Transcript of Mentor Interview with Alice Hwa:

Q: What exactly do you do for Medtronic?

A: I recruit people and I am involved with the Diversity & Inclusion group.

Q: Where did you work before you worked for Medtronic?

A: Charles Schwab in San Francisco as a Generalist or someone who advises managers how to manage their employees.

Q: How did you become involved with Medtronic?

A: When I was in college I traveled abroad and heard a Medtronic speaker talking about the company and what it was like to work for them.

Q: How did you get into this field of work?

A: How did I get into the field of HR? Let’s see, quite honestly I don’t know what the purpose of this as career advice to give to you, Human Resources I fell into it, that wasn’t a career that I had thought out, it was a career that just happened at my first work. But sometimes you don’t know what your career options are; I had thought I was going to go to law school or medical school. I found a job with a law firm and found out I would never want to be a lawyer because the thinking is very dry and very rote and I found a job there recruiting and liked the softer side of it.

Q: What is the most important thing to know to be successful in this field?

A: The things to be successful I think, not just the human resources but in any field is to be passionate about what you do, to think about the possibilities that are out there, what are you trying to aspire to, and also the impact that it may make on others and just overall the benefit for you in the long term. You can find a job, I think anyone can find a job and do it well but if it has very little meaning for you and the direction that you want to go into it just ends up becoming that, just a job. In order to be successful I would say be true to what you want, keep the expectations high, and continue to help others, and that will serve you well in the future.

Q: Do you enjoy your job?

A: I really enjoy recruiting, and why I like recruiting is I like happiness and I think that I bring a lot of happiness to myself and others by extending an offer to them. There is also an end process to it. And then on the Diversity side, I also fell into Diversity, it wasn’t something I had known, being raised Chinese in the US, and also being female in a male dominated work environment I just always thought you had to embrace your differences rather than make you feel sad about yourself or others making you feel small, those differences really set you apart and who you are and what you want to accomplish. So I really enjoy doing both it’s been great.

Q: So this is not what you have always wanted to do?

A: No, I wanted to be a doctor; at 18 I thought I was going to be a doctor. When I was your age, a junior in high school I wanted to be a pediatrician or some type of cardiologist, those were the two specialties I had picked out for myself. But I had no idea what being a doctor was about, not enough research at that point. And then I had shadowed a few physicians, talked to a few physicians when I was in college, just to get a better idea of a day in a life of what it’s like. And I realized I didn’t think I would be cut out for it, I think I would have enjoyed the bedside manners towards patients but some of the hospital administrator politics behind that I think it would have worn me out.

Q: If given the choice to relive your professional life, would you still go into this field?

A: I think this is a great question and I had to think about it for a while, I would say that if I had to relive it, I probably would not, there are certain aspects of HR that are not creative enough for me, and I guess what I learned, I thought I was a very analytical person and very interested in the sciences and math, but if I had to relive it I probably would have been more of a history person and chosen more of a creative career path for myself.

Q: Do you find what you do to be valuable?

A: I do find value and that’s what keeps me coming to work every single day and helping people. It’s just for that element, matching people’s experiences and careers to find a fit within Medtronic. Can you grow your career; can you achieve your expectations? Not just on a title, monetary side, but on the intrinsic values, what do you want to grow and develop within your career? I think Medtronic offers quite a bit and I like talking to individuals about it, and seeing where that fit may be, whether it’s for today if not for today hopefully in a few years from now, we stay in contact with people.

Q: What has been the most valuable work experience for you?

A: I think for me, where I have learned the most value is when I am doing something that is outside of my comfort zone and the points in time where I made a mistake. Because that is where you learn, you learn something about yourself and you learn something about the person you’re working with. I think for me that’s always the best experience, like going into Diversity is really outside of my comfort zone, I am really not creative but I’m trying to be more creative and hone in on the other side of my brain. But then also, drawing in your personal experiences and for me that’s what I bring into the work. I had a chance earlier in my career, where we did volunteer work. So I had a chance to serve food at a local church to the homeless population that was part of our community service, it first turned out let me just pitch in, see what happens, see what I can do. But then after a while you’re in there you’re helping to prep the lunch with the church and their volunteers and you talk to the people who work there and why they work there, and it’s really a sense of giving back to the community so I saw great value in that. And then also as I’m serving food to the people coming in for a meal you can just see the look on their faces, like they may not have had a meal in a long time and they are so appreciative of someone serving them a hot meal. I just kind of looked at volunteering and non-profit organizations in a very different way that it’s not always about yourself and where you’re trying to go but also what can you do to bring others along. So that was kind of the biggest epiphany that I had in the work environment, it grounded me to say hey it’s not about advancing your career and your title and making more money, that is one aspect that is important, that drives me also but then also having the other side, what the impact is, how can you give back and help others within the community.

Q: What experience most prepared you for your work with Medtronic?

A: I would say everything that I had done up until that point, definitely I would say my education my undergraduate degree in Biology, so you know they throw out terms here, I wasn’t intimidated by it, I’m like alright you can just kind of figure it out. And then also I went to get my MBA also and that really helped me develop frameworks for strategy and problem solving and walking into situations that you don’t have any experience in, how would you handle that type of scenario. So I felt that education helped me quite a bit and the different work experiences along the way just you never know what is going to be thrown at you in HR and you expect the unexpected. And you try to be prepared as best as you can but sometimes it’s okay to tell the person, this is a new situation, I don’t have much experience in it, let’s talk through what the problems and challenges are and let’s figure out what possible solutions are available. So you kind of draw in other people and use resources available and come to a solution that may not be the standard, but it might fit the solution needed for that problem.

Q: What is the greatest challenge you have overcome in your professional life?

A: The greatest challenge I would probably say is my shyness, I am extremely shy, I am quiet, I like to be behind the scenes, I like to be invisible, so that is my natural tendency. And I would say in high school I was a very different person and when I entered college I made a very conscious decision, I am not going to be this way. And so I really put myself out there I joined clubs, and a sorority, I had goals set up for myself, how many friends and how many people would I talk to on an annual basis and the people have to be different than the people I naturally gravitate to, so force myself to have a very broad and diverse social experience and took leadership positions within my sorority where I could, wherever school allowed me to so I could always have speaking opportunities, so when you are very shy just getting up in front of an audience is very intimidating and for that will be an ongoing thing to look for opportunities to engage with other people and that is why I chose recruiting, you have to talk to people on the phone and you have to meet them face to face, you have to make a connection. SO it forced me to connect with people more, otherwise I would love to be behind the computer doing analytical things, but just putting yourself out there is always a good career hurdle for me.

Q: What is the most difficult decision you have had to make in regards to work?

A: I think for right now within HR it’s putting aside your own personal values, when you are talking to a manager, they have a different set of values that may not be the same as yours, so then how do you make that decision? Where do you want to place yourself? When I’m in that type of situation I usually will give the advice that I feel is sincere that is going to be in the best interest of the company, the manager, and the employee so I just put it out there and have the manager decide what that is. So for me I have had to pull back, I can’t think that everyone is going to think the way that I do, or they are going to take my advice but I try to put forward the best advice that I can and have a lot of different perspectives and have the manager make the final call. And sometimes you just have to walk away with that, if the decision they make is a really bad one and granted I have not had too many of those situations but if there are just too many risks within the decision that the manager is making I’ll continue to have follow-up discussions with them to make sure that they have really thought it through. The hardest things sometimes is when someone is not making the right choice, making the decision if you let them make that choice or if you be more assertive and influential to stop them. And sometimes you can’t stop people from making that decision but you can give them enough information so hopefully they make the right choice.

Q: What has been your biggest accomplishment in your work experience?

A: The biggest accomplishment for me personally, in some of my other HR roles is developing an employee. Having career discussions with them and seeing how they grow and advance their career within Medtronic, because I’ve given people advice, maybe if they are depressed or maybe a little lack of spirit with their career direction, giving them advice, giving them encouragement, providing opportunities that are available within Medtronic or sometimes it is outside of the company, and just seeing their careers flourish from there, so for e the accomplishment is helping others and seeing them achieve the goals that they want to achieve.

Q: What college did you attend?

 A: I attended the University of California Irvine.

Q: Did you enjoy it?

A: I loved it, a lot of fun, a great time to learn about yourself, to grow personally, academically, the challenge of college, I thought I was pretty smart graduating from high school, graduating in the top ten percent of a class of about 660 students, no you can’t manage college, the social pressures are different, the course curriculum is different, everything that I learned in high school in four years was covered in 10 weeks. And it moves at a very fast pace, the professors were very dynamic individuals, who posed questions that I don’t think have ever been posed in a high school setting, which led me to believe that life experience wise you do have to talk and meet as many people as you can. Because their perspectives will add to your own personal enrichment. So for me college was a time of growing up in every respect.

Q: What was your major?

 A: My major was biological sciences, which was a pre-med track.

Q: Did your college prepare you for the work that you are doing now?

A: I would say it provided me with the foundation as far as tools and thinking ability, but the actual work of course not because that was biology and you are doing lab and lab work and in here in HR it’s not the same. But I would say about the problem-solving challenges it is the same, I end up do relying on my science background, you get your data, you test it out, you try to validate your theory and conclusion, and you try to back it up with information and you try and make a compelling statement for which position you want to be a part one versus the other and you kind of stick with it.

Q: If someone told you in college that this would be your job what would your reaction have been?

A: I would have been like what are you talking about? People, soft skills I have nothing, I have no skills or interest to continue with that type of career, so it would have took me off guard and by surprise, but I guess that is what I learned about life, you have to be open to opportunities and what I learned is what I thought would be the best for was actually not the best for me. And you have to be flexible and adapt to your environment and learn more about yourself and put yourself in these different situations. When you’re in a biology major type of degree track it is only one mindset because you only have limited time of the amount of courses that you can accomplish in a four year time-frame. So you don’t really have time to think and experiment with different majors and courses, so I was so narrowly focused on that that I forgot about the other 90% of life and what else there is out there and that’s where if somebody would have told me you need to explore that other aspect of life I probably would have listened to that but if they had said you’re going to go into Human Resources I would have said no there’s no way you don’t know me you have no idea what you’re talking about. But I think life has a way of working itself out and listen to the people along the way, I’m sure you get a lot of great advice from the people around you, listen to it. Especially listen to the ones that goes against what you actually think is true there’s probably a hint of truth behind it and maybe it’s something to explore, it could be a dead end but you never know so just kind of be open to feedback.

Q: What do you think is the most important advice for someone who is getting ready to go into college?

A: I would say the one thing that I missed out on, I would say go abroad for an international semester or even one year, the best way you can learn about yourself is to put yourself in an environment that is completely different from what you know, different language, culture and smell, and that is where you’re going to learn the most about yourself, you can spend four years studying and getting great grades but it’s not going to be who you are. So meet different people, talk to professors, just get a broader life experience and I think that would serve you really well, don’t always focus on the coursework but that’s only one aspect of education, education is the social part and discovering what motivates you and what is going to take you from here to there. So that would be my career advice.