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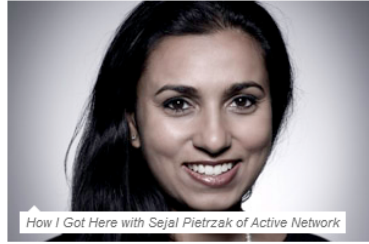
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Event

How I Got Here - Sejal Pietrzak

Georgina Cotton, 09 October 2013, 9:12am

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How I Got Here with Sejal Pietrzak of Active Network

Sejal Pietrzak is senior vice president international at technology and media company Active Network. She talked to Event about launching the company's London office, her experience of working at an ice cream store, and how she would like more time to mentor women in events.

What do you do and how long have you been in your current role?

As the senior vice-president for international at Active Network, I am responsible for the expansion, growth and strategic direction of our company's business outside of North America. I started our international division back in 2007 and have been managing Active's overseas operations since then.

Where was your first job?

My first job was with the US Chamber of Commerce's international division in Washington, DC. It was a great experience that enabled me to work with multinational corporations and gave me the opportunity to manage events and conferences designed to foster relationships among companies, government leaders, and industry experts in the USA and South Asia. The events aspect of my first job gave me a special appreciation for the complex work of event planners and conference organisers.

What was the most important thing you learnt there?

I learnt a great deal about working with other cultures and the challenges facing American companies as they expand overseas. But probably the most important lessons I gained were about how to execute efficiently, get things done, multi-task and prioritise.

How did you get from there to where you are now?

After working at the US Chamber, I earned my MBA from Wharton and then moved into strategy consulting at the Boston Consulting Group. From there I worked in banking for a few years. But, I longed for an entrepreneurial role where I could help grow a business again. Active Network presented me with the perfect opportunity to manage a fast-paced, growing business, that offered event organisers excellent technology to help them manage successful events from triathlon races to conferences. Nine years later, I continue to love what we're building at Active.

Looking back, did you expect your career path to take the course it has?

I feel incredibly blessed that my career has taken the path it has – I don't think anyone can predict what their career path will look like when they are starting out. I feel as if each step in my career has led me to where I am today. The move to Active was a perfect fit and gave me the opportunity to combine my university education in international studies and Masters in business with my experiences in event management, business leadership and corporate strategy.

What has been a highlight of your career?

A recent highlight for me was launching Active Network's new London office this past summer at One Euston Square and announcing that we had surpassed an important milestone of supporting more than 25,000 events in the UK and EMEA over the past five years. I started Active's business in the UK back in 2008 with just four full-time employees in a tiny office in Hammersmith. And now we have over 50 full-time staff in our London office dedicated to supporting all types of events. Our success is a result of Active's team, who offer great service for event organisers, along with Active's strong technology.

What would you have done differently?

I am often asked to be a mentor of women shaping their careers and to speak at events about what I did to become a successful woman in the competitive and male-dominated technology industry. I enjoy these opportunities and believe that giving back is a critical aspect to being successful not only in one's career, but also in one's life. If I could do something differently, I would dedicate more of my time to mentoring and coaching women, imparting my knowledge, and sharing lessons learned from over 20 years of working in fast-paced, global businesses.

Who has inspired you along the way?

I have been lucky to have had two incredible women mentors who taught me to always be confident, ensured I knew that it is possible to have a family and a rewarding career, and gave me guidance and advice at the times when I needed them most. I've also been inspired by my team at Active who show passion and commitment everyday – their optimism and their 'we can do it' attitude inspire me to work even harder each day.

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Have you ever had a job interview that went particularly well or spectacularly wrong?

When I was a teenager, I applied for a summer job at an ice cream store in my town. However, it didn't look like I was going to be hired as I had no prior work experience. I tried to convince the manager that I was hard working, a fast-learner, and could scoop with the best of them. As I was interviewing, the store received an unexpected bus-load of hungry children, and I offered to help. I washed my hands, put on the apron and hat, and off I went to take orders and scoop ice cream onto cones and into cups. About 15 minutes later, as we were rushing around to fulfill orders, the manager said loudly to me over the noise of the kids; "You're hired!". It was a fun summer at that ice cream store.

Is there a piece of career advice you've ever been told that has stuck with you?

The best career advice I ever received was focus on your customers and your team, and everything else will fall into place. If you think about it, focusing on those two stakeholders – our customers and our team - are all that matter in building, growing and leading a successful business.

What career advice would you give to your 21-year-old self?

Enjoy the day. We should look to the future and learn from the past, but it's so important to just enjoy the moment. Even now, enjoying the day is something I constantly remind myself to do.

How do you wind down and relax after a hectic day?

Spending time with my husband and two children (ages seven and nine) is the best relaxation – we often play family games like Monopoly and Scrabble together, we ride our bikes in our neighborhood, and we often go to the beach - we love living in San Diego! Going out for a run always helps me release tension, and I often come up with new ideas when I'm running. When I have time, I love to cook, try new restaurants, and have dinner parties with friends.

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