

## Talent Spot: Kate Russell, the HR Headmistress

Posted by Janine Milne in [CPD](#), [Business lifestyle](#) on Wed, 22/02/2012 - 10:20



Although officially Kate Russell is managing director of her own consultancy, Russell HR Consulting, she's better known as the HR Headmistress - a nickname coined by friends to describe her no-nonsense manner that has refused to budge.

0  
tweets  
tweet

"It's my own fault," laughs Russell. "I'm short and very middle class in my accent, but with rather a stern aspect. And I'm short-sighted so have rather intense eye contact, so friends used to say I was like a headmistress or midwife. But if life hands you a lemon, make lemonade and sell it."

Share

And sell it she has. Russell runs a successful consultancy, applying her no-nonsense approach to clients' HR requirements and providing them with employment law training. She is also an author, public speaker, presenter and blogger.

But HR was not the path that she initially set out on after university. Russell trained as a barrister but, frustrated with the time and money it took to get a career at the Bar off the ground, she decided to change direction.

"I decided the best thing to do was move on, but the experience was valid because now I specialise in employment law," she points out. "I'd always wanted to run my own business. But I was young and naive and because I liked food, I thought I'd run a cafe."

So Russell went from the Bar to the kitchen, working in restaurants to build up the knowledge and experience she needed. It wasn't long, however, before the reality of what it takes to succeed in the restaurant trade began to hit home.

Although it was good fun, she recognised that tight margins and high staff turnover created a highly risky business model. After working in a number of different restaurants and roles, she decided it was time to move on.

"I've got a low boredom threshold so, by the time I could do something, I was looking for the next challenge," Russell explains.

### **Resurrecting dreams**

That challenge was HR. She'd started studying for a Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development course alongside her restaurant work, which led to her landing an HR role at an airport terminal catering company.

It turned out to be very much a bums-on-seats recruitment role, but it was also an industry that was based on plenty of policies and procedures, providing ample opportunity to get a good grounding in some of the HR basics.

From there, Russell moved on to Whitbread. "It was a completely different game, both in terms of culture and environment and the type of work I was doing," she remembers.

After six or seven years in HR and after reaching middle manager status, she moved sideways into a training role - a decision formed more by luck than judgement. "If you'd said 'what's your ideal job', I don't think I'd say training because I was so nervous, but actually I thoroughly enjoyed it," Russell says.

Once again, it wasn't long before her career veered off in a different direction, however. "I worked for a company and I was bullied by a very senior officer and nearly had a breakdown," she recalls.

Although it wasn't the impetus that anyone would wish to kick-start a career change, it did push Russell into resurrecting her dreams of being self-employed. So, she started temping while she began to set up her own business.

Starting at the top of her address book, she began contacting people whom she knew, offering her services as a trainer and HR specialist. For almost a decade from 1998 as she established her consultancy, Russell worked on her own.

"I made the deliberate decision not to employ anyone because I know that I don't do pink and fluffy small talk very well and have to make a conscious effort in that area. My strength is in delivering complex material to a high standard," she explains.

### **Chameleon career**

But in 2007, Russell realised that she could no longer manage everything single-handedly. Today she has one person reporting directly into her as well as a team of "astonishingly good support people" to whom she outsources work.

She strives to maintain close contact with all of them, saying: "I want them to not just supply services but actually support me."

But her chameleon career, combining skills in law, business and HR have given her a unique perspective on the HR world and she worries that some HR people may struggle without a background in business.

“Because there are a lot of people just from an HR background, they see it from that point of view - there’s nothing wrong with coming from just an HR background, but you have to think more broadly. HR people, by in large, are different animals from business people,” Russell says.

This can mean that HR is seen as an obstruction, forever saying what cannot be done rather than coming up with possible solutions. “They don’t necessarily behave in the way that the business expects,” she explains.

As a result, her advice for HR professionals is to get some commercial experience - not just by undertaking a six-week secondment, but by taking the time to really understand another discipline as well as concepts such as profits and margins.

“Too many managers are not officially financially-literate and you need to see how difficult it can be to be a manager in business,” Russell suggests.

In fact, in order to convince the business of the value of HR, professionals need to learn to speak in business terms, talking about the impact of decisions on the business and earning credibility.

So it seems that, while the HR Headmistress may have reached the top of the class, she has, in best school-girl fashion, achieved it through nothing less than good old-fashioned hard work.

### **And finally...**

#### **Who do you admire most and why?**

The people who made me what I am today and have the values that I admire are my mum and dad. I was brought up in a very old-fashioned working-class way with high standards: work first, play later. And always give 100%.

#### **What buzzword do you hate?**

People who say: “They’re my human rights” without understanding what it means and those who say that they can’t do something because of “data protection” when it has nothing to do with it. I also hate the phrase ‘work-life balance’.

#### **What’s the best piece of advice you’ve received?**

It was from one of my brothers who set up his own business during the last recession. He said: “Don’t go for sales for the sake of sales.” So if your gut is telling you that the person or company you’re going to work with is going to be a problem, then it’s not worth the money. As a result, if I don’t like them, I double my rates.

### **How do you relax?**

When I'm by myself, then reading, but Peter (my partner) and I like walking and we try to get out once a week. I also try to run - I'm a very slow runner - and cycle.

---

### **Attached Images**

