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Scratching the Surface: How Nicola-Jane McNeill Helped to Grow a Multinational Parking Giant

Interviews and Profiles



If you've ever parked your car in a major city across Canada or the United States, chances are that you've used an Impark parking lot. With over 3,400 parking facilities, Impark is the largest parking operator in Canada and the second largest in North America. While some may look at the parking

industry and question its complexity, Nicola-Jane McNeill, vice president, legal affairs for Impark, would argue that there's more than meets the eye.

"I know parking is not the most glamorous industry, but as always, the backstory to most businesses is far more interesting than it might first appear," she explains.

In fact, there are a multitude of factors to consider when working in-house for a company like Impark.

How can you balance the price point of a parking lot to counteract the influx of ride-sharing services? How can technology streamline the parking experience to make it as comfortable as possible for the user? How can you optimize your service offerings to make Impark the provider of choice for parkers and property owners alike?



Nicola-Jane McNeill

McNeill has spent the last 21 years helping to answer these questions, and has been a mainstay of Impark's legal department during its transformation from a small Canadian company located in British Columbia, to a multinational parking giant with locations in almost every major city in North America.

From an early age, McNeill has always seen the world from a global perspective. Her parents emigrated from Northern Ireland to Vancouver, British Columbia, when she was a child, and encouraged her to have the confidence to move away from home as an adult.

"My parents always encouraged my sister and me not to pitch our tents in our own backyard. They made me feel like there was nothing I couldn't do," she says.

McNeill's fearlessness inspired her to enroll at Stanford University in the United States in 1982. She became immersed in the experience, and found Stanford's diverse and forward-thinking culture to be

inspiring. A career in law was an option, but in the short-term, McNeill hoped to stay in the country and work in international banking. Under immigration laws at time, it was nearly impossible for a Canadian expat to find work in the United States.

Faced with the looming prospect of moving home, McNeill decided to travel to Toronto to attend the Osgoode Hall Law School in 1986. After graduating, she accepted a position at Ladner Downs, now known as Borden Ladner Gervais, and began her career in real estate. What she ended up finding, however, was a passion for in-house practice.

“I wasn’t interested enough in real estate for it to be my whole career,” she admits. “I found the interplay of company issues to be far more interesting. It wasn’t satisfying enough for me to close a commercial purchase or sale and then move on. The aftermath from the client’s perspective was what I found most compelling.”

A partner at BLG noticed her interest and put her name forward to work in-house at Dairyland, a large local dairy and food processor with over two billion dollars in annual sales.

McNeill would serve as Dairyland’s first in-house lawyer. The experience would push her into the deep-end of the legal field, as she suddenly became responsible for advising on transactions involving multiple packaging facilities and deals with major brands like Coca-Cola. While the position served as a dramatic introduction to the in-house world, it would only further her interest in the profession.

“When you’re an in-house lawyer, you have to be practical. You have to figure out the best, fastest, most cost-efficient way to deal with an issue. I found this to be far more interesting than traditional legal practice. Pioneering an in-house role is not easy, but it is crazy fun,” she reveals.

According to McNeill, the transition from Dairyland to Impark was a result of an especially “small world.” She had originally applied for Impark at the same time as she accepted her role at Dairyland. The parking company, however, was always keen to keep her engaged in their network.

“I got in pretty close to the ground level for the legal department at Impark. When I arrived, we were Canada-wide but only operated in a few US cities. However, we’ve grown exponentially since then. Just recently, I got off the phone with our COO to catalog over 50 different trademarks and brand names under the company. It’s fascinating to be a part of something that’s growing so quickly,” she beams.

When asked about the similarities and differences between Canada and the United States, McNeill observes that there are sufficient similarities in the substantive law that make it possible for Impark’s legal team to handle day-to-day legal work from its headquarters in Vancouver. However, while the laws in the Canadian provinces tend to be quite homogeneous, US state laws can vary considerably.

“I did a tuck-in acquisition once, where we were acquiring 10 locations from a small operator in New York City,” she explains. “It wasn’t really a complicated deal, but the New York business culture made it complicated. There were a lot of demands that had to be met, and last-minute negotiating that needed to be handled.”

Her interest in international legal affairs would lead her to the Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC) in 2014, where she would sign on to be a member of the ACC British Columbia board of directors. To McNeill, finding a sense of community in the in-house profession can be challenging but

is ultimately very rewarding, both personally and professionally.

“As someone who started as a lone ranger, I understand how working in-house can feel quite isolating. The sense of community that the membership at ACC provides is invaluable. From a cross-border perspective, the resources I can access through the website or member-to-member are top-notch. If we’re acquiring a location in Wisconsin and we need to look up Wisconsin law, that information is readily available to us,” she acknowledges.

In April, Impark acquired Republic Parking System, which helped establish Impark as one of North America’s biggest parking management companies. McNeill couldn’t be happier about the prospect.

“We’re very pleased with it,” she says. “It’s really increased our US footprint and advances our position in the vertical market sectors of municipalities and airports. Because Republic has a greater reach, we can expand our brand to new regions.”

McNeill, however, already has her sights set on the next frontier in parking, arguing that addressing the nuances in any industry is the first step to capitalizing on them.

“A few years ago, compliance with Payment Card Industry standards for processing credit cards was a relatively unknown concept in the industry,” she says. “Our clients didn’t understand it, and that gave our meter team opportunities to engage with them and showcase our bench strength in field technology. Relationships and trust are key to our success as a company.”

In competition with ride-sharing apps like Uber, Impark has to consider price point as one way to encourage people to drive their own cars instead of paying for a service.

“Price is often a big part of what motivates customers. But also, we need to show our property-owning clients, as well as our parking customers, that we will give them a first-class operation. It will be clean, it will be well staffed, and we will promote it. You need to strike a balance between cost-efficiency and quality assurance,” she says.

In the next five years, Impark hopes to take advantage of new technologies to streamline parking processes and encourage increased business in areas where profits are lacking. Online parking reservations and online payments are becoming increasingly popular around North America. By implementing advanced priority parking for large-scale events, Impark can incentivize people to drive by making the parking process cheaper, easier, and more efficient than the alternatives.

Throughout her life, McNeill has always looked at the bigger picture. From serving as the first in-house counsel at a burgeoning food processor to minding the legal risks in the creation of a multinational parking industry, her tenacity and commitment to efficiency has solidified her impact on the global in-house community.

Getting To Know... Nicola-Jane McNeill

WHAT BOOK ARE YOU CURRENTLY READING AND WHY?

Travels with my Aunt, by Graham Greene. I’ve recently returned to a book club that I belonged to for about 10 years. I had gotten busy with a young family. The club is full of great women, with fascinating careers and life experience. I read books I would not have considered as a result. I’m

really enjoying this one.

WHERE ARE YOU GOING FOR YOUR NEXT VACATION?

Fall and winter in Vancouver are often pretty grey and wet. I have a travel website habit that has paid off over the years in good deals, particularly regarding cruises. Right now, an all-inclusive trip to Mexico is a good bet for February at the moment.

IF YOU COULD HAVE DINNER WITH ANYONE, LIVING OR DEAD, WHO WOULD IT BE?

Stephen Colbert. Scary smart.

[Matthew Sullivan](#)



