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BBC'S HR BOSS CAUGHT IN THE MEDIA SPOTLIGHT

By Dina Medland



Lucy Adams: 'A headhunter told me my CV could be called eclectic - or rubbish'

Lucy Adams' five years at the BBC have coincided with one of the most torrid periods in the corporation's history: spending cuts, a move to Salford, redundancies and [controversy over pay-offs for executives](#).

As the BBC's HR director, she has also been in the spotlight when facing the cameras and fierce questioning from parliament's public accounts committee, chaired by [MP Margaret Hodge](#), over the severance packages.

The stream of online abuse that followed included being called "a lying harlot".

"I had no idea when the opportunity came up to join the BBC of the press intrusion on the doorstep, the freedom of information requests flooding in at the rate of 30 a day – or that I would be termed 'the designer clad pay-off queen'," says Ms Adams.

The senior human resources role in most large organisations is widely regarded as being more anodyne than those in the frontline dealing with strategy and results. The career of Ms Adams suggests otherwise.

She is soon to leave the BBC at the end of her five-year contract with another set of experiences to add to her eclectic CV.

One of two sisters, she speaks of having a "working class background" growing up in London. Her father was an actor and her mother a secretary – they met at the BBC. "My

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father was creative, interesting but really quite a difficult man. We went to museums, theatre, all that – they scraped together the money,” she says.

Childhood activities included much-loved ballet lessons, and the ritual of exams that goes with them. She had thoughts of being a ballet dancer but at the age of 12 she shot up in height to 5ft 10ins. “And that was that,” she says. “It was never going to happen, and besides, I was not good enough,” she adds.

With no idea what to do after school, she studied history and English at Brighton polytechnic. “I loved it, but I had no career plans. I thought I might go into PR. I pursued a temporary contract copywriting for a corporate gift magazine – it was very boring,” Ms Adams says.

“I had to get a permanent job to pay off debts, so when one came up in recruitment, I took it – but then I loathed it,” she says.

Marrying young, she gave birth to a daughter at 24. “Then suddenly, I was divorced, broke and a single mother. It was less about career choice than about trying to make ends meet,” she says. Having left home in her late teens, she never went back.

The early 1990s were spent in telesales and cleaning jobs to pay bills. She tried moving to Yorkshire, where she set up a mother and baby group to meet people – which is still going today. But she felt isolated. “I’m an urbanite at heart,” Ms Adams says.

Her next move, when her daughter was two and a half, was to train to be a teacher and she taught at Harrogate College. “I taught communication skills to electrical installation engineers in their first year. They were 18 or 19, I was 26 or 27, and it was a terrifying prospect. They were whistling and calling – my hands shook at first,” she says.

A series of jobs found via the Jobcentre brought her into contact with people from different backgrounds, which she enjoyed. She comes across as resourceful and independent and says her first “proper job” was working for the government-funded training and enterprise councils in 1993. Promoted rapidly, she stayed for five years and became head of strategy.

“I enjoyed it very much but I needed to explore,” Ms Adams says. This led her to PICF, a firm of consultants, for her first experience of working in the private sector. She was advising clients but was not comfortable in the role. When PICF pitched for an internal auditing contract with Serco, she was asked to go along for her knowledge of people, culture and change management.

PICF did not win the contract, but Ms Adams received a call from Chris Hyman, then Serco’s finance director, asking for a meeting. He offered her a choice of jobs. “You can have one of three jobs if you would like to join us,” was the offer, and Ms Adams chose Serco Rail. Her job was to be “the people part” of its bidding for contracts and she took control of “transfer and mobilisation”.

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“They were looking for good commercial sense, commonsense, bags of value and real potential. I am very grateful to them,” she says.

After four and a half years in Serco Rail, Mr Hyman became chief executive and she became group HR director. “I was very lucky. I wasn’t really qualified for that role and it was a massive leap,” she adds. Her global horizons widened considerably as she travelled to destinations such as Dubai and China.

“A headhunter told me at this stage that my CV could be called eclectic or it could be called rubbish,” she says. Having spent nine years at Serco, she felt it was time to move on. “People sometimes struggle to recognise how you have grown if you stay somewhere too long.”

She moved to be HR director for Eversheds, the law firm. But a year later, the BBC, under director-general Mark Thompson, called her. “If you’re in your 40s in the UK, the BBC is the backdrop of your life.

“It felt fantastic to get the call. I was looking forward to telling my mum I would finally be working for an organisation she had heard of.”

Today, Ms Adams herself has her own public profile – one she had not expected. “One of my first meetings was with the head of press, which I found strange at the time. Then it occurred to me I had never had any experience of dealing with the press at all,” she says. She is now looking forward to yet another career change as she leaves behind a role in the media spotlight and a £320,000 salary.

It was always a five-year contract, ending in April, she says. As for what is next, she is unsure: “I don’t know – but it’s about resilience and helping others to explore ways to find it.”

Secret CV

Who were your mentors?

I have sought out people to guide me whenever I needed them.
But my mother is the amazing one, and my role model – always optimistic.

Your first big break?

Serco telling me: “You can have one of three jobs if you want to join us.”

What else might you have done?

I would have loved to have been a ballerina. I didn’t like being taller than boys aged 12 –

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that was hard. But now I love my height.

Best career advice to others?

Get lots of advice but in the end go with your gut. Instinct is important – but as women we doubt it.