

## **MWAF interview: Portia MacDonald-Dewhirst**

**Work title:** Executive Director, Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC)

**Educational background:** Masters in industrial and organizational psychology

### **1. What are the main milestones of your career?**

I worked as an independent consultant for many years in various high-tech companies doing similar things as I do now, i.e., research on occupations and developing human resource management systems. After that I extended this approach and did occupational research, training, occupational assessments and developed a competency framework in the public sector, working with police services across Canada and also internationally. Again, it was similar work, i.e., understanding labour markets and the needs for skilled workers in a particular industry, skill development, training programs, human resource management systems, gathering leaders together to share best practices across different companies and countries. Then, I moved to the agriculture industry to do similar work, i.e., researching the needs of the industry from the labour market perspective, researching occupations, understanding gaps and building programs to address them and collaborating with different stakeholders to ensure everyone is working on solutions in a collaborative way. The industry has a significant problem, the shortage of labour is extensive and worsening, a focus is needed on this issue as well as efforts to increase career awareness, skills development and diversity & inclusion. Effective HR management research, strategies and actions are needed, and collaboration is the key to success.

### **2. What were the reasons of your milestones?**

Throughout my career there have been a lot of parallels, the work I've done has been similarly focused on occupational research and tool development but in different industries. It's been interesting to take a similar set of processes and apply them to unique industries that are emerging and blossoming in Canada, and that have different constraints. The reason I changed industries was that I was ready to tackle something different. Having worked in the IT industry with big companies I was able to move from that large company perspective to an industry perspective with national and international considerations within the public safety and agricultural settings. I made these changes because I wanted to leverage my experience and try the same approaches within different industries.

### **3. What motivates you in good times and through road blocks?**

I guess I've always been entrepreneurial. After university I started my own practice and built my client base. I'm self-motivated. It was OK for me that there wasn't a whole runway of opportunities or a steady pay cheque and clear path. That was part of the fun, to try to figure things out along the way. I didn't see things as road blocks but as opportunities. That has been true even when I was working in an industry association and running this one. There are always uncertainties about the future, never clarity about the path ahead but that makes it exciting and presents opportunities for reassessments, re-inventing and evaluating priorities about where you want the business to go. You can listen to what stakeholders want and then you can be flexible and adaptive.

### **4. Did you see yourself as a taking a leadership role in this field before?**

In terms of noticing differences between genders, I have always worked in male-dominated fields, such as high-tech, high-level policing, and agriculture at the leadership level. These are

traditionally male dominated industries that have been like that from the beginning but not because they are closed off to women's participation. I've always tended to focus on the positive side of that. You can always find champions that encourage diversity and participation, and those are the people I gravitate to and want to work with. You can gather others that are like-minded and start movement through people that are already championing those values and recognizing the important contribution women make in the different industries and that can play at the leadership level. You can find that sense of value and diversity everywhere and then you can harness them. Not everybody is ready for a whole scale change but they can recognize where the industry is going so that you can push and nudge to challenge people's thinking and open their eyes to new opportunities. You can always find champions that have been doing that for a long time already.

I don't think of myself as an influential leader but I am always asked my opinion about important policies and perspectives and it's in those moments that it's surprising to me because I am all about working with others. So, it's finding the way through the information and explaining that there are lots of people who are contributing to the ideas. So, it's exciting and exhilarating and not something to be shy about. So, if you feel passionate about it, if the door is open and someone asks for your opinion, you should give it. Feel good about the recognition. It's important to take the opportunities when they come your way. I explain that stakeholders across the industry have all contributed in all sorts of ways. It is my role to explain that collaboration has worked and continues to work and open people's eyes to something that is not unique to me but a perspective that I share.

#### **5. Why are you involved with gender issues in ag?**

Because there is more work to be done. We need to ensure the industry attracts the best talent and is being led by a diverse group of people that truly represent the Canadian population and everyone has the opportunity to rise to those positions. That's why it's just the right thing to do and really good for the industry. It's really good when the industry can attract and retain the best and if we don't ensure that women can access the skills development and leadership opportunities at the same extent as men, the industry suffers and that's not good for anybody. Some parts of our population need more support, and there are some associations that are not as diverse as they could be. They are, however, recognizing that and working towards change which is great. We need to help those associations and the women in those commodities and regions to see that their ideas are valued, their work recognized as important and they are welcome at leadership tables. My comments apply to the whole range of diversity, not only women, but also age, the region, religion, etc. There should be equal opportunities for everyone. It takes a while for an industry to change but it's a journey.

#### **6. Please comment on what's been going on with women in ag up to now? What's going on now? What do you see happening in the future?**

It's really interesting that the women in ag groups are strengthening, some have been around for a while. Now we see more activity and women being more vocal about the needs for networking and connections. This topic has been talked about more in and outside the industry, in newspapers, seeing that publicly-traded companies have to report on how many women are on boards. That's now a component of business. It's exciting to see that. Where this will go into the future is hopefully a place where men and women talk about inclusion more broadly, not only about policies but also about the make-up of the industry.

### **7. What are you doing now? Why?**

Over the past 7 years I've been with CAHRC. This is an organization that has gone through a lot of changes. I started with a sense that this organization needed change, had no secure funding moving forward and no clear business model. I took it on to see if I could turn the organization around and make it profitable and continue doing the good work it had been doing. The challenge was never about the quality of the work the Council did, but finding a way to continue doing it and leveraging the professionals that had been contributing and shepherding this organization along. I continued in that role and the organization has thrived. A big part of it is a real collaboration priority we had, listening to what stakeholders needed and conducting research in those areas, research that is applied and results in something that affects change. We build training, tools and inform and advance the industry in terms of human resource management practices. And so, it is exciting and I continue looking forward to building this business and gather more people, stakeholders and collaborators to help address a very significant problem in the industry, which is labour shortage. This problem is not going to go away without concerted effort. That's what we are doing, getting all minds together to figure out as industry how to tackle it. We are doing it in a way that allows the industry to meet the growth priorities and targets that have been set. We built a model of partnership and collaborate with hundreds of associations and through those we can move the yard stick forward and be successful.

### **8. What would you like to leave behind you after retirement?**

It is really important to me to have made a contribution, that people see that this organization (CAHRC) has thrived under my leadership and continues to build forward momentum to track labour challenges and develop solutions in a collective way. That's a key piece, the collaboration component, facilitating the input of many different stakeholders. Those are the critical aspects of any legacy I want to build, it's really getting people more aware of the labour situation and the value of investing in the human side of the industry. This industry cannot succeed without people, and if we want to see growth and ensure that the industry reaches its full potential, we have to pay attention to this issue. Shining a light on the people side of the industry and developing the mechanisms and tools to support progress through collaboration is really what my role is all about and the legacy I want to leave behind.

### **9. What do you think are the most important characteristic good leaders should have?**

Leaders definitely need a vision, they need to know where they are going and have a sense of enthusiasm and positivity around that vision. Without that they are not going anywhere, and are not convincing anyone to go with them. Leaders cannot be successful on their own. They need to build an effective team of colleagues and supporters. Having a clear vision with enthusiasm around that vision, along with a strong and committed team are the means to achieving success.

### **10. What do you think is necessary to engage industry in gender conversations and make progress for the women's file in Canada?**

I think it is easier when we find common ground. Everybody in the industry is interested in its success and aims to see the industry thrive. Unfortunately, not everyone is included in gender conversations and finding ways to improve gender participation at all seniority levels. For this initiative to be successful, it needs to leverage a broad scope of people in the industry. That means more people need to be invited to have these conversations and more men need to feel welcomed, included and involved. The messaging also needs to clarify that the best way to

support industry prosperity and growth is to improve diversity and inclusion. When you start from a common position like industry success, I find that's always a better way to have a conversation. Coming from a position of shared goals and values really helps.