BRINGING EXCEPTIONAL PEOPLE TOGETHER: RICHARD WOLSTENHOLME AND SARAH FRENCH

AGSM MBA (Executive)
Australia’s leading part-time MBA
Preparing leaders for the next big move
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More than ever, talented business people know they can't accomplish great things alone. Having a like-minded but diverse group of peers to exchange ideas with, to inspire and be inspired by is critical to career growth.

Driven people don’t take time out to achieve their goals; they put time in. Which is what Richard Wolstenholme and Sarah French were doing when they met and began exchanging ideas during their MBAE.

Richard

Richard is currently Head of Sales, Automotive for Google Australia. Joining Google in 2011, Richard's first role was as a National Sales Manager. He took the role two years into his MBA (Executive) and has applied his learnings from day one, in his capacity managing a team or earlier in his tenure as an individual contributor. Richard’s MBAE has helped him lead teams in the dynamic and constantly evolving environment at Google.

Sarah

Sarah has a corporate strategy background, having worked to help shape the future of some of Australia’s largest companies including Westpac and Qantas. At the completion of her MBAE, Sarah was inspired to leave behind the comfort of strategy to join a whole new world of digital sales as Travel Industry Manager at Google. Sarah strongly believes that if you look after the customer, then all else will follow.

Exchanging ideas and places

Richard recommended Sarah join Google during their final group assignment of the Strategic Management Year (SMY).

Richard now mentors Sarah with regular catch-ups supported by their relationship at Google. They are currently working on a project together using AGSM tools and frameworks to support and develop consultative selling techniques. Richard was referred to Google by a fellow AGSM MBAE graduate.

Both Richard and Sarah stay in touch with the six-person team from their SMY, catching up quarterly.

Richard says the AGSM MBAE underpinned a “complete transformation of [his] career,” changing industry, role and function. He says it helped him see the world through a different lens. Richard found it helpful to be surrounded by people focused on their career.

His attraction to Google continues this journey. Google invests heavily in learning and development and supports employees to be the best they can.
Tell us how you both met?

We met in our final year at the AGSM MBAE, we were in the same cohort for the duration of the Strategic Management Year.

Yes, we did all four of the modules together. That gave us a continuity and a depth of relationship that we otherwise wouldn’t have had if we’d been re-assigned to different groups.

I remember thinking, when I first met Richard, “I’m glad he’s in my assignment group.” I was excited about what we could learn from each other.

Yes, and my first observation of Sarah was just how grounded she was in the principles of business. Because I came from a marketing background and she had the strategy background our comparative skills sets and experiences were well complemented, I knew I could learn a huge amount from Sarah.

How does the MBAE encourage you to take the next step?

The example that springs to mind are client presentations. Every quarter, a different client came to present a real business problem to the cohort. Each assignment group had just one night to prepare a solution to the problem and present it to the client the next day. It was quite a high pressure situation as we were presenting to real people in response to real problems.

We discussed as a team; “do we want to 100% nail it or do we want to go for development opportunities?” And every time, we chose development opportunities. For example, in one of the client briefs, I knew nothing about the client’s industry, so I put my hand up to present, which was quite an uncomfortable scenario for me. The different strengths of the group and the way the group worked helped make it comfortable for me to present.

How did you push yourselves?

We enlisted people that wanted to take a certain role as opposed to somebody else in the group who might more naturally have assumed a particular role because they had previous experience. There was a willingness to say, “Look, I’ll take this role, even though I know you might be a specialist on this, but I’ll take what I can from this learning tonight and I will give it a go.” So we created a safe environment that fostered a culture of risk taking in the knowledge that everyone was supported in taking those risks.

I think everyone was really nervous about group activity going in, because we’ve all had bad experiences of group work.

So you literally had a safe word?

Yes, you’d just call it out and if two or more of the group agreed that we’d moved off topic, we would re-focus the conversation on the central topic of discussion. So we created a team environment and a culture of understanding early on.

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Were there many all-nighters?

We were pretty good; we set boundaries. Another part of our group chemistry was that we were very focused and structured in the way we would approach anything, whether that be about how recognized great work within the group or how we managed grievances; if someone in the group was not actually pulling their weight or not delivering according to expectation. We had processes and agreements set up across the team, and we were always very much aligned in our approach to the various components of the group work, so we never really worked beyond midnight.

We had a series of words, like a lexicon, that we used to manage the group efficiently when under time pressure, for example if the group conversation went off on a tangent.

I remember one of the lecturers saying that historically the AGSM had produced exceptional individual performers but that feedback from industry was that there scope for greater collaboration and teamwork. As a result the AGSM re-configured the curriculum to put more of a focus on team dynamics and that was evident during our experience throughout the MBAE.

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So we learned our team dynamics quite quickly and this encouraged us to put structures in place, which we did, and I’ve definitely carried that on to things I do now in the workplace.

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I think that’s a big focus for Mark, the director of AGSM MBA (Executive). He talks about it all time, in terms of developing team players because they reached a point where they were producing some really amazing people but then they would fall down because they could not interact with the team.

Yes.

What sort of other cohort experiences did you have?

We were tasked with going out and speaking to industry players.

One of our first projects was to go and speak to an entrepreneur. I know a guy that’s a great entrepreneur, so I got the team to speak to him and the types of things he said became key touch points. They still reference him now. It really gave many of the team a new way of thinking about things and they were really impressed with the way that he approached problems.

We found that the most interesting part of the process was conversation as a group. We also met heads of businesses or divisions to actually help us develop our assignments. We had to stick with the same business, so I met with the MD of a local subsidiary of a French multinational and got to know him and his business really well. That exchange was mutually beneficial.

So the engagement is two-way?

It is. Not just content, but the relationships that grow. I think it is about the design of the actual course. By the time you get to the AGSM Strategic Management Year (SMY), everybody who is in the cohort has actually shown evidence of both their commitment and their performance.

There are no passengers there. I think that is probably the first part, and I think also that it would be a pretty lonely individual experience, if it wasn’t for the SMY. You are exposed to content through the GCCM (Graduate Certificate in Change Management), in that first portion, which is in itself valuable – but the richness and the depth and the continuity comes in the final year.

Do you get to know people well?

Yes. Continual feedback loops were a huge part of our getting to know each other. If you were presenting, you would open the floor for feedback, so you were continually being given guidance on how to improve by your peers; which is really valuable. Everyone has reached the SMY on their own merits and deserve a place there, so you are willing to listen and learn from your peers. And the group was always generous in their giving of feedback and guidance.

Everyone, yes. We did peer-to-peer coaching as well, so we learned how to give good coaching, and then we did peer-to-peer coaching sessions, and that’s something I have carried through after, with a fellow team member from our first assignment group. We get together on a monthly basis and coach each other on any particular topic. I have found that extremely valuable.

Talk to us about those things that you have continued to do post your MBA experience.

I have a good relationship with Rachael, who is in the AGSM MBAE team. She will connect me with people that are currently doing their MBAE, and are either interested in a big career switch, like what I did, or are interested in Google as a company.

I have also gone back to the AGSM and presented as part of careers week on Google. So my involvement has mostly been in the careers side of things and helping current students, which is great. Really rewarding. We both got so much out of it that we want to give something back.
If someone in your team or within the organization asks why you would choose an AGSM part-time MBA, or any of the other programs in Australia, why would you encourage them to do an AGSM MBAE?

The structure of the course would be one part, the quality of the content and the delivery the other.

I always say that the Strategic Management Year was for me, by far, the most powerful and unique part of doing the MBAE. It wasn’t just the strategic business content, but the surprise that I got out of it was how much I learned about leadership, how much I learned about teamwork and how much I learned about myself. As Richard said before, the ability to try different things and adopt different styles was very valuable.

We would like to understand how you came to work at Google, Sarah?

For me I had this click, where I just thought, “Sarah should be working for Google.”. So I simply asked her if she had considered working for Google. I remember Sarah being a bit surprised as it wasn’t anything that she has previously considered but was immediately curious and wanted to know more.

My initial reaction to Richard’s question was that I wasn’t currently considering an organisation shift and that I wanted pursue a career at my current organisation.

During that time, I was going through a process where I had been re-thinking my next steps at my current organisation by focussing on the skills that I have and the skills that I love to use. I had articulated these skills in my career plan, and when Richard talked to me more about the roles available at Google, I realised that he was basically describing every single skill that I had articulated in my career plan.

For me, sales was big... I wasn’t sure that I wanted a career in sales... I thought I wanted to stay in strategy or move into a GM position and I didn’t have sales on my radar at all, but Richard helped me realize that sales at Google was actually a great fit for me.

Yeah. How do you continue to engage with each other now, now you work in the same company?

Richard’s my mentor, so we have monthly catch-ups.

We schedule an hour every month, and Sarah typically comes with 2 or 3 themes or topics that we discuss.

How has the AGSM MBAE changed your career path at Google?

For me, it was a complete change. The MBAE gave me the confidence to make the change, the desire to make it, and the ability to do it. Probably the most important thing was that, even if I didn’t have a background in technology or in digital media, I could learn it because we had got into this cycle of four years of just focused learning and adaptability, and Google is all about learning and adaptability. For example, the role I am doing now at Google is my third role in three years. At Google people’s roles are continually evolving or they are moving role regularly given how dynamic the company and the tech industry both are.

It is such a highly dynamic environment, I think the MBAE sets you up with the ability to adapt to change and stimulus.

Yes, and ask the right questions of people, by the sound of it?

Yes. Absolutely.

I think the piece that Sarah mentioned around the softer side of leadership; it is more difficult to quantify but leadership, coaching, mentoring, that’s really important, and has been a big part of my career trajectory here.

At the final session in our last ever residential, our lecturer asked us if we could come half an hour earlier to the session. He played for us the Steve Jobs Stanford address and a strong message in the address was to, “Think about what you love, do what you love.”. This mantra was playing in my mind, and so when Richard suggested coming here, it gave me the confidence and impetus to change career. I felt like that final session in the MBAE was the final cherry on the cake that I needed to actually go for it and do something quite different, dramatically different.

So it is almost like you’re there for four years but the interaction and the learning from AGSM MBAE continues on?

Yes, that is a good summary.
Tell us about that project you are working on together?

It is taking the tools and frameworks of the AGSM SMY and using them in a Google context to help our teams and peers approach conversations with clients about business model transformation.

When you try and pin people down to a definition of business model transformation, you end up with a very broad set of observations, and this project is to bring what we have learned from the MBA and apply it to a real context to support our goals around supporting clients’ business transformation in a Google context.

So when you talk about having the right conversation, can you explain that a little bit more?

Just to elevate the conversation beyond Google’s products, to actually flip it and look at it from the point of view of the business owner, actually using these frameworks to be able to put us in the shoes of these people and look at their business through their eyes, as well as Google’s view.

To amplify the approach at Google, so that it will live beyond Sarah and I across the rest of the sales teams.

Individually, we have both taken the tools and frameworks and applied them to our own clients and now we want to take that to the rest of Google.

Has the AGSM helped you to form other good relationships or exchange ideas in your career? Are there any particular exchanges that you guys have with other people?

At my previous organisation, a colleague and I mentored each other informally, and we have carried that on even after I left. We still go for walks and we just say, “Can I pick your brains on this?” That is an example of an exchange that I find immensely valuable.

This mentor helped me think through this Google move as well, and whether it was right for me. Even though she has several more years of workplace experience than me, we find our sessions mutually beneficial; it is not just her mentoring me.

Richard?

With my father; he did an MBA twenty six years ago, and just going through the full experience and talking to him throughout the journey, was a significant support and kept me focused. It also added a new dimension to our relationship.

More broadly, I found it really useful to look at other relationships and use some of the development techniques to address situations when something was not working out. I found that that the quality of relationships, beyond my immediate friends and family has improved. I approach them differently because of the way that we learn to develop relationships at the AGSM.

How does a part time MBA compare to a full time MBA?

It is probably difficult to say, having not gone through the full-time to compare, but the difference is that we all have day jobs so we’re thrown into this high-pressure situation, where we have got so much else going on in our lives. I think that helped the bonds to be stronger, we supported each other through the good times as well as the tough times.

Yes, I think the richness of doing that over four years, you get to know yourself really well. A lot happens, I had a child, changed jobs, moved house, and all of that may not happen as frequently over a more condensed study period of 12 or 18 months.

In the final year, every quarter we would share as a group whether anything significant has happened to us since we last met. I got engaged in my last year, which I am told is quite rare, because breakups are actually the norm in the final year, not getting engaged!

Can you tell us how the MBAE has changed your life?

It has given me the confidence to do things that I would not previously (sic) have considered. For example, I would not have considered going for a sales role before. After the MBAE, I just thought “I’m just going to go for this and I think I can give it a good crack.” Now, in my job, I am out of my comfort zone all the time but I have the confidence and the tools behind me to know how survive and thrive.

It has given me a willingness to take more risks. Changing a career is something I probably would not have done without my MBAE. It has given me a much broader horizon, whether that is of my own capabilities, of other people’s capabilities, or just what is possible.

I would do it again in a heartbeat. I really would. The one thing I will say is, “You need to know why you are doing it. You have to know your why, because over the course of four years, or five years, how long it takes to do it, you are going to come back to, “Why the hell am I doing this, the late nights, early mornings?” Because there would be moments where it is five in the morning, you are at home, it is dark, it is winter, you are in the middle of an assignment assignment, and you ask yourself, “Why am I getting up?”