

# Reflections on the Human Resources Profession

An Interview with:

**Daphne J. FitzGerald, CHRP, SHRP**  
Partner, Capital G Consulting Inc.  
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Interviewed by:

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*Daphne FitzGerald has worked in the field of human resources (HR) for over 30 years. A dedicated HR professional, Daphne spent the majority of her corporate career at Zurich Financial Services. She currently operates two consulting businesses: BOARDrx Inc. and Capital G Consulting Inc. In May 2011, Daphne will assume the role of Chair of the Board of Ontario's Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA).*

*In December 2010, Queen's IRC Research Associate, Alison Hill, spoke with Daphne to glean her insights on the HR profession in Canada and globally. Based on her breadth of experience and expertise, Daphne provides an optimistic outlook on the current and future state of the HR profession.*

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*Drawing on your experience, how would you describe the current state of the human resources profession in Canada?*

I think that the HR profession has evolved to the point where it is seen by business leaders, elected government officials, and members of the public as an important business profession that is fundamental to organizational success. This paradigm shift is not surprising, when you consider the increasing challenges of workplace rules and regulations with which employers must comply and HR's important role in managing those challenges. I think that the current state of the profession is best summed up as facing ever-increasing regulation, in addition to all of the other demands that the workplace has traditionally had on its managers and employees.

Over the past 20 years, since the *Human Resources Professionals Association of Ontario Act, 1990* was introduced, the profession has certainly matured. A degree requirement was introduced as part of the criteria for earning the Certified Human Resources Professional (CHRP) designation, along with successfully passing the exams and meeting specific experience requirements. These credentials are all important—not just to advance the profession in the eyes of other members in the business community, but also to give the public some assurance that organizational best practices are being considered. Formal credentials help to validate the fact that HR professionals really understand what's needed and what's required in organizations, and emphasize that managing human capital effectively is not just part of the HR profession, but also relates to the broader world of work.

There's been a shift in not only how we see the HR profession and the HR function, but also how we see the people in HR roles, and what we call them. I think everything is moving in a really positive direction. We've moved from "Personnel" to "Human Resources," and now we often talk about "Human Capital." I met someone at a conference whose title was "Chief People Officer." I kind of like the 'people' word—in my view it's more human than "Human"!

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*How do you think that the role of the human resources profession in Canada is similar to or different from global trends that are happening in the profession?*

I am looking forward to joining the Board of the Canadian Council of Human Resources Associations (CCHRA). The members of CCHRA are the provincial associations. When you become the Chair of the Board of a provincial association, you then sit on the Board of the Canadian Council to represent your provincial group. I'm looking forward to meeting other HR professionals from other parts of the country and learning about the challenges they're facing—to learn about both the similarities and differences faced across the country.

That said, so far what I've seen, what I've heard, what I've experienced first-hand, suggests that there are far more similarities in the profession than differences, not only in Canada, but I think internationally. When I went to my first international HR executive meeting that my company held in Switzerland (we're talking 25 years ago) and heard first-hand what my colleagues said their challenges were, I was really struck by the fact that once we got beyond the different languages and some of the different cultural protocols that were part of how people do their jobs—basically everybody was struggling with the same problems.

Just recently, I was very fortunate to be invited to attend the Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM) Thought Leader conference in the United States (September, 2010) and I was struck by how many international presenters were discussing challenges similar to the ones we talk about around boardroom tables here in Ontario.

Recently, I was reviewing some research that PricewaterhouseCoopers (2005) conducted on behalf of the World Federation of Personnel Management Associations. The study includes responses from senior organizational leaders across the globe. I thought it really interesting that in their findings, they reiterated some of same things that I've observed: although there were some national and regional differences, there was remarkable unanimity around the three key issues of change management, leadership development, and measurement of HR effectiveness. I would say that I haven't personally seen or experienced anything that would suggest anything different. I still stay in touch with a number of associates I worked with who are in the business here in Canada as well as in other parts of the world. Whenever we start talking "shop," I'm still amazed by the similarity of our current challenges.

I believe that deep down people are the same everywhere. We all know that there are some workplace practices that make perfect sense in one culture or country that you might not see in another, but when you strip all of that away, I think the expectations people have of work are much the same. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs had it right! First we worry about our basic needs, and then as we get those covered, we move up the hierarchy clamoring to reach the self-actualization pinnacle!

Change continues to be a constant challenge everywhere and if not managed effectively leads to job insecurity, job displacement, and job unrest. Why do people leave jobs? Studies, I'm sure, would suggest that people leave their jobs—regardless of their location—for the same reasons; with the quality of leadership being

near the top. Accordingly, leadership issues and creating dynamic workplaces are two central people challenges. Businesses are demanding more and more from their leaders, and thus measuring individual and corporate effectiveness is a constant challenge in any enterprise.

*What kinds of changes have you observed in the human resources profession?*

I can only speak about my career and personal observation and can only speak to the business that I was in. Certainly, in many organizations, the role of the HR professional has changed from one of, what I would call a “service” role, to one that focuses on the “consulting/advisory” role.

I am a member of HRPAA and I’m a proud member of the Toronto Chapter. The Toronto Chapter introduced a really excellent mentoring program a few years back. They matched up young professionals who were looking for mentors with those of us who had been around a bit longer. I had the opportunity to mentor a young woman in another financial services organization. One of the changes we talked about has become common in very large organizations—the practice of embedding a human resources professional into the business unit, as a fully-functioning member of the business unit, so they can live, eat, and breathe the business, along with the other folks in line positions.

If you look at how HR has been structured over the years, I think that’s one of the changes that I’ve observed—this never-ending challenge to get HR professionals into the business, not just as observers, but as living, breathing, thinking members of the business. I think HR professionals have a much greater role to play in assuring that all of the regulatory requirements at the provincial, municipal, and federal levels are met. If we’re in touch with the business, because we’re part of it, our business partners will trust us more to lead them through the regulatory landscape, thereby appreciating our contribution rather than resenting it.

I think there’s been a lot more effective communication about what we do, the role we play, and how we create value. It’s a shift in thinking that has taken hold, but also something that has to happen more. I think the use of, and reliance on, technology has also increased. I don’t just mean the use of technology to make HR more efficient. When human resources information systems were first introduced, their purpose was to help HR do its job better. Now, we’re seeing a huge technological shift that is more about how we can extend the HR role more effectively to line managers, and also to employees themselves.

One of the last things that I got to do before I retired from Zurich Financial Services, was to spend the last 18 months of my career in the North American headquarters in the Chicago suburb of Schaumburg, Illinois, where we created a single HR platform to serve all seven of our North American companies and the 10,000 employees who worked for them. One of the things that we decided to do as part of that project was to think about how we could leverage technology more effectively to help line managers perform their role more effectively, and be more informed about their workforce. Also, how we could leverage technology and put it in the hands of employees. That was very liberating for line managers, and very liberating for staff. It also shifted the role of HR away from being one of a service provider to one of a consulting/strategic partnership role in the organi-

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zation. That was the intent of the project. I don't think this approach was unique to our organization. When we started to research the project to learn which other organizations had implemented a similar system and the lessons they had learned, we found that this is a growing trend and another significant change that is taking place in the HR profession (at least in large organizations that have economies of scale).

*What do you see as the major challenges facing the HR profession?*

HRPA is working on a project with Knightsbridge, interviewing 40 CEOs of leading organizations to get their thoughts on the HR profession and the challenges they face. I think that the results of that are really fascinating because apparently there is a consensus that senior HR leaders are trusted advisors and they have a tremendous handle on human capital considerations. But, they typically need to have a better understanding of general business and its issues and challenges.

Based on this research, I think to be more effective, the big challenge for HR is to have the best understanding it can have of the business, including customer expectations, the financial drivers of business success, and overall business strategy. I also think that marketing the organization internally, to current employees, and externally, to prospective employees, is another significant challenge for HR professionals.

I am very proud of the work the HRPA is doing right now to build the financial capability of HR professionals. We introduced a new certificate program, in co-operation with the Certified General Accountants of Ontario (CGA Ontario). I think it's interesting to note that while CGA Ontario is offering courses to HR professionals to help with their understanding of finance, HRPA is offering human resources courses to the members of their association; it's a two-way street.

I believe the key challenge for HR is still to ensure that those working in HR have a solid understanding of business fundamentals as well as the particular business they are in. I used to say, maybe cavalierly, that we have to get out of the "people business" and into the "business business." I think the people business IS a big part of the business business, but I also think that nothing beats going out there and actually doing it, working in the field. The opportunity that I had in my career was to grow up in HR and then to go out and actually run two strategic business units within a very large corporation—the best opportunities of my career.

*How do you see the human resources profession changing over the next decade? Perhaps you can provide an optimist scenario, and then alternatively, a pessimistic scenario.*

I'm afraid if you want the pessimistic view, you won't get a very good one from me! I think Oscar Wilde was the one who said that a pessimist is one who, when he has the choice of two evils, chooses both. I've always been optimistic; I'm an optimistic person. That said, I absolutely believe that you have to consider all the possibilities—the good, the bad, and the ugly—and have an appropriate strategic response for all of them.

I absolutely believe that the HR profession is on a very positive trajectory and I see absolutely nothing to suggest that something will move us off that course. I think that's true because we have better educated and informed people in the

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profession. We have quality human resources organizations and associations, not just here in Ontario, but across the country under the leadership of CCHRA.

I would say that as HR professionals bring more value to the table, in terms of creating competitive advantage through the management of human resources, their organizations will view HR in an ever-increasingly positive light. This favourable perspective will advance the profession, and advance the individuals in the profession, to realize greater career goals than they would have say twenty, or thirty years ago.

*Do you think this trend, the advancement of the human resources profession, is happening globally as well?*

Oh, sure. In fact, I think that it's likely that a number of people who are running organizations today may have started in HR. The fact is that they didn't go from senior HR leader to CEO; they probably took a more winding path. That's not surprising. I think most organizations now require that CEO candidates move through a variety of opportunities. Nobody, whether they start in finance, or marketing, or research and development, or wherever, usually gets to jump into the CEO role without experiencing other parts of the organization. They get moved around, not just between job families, but also from one location to the next. Human resources people are no different.

I think most organizations—particularly large organizations—want to find people with varied backgrounds and varied experiences because that well-rounded view is what makes for a well-rounded business leader.

*What skills, competencies, and knowledge are critical, in your view, for individuals who are in a human resources leadership role?*

Well, I think that besides the need to learn the business inside out and upside down, strategy and strategy development are crucial. So, that means going to work in the business, not just showing up for a while as an observer. I think that in the past, HR might not have been held up to the same measurement rigour that other departments in the organization have been. I think being really strong in measurement of organizational effectiveness, and the effectiveness of HR, and how it contributes to organizational results are critically important. I think that if we're not part of the solution and can't show in quantitative and qualitative terms that we're delivering, then obviously we're part of the problem.

Not surprisingly, I believe joining a professional association is a necessary part of being an HR professional. I've been a member of the Human Resources Professionals Association—the Ontario association—for over thirty years. Absolutely every year, I've seen the value in my membership for a number of reasons. Life-long learning is, I think, a critical component of staying relevant, staying current. I think that when you are a member of an HR association, you have the opportunity to stay on top of what is best practice, to network and learn from your peers about what they are doing. Also, association membership provides an understanding that you are not alone, that there are many others who are meeting the same challenges, and that enables you to learn from their successes, and even mistakes.

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And of course, recertification is essential. We already have an Act that requires us, as human resources professionals, to maintain our professional standing through recertification. I think that through the association, members can access valuable information; we have a tremendous resource centre. All of the associations are doing more to support their members, in terms of providing them with educational information and research material.

I think that the other advantage that we have going for us now in Ontario is that HRPAs has resurrected the Human Resources Research Institute (HRRI). The mandate of the Institute is to fund the advancement of HR thought leadership through scholarships and by funding evidence-based research that has practical applications for HR professionals. Given that part of HRPAs's strategy<sup>1</sup> is to help improve members' careers, being able to provide them with practical research that will help them to carry out their jobs more effectively is also important. Through the HRRI, we'll be able to do that. Not only will we award prizes for the best PhD dissertations and Masters theses in HR in Canada, but over time we also hope to publish books, papers and reports based on the research findings, and to develop and market those resources as valuable and necessary pieces of information for our members.

*How do you see the human resources function fitting within the overall organizational framework?*

Well, I think I've said it before, and I'll say it again, definitely one of the things that we have to do is help create competitive advantage. It's not always going to be about the best products or the best services; it's also going to be about having the best people—developing the workforce to be a competitive advantage.

I think the whole area of teamwork and how it contributes to organizational effectiveness is also critical. The danger of silo thinking has also become a focus in organizations; breaking down the silos, and being able to develop cross-functional teams that can work effectively on a strategic issue or problem. I think HR can help build teams by training people to be better team members and being the glue that holds teams together.

I think HR professionals need to be able to understand the business well enough to contribute to the development of organizational strategy and the HR components of that strategy. Being at the table, when strategies are first being considered, and contributing to the effectiveness of those strategies by bringing the HR piece to the table, is an integral part of the HR role.

HR, as an essential driver of business strategy and organizational success<sup>2</sup>, is where we always need to be and I think where we are firmly placed. Shaping an organization's culture is also one of HR's fundamental responsibilities. While I believe that building a great culture takes the hard work of everybody in the organization: the managers, the leaders and the general employee population, HR has to take a leading role in making this happen.

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<sup>1</sup>For more information regarding HRPAs's strategy, please visit: <http://www.hrpa.ca/AboutHRPA/Pages/StrategicPlan.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup>This statement is a fundamental component of HRPAs's mission. For more information on HRPAs's mission, please visit: <http://www.hrpa.ca/AboutHRPA/Pages/StrategicPlan.aspx>.

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Another tremendous responsibility I see for HR is that we have to take the lead in developing an employee value proposition that really emphasizes the values of the organization and the behaviours that are expected of people when they come to work for the organization. Then, translating that value proposition into the performance expectations of employees on the job, so that work is not just about what you do, but how you do it, how you approach the job, and how you approach others in the workplace. In addition, acquiring talent that actually has the capacity to work in that kind of environment and working to build employee talent, while cultivating a collaborative organizational culture. HR also has the capacity to develop an employee performance management system that truly recognizes not just what employees do, but how they do it, in terms of living the values of the organization, and training managers to lead by example. Fostering employee talent, leading by example in HR, and celebrating employee and organizational successes along the way, particularly successes that support the culture and values, are all important. The list goes on and on.

When I carry out an HR assignment with an organization, I always want to look at the value proposition. I think there are still many organizations that haven't truly articulated what their employee value proposition is, for the benefit of the people working there, and for the benefit of those who might consider coming to work at the organization. So, I think it's an area where we have a lot of opportunity to do more.

*What do you see as the most crucial role for the human resources profession?*

I am not sure that I can definitively say that any one thing is the most crucial. I do think that developing a meaningful employee proposition that resonates with current and future employees and then developing employee programs and practices that bring that value proposition to life would be a really good start.

*What role do you think human resources plays in helping to promote healthy workplace practices?*

Obviously, no employer today wants to create a value proposition that says we promise if you come here, we'll chew you up and spit you out in five years. One of the organizations at the HR Thought Leaders conference was talking about introducing, and almost having to impose on their employees, a "no blackberry" rule. Where they physically shut down the system for certain times of the day or the week so that people just could not check and respond to their e-mails. And yet, you talk to others who say work is now a twenty-four hour, never-ending story, and that finding any kind of balance between work-life and home-life is almost impossible.

Finding balance isn't just a concern of young people entering the workplace; many of them have parents who are also yearning for balance. Older workforce participants are dealing with aging parents and with their own aging and personal challenges that make balance a necessity and not just a nice-to-have.

Commuting is an issue as well, if you are living in a heavily urban setting. HR has a role to play in creating and promoting organizational policies that recognize this kind of wear and tear. Some organizations have been very proactive in emphasizing work-life balance as part of their value proposition, and then using the value propo-

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sition as a lens to look at all of their policies and practices to ask: Are we really practising what we preach here? There are other organizations that talk work-life balance, but actually don't deliver on the promise.

I think organizations that offer flexible work hours and then actually make it possible for people to enjoy time away from the office and not feel guilty when they do are on the right track. I think one of the big challenges for HR professionals is that if a telecommuting policy or a flexible work schedule opportunity is introduced, it puts more pressure on line managers to ensure that productivity remains high and work still gets done. You have to learn how to manage people differently when they're not always there every day. Not surprisingly, line managers turn to HR and say: "help me with this." What we can't do is use HR policies that were developed before this trend and try to cram them into a workplace setting that now has flexible work hours and telecommuting. We know that the way we approach work and how managers manage people has to change in order to make this work-life balance actually work! I think that's a big challenge.

*The human resources profession has, it seems, become very much dominated by women. Why do you think that this demographic trend has emerged?*

I think it goes in cycles. When I started in HR more than 30 years ago, it was staffed by women, but primarily led by men. As society's attitudes towards women assuming senior positions took hold and as the men in charge of HR moved up and/or out, the women who had worked their way up became the logical successors. So it's not at all surprising to me that many of today's HR leaders are women. They grew up in the profession and capitalized on the opportunities HR offered as a place to build a career. It's not surprising that many young women today who are considering where to best start a business career would gravitate to a profession where there are so many stand-out senior women.

*Why do you think that so few human resources professionals are promoted to the position of CEO?*

I'm not too sure that they're not! I think that if you went back and interviewed CEOs and asked them how they started out, I think that more and more of them would probably say that at some point they had a stint in HR. However, that doesn't necessarily mean that they were lifelong, career HR professionals.

I think first of all, you have to want to be the CEO. And not just want to be, but also be prepared to put in the extraordinary amount of time and energy required to get there. I think that when you're a senior HR professional in a very large organization, you become very much a trusted advisor to the CEO. So, you see first-hand, maybe better than anybody, what that means. I'm not surprised when I talk to other HR professionals who say they wouldn't want the CEO job. They see first-hand the challenges of moving the family, working ridiculously long hours over extended periods of time, and learning to live on very little sleep. I think it's easy to say that HR professionals should be promoted, just like those working in Finance, Marketing, or Research and Development, but whoever gets that top job, I would say, sacrifices a lot of that work-life balance that we, as HR professionals, know is so important.

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Also, what do HR professionals who want to become CEOs need to do to get there? I think that maybe in the past CEOs haven't seen HR as a logical successor, or maybe their Boards haven't. I think that's changed. This survey that HRPA is carrying out right now in partnership with Knightsbridge highlights that. CEOs are saying that HR professionals are trusted advisors and should, and often do, have a seat at the table. What makes them a logical successor is being able to step outside of the HR role and take on other experiences in the organization to really round out their portfolio.

You have to want it, and you have to put in the terribly long hours to achieve it, and I think you have to be able to step outside of your HR comfort zone and say: "Okay, now let me go off and run another part of the business." I think that as that happens, there will be more CEOs who understand the value of HR because they probably put in some time there.

*Reflecting on your career, are there mistakes that you have made? Are there any insights that you wish to give to other people, based on your experience?*

My only regret is that I had to pass on an international opportunity—the chance to assume a senior global HR role. But the impact this move would have had on my home situation just made it impossible. I know that it was the right decision for us but, I've always wondered what that would have been like and what other doors it would have opened up to me as a result. I think I still did very well. I got to stay in Canada. I got to stay in Toronto. I got to run two different businesses. I got to go back to HR at the end of my corporate career and use all that business experience that I had and contribute to shaping a new kind of HR function in a large organization.

As far as mistakes are concerned, I've made a ton! Both of my mentors really reinforced that making mistakes is a big part of learning. I think that is one of the things that I see when I am in the classroom and young people come up and ask questions. What I see is that terrible fear of getting it wrong. I think that if you're afraid to try new things for fear of making a mistake, you miss a great opportunity. You can't learn from your mistakes if you don't make any. If you're always struggling for perfection, I think you get paralyzed and will end up doing far less than you could.

I really do believe in the rule that sometimes you don't have to work on something until it's absolutely perfect. If you do, you've waited too long and the opportunity has probably passed you by. Luckily none of my mistakes were fatal! That's the thing—you have to learn how to try out new things, but you have to do it with a really sensible risk management system in place. To know how far out on a limb you can go before you fall.

If I were to do it all over again, the thing that I feel very strongly about is that I would have tried to run HR like a business right from the start. I think that completely changes the perspectives of the people working in HR, and changes the views of the people they serve: the business partners they work with.

I don't regret anything that I've done. I think I might regret a few things that I haven't done, but I think, too, you have to have that balance. I've been very for-

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tunate to have an incredibly supportive husband who has in many ways made it easier for me to have this wild career, where I've travelled extensively and done all kinds of interesting things.

I know I'm going to be very busy for the next two years starting in May, but I am also really looking forward to it. Will I be perfect? Absolutely not! Will I come out of it better, and smarter, and more capable? I hope so. I believe so.

*To close, do you have any additional questions or comments or insights that you'd like to provide to human resources professionals, or people launching their HR career?*

There was one role that I really hated when I was "growing up" in HR and that's what I call the "cop" role. Line managers are difficult customers to satisfy in HR because they report to people who have really high performance expectations and they're trying to get the job done to the best of their abilities. They can sometimes perceive the HR role to be a barrier or an impediment to getting the job done and they hate the restrictions that they feel HR places on them as they try to carry out their responsibilities.

Part of our job is to implement policies that comply with government regulation and legislation, while at the same time being seen as a business partner, a trusted advisor. HR legislation and regulation is a fact of life. But that said, we have to find a way to help line managers get the job done, help them understand our role in legislative compliance and to change their view of HR as a barrier to success, or something that has to be worked around.

When we operate HR as a business that has customers, rather than as a function that has users, we are seen less as a necessary evil and more as an absolute driver of organizational success. I would say that if you are getting into the business to be the enforcer, don't go there. It's not the role for you; and it's not how HR has to operate in the future. I think that when you're the collaborative partner that helps to create competitive advantage, who is committed to bringing out the best in the people who work in the organization, and who also contributes to a winning organizational strategy, then you're cooking with gas and isn't that a great place to be?

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## **Daphne J. FitzGerald, CHRP SHRP**

Partner, Capital G Consulting Inc.  
Co-Founder & President, BOARDrx Inc.  
Vice-Chair, HRPA

Daphne FitzGerald has been a member of HRPA and its predecessor organizations since 1976. Between 1974 to 2002 she held a number of executive positions with Zurich Financial Services, one of Canada's largest property/casualty insurance companies, including Senior Vice President of Corporate Development, managing all facets of Human Resources, Organizational Development, Strategic Planning, Corporate Communications and Public Relations. Daphne subsequently assumed the role of Senior Vice President of Personal Insurance – one of Zurich's largest

strategic business units providing personal insurance products to home and car owners across the country. She was next appointed to the position of President of PeoplePlus Insurance, a Zurich strategic business unit providing car, home and life insurance solutions to the members of employer and association groups.

Since 2002 she has been President of Pension Puzzle Inc. and Chief Operating Officer of Capital G Consulting Inc., providing specialized HR consulting services (Capital G) and retirement education seminars (Pension Puzzle) to Canadian employers. In 2004 Daphne co-founded BOARDrx Inc. a firm which provides strategic planning, board governance and organizational improvement support to Ontario's not-for-profit sector.

Daphne has considerable board and advisory committee experience. She has been a member of the HRPA board since 2005 and is the current Vice Chair of the Board. She has also served as Chair of the Human Resources & Compensation Committee, the Audit & Finance Committee, and the Governance & Nominating Committee. Daphne is a former Vice Chair of the Professional Standards Committee and has also served on the Government Relations Committee.

Daphne served as a board member of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce from 1996 to 2003 where she was a member of the Executive Committee, Chair of Finance & Audit Committee and Chair of the Policy Review Committee. Prior to joining the board, Daphne was chair of the Chamber's HR Committee. From 1991 to 1994 Daphne served as a board member of the Workers' Compensation Board of Ontario (now WSIB). She also served on the boards of World Travel Protection and MultiServices Canada from 1993 to 1995. Daphne currently is a member of the board of Parkinsons Society Canada where she is Chair of the Governance & Nominating Committee.

Daphne has been a member of a number of advisory committees over the course of her career including committees at George Brown, Ryerson University and Waterloo University. She has also volunteered her HR and board governance experience to such organizations as Architects for Humanity, Parkinsons Society Canada, Moorelands Camp, the Canadian Council for Native Business and the Insurance Institute of Canada.

Daphne's teaching experience includes being a part-time lecturer in the HR program at George Brown College and a part-time instructor of Human Resources Management at the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies.

In 2002 Daphne was awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Medal and in 1992 was a nominee of the Women Who Make a Difference Award.





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