50 hour weeks, and despite pressure from some managers (male and female), I don't believe I should put work before family. I see some managers so dedicated to their work that they put it ahead of all else, but more often than not their family life is in shambles, they have marital issues, and estranged children. I don't think anything is worth that.