



## Leader Spotlight

**Jim Orban**

President and CEO

University of Ottawa Heart Institute Foundation

*with* **GLAIN ROBERTS-McCABE**



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*For this month's Leader Spotlight, Glain Roberts-McCabe tracked down her first boss and mentor from her early days at the Ottawa Citizen.*

*Jim Orban left his long-tenured career in publishing six years ago to join the University of Ottawa Heart Institute Foundation as President and CEO. Known for his community leadership in addition to his ability to get results in tough markets, Jim shared some of his lessons learned from shifting careers and reflected on the positive impact relationships have had over the course of his career.*



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**GRM** Jim, it's great to reconnect with you! It seems like just yesterday that I was calling you every day until you finally hired me! Great memories. But before we trip down memory lane, let's start by hearing what you're up to these days in your leadership role with the UOHI Foundation.

**JO** Sure. I joined the University of Ottawa Heart Institute Foundation after retiring from publishing. The Foundation plays a vital role in supporting the University of Ottawa Heart Institute which is a recognized international leader in cardiovascular care, treatment and research. At the Foundation, our job is to ensure that many of the most critical components of world-class care are available. We raise funds for much needed equipment, facilities, programs, research and education at the University of Ottawa Heart Institute. I lead a dedicated team that, with the support of a generous community, are helping an exceptional team of health care professionals advance cardiovascular care and save lives everyday. It's incredibly rewarding.

**GRM** It sounds very rewarding and a change from your previous role with the *Ottawa Citizen*. You had a very long and successful career in newspapers, eventually landing the top job as Publisher at the *Ottawa Citizen*. Was it a tough decision to leave the publishing industry after spending so many great years there?

**JO** I definitely enjoyed a great career in publishing and had the opportunity to see up close the evolution of a sector which was a great learning experience. Up until the mid 90s, the newspaper publishing business experienced steady subscription/ advertising volume growth, along with fairly consistent levels of return-on-revenue of 30-40%. During this time, family-owned newspapers were being sold at significant ratios to other media/ Telco companies. Over time, volumes started to decline and to preserve profit levels, aggressive pricing and cost reductions were implemented, along with increased debt to finance

specialty channel and internet defensive strategies. This business environment was poorly timed with the financial collapse of 2008, which caused newspaper ownership throughout North America to shift into the hands of private equity firms. It was clear to me that newspapers were headed for a dramatic shift and decided the time was right for me to retire from the newspaper business in August 2010.

Since then, it has been difficult to see so many dedicated staff leave the newspaper business, however, along with great memories, I also reflect with great pride on the past. The industry has changed and the newspaper is not what it once used to be. Things continue to evolve, and I do remain confident that there will be a printed newspaper in most major markets for decades to come, but they will be owned by individual entrepreneurs as a vanity asset with expectations for only a modest profit.

**GRM** I think that's an interesting point. It makes me think that just like industries need to evolve or die, so do our careers. Many people I speak with feel anxious about shifting career paths. Did you have any trepidation about leaping into something unfamiliar following such a long-tenured run in print? What advice would you give to someone who's looking to reinvent their careers?

**JO** The offer to join the not-for-profit sector came out of the blue.

It took only two weeks from initial contact to agreement. A few months later, I heard the reference to an "encore" career. For me, that phrase somehow

balances the feelings of uncertainty about the future with those of pride for what you have accomplished in the past. My advice to those who are making a career transition is to embrace the concept

### **Leadership Tip**

Embrace the concept of life-long learning.

of life-long learning. The door of opportunity can be unpredictable, and may not reflect your current skill, experience and aspirations. To re-invent means leaving your comfort zone and charting a new course toward a career you probably have not imagined. As someone who's made the transition, I can attest that it's highly rewarding and probably not as much of a leap as you may think.

**GRM** On that note, what have you found to be different about leading in a not-for-profit versus the corporate space you had grown up in? Did you have to make any adjustments to your mindset or behaviour?

**JO** After five years in the not-for-profit (NFP) world, I have concluded that there is very little difference with the corporate space. Larger NFPs typically operate like large businesses and smaller NFPs run like small business. If there are differences, it is generally about nuance and jargon such as storytelling versus marketing, gifts versus sales, but all are bound by strategy, integrity, ethics, financial management, human resource management. Customers want results and donors want impact for their charitable investment. The NFP culture does tend to be less comfortable with accountability and performance management, and, on the other hand, corporate sales types could benefit from the donor-centered approach used by NFPs for cultivation, relationship building and recognition. There are more similarities than differences in my experience and opportunities to learn on both sides.

**GRM** What would you say are the qualities that you possess as a leader that have served you well in this new role?

**JO** I've always been a contrarian by nature when it comes to developing strategies and I am comfortable working off the traditional 'play book.' I've certainly brought that lens to my current role by looking for innovative approaches for fundraising. I'm also an empathic person who spends time with staff and donors to

fully understand philanthropic trends and habits and generally seek their viewpoint. I've found

that taking time to understand the views of all my stakeholders helps me make more informed decisions and identify where there may be uncovered opportunities. Standing still or striving for mediocrity are not options in today's competitive business environment.

**GRM** I do remember all those qualities from back when we worked together in 1989. You were always a very kind "boss" who cared about your people. We talk a lot to leaders about their 'brands.' Whenever I think of you—in addition to the kindness—I always think of someone who is phenomenal at networking and relationship building. Obviously with your roots in sales, that was probably part of the job, but you've always seem to have made a conscious effort to be connected well beyond the boundaries of your role. Was this something you did intentionally or is it something that just came naturally to you?

### Leadership Tip

Build mutually beneficial relationships.

### Leadership Tip

Understand your stakeholders and the trends of your business.

**JO** Initially, it was probably more instinct, but over time it has become more structured. I've always aimed to build relationships with

sincerity and for mutually beneficial purposes rather than one-sided. I am fond of referring to these relationships as the "halo" effect that causes customers to look beyond your offerings when making a decision to work with you and your NFP or business. We do business and work with people we like. I think if you conduct yourself with integrity and give more than you expect in return, your network will always have a place for you.

**GRM** I think that's a great point and one that actually goes back to our discussion about making a career transition. These types of external relationships can help you make transitions into new areas, certainly that's been my experience. It's no secret that the publishing industry has been facing more than their share of tough times in recent years. Looking back on your time there, was there anything you wished you'd done differently as a leader?

**JO** I have to say, I don't believe in second guessing. As a leader you will have to make tough decisions and often have second thoughts or get subjected to "arm chair quarterback" comments from others. Things always look different

### *Leadership Tip*

Don't second guess yourself and trust your decisions.



with hindsight. However, as in life, we never really know what cards we are going to be dealt and all we can do is play them to the best of our ability. Looking back and second guessing really doesn't provide much value. I think it's better to focus on the future and taking what you've learned and moving forward.

**GRM** What advice would you give to young leaders who may be making their way in industries that are facing disruptive change?

**JO** Disruption is omnipresent and is driven by a growing mantra that, "If you and your businesses are doing the same activity as two years ago and your market share is not increasing, then you must chart a new strategy with a sense of urgency." Change is the new normal and I think younger leaders—and really all leaders—need to be willing to take risks, keep learning, and stay curious. It's all about agility.

### *Leadership Tip*

Be agile and embrace change.

**GRM** You've mentioned to me that emotional intelligence and self-awareness are both critical ingredients for leadership success. What do you know now about leadership that you wished you'd known earlier in your career?

### *Leadership Tip*

Be confident but not arrogant.

**JO** When I started in my newspaper career, I wasn't as aware of the impact my behaviour had on others or how things I said or did would be interpreted (or

misinterpreted). I have adopted the saying that confidence is the sweet spot between arrogance and self doubt. We should be proud of our accomplishments because success attracts investment, talent, support and loyalty, but we should be mindful that this can be



interpreted as being self congratulatory. Everything you do or say sends a message.

**GRM** I find companies are often looking for a “silver bullet” when it comes to hiring or developing strong leaders. From your experience, what are your top three skills you look for when you’re hiring leadership talent?

**JO** There are many but the top three are: character, respect, and relationship builder/communicator. At the top of my list is character, which includes talent, integrity and reliability. There seems to be many definitions for what a team player is but for me being a team player is about being respectful of *all* staff at all times and engaging in activities that encourage positive team behaviour. Finally, a person who is a strong relationship builder and strong communicator is key for building both internal and external relationships.

### **Leadership Tip**

An employee with great character plays well with a team.

**GRM** Looking back over the successes you've had throughout your career, what's the thing you're most proud of accomplishing?

**JO** When I look at my time in publishing, I'm proud of the fact that we were able to successfully identify changing reader and advertiser trends in an ever changing media business and staying ahead of the curve with the committed support of staff as we transitioned from one business strategy to another. In my encore career, maintaining a winning spirit that makes further wins more likely, is a constant source of energy because at the end of the day optimism is the "secret sauce" that fuels most NFPs—and I can't wait to get into the office each and every morning!

### Leadership Tip

Having a winning spirit gives you the energy to create more wins.

**GRM** Jim, thanks so much for sharing your lessons learned. It was terrific to reconnect with you and I'm thrilled to see you thriving in your encore career. I think the big lesson for me personally here is the value of building and maintaining your network affords you more opportunities and things you can tap in to.



**Glain Roberts-McCabe** is passionate about the art of leadership and supporting ambitious mid-career leaders. She created **The Executive**

**Roundtable** to provide emerging leaders with the navigational skills, tools and savvy needed to manage increases in scope, pressure and leadership complexity.

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