

TANIA SIBREE – FINDING YOUR PASSION

BY CATHERINE MCGREGOR

HAVING A PASSION IS INCREASINGLY SOMETHING EMPLOYEES WANT FROM THEIR JOB. BUT SOMETIMES IT'S FURTHER ENHANCED BY ACTIVITIES WHICH MAY RUN ALONGSIDE YOUR MAIN CAREER. FOR MANY AT THE MORE EXECUTIVE END OF THE MARKET, INCLUDING SENIOR LAWYERS PURSUING INTERESTS OUTSIDE OF THEIR MAIN ROLE IS ALLOWING THEM TO TAP INTO OTHER PASSIONS AND PROJECTS, WHICH CAN REVITALIZE AND ADD VALUE TO THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR DAY JOB.

INTERVIEW

One such lawyer is Tania Sibree, Associate General Counsel for HSBC Banking & Markets based in Hong Kong whose side interest is a consultancy and supply business which provides environmental and sustainable products at a wholesale level to hotels, resorts, aviation and more. This is not to say Tania doesn't have a demanding job; she heads up the securities services legal department for Asia in HSBC and has twenty lawyers in her larger team.

But a combination of personal circumstances and a consideration of longer term climate change issues, caused her to think about the bigger picture, namely the effect that the environment was having, as an individual consumer. "I got to a point where I was pretty fed up with colossal amount of waste that I was seeing, particularly on the weekend when I was down at the my local

beach with the kids" Tania states, "Whilst Hong Kong is a great tourist destination, that can bring with it a lot of consumerism and waste. With an eye to the future, I wanted my kids to understand that, there were other options."

As a divorced mother of a nine year old and a five year old, and sharing their parenting with their father, Tania found she had spare time, and wanted to use this in a meaningful way. As she feels passionately about the environment and the amount of plastic waste developed economies create, Tania started giving away bamboo straws on those weekends she didn't have her children.

She started small and found a supplier of bamboo straws, which she began to import and give away to restaurants to try. Initially her request was to ask the restaurants to try



the straws and see if their clientele responded favorably; if so she would sell the straws to them at cost. This initial venture took off - Tania had 30 restaurants signed up and got interest from overseas.

Tania began to get interest from a hotel chain who asked what else she could supply in the way of environmentally friendly and sustainable products.

"It dawned on me that the straws were just the lowest of low hanging fruit." Tania explains, "I began to consider whether I could do more in helping businesses look at sustainable options.I then began to explore the wider area of bamboo products."

Tania incorporated the company, having made the decisions to run the enterprise as a for profit entity until there was sufficient revenue to allow the company to return some of the profit to charitable organisations.

She also joined forces with another mother from her children's school, Naveet McMahon who runs a multi-media financial services publishing company. The decision was partly a necessity as Tania was finding it hard to do this completely alone: setting meetings and getting the supply chain for bamboo products sorted proving time consuming. Both women take inspiration from their children, for whose generation, even at a young age, environmental issues are increasingly important. Using the initials of their three children's names: Bas, Alice and Keira, bakbamboo was born.

Whilst some employers might frown upon an employee focusing time and energy on another venture, HSBC been really supportive of what Tania does.

In common with other financial institutions, HSBC, is seeing the increasing importance of Environmental Social Governance issues and the need to be environmentally aware and sustainable as a business. Tania is actively part of the local green club at HSBC in Hong Kong, looking at how the bank can be more environmentally aware and making links with other ESG work in the Hong Kong Business community.

Supporting Tania's work also links into HSBC's HSBC Living Business initiative, which helps small and medium sized enterprises in Hong Kong to become more competitive by incorporating socially and environmentally sustainable practices into their operations. This helps these businesses assess new business opportunities related to sustainable

development, and gives them insight into what larger corporates are doing to make their supply chains more sustainable.

Aside from tapping into the bank's broader ESG goals, Tania says running Bakbamboo has provided her with a renewed energy and ideas, which she is able to bring back to her day job and her team. It's also allowed her to develop new skills which have also helped her in her Associate General Counsel role.

"I think a lot of lawyers can end up in this place, where it can be hard to look at a life outside of law. Our training can encourage us to become subject matter experts and quite

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focused and narrow. Bakbamboo gave me another avenue to look at the world and Hong Kong and my work in a very different light."

That's not to downplay the extra work involved! But Tania states even in the long hours she has to put in, the realization you are doing something so meaningful gives her extra energy.

Bringing a new perspective to your existing role is a reason that many business experts feel that even senior executives can benefit from a 'side interest.' Executives can benefit from lateral benefits that another enterprise can bring such as learning new skills, growing one's network in

new ways and enhancing personal brand.

That's something Tania can completely relate. The passion and advocacy Tania feels for her environmental side business takes her back to the start of her legal career when she specialized in human rights law.

Tania also feels she is bringing something back to her team through showing how even working in a large financial institution as a lawyer, you can be have an impact on bigger picture issues such as the environment.

There's another very significant aspect in that environmental issues

resonate strongly with younger generations. Bakbamboo has recently been recognised as a social venture enterprise by Hong Kong University, which has given them two interns from its environmental venture course. This demonstrated to Tania how forcibly these issues resonate with Generation Z and beyond. She explains:

"They're the next generation of lawyers and bankers, and not all of them will be able to work or want to necessarily work for Greenpeace. So the ESG focus is a really key talent piece. If you can demonstrate that your company is truly driven by a sense of community orientation then this is a really key selling point in attracting and retaining." The resonance of Greta Thunberg's message and the movement of school strikes for climate change awareness, shows how much this message reverberates with younger generations.



And for Tania, this message also resonates at home.

"My kids have been green washed!" She laughs, recalling a party where a balloon artist was present but she explained to her children they should not have a balloon sculpture due to damage the waste from plastic balloons does to the planet. "Similarly my children are

used to not getting lots of plastic toys but trying to find presents that are meaningful."

It can be challenging trying to live consciously in a society which is very consumer focused, in the past Hong Kong has been described as the capital of conspicuous consumption. But now, as one of the environmental community groups in

the region, Tania is able to see that there is a growing community of environmentally aware individuals and company's looking to upcycle: "The banner for Bakbamboo is hand made out of recycled bottles and is hand embroidered; the seats we used for a TedX event are bamboo modular seating; our toilet paper is bamboo."

Tania's transferable skills from Bakbamboo extend much further than advocating for sustainable loo roll! Previously in her career she worked in a business role so was familiar with the idea of running a P&L. But applying it in her own business really gives her a very immediate awareness of costs and margins, which she feels has given her greater perspective on how HSBC's retail side operates with small businesses. Similarly the amount of presentations and public speaking she does for the ESG business has helped her become more confident in her in-house legal role with these skills. But more than anything else what Tania feels Bakbamboo has given her is a restored vitality: "I think I had somewhat lost my confidence and energy for life about two years ago but this has reignited my passion and given me a renewed vigor in both my personal and professional life. Sometimes you need a catalyst like this to make a change in your life, to force you to think outside the box and be creative."