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A Hyper Lawyer for Hyper Growth Companies

Interviews and Profiles





In 2005, Paula Pepin decided she was done with the law. She had tried working in a large firm in Montreal, mostly specializing in litigation. When the long, lonely hours and combative nature of litigation didn't suit her, she spent a year and a half at a small boutique firm that specialized in corporate and securities law. The commercial work was engaging but she wanted to be closer to her family in Hull, Quebec, just across the Rivière des Outaouais from Ottawa.

When an Ottawa-based client, ACE Security, offered an in-house position, she took it. A year later, after some difficult internal trouble at the company, she'd had enough.

"I left my job and I went to do my MBA fulltime with the hope of not returning to the legal profession, which is not what happened," she remembers. She calls her year at Telfer School of Business at the University of Ottawa one of the best experiences of her life. Not only did she find the coursework engaging, but she also found her now-husband.

A new start

With a fresh degree and a renewed determination, she moved across Canada in 2006 to Vancouver, British Columbia. She mined her connections from previous jobs. Through one of those connections,

she met Olivier Vincent, the CEO of Canpages. The service allowed users to find information about local businesses online and via yellow pages publications. The company didn't need a lawyer, but they did need a human resources director.

Pepin went to the Vancouver library and took out about 10 books about human resources and organizational behavior. She sat in her living room for days reading through the books because she had never managed an HR department before. She told the CEO to "test her" in exchange for a low salary because of her inexperience and she became the director of HR and legal affairs.

"I would never advise an in-house counsel to take on [both roles] because it's a true suicide move. Priorities of both departments are always competing," she says. For example, she says, when closing an M&A deal a lawyer needs to perform due diligence. At the same time, the HR department needs to address the tough people issues that are coming with it, like the job integration and making sure they feel welcome and organized on day one.

Canpages gave Pepin her first experience in a hyper growth company. She estimates that the company expanded from 50 employees to about 700 to 800 in the span of two years. It went from operating in one province to becoming a national company in a few short years. "It really gave me the taste of business that I needed. I learned how to build and grow a company. From the start I was part of the founding executive team," she recalls.

The little bit of law turned into a lot of law. Pepin managed two injunction trials, several M&As and a competition bureau review that lasted for five or six months. Canpages was then sold to Yellow Pages of Canada in 2010 for CA\$225 million.

"With the sale of the business, the legal work became quite significant, complex and challenging. That's when I reflected and realized that over the last few years I had fallen back in love with law," Pepin says. "After going through building Canpages and working in such a thriving environment, I realized that I was not ready to quit law yet."

Downsizing a company and starting a family

Hicks Muse, a private equity firm that controlled Canpages' sister company, Ziplocal, asked Pepin, the CEO, the CFO and the VP of sales to take over the US-based partner company after the sale of Canpages to Yellow Pages. The US market was a challenge for the Canadian team. After a year of trying turn the company around the leadership team decided to downsize the company and move it away from its growth path.

Pepin, who had helped engineer the hyper growth of Canpages, was now doing the opposite. The team downsized the company from 1,000 employees to about 150 in September 2011.

The downsizing was finalized at the perfect time for Pepin, who was seven months pregnant at the time. After spending a few months with her newborn son, she received a call from James Ruble, the former CFO of Canpages. He was now the CFO of Hootsuite, a platform for managing social media networks.

Hyper growth at Hootsuite

Hootsuite was just entering their phase of hyper growth and starting their enterprise product, which

was sold to larger companies to help them manage their social media accounts. The company needed a business lawyer who could help with sales negotiations. At the time, there were only four sales representatives compared to hundreds of sales people the company employs today. Pepin joined as the founding lawyer and has been general counsel since August 2013.

Hootsuite's customers are individuals, small businesses or large organizations that use social media to build customer relationships, listen to the needs of the market and grow their revenue. The technology allows customers to see how many have viewed and shared the content, from a precise geographical location, and other details. Over 800 of the Fortune 1000 companies use Hootsuite software.

Pepin had experience growing a company on a national level but Hootsuite had bigger plans. Her biggest challenge right now is managing hyper growth on a global scale. Eighteen months ago, the company operated in three countries and it now operates in 10 countries. To help her with the workload, she has added four in-house lawyers.

"There are privacy challenges and questions like how do we hire people in France, how can we terminate employment in each country in which we operate" Pepin explains. Even a task that sounds easy, like opening bank accounts in France, Germany or Singapore, becomes a challenge because the Hootsuite staff is stretched thin.

International expansion has been especially complex in Romania and Brazil. Pepin works with a large UK-based law firm that "has tentacles in various countries." Hootsuite acquired a big development team in Romania, which has vastly different employment laws than most Western countries. Brazil has similar challenges.

Hootsuite's no.1 strategic goal is to stay ahead of its competition and control the market share through innovation.

Balancing priorities

Pepin jealously guards her schedule. She blocks time on her calendar to allow her to concentrate on big projects and will not take meeting calls before 8 am or between 5 and 7 pm when she is spending time with her family. With two small children, she says she has "negative free time." She typically logs back on her computer when they go to sleep.

She is a big fan of Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In, which helped her set her boundaries for her hours and reassured her that other executives experience the same set of problems she does.

Pepin knows that she thrives in high-energy environments — whether at home or at the office. "I like building and I like fixing things," she says. "I don't think I would be happy in a very large legal department where policies and procedures have been established." She relishes leading a global legal team. She doesn't anticipate leaving Hootsuite anytime soon, but the allure of the startup is a powerful force. For someone who thought 10 years ago they would never practice law, she has certainly proved herself wrong.

Getting to Know... Paula Pepin

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE HOBBY?

These days I don't have much time for hobbies. I spend every bit of spare time with my two sons. Being general counsel of a hyper-growth company, and having two kids under four creates negative spare time in my life. So really, I spend weekends at the park, at the beach, hiking the North Shore trails and building up my sons' rock collection. Aside from time spent with the kids, I like being active. I try to find time to run, and to enjoy the outdoors on a regular basis. During the winter, we love to ski and we are hoping to get our four-year-old into ski school this winter.

WHAT'S YOUR COMMUTE LIKE?

I live on Vancouver's North Shore, right at the base of Grouse Mountain so my commute is a short 20 to 30 minutes drive. I use that time to relax, winddown after a busy day at work and to get ready for a chaotic evening with the kids running around.

ARE YOU READING ANYTHING RIGHT NOW?

Not right now, simply because of the very little down time that I have. When I do find time to sit down and read, I typically geek-out on business books. I also spend time reading the news, or the latest developments on legal issues. I am a bit of a geeky reader in that sense. The last few books that I've read were Lean In, by Sheryl Sandberg, Creativity, Inc. by Ed Catmull, and Winning from Jack Welch. Most of my readings in the last few years have been business books.

IF YOU COULD GO ON VACATION ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD, WHERE WOULD YOU GO?

Italy is one of my favorite places in the world. My husband and I are big foodies and wine lovers. Italy is simply the total package: incredible food, great wine, and then a mix of mountains, beaches, history and beautiful scenery. It holds a special place in our hearts, and it is one of our favorite places to be.

SPEAKING OF FOOD, WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE FOOD?

Having been raised in Quebec by a French Canadian family, I would say that it's my grandmother's Tarte au Sirop d'Erable (Maple Syrup Pie). It's a secret family recipe from my great-grandmother. It is very similar to the traditional Quebec "Tarte Au Sucre" (Sugar Pie), but with a maple twist. If you ever spend time in Quebec, it is an absolute must try.

[Joshua H. Shields](#)



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