

# Ashleigh Watson

People and Culture Director

MxD

Ashleigh Watson wanted to be a film historian, making sense of the past for us in the present and future through cinema. After getting a bachelor's degree in history from DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana, then a masters in history and documentary filmmaking at Syracuse University, she decided that she really wanted to work with people so they could live out their stories as best as they could.

"After I graduated from college, I worked a little bit in the film industry, and then I transitioned over to HR," recalled Watson. "One of the things that's really unique about both industries is that you are always working with people. There's never a dull moment. You have to practice patience."

As a Chicagoan coming back to her hometown after grad school, her experience working in the city's film industry was fun, though it had some less than pleasant moments. "I still love the medium of film and storytelling, but I don't miss being on set and the 12-hour days."

Watson uses the people skills that she learned working on film sets in her current position as MxD's sole HR professional. Similar to on a set, where many relationships need to be managed for the sake of producing a film, Watson is building relationships with all 44 of MxD's full-time employees. She has only been in this position since June 2020, but she is already helping employees grow, even during a pandemic, by focusing on the employee experience.

"It's really important to have a relationship with the employees so they know that I'm a resource, not just for when something bad happens, but for their career



development," explained Watson. "We're a small team, but a dynamic and collaborative environment.

Anytime I'm screening for resumes or during interviews, I really hone in on the fact that this is not a typical put your feet up on the desk, answering emails all day type of job. You'll be doing a lot of work."

In general, what troubles Watson about the manufacturing industry is the focus on youth and not enough focus on experienced workers who are new to the industry. If Watson could make a career change from film to HR, then why couldn't any experienced worker go from being a bank teller to working as an assembler? Watson believes that we should listen to students and reach them where they are, regardless of age.

"I think it's important to at least know the motivations of those experienced individuals, and to see if that's something that we can meet," said Watson. "We always look for what 17- to 22-year-olds need, when there could be a 35- or 36-year-old who's really looking to change their career, and are a little bit more focused on what exactly they want out of a career."

Companies may feel that it is too risky to retrain an older worker, and it can be. However, people who still have 25 years of work or less left can be as committed or

more than younger employees who are just now finding out what they like, and have 50 years of work ahead of them. This is where understanding people from an HR perspective is valuable, because then you can find the workers in their 30s and 40s suited for manufacturing. How those workers are retrained while paying for a mortgage and a family is part of that risk, but Watson does not see why this cannot be fixed.

“Programs will have to work with academic institutions to sponsor adult students by giving them a stipend,” explained Watson. “Companies should be prepared to either front the costs, which may not always be feasible, or be more accepting to work with programs that offer adults or older students as trainees.”

Being comfortable sharing bold ideas like that is why Watson was drawn to MxD. It is a fast-paced workplace where ideas are respected, regardless of their origin. That is why diversity matters to MxD — not just racial diversity, but diversity of perspectives, especially in a global economy where manufacturers have competition overseas.

“Diversity is sometimes one of those things that people do when they feel like it. We don’t have the luxury to only care about diversity when we can,” said Watson. “It affects the bottom line and our ability to recruit the best candidates sometimes. In this position, I want to ensure that we are always at the forefront of any type of anti-racism, diversity, and inclusion initiatives.”