

EPISODE 125

[INTRO]

[00:00:02] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to The Mentor List.

[00:00:05] MALE: To turn you into the best version of you that's around.

[00:00:08] FEMALE: To seek support, then you need to allow yourself to be supported.

[00:00:12] FEMALE: To really have a point of difference.

[00:00:14] MALE: What is precious, what's really important, and then putting some boundary set.

[00:00:18] ANNOUNCER: The Mentor List specializes in interviews with top business minds. Gather their advice for your career. This is The Mentor List.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:31] SD: Welcome to The Mentor List. I'm Sharon Daly, Managing Director for Mentor List Talent, and I am co-hosting today's episode with a very good friend and the Director of Mentor List's Digital and Advisory, Peter Jackowski. We are pumped about this episode today. We're going in deep on a topic I am extremely passionate and giddy about, the women in leadership, with a focus around the tech industry.

On the show today, we have Helen Sounes, who is CEO of RMIT Online. Helen is a senior executive with a career that spans more than 30 years of commercial experience working in the digital strategy, marketing, and product across market leading companies, including Lonely Planet and groundbreaking marketplaces, Seek, Envato, and Etsy.

Helen, are you all settled in with a coffee and cup of tea there, ready to go?

[00:01:33] HS: Absolutely. Thanks.

[00:01:36] SD: Helen, I think in your intro, we haven't even touched the sides of your career, so let's dive in a bit deeper. Can you tell us a little bit about your journey and your career path?

[00:01:49] HS: Sure. 30 years, it makes – It ages me, doesn't it?

[00:01:52] SD: **[inaudible 00:01:52]**. Not at all.

[00:01:56] HS: I educated as a lawyer actually. I did a couple of years in a big law firm in New Zealand. But ever since then, I have moved through a number of commercial roles. I sometimes called myself through my 20s and early 30s the lateral mover because all I wanted to do was learn. So I moved from – My first job out of law was kind of contract and bid negotiation and a telco. I moved into strategy consulting, which was like almost doing an MBA on the job because it was all financial modeling and so on in London. Then a number of roles from strategy to product to marketing in London and then back here, the names you mentioned in my time in Australia over the last 15 years, starting in Lonely Planet.

I moved from many years at Seek as the marketing director, with one of my big roles here for seven years, which was a fantastic education in marketplaces and really best practice digital. Then I've had P&L kind of ownership roles for about the last 10 years. So I moved from a function to, I guess, a GM at Envato, MD for Asia at Etsy, and then the CEO role, which has been a fantastic run the last four years, essentially building a team. We're up to 140 people and we work with 500 plus teachers and contractors. We've sort of decided to keep our teams small but work with a lot of different people to build online courses for adult learners to help them really update their skills as they go through their careers and gain university qualifications or sometimes just a six-week course that we build with industry and just our little update of your skills in, say, a new technology or other area that you want to update yourself; agile delivery, product management, etc. So we've had a lot of fun. I've had a lot of fun through the career.

[00:03:50] SD: Yeah, I imagine.

[00:03:50] PJ: That's fascinating, Helen. Fascinating. How about, Helen, in terms of your insights from lateral movements? What advice could you give to listeners in terms of how to make the right lateral moves?

[00:04:00] HS: Yeah. I think every single one leveraged where I came from. I didn't completely abandon but I moved and grew in some way, and it wasn't always up. I sometimes do career advice for the grads and some of the people at the university. I draw my career as a squiggly line. It's not this kind of nice chart, like a revenue line, even business case. It's actually very squiggly, but each time I was leveraging something I had been doing. Say I was in telco, so I could move from strategy in telco into product. But I was going to gain a new skill. I was going to learn how to launch great products, work with tech teams, etc. So each move was a leverage, but also I could see what I would two more years in that role, however long. I would end with really a new skill set and I felt like I was kind of building my briefcase of tools if you like to be able to then address new problems in new ways after each new kind of experience.

[00:05:02] PJ: Brilliant.

[00:05:02] SD: What a journey. Helen. Speaking of that journey, what is one thing you wish you knew when you began your career, and what advice would you give your former self?

[00:05:14] HS: It's a great question. I think what I would say, and it's easy to say after a few decades working and it's really hard to do in your 20s, say, but remember that it is a long game. What I mean by that is I think you can be reactive to situations that aren't quite right for you. I think you can cut off your nose to spite your face, and I've done it plenty, so it takes one to know one.

[00:05:38] SD: Same —

[00:05:40] HS: Say your boss isn't valuing you, for example, and that's going to happen. There's lots of not such great bosses out there. That's not necessarily a reason to just move. You can still gain a lot from that role, and it can leverage you well into the next thing. Sure, you have to accept that that boss is not appreciating you and not giving you the raise you think you deserve, whatever it is. But don't let those frustrations eat you too much because it's a long

game. The next place will be perhaps the great move, and this place could help you get there. So just plan it in 5, 10 year blocks, not six-month goals.

[00:06:18] SD: Yeah, definitely. Definitely, yeah.

[00:06:21] PJ: That's great advice, Helen. I think that the long game is something that definitely the millennial generation can take a learning from it and the importance of, again, putting things into perspective and, again, investing it in yourself in the long term. How about in terms of like I'm interested in how you've managed to stay ahead of the curve. A lot of your roles have been in tech companies, in the online digital space. Given how fast-paced and ever changing this industry is, how have you managed to stay ahead of the curve?

[00:06:48] HS: I'd love to say I've done all our courses. I've done some of them, and that is really useful. Formal training is really awesome. But actually, I think probably the key for me has been to ask dumb questions, and not be afraid to show you don't know, and ask, and sit down with the guru that you work with or that is from another company. I remember when I was looking at doing a project to test agile delivery for Seek. It wasn't like an extension project when I was in marketing there. I went and talked to Nigel Dalton, who at the time was at REA, now ThoughtWorks. He was one of the gurus in Melbourne on agile. I just sat down with him, and he's very generous. I sat down with him for two or three hours to just really pick his brains on the approach and then did the same with car sales and all the key players in the city.

So just asking from fundamental questions, why do you do it, what have you gained, what don't you like, what are the risks. Just really open questions and be prepared to learn and show you don't know with your colleagues and with your network. I think that is fundamental because as far as I'm concerned, there's always clever people. There's always insights to gain, if only you ask the open question in a sense. Honestly, I think that has been the main way, and I've stayed up to date.

[00:08:09] PJ: Yeah, brilliant. Thank you.

[00:08:10] SD: Helen, in that journey as well that you spoke, and you have a long game, what would you say in that long game are the habits that served you well in your career?

[00:08:21] HS: Maybe people don't want to hear it. But, I mean, I've always had a lot of energy and worked hard. Honestly, I don't do shortcuts. I think to really keep learning and pushing yourself and progressing, you're going to need to give a lot of passion and energy to your work. That's maybe not the advice everyone wants. They want to know the simple one.

[00:08:38] SD: No, I agree. If you get too complacent, you'll lose sight of your passion. So I completely agree. Yeah.

[00:08:44] HS: Yes. I think that's always been my habit is to think about it a lot. Work hard at it. But then I guess be curious, especially about people. I think leadership, in particular, is the topic. It's all about people and trying to understand where people come from, trying to understand what their goals are, and try and find that place where their goals meet the business goals. A lot of magic happens in that place. We get people into a position where they're really personally motivated, as well as really leveraging their skills for the business goals.

I think a lot of curiosity about people and what they really want and need has been pretty key to me. Really, I guess, having my people high-performing. If I have any success, that's why I've had it because my people have been thriving and doing amazing job after job. So I think that habit of really being interested in people, caring about them, and finding the right spot for them to be high-performing is my best habit maybe.

[00:09:56] PJ: That's great Helen, and like that's a really interesting discussion point. Because in the context of COVID and remote working and the size of your workforce in RMIT Online, could you share with us some insights around how you drive engagement? How do you galvanize people in that context because it can be really difficult being entirely remote, given the past 12 plus months of experience? Could you share with us a bit in terms of that?

[00:10:18] HS: It's been probably the hardest 18 months of my experience in leadership. It sometimes talk about the pandemic or the epidemic that follows the pandemic. I think mental health has undoubtedly been impacted for a lot of people, be they parents helping kids at home and just the stretch of trying to be a good parent and do your work remotely. Plus, for the younger ones, not working in an ideal situation, in a flat, at the kitchen table, etc., and really

struggling without the social connection. So keeping people engaged when they're really struggling with quite coordinates of kind of comfort and work stress and life stress has been just the most challenging of my career.

The first thing is I'd say I don't think I've got all the answers. I think it's a really tough challenge for all leaders at the moment, and hybrid work hasn't in some ways helped it. We're in and out of the office, and it's not – None of the old techniques work. My old walk the floors every day, talk to people, see the sad faces. None of my old techniques work. So what have I done? Some of the things I think have worked well is just really upping communication — a lot of broadcasting just to keep people up to date because I know we're not getting the casual contact. So a lot of videos, a lot of all hands, more than usual to try and make up for them, the missed chance meetings.

I've done random ways to connect with people and hear how they're going. Like I do a SEO roulette, where I just get five or six people from different teams, and we speak for an hour. What's worrying you? What are you excited about? Just spend time together so that it's both chance meeting for them across the teams because what I have found is individual teams are actually, if anything, more productive. You talk about a sales team. They're really on fire. They're using their commute time; one to exercise, two to do more calls. So you get productivity gains, too, I think. But the cross team collaboration is so much harder because they're not even meeting each other on.

It's been all these ways of trying to get that cross team. I've had leadership teams speaking and have open floor, ask me anything. Just a million different ways of trying to up communication and chance communication as much as possible, as well as formal so that we can try and uncover issues and help people and remove blocks, whereas normally they would grab me in the office right — so it's challenging.

[00:12:53] SD: Helen, I'm sure there are a lot of people who are inspired by you and look up to you and what you do. What I want to ask you is who inspired you to be a leader and why.

[00:13:05] HS: Yeah. It's so hard to pick one, Sharon. Because I'm a bit of a sponge, I guess I've just learned from so many amazing people. I have to say though I don't think getting anyone

an encouragement. I wanted to be out in front from really young, so I was pretty precocious. I mean, **[inaudible 00:13:24]**, I was up on the table, asking everyone to sit down while I lip-sync, which is appalling because I'm a terrible singer. There's something innate, that I felt like I wanted to be out in the world and learn lots. Very quickly, that became lead people because it's how you make a bigger impact. Just doing something individually yourself, like I could never have stated more. That's quite constraining if it's just the idea of just being impacted by how many hours you do fillings. But that doesn't attract me. I want to have a bigger impact than just myself. So, yeah, I think no one person but lots of amazing leaders.

I mean, my vice chancellor now at the university has been an incredible mentor and leader for me. Just had an amazing vision of what we were going to do, a real disruptor in the industry. Just absolutely at my back every moment, always supportive, which has just been – It's such a privilege to work for someone like that, so I would always seek to be someone like that for my team. I think even the bad managers, again, in that long game. Some of my worst managers have taught me the most about what not to do. The ones that just can't delegate and how frustrating that is that you can't show any initiative. Or the ones that sort of compete or whatever it is, those have taught me so much about who I want to be as a leader. So everything's a learning experience. I'm not sure there's one mentor. Yeah.

[00:15:02] PJ: If I'm building on that, Helen, what's your perspective in terms of – As a champion in diversity, how are we tracking on that front. Broadly speaking in the Australian market right now, what's your perspective around being a champion in diversity and how we're tracking?

[00:15:18] HS: You mean all types of diversity?

[00:15:20] PJ: Yeah, like diversity of thought, diversity of gender, like really broad brushstroke. But, again, I just sort of came to understand, again, how you've been **[inaudible 00:15:28]** and I guess understanding the great work that's done, but more importantly all the work that's still to be done.

[00:15:34] HS: Yeah. I mean, to sort of challenge Australia a little bit, I must admit, when I came here, being a Kiwi, working in New Zealand and then in London for eight years, I was shocked

at how little people valued diversity as a sort of implicit good. I think it's really improved in the last 15 years. But in London, for example, we were looking 20 years ago to have our management team reflect the people we served 20 years ago. When I first came here, there wasn't even particularly awareness that, hold on, everyone in this room was born and raised in Melbourne. They're making all the decisions for this company. That's dangerous because we are – I mean, and it was whole teams.

Apologies, Peter, but white males that were born and raised and never left Melbourne, that's very lacking in diversity, if you're, for example, making investments in Asia, and no one's ever worked in Asia in the room. That terrified me because coming from London, that's a flaw in this management team, right? No one was even worried about it, and you're the only woman in the room raising it. Actually, talking about cultural diversity as a real risk, and they sort of think it's – You get a bit dismissed. They'll say, "She's on about diversity because she's the only girl." It's like, "No, guys. There's something very implicitly –" There's so much research, and that research has been around for decades, that more diverse leadership teams are more powerful and more impactful and have better performing companies. It just seemed like Australia had a bit of a tone deafness on that, to be absolutely honest. I was shocked when I came here. It was probably the biggest cultural difference working here. I love Aussies. I love the sense of humor. I love lots of things about living here. It's absolutely my country. But that was a shock, and I think a real fault for Australia in its place in the world.

It almost – Compared to New Zealand, I think the risk for Australia is it's big enough to think it's enough. Whereas New Zealand, you know you need to go and get lots of things from overseas and lots of diverse thinking because you know you're too small. Whereas Australia is in this dangerous place where it's almost got critical mess but actually hasn't. You look at so many industries here. A virtual monopoly duopolies, be it supermarkets or telcos or so many other things. There's just not the same level of competition that other countries have because it hasn't quite got the population to sustain it. Therefore, it could be moving to the lowest common denominator, instead of best in the world. I think that's a real risk and I think diversity, be it immigration, refugees, etc., diversity really helps that competitiveness over time. Australia is kind of a little bit missing something there. Very dangerous — It's a bit of a protagonist's view. Sorry.

[00:18:33] SD: I completely agree, Helen. I think there is a long way to go yet. I think it's baby stepping its way there, but I don't think it's anywhere close to where we need to be.

[00:18:44] HS: Yeah. It's a very interesting time. Look, we can't have immigration at the moment and for good reasons. But it's even more of a risk right now, right?

[00:18:53] PJ: Yeah. That sort of fortress Australia compounds that challenge that you've painted there. That's really interesting insight. Perhaps, like, again, to shift gears, Helen, we've talked a bit in terms of who's inspired you. How about your thoughts on the importance of having a mentor or having people in your network that you can confide in and, again, share your challenges? Can you share with us whether that's something that's sort of been beneficial in your career journey, please?

[00:19:20] HS: Yeah, absolutely. I think, again, there's loads of research around also just having a friend at work. If that's your mentor, then that's super lucky, right? That is someone that you're also learning a lot from, but even just having someone you can vent safely with and process tough meetings, whatever it is, tough challenges with at work is I think just infinitely important. It really is for being able to bounce back from challenges and process them and move on and be effective. If a mentor is doing that, lucky you. That's amazing. I have that in this job. I've hardly ever had that, to be honest. I've usually had a mix of people who my trusted – My crew, if you like, in a job, and then a boss. Then it's separate. Or people I'm learning from professionally.

But I think whatever you do, the need to reach out to leverage that network, to find trusted people, that is fundamental to being effective at work. If that person is formally a mentor or informally a mentor, you did everything you can, you're very lucky because that is gold if you're also looking up to them professionally. But I've also got a lot from looking professionally and learning. I don't know. Say it's about agile delivery there and leadership there and also having people I can talk to and vent with somewhere else. That's okay too. As long as between all the influences and the people you can talk to and learn from, you're getting a good mix is I think the key thing. So, yeah, you're lucky if it's one mentor but not necessary.

[00:21:01] SD: Going back to leadership and just in talking about what we've talked about and in particular the impact leaders within organizations can have to make the changes now even

more progressive, what would you say are the three best attributes a leader should possess to make this happen?

[00:21:25] HS: I think the first one is you have to be trusted, so I guess being trustworthy. I think without trust, relationship can't form. I think that it's just always in fast-moving, challenging environments, and I've always moved and worked for the last, well, 15 years in fast-growth environments. That means there's never enough time to talk, to check. You have to believe in the best and assume positive intent. You can't do that. You just don't get that from your people unless you're trusted. So I think that's almost like ticket to ride. You have to deliver on your promises, be trusted, and at least be trusted enough that if you've made a wrong step with someone, they'll talk to you about it. It doesn't just go underground because as soon as it's underground, it's sort of a big risk to culture.

Trust, I mean, I think empathetic. I think the wonderful Prime Minister of New Zealand is showing how important that can be to connecting with people, so kind of understanding that everyone is a person. They're a parent. They're a child. They're a whole person at work. I think some empathy is needed for that and I think that is a very powerful thing. Actually, not something that means you're soft on them. I actually think it means you can push them harder if you know who they are and where they got their stretch points or amazing capability. So some empathy on where they're coming from, that old thing everyone has a story.

I mean, I think when we say leader as against a great manager, vision is always part of it. So I think visionary, seeing some form, what size can this company be, what valuation could we reach, what impact could we have in my world at the moment on. Actually the economy with better skills, whatever it is, you need a vision. You need to be able to motivate people toward a future state, so some vision would be my third one.

[00:23:29] PJ: Awesome insights. Thank you, Helen. Touching on, obviously, RMIT Online and that really salient point that you've made around the skills gap in Australia in a digital context and how we sort of build the digital workforce of the future, obviously there's a lifelong learning sort of aspect or you're always continuously learning. Could you sort of share with us a bit of the thinking behind that and I guess the great work that you're doing in that space to help you bridge that current divide or the gap, please?

[00:23:58] HS: Sure. Obviously, universities have put traditional degrees online. I came in and looked at them and went, “My god, they're not using a lot of the digital skills.” Things like user experience, testing wasn't being done on online degrees, and you're like, “Wow.” We weren't doing that much analytics around all the engagement points for the student, which, of course, if you come from digital, that's your DNA. You look at the analytics to see what your users are doing. That just was a new skill for education. First, we wanted to sort of upgrade the traditional degree products, as I call them, slightly contagiously for some. We wanted to upgrade those products and get them consistently great quality, and analytics has been the key to doing that; analytics of the teachers, analytics of the student interaction, etc.

But then the other thing we realized is it's not always – People when they're constantly needing to upgrade their skills, it's not always a whole master's program that they need. Sometimes, they just need a short, sharp new skill or some confidence in a skill they're already doing. Say they've kind of landed into a product manager role, which is amazingly common. They often come from other roles but they're just not confident in the language of the new role and some of the approaches like business casing and things if it's the first time they've done that. So just giving them some confidence, we've started these short, sharp six-week long courses, learning from industry, people working in industry. Some mentored by industry people and built with industry. So built with people who are the best product managers around, be it REA Group or all sorts.

That has been I guess really looking at the market needs and where people are, where are the skill gaps, where are people struggling, where are organizations struggling to find skilled people too. So we're working more and more with governments and with big business to help them be at a bank, increasing the risk awareness of their teams after the banking inquiry or other really vital skill areas in different industries and how do we up skill these people quickly. Then give them a path into a postgraduate qualification. We're now increasingly stacking those short courses into a post grad quo but not necessarily getting people to enroll in that from the start. Just giving them what they need as they need it. It's that lifelong journey. It used to be you've got your degree, and you're done by 22. It's like no. None of us are done. We need to keep going throughout our lives. Basically, our job has been to keep developing our product portfolio

to meet those needs in the areas that are burning hot. So that's what we've been up to. Does that answer your question?

[00:26:43] PJ: Absolutely. Yeah, it's awesome. I think tactical learning to help people and give them that confidence in the roles they're in is fantastic. Again, helping build that digital workforce in the future for the Australian economy is super important as well to ensure we remain competitive and relevant. I'm a big advocate for what RMIT is doing in that space. I think it's brilliant, especially the industry lens that's applied to the course offerings and the facilitators. That connection within industry is really important too to make it actionable and practical. I think great.

[00:27:14] HS: Yeah, thanks. It's what we're keen to do. I'm glad you think we're succeeding.

[00:27:21] SD: Helen, I have a quote that I live by because we all know we're not in control of every situation in our lives and we get thrown curveballs everywhere. So I live by this quote to ensure because you have two choices how you react to things. You can stress out, blah, blah, blah. Or you can live by this quote. "When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away the ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer." So I want to ask you, do you have a quote that you live by for our listeners today?

[00:27:56] HS: I love that one. I've never heard it. Thank you. Look at a lot actually. Back to maybe my point about the long game, one I really love from Bill Gates, who I think was originally used in relation to technology, but I actually think it's also true of our lives. He said, "Most people overestimate what they can achieve in a year, and they wildly underestimate what they can achieve in 10." That, I think, is really, really true in my life. I've definitely had bumps along the way but I've had a few goals, including personal goals. My husband and I for 20 years planned the house we wanted to design, and we built it a couple of years ago. But like it was a 20-year plan.

[00:28:42] SD: But reality is –

[00:28:44] HS: I think there's very little we can't achieve if we focus on it for long enough. So, yeah, I think it's really true, and I think you can get very frustrated about your goals for this year

and your New Year's resolution and stuff. But if you have the big goal for longer, there's nothing that will stop you achieving it if you stay focused. So I love that one.

[00:29:07] SD: Absolutely. Helen Sounes, it has been an absolute pleasure to have you on the show. You've given us great insight into the world of women in leadership, and we look forward to following your journey further.

[00:29:21] HS: Thank you so much. Thanks for your time.

[00:29:23] PJ: Thank you, Helen.

[00:29:24] SD: Thanks for joining us on the show. Until next time listeners, this is The Mentor List.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:29:30] ANNOUNCER: Thank you for joining us today at The Mentor List. If you'd like to hear more or speak to us about recommending our next interview guest, come on through to mentorlist.com.au. You can also find out more about our suite of mastermind series taking shape in your area, your industry, and your discipline. We look forward to welcoming you to one of our events very soon. Stay tuned for another great show.

[OUTRO]

[00:29:59] ANNOUNCER: Thank you for listening to The Mentor List. If you like what you're hearing on The Mentor List, the best way to support the show is to just take a few seconds to leave a rating and/or a comment over on iTunes. You can also find further information about this show and links to further episodes at mentorlist.com.au. Until next time, this is The Mentor List.

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