

Secondments

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Jeya Thiruchelvam: How does an organisation of 2,000+ people effectively identify and develop all of its talent? And how do we make it easier for people from different brands to connect with each other?’

Robert Shore: Hello, and welcome to the Brightmine podcast, formerly known as the XpertHR podcast. Brightmine is a leading provider of people data, analytics and insight, offering employment law expertise, comprehensive HR resources and reward data to meet every HR and organisational challenge and opportunity. You can find us any time of the day or night at <https://www.brightmine.com>.

Hello everyone. My name is Robert Shore, and today I am joined by Jeya Thiruchelvam, the internal communications and engagement lead here at Brightmine. Hello Jeya.

Jeya Thiruchelvam: Hi Robert. So lovely to be here in person as well, which is a real treat.

Robert Shore: And we’re going to be talking about secondments, career shifts and talent pathways. And really that’s just how organisations can get the best out of their talent and development, and how individuals within organisations can develop themselves without having to change organisation.

So, in order to do this, let’s ask you a few questions about yourself first, ‘cause it’s a personal journey you’ve been on, isn’t it? So Jeya, why don’t we begin at the beginning. Why don’t you tell us a little about yourself?

Jeya Thiruchelvam: Sure. So, growing up I always wanted to be a lawyer and I spent six years training to do that, and then six years being a lawyer before I decided it wasn’t for me after all. And I think I probably knew within the first couple of years that it wasn’t what I wanted to do for the rest of my career, but I kept on going because I’d invested so much in that decision.

And the reason that I mention that is because actually we all have dreams and ambitions, and there’s lots of points in your career when I think you know that you can be more or do more, but it’s not clear how you do that or what that next step looks like. And working that out can be hard. So the period before my secondment, when I was working as the managing editor of the employment law team within

Brightmine, and had been for some time, was one of those points. And then actually the chance came up to be seconded from my role as managing editor to the talent pathway team. And I intuitively knew it was something that I really wanted.

Robert Shore: Okay. So you are seconded to the talent pathway team, about which I knew absolutely nothing before, despite working for the business! So, can you tell us something about the talent pathway team?

Jeya Thiruchelvam: Sure. So, it's a central Data Services team and its work is centered around creating an inclusive culture, increasing internal movement within Data Services, and really making that a realistic possibility for everyone who wants it.

Robert Shore: So why did you want to do the secondment? Why this one?

Jeya Thiruchelvam: I think for me it was a real chance to be a part of the organisational conversation around talent and really influence it. So I ended up doing a six-month secondment, and our biggest focus during that time was internal mobility. So how do we move, develop and keep our talent?

Robert Shore: Yeah, which is a growing question, isn't it, for a lot of businesses? Right. So, first day of your secondment. I mean, you're very used to your other role, so you're not used to Day Ones, I suppose, at this point. So, what was Day One like? What did you do?

Jeya Thiruchelvam: So, probably Day One and the first couple of weeks I really immersed myself in everything talent pathway team-related. And I was thinking about things like, 'How do we make it easier for people to move around Data Services to different roles?', 'How does an organisation of 2,000+ people effectively identify and develop all of its talent?' and, 'How do we make it easier for people from different brands within Data Services to connect with each other?'

Robert Shore: Yeah. I mean, obviously there are some big questions there. Did you get them all sorted on Day One? Presumably not! I suppose then we should begin by saying you mentioned Data Services a few times there. Can you give us some context around how Brightmine relates to Data Services and so on?

Jeya Thiruchelvam: I can. And yeah, the challenges are definitely still a work in progress. So you and I, Robert, obviously work for Brightmine, which is one of the four brands that makes up Data Services. And I guess the really interesting point here is that it's quite a diverse portfolio. So Brightmine specialises in employment law guidance, and reward and data analytics. But we also have Cirium, which is all about aviation data; ICIS, which specialises in commodities data and analytics, and

Nextens, which provides guidance on complying with Dutch taxation requirements.

So, a diverse combination of brands. But actually, once you scratch the surface it's clear that there's so much more that connects the brands than separates us.

Robert Shore: Right. And I suppose that that's exciting from a talent perspective then?

Jeya Thiruchelvam: Well, I could barely contain my excitement! But it was a massive opportunity to grow and develop talent, and help people to diversify their careers and try new things.

Robert Shore: In doing this, did you hone in on a particular part of the organisation for the secondment?

Jeya Thiruchelvam: We did. So, for the purposes of the secondment, we focused on Data Services, which has around 2,000 employees. But actually, Data Services is a part of Risk, which has around 10,000 employees. Risk is a part of RELX, which has around 36,000 employees. So the potential for internal movement is huge and massively exciting.

Actually, it's not happening as much as we would like, which is one of the reasons the talent pathway team was established.

Robert Shore: You asked all these really big questions. Now what?

Jeya Thiruchelvam: So, I continue thinking about those really big questions, 'cause actually just talent is one of those areas that you could approach it in so many different ways.

So, one of the challenges that we honed in on was, 'How do we make it easier for people within different brands to connect with each other? (bearing in mind that's a combined population of 2,000 employees within Data Services) and how do we make it easier for people to move around?'

Robert Shore: That's a bit of a challenge. What do you do?

Jeya Thiruchelvam: So, I think a challenge has got two main dimensions. So, from the organisational perspective we needed to really know our talent. And when we're recruiting we need to give our internal talent the same love and attention that we give our external talent. And we need to make sure that our internal recruiters and vacancies are really visible within the organisation.

Robert Shore: You said there were two dimensions. That was one. What's the other one? [0:06:41.7]

- Jeya Thiruchelvam:** The other one is we needed the employee perspective. So we needed to create more opportunities for people to come together from different brands so moving brands feels like less of a risk. And we needed to reinforce the message that you're in control of your own career here at Data Services, and there are lots of chances to move and grow and diversify it. And, critically, have enough things in place that when we talk about growing your career it doesn't just feel like words on a page or something that our leaders say, but it feels like a real possibility.
- Robert Shore:** You mentioned leaders there, senior leaders. 'Buy-in' is the word that often gets placed next to senior leaders. How did you get the buy-in of senior leaders for this new... 'cause it's a new process, isn't it, for the business?
- Jeya Thiruchelvam:** So, we were lucky. So when I joined the talent pathway team there was already a deep commitment within Data Services to people moving between brands and to expand their careers. So the challenge was really, 'How?' How do we make it easier for people to move between brands and functions, and how do we make that feel within everyone's reach?
- Robert Shore:** How have you done it? How do you try and solve those challenges?
- Jeya Thiruchelvam:** There's tonnes of different ways you can do it, and I can talk you through some of the things that we tried. I think one thing that's worth bearing in mind is that it's worth trying to see the challenge from different angles. So, remember you don't always have to go to the very centre of the problem to have some impact. Sometimes you can make ripples from the edges of the challenge, and that's kind of what we did.
- Robert Shore:** And are we going to talk about attempted solutions that didn't work sometimes, as well as just ones that proved very successful? 'Cause they're always quite interesting, aren't they?
- Jeya Thiruchelvam:** So, they were kind of a mixed bag. So I'll talk you through the two I've chosen and tell you which bits kind of landed and which bits we evolved.
- Robert Shore:** Right.
- Jeya Thiruchelvam:** So, one of the things that we did that probably fell into that bucket of trying things from the edges. So, really trying some simple steps to make inroads into a quite complex, multi-layered problem was...one of the solutions was the creation of the Data Services manager community.
- So, one of the things that was standing in the way of internal mobility across the wider organisation, certainly this time last year, was that

there were still lots and lots of silos in the organisation, and we wanted to replace those silos with connections. I was lucky enough to have a really brilliant secondment partner, Cath Morris, and something we were acutely aware of was that we were getting all these amazing chances to talk to different people across all the brands and beyond. And those conversations and connections were so insightful and also energising because they extended your organisational view and reach, and so your world got bigger. And that really was the inspiration behind the manager community, so to make that kind of experience a reality for everyone within Data Services outside of a secondment experience.

- Robert Shore:** Okay. So, Data Services. Remind me, that's 2,000 employees? Is that right?
- Jeya Thiruchelvam:** 2,000, yeah.
- Robert Shore:** And how many managers are there?
- Jeya Thiruchelvam:** There are around 500.
- Robert Shore:** Right. And so you're going to create a manager community. How did you go about doing that?
- Jeya Thiruchelvam:** So, we brought managers together from different brands to share their experiences, their challenges, their insights, and generally connect with people they wouldn't otherwise have had the chance to meet. So we kept the groups quite small and we curated the attendee lists really carefully to maximise the chance of people making new connections.
- And actually, when we were designing the sessions we weren't immediately clear on what we were trying to create. But we were in sync and pretty clear on what we didn't want to create. So we didn't want the sessions to feel too corporate, too top-down or to be us delivering a monologue to the group. And we kind of worked backwards from there to design the sessions.
- Robert Shore:** And these are all in-person sessions, aren't they, as well because actually I don't know whether we've said it up to this point, we actually all share a building, don't we? We're not all here all the time, but actually all of these businesses are in the same place, physical space.
- Jeya Thiruchelvam:** So, the Data Services has a mixed population. So some of us are in Bishopsgate, some of us are in Sutton, and also we're in different countries across the world. So we did have to think about, 'How do we scale this effectively?' So I think as we build this out we'll be looking to have in-person manager community sessions at all our various offices around the world. But actually, we did start with the

in-person thing, 'cause there's just a different energy when you bring people together in person.

Robert Shore: Yeah. And peer-to-peer learning then is key?

Jeya Thiruchelvam: So, absolutely. So that's what we were trying to do here, to facilitate peer-to-peer sharing and learning. So Cath and I facilitated the sessions ourselves as fellow managers, rather than HR, and that did help to create a space where people felt more able to share. And that's something that people specifically fed back on.

And the sessions themselves were quite structured. So we had different themes for each session. So, for example, we ran one on internal mobility, another one on inclusive hiring, and we're about to do one next week on managing change. And we were then able to share the insight on an anonymous basis that we gathered from the sessions back to the leadership team, which helped to bridge the gap between our leaders and our manager community.

Robert Shore: Okay, so that was a pilot, really. How has that evolved?

Jeya Thiruchelvam: So, we started our manager community sessions and we also then decided to run some individual contributor sessions. And I'm pretty sure, Robert, you came along to one, didn't you?

Robert Shore: I did, I did. And it was great fun.

Jeya Thiruchelvam: I will pay you later! I can't remember which one you came to, but it might have been internal mobility. That was one of the first sessions that we ran with both groups. And the sense from individual contributors that we got was that they didn't feel like they had enough access to, or visibility over, the development opportunities that are out there within Data Services. And that feeling was shared to some extent by managers, who also talked about being constrained by their own networks. So, if they didn't know the right people in the right functions or brands, they struggled to facilitate a pathway for their team members who might be trying to move internally.

Robert Shore: And that's certainly...I don't know that I did any feedback in the end but I would have fed that back if I'd done any. I wonder whether I did. I can't remember!

Jeya Thiruchelvam: I'm going to look that up now!

Robert Shore: Were there any other useful insights that came out of those sessions?

Jeya Thiruchelvam: There were a few recurring themes. Another thing was that managers talked to us about there being a degree of apathy around career development, and also a lack of willingness on the part of

some employees to really take charge of their own careers. And it was really that feedback that inspired our second pilot, which was our Career Adventures campaign. We wanted to excite people about their career possibilities within Data Services, and we knew we could only do that by doing something genuinely different.

Robert Shore:

Okay. That sounds intriguing. Tell us more.

Jeya Thiruchelvam:

I will. But first of all, Robert, I'm going to turn things around and ask you a question. So, if you had to plan your perfect, once-in-a-lifetime, out-of-this-world bucket list holiday, what three elements would it absolutely have to include?

Robert Shore:

You said 'out-of-this-world' so obviously I'm going to Mars. Definitely for that I'd need comfortable travel, very comfortable travel rather than...

Jeya Thiruchelvam:

Life insurance?

Robert Shore:

Life insurance, yeah, but I'm not putting that on my top three. Sea-view, whether I'm going to the seaside or not! And also, obviously, extremely good food.

Jeya Thiruchelvam:

That answer didn't go quite as I expected but I'm going to ask you one more question. So, if your aim was to make the next five years of your career the most rewarding of your entire career to date, what three elements would those next five years have to include?

Robert Shore:

Gosh. Yes, that's a more challenging question and you're saying I didn't answer the other one very well! But this one, even to answer jokily I'm going to struggle a bit more. I don't really...I don't know, actually. I don't really know how to move forward. Yeah, so actually I don't know. And actually, interestingly it makes me think. And I remember going to the session as well and thinking that these are questions I've never even asked myself. So why have you asked me these questions? Why have you put me on the spot today, Jeya?

Jeya Thiruchelvam:

Well, there's a very good reason, Robert. So, we put those questions to a few groups, and actually most people, like you – I mean, no one said Mars! – but most people, like you, were able to list their travel bucket list way quicker than they were able to list their career bucket list. So we really wanted to use that concept of travel and adventure to get people to think and plan their careers in different ways.

So, we came up with the concept of career adventures, and that was really at the heart of this internal marketing campaign. And the concept of travel adventures is something that most people love. And it does pull you into that big picture-type space, I think, whether you're 7 or 47 or 97. People are always happy to share their travel dreams, their experiences, their bucket list destinations. And I think

we associate travel with new horizons, new possibilities and new experiences. And the thing is that a different career choice can deliver all of those things.

Robert Shore: You've explained some of the pieces of the campaign there. What did it look like in practice?

Jeya Thiruchelvam: So, it was all about encouraging people to see their development and careers through a different lens, this lens of travel and adventure. So we sent out four actual, physical postcards from Data Services to every single employee in all of our offices across the world. And each postcard had a beautiful visual on the front and they had really probing questions on the back. And the idea behind the probing questions was to ask them when people were hopefully feeling inspired by the amazing visuals and in that more contemplative space.

Robert Shore: I mean, do you have an example of a question?

Jeya Thiruchelvam: I do. So, one of the questions, which was really designed to get people thinking about, 'What would you do if there was nothing in your way?'...so one of the questions was, 'If you could learn a new skill overnight, what would it be?' What would yours be? I'm going to put you on the spot!

Robert Shore: All these questions really throw me into a real existential funk, actually and sort of...oh, I don't...and I'd spend three years thinking about what it would be. Well, I'm hoping to go to Japan later this year so learning Japanese would be very useful. To recap, what was the purpose of the campaign, then?

Jeya Thiruchelvam: So, it was to unashamedly try and inspire people about the possibilities the future can hold within Data Services. I think we spend so much of our time on autopilot, and if we can get people to pause just for a couple of seconds to make an impression, to reflect on previous choices, to think about where they want to go next, that can be really, really powerful.

Robert Shore: Yeah. And obviously we've skirted this issue a few times but what is the value to the business of doing this? Why would Data Services invest in this whole process in the first place? I mean, obviously you have a lot of talent in the business.

Jeya Thiruchelvam: It goes back to the beginning, that really simple premise of wanting to develop and keep our talent. It's all about that.

Robert Shore: Yeah. So, I mean, there's a huge sort of retention value.

Jeya Thiruchelvam: And developing our talent too. I mean, there's people who you know they've got so much potential but they kind of...it's about going back

to that, 'What does that next step look like for me? What else could I do?' and thinking about what benefit they could bring to the business.

Robert Shore:

Yeah. And of course this is your story, in a way, through actually doing the secondment, isn't it? So, returning really to that thing about your personal experience, what did you want to get out of the secondment? This would be on your sort of bucket list for the adventure, wouldn't it, really?

Jeya Thiruchelvam:

It would be! So I was really looking at that point to grow and develop my career in probably a slightly different direction. And the secondment delivered on that in every way. So I think...so now I'm a real advocate for secondments because they are a brilliantly low-risk way of trying something new. And I think I found stepping away from my home role as managing editor of the employment law team – so where I'd be thinking about things like, 'What does the Employment Rights Bill mean for employers and how will it impact our subscribers?' – and immersing myself in a completely different set of challenges was just so energising.

And actually, as a result of the secondment I've now moved to a different role. So I'm now the internal communication engagement lead for Brightmine, and still a part of the talent pathway team.

Robert Shore:

Yeah. And I've heard you describe the experience as...'profound', I think is the word that you've been heard muttering around the office on many occasions – 'My, how profound that was!'

Jeya Thiruchelvam:

That paints quite a disturbing picture! And 'profound' is a really big word. But I stick by that. I think I got the chance to try lots of new things, and you are thrust into so many new situations. There's an opportunity to really do things differently and take some risks. And to be honest, to reinvent yourself a bit.

And we did an event which I think, Robert, you also came to, which we invited people to share their secondment stories. And that is probably one of the things that everyone who'd done a secondment agreed on, that the impact can be really profound.

Robert Shore:

Yeah, and that was a great event, actually, and I must say I did learn a lot from that. I mean, I still feel I'm only just scratching the surface of the bigger business, but I have learnt a lot through those events that you organised. So I'll say thank you here!

Finally, can I just ask you what your biggest learning from the secondment was? I mean, obviously you've ended up in a very different place as a result of that, but what did you learn?

Jeya Thiruchelvam:

It's a really good question. There were lots of learnings. But I think the main thing for me was it's just so easy to define yourself by your job title or your experience or your output. And if someone had asked me what my transferable skills were before my secondment, I would have reeled off just the typical lawyer stuff. So analysing complex information, converting it into accessible advice, weighing up risks, all that sort of stuff. But I don't think I really believed it. So I'd used my skills on one area for so long that I wasn't confident that they really were transferable. But the secondment really changed all of that. So, using my skills in a different context made me realise they absolutely are transferable. So I think that's the biggest thing. As a result of doing the secondment I see and have real confidence in the transferability of my own skills and – and this is probably the most important thing I'll say – of everyone's skills. I think it's definitely something to think about because it's just too easy to put yourself into a box.

Robert Shore:

Yeah. And of course for businesses it means that they can end up with teams that develop themselves in fresh ways and actually, you know, find new dimension to themselves without losing valuable team members.

Jeya Thiruchelvam:

It's a win-win. It's brilliant for the individual and it's brilliant for the organisation.

Robert Shore:

Jeya, thank you so much for taking time out today to speak to us.

Jeya Thiruchelvam:

Such a treat to do it in person.

Robert Shore:

We have lots of supporting materials on the Brightmine website, which I'll put into the show notes. And beyond again saying thank you to Jeya, I will say, until next time.

<https://www.brightmine.com>