

»WHAT I SEE AS A KEY CHALLENGE TODAY IS HOW TO CREATE A STRONG MANAGERIAL CORE WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION THAT CAN EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENT PEOPLE INITIATIVES.«

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*Interviewed by Vera Pasyukova,
photos by Saša Četković and Boris Pretnar*

When one looks at your career so far, an established and a pretty mature HR professional, a question pops up if you always wanted to work in HR? What did you study and what were your career aspirations back then?

After high school, I had no idea what I wanted to do, so I decided to study economics, as it offers many different options. When it came time

to choose my major, I was indecisive about whether to pursue accounting or management. In the end, management prevailed, and that's where I first learned about HR. I became certain that I wanted to build a career in human resources, mainly thanks to my professor, Ms. Bahtijarević, and her passion for this field. Nonetheless, accounting and finance remain my secret passions, as they provide a broad understanding of business.

When you reflect on your experience in HR, what changes have occurred in all these years, what do you consider the most critical HR challenges facing organizations today, and how do you address them?

I've been working in HR for twenty years, and I believe the challenges have not changed dramatically; they largely remain the same. The difference now is that the HR function is no longer seen as

merely a “supportive” role but as an integral part of shaping the business. Depending on various economic circumstances and market conditions, some challenges may carry more weight than others.

What I see as a key challenge today is how to create a strong managerial core within the organization that can effectively implement people initiatives. We can have state-of-the-art HR processes, practices, and initiatives across recruiting, development, performance, and talent management, but without strong managers at all levels to execute them, they become ineffective. This is why I believe the biggest challenge, not just for HR but for the entire management team, is in strengthening this core to focus on shaping the future and ensuring the sustainability of the business.

Several years passed now after the corona pandemic, do you notice the impact it had on people’s communication and behaviour? What practices in people management that got extensively used during the pandemic time remained and which did not? Which do you think should have stayed?



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I think it depends on the industry. There are companies whose employees can do most of their work from home or anywhere in the world, and others, like those in production, retail, and construction, that cannot. One of the major changes that have occurred is where we work from and how we connect in our daily tasks. Remote work or working from home is a practice that has stayed, offering a good option that allows for more freedom in balancing private and work responsibilities. However, it can also impact how we build the desired culture and sense of togetherness, which is, for

by providing different practices and tools to support employees in overcoming these challenges.

In my opinion, one business practice that started to be used more frequently is scenario planning. During the pandemic’s development, planning became more difficult and required significant effort to consider different scenarios: how the market would develop, how consumer behavior and habits would change, and how our employees’ needs would evolve. This way of thinking about the future helped us be



example, very important in our company culture.

More than ever, we need to be intentional in planning our activities and work to foster a sense of togetherness, facilitate more constructive dialogue, and celebrate successes. Another topic that was intensely discussed during COVID, and one I hope will remain a concern for everyone, is the physical and mental health of employees. The pandemic brought to light the battles many of us face, and companies responded

better prepared with various plans and respond more quickly to emerging market opportunities. However, it seems that we are slowly abandoning this practice, reverting to the illusion that we can predict the future.

As an HR professional, you certainly agree that learning contributes significantly to people’s engagement, motivation and, at the end of the day, hopefully to a successful career. Would you recall why did you decide to enrol

into the IEDC EMBA program back in 2012 and how did you learn about the school? To what extent did an EMBA experience help you in your further career, if it had any impact at all?

Even though it was 12 years ago, I clearly remember the moment I decided to enroll in the IEDC EMBA. It had always been on my bucket list, and when the opportunity finally presented itself, I had no doubts. The school and the program were very well-known in business circles, and I was encouraged by my boss to seize the opportunity.

The entire experience of being a student again, engaging in discussions with people from different industries and countries, and facing challenges from top-notch professors was invaluable for many reasons. It gave me the chance to think differently and broaden my horizons, not just as a business professional but also as an individual.

What made IEDC stand out for me was the inclusion of elements of the arts and their incorporation into leadership



learning. It truly challenges you, pushes you out of your comfort zone, and helps you feel more comfortable in various situations—skills that have greatly benefited my career. It also helped me become more confident in my choices, both professionally and personally.

There is this quite common stance that women can either have a successful career or have a family. What's your view, is both possible or there's always a trade-off and some compromise involved? How do you manage both being a mother of two and a successful manager?

This question is difficult to answer because we all have different definitions of a successful career and what it means to have a family. The only thing I know for sure is that life isn't about compromises but about finding your own balance so you can play all the roles that make you happy—whether that's being a professional, a parent, a partner, or a friend. It's easier said than done, though. What has helped me is accepting that I can't play all the roles with the same intensity all the time.

When my kids were small, I chose a job that didn't require a lot of traveling. Now that they're older and more independent, I choose to spend more time with my friends. Is this a trade-off? I don't think so. It's simply my way of finding the balance that allows me to play the roles that matter most to me at this moment.

Let's talk a little bit about diversity and inclusion. How important are those, in your opinion, in organisations? How do you ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion are not just policies on paper





but actively integrated into the company's operations and culture? Any examples of good practice that you think we should all have reference to?

In our company, the DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) policy is a fundamental part of our strategy. It's a broad topic, and I believe the focus areas depend on the company culture, structure, and the market in which the company operates. One of our top priorities is to maintain a gender-balanced senior management team—here in Croatia, we have a team that is 67% women, who

prioritize creating a culture of high inclusion, respect, and understanding.

To support this, we have implemented several initiatives. One of these is the "Listening Sessions," which take the form of a series of workshops involving small groups of employees and the management team. This open dialogue allows us to discuss inclusion, diversity, and the challenges we face, as well as the practices that are valued and worth maintaining. These sessions have provided us with valuable insights into areas where we could improve. For example, our employees

expressed a desire to better understand the challenges their colleagues from other departments face, which led to the creation of the "Among Our Own" initiative. This series of videos features different employees talking about their daily tasks, which are then shared on our internal social network.

Last but not least, how do you see the role of HR evolving in the future? What role does AI and modern technologies play in it?

If I compare the HR function today to what it was twenty years ago, it's clear that technology now plays a crucial role in shifting the focus from merely analyzing HR process data to gaining insights and creating value for the organization. We are still somewhat modest in our use of technology, primarily focusing on HRIS (Human Resource Information Systems) and reporting. I believe there are many more opportunities to learn from our past data and trends to better understand how to support the business in the future.

Will AI make HR obsolete? I recently listened to professor Filipović, who shared some interesting data with our talents during the IEDC Case Study Competition. He pointed out that AI still cannot replace people in designing and shaping strategies, and this applies to HR as well. No amount of AI can elevate the HR function to the role of a strategic business partner on its own.

WHAT ONE CAN'T FIND ON DANIJELA'S RESUME



EMBA 2012

Danijela Govorčinović Šimunović,
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When and how does your workday start?

I like to start early with a cup of coffee and my Duolingo lessons of Italian and German. This is my half an hour before my kids are up and suddenly remember that they need a new notebook for today's class :)

What's your favourite book and why?

I don't have a favourite book, I like to read novels from different parts of the world where you also get a feel of the culture and history of the place, like a Chilean author Isabelle Allende, or a Vietnamese author Nguyen Phan Que Mai or a Czech writer Alena Mornštajnová. This year I have been reading mainly Croatian authors, Zoran Žimirić and Kristian Novak who are writing about contemporary problems in our society in a quite bold way.

What kind of music do you listen to in your car while driving and what do you play on Spotify/ Youtube music on a lazy Saturday morning?

My first choice is always Gibonni, who I follow from my high school days.

What's the funniest thing that your kids have done?

There was one time, when I was driving with my kids and my younger was explaining how his dad, my husband, is a boss at work. I asked him if I could one day also be a boss. He answered: You could, but you need to do something important like construction. So it seems, no future in management for me :)

Are you a cat or a dog person?

My favourite pets are my plants, I don't have a »green hand« but I enjoy taking care of them.

Your favourite cartoon when you were a kid?

When I was kid we were waiting for this one cartoon before the evening news show to start, or there was even two during the summer break in the morning. My favourite were Smurfs and Biscuits, the classic fight against the villains.

What's your favourite type of vacationing?

My family and I usually choose a destination in Croatia where we have the opportunity to explore nature, visit museums, and enjoy the local cuisine. My boys are complaining that they would like to go abroad but they still need to get to know their own country first, I think, especially since we have such a beautiful nature and traditions and lot of diversity. Croatia is truly a small Mediterranean jewel.

Your favourite food/dish and why?

The first thing that comes to mind is my mother's "knedle" (dumplings with plum) - this evokes some very nice memories of my childhood.

What's the silliest question you have been asked?

I believe that there are no silly questions, it's just a matter of perspective.