

Les Dakens: My Journey as CHRO

“21st century – the CHRO title should be changed to
Chief Strategy Execution Officer.”

Dr. Chris Bart, Principal and Lead Professor, The Directors College

INTRODUCTION

The simple fact is I had no intention of ever working in Human Resources. Perhaps, more accurately, I should say that I barely knew the role or the department even existed – it wasn’t even on the consideration list – and as far as my future was concerned, the HR department was nothing more than a hurdle to be jumped – the gatekeeper to my exciting new career in some other department, any other department. But all that changed not too long after I met Carolynn Walda.

After high school I didn’t have the money for college, so I worked on the assembly line at Nortel – the jewel of Canada’s burgeoning high-tech sector and one of the world’s leading telecommunications companies – and I took my college courses at night. My goal was to earn enough to be able to quit Nortel and go to school full time in my final year.

Coincidentally, one of my instructors at night school was an HR executive with Nortel, Carolynn Walda. Young, smart, well-educated, and totally ambitious, she was among the first cohort of post-war university grads who were destined to redefine North American corporate culture in the latter part of the 20th century. To me, she was absolutely someone to pay attention to and so when she suggested that after I finished college I should apply for a full time job at Nortel, it was an easy decision to make and that’s exactly what I did.

Naturally, as a graduate with a Marketing degree, I thought I would be interviewing for a position in Nortel’s Marketing Department; and although a marketing position was indeed discussed, it was Carolynn’s advice that instead I should consider a position in the “Personnel” department. By that time, Carolynn had become the

first female HR director at a very male-dominated Nortel. She was a successful 28-year-old business executive with an eye to the future and so I took her advice and the rest, as they say, is history.

My first HR position at Nortel was called a “Personnel Specialist”, an analyst position working on employee attendance and related projects. What struck me immediately about Nortel’s HR department was that very few were professionally trained in HR and not only that, it soon became apparent that some had even failed at their previous position and were one step away from being out the door. It was not an auspicious beginning, and many times I found myself asking, “What the hell am I doing here?”

Occasionally, I had the opportunity to pose that question to Carolynn and that’s when she would tell me about her vision of the future of the HR world; a world where HR executives were valued senior members of the core business management group and where human resources departments were staffed with ambitious professionals dedicated to the company’s most dynamic resource and its most valuable asset. She was committed to transforming the HR department at Nortel into such a place and she was indeed the catalyst for making that transformation a reality.

Carolynn saw something in me that convinced her I would be successful in the HR world and so I took that position in Nortel’s HR department. That was 1975 and I am glad all these years later that I trusted her instincts; Carolynn’s 70s-era vision of creating a new breed of Human Resources professional has not only become a reality, it has been a significant focus of my career.

In many ways, my career and the way I approached the HR roles I’ve held over the years might be considered by many to be “unconventional,” and so in keeping with that tradition, let’s begin the rest of my story... at the end.