

Making the Transition: Melissa Boatwright, APR, on Military and Civilian Life

Melissa Boatwright, APR, is the interim director of internal communications for Thomson Reuters in the Intellectual Property and Science business. She helps business leaders connect with more than 4,000 employees in 90 locations, including 27 countries.

Boatwright has been a communications professional for more than 20 years, specializing in internal and external communications, with 16 years in U.S. Air Force public affairs, concentrating on internal messaging, public relations, media relations and community relations.

During her time on active duty, she was a TV reporter, covering the Pentagon and combat operations in Iraq and a news director in South Korea. After finishing her master's degree at West Virginia University, she was a communications manager for a plaintiffs law firm in South Carolina.

What was your dream job when you were a child?

I wanted to be a sportscaster — Bob Costas and Hannah Storm were my idols.

How did you get your start in

public relations?

I got my start in communications at 15 years old as a country music DJ for my hometown radio station in Wyoming.

Q&A

How did you land your current job?

I landed my last two jobs by responding to Internet job postings where I knew absolutely no one in the companies. So I can attest that, although it doesn't feel like it when you're in the job hunt, real people read your online job applications.

What's the most important skill set you learned or course you took in college that you use today? And what key skills do you think employers are looking for in new hires today?

My rudimentary understanding of HTML, courtesy of a self-paced online course, has been useful in unexpected ways. One important way was giving me the confidence to build websites for nonprofits that support veterans, like saveawarrior.org.



The skill I'm looking for when hiring is relationship management. It takes so many people to make an internal communications program successful. I need team members who are good relationship managers, challenge constructively and courageously, and help people understand how internal communications drives business results.

Talk about your role as interim internal communications director at Thomson Reuters and what your job entails.

My team partners with business leaders to develop communications that drive business results and engage employees to feel valued, to understand what's going on in the organization, and [to feel] connected with each other and our customers.

What was it like transitioning from active military duty to a civilian job?

There was a definite honeymoon period where I felt liberated and painted my fingernails whatever color I wanted and freely allowed my bangs to touch my eyebrows — both prohibited in uniform by Air Force regulations — but I still miss the camaraderie and the clarity that the military provides. In the civilian world, there are a lot of gray [areas] that make it hard to know what the right thing to do is.

For others making a similar career transition, what advice do you have on acclimating?

Find a company that values your military experience. That doesn't necessarily mean that they employ a lot of vets. My military experience makes building credibility and relationships a lot easier. It's also fun to see people's reactions when they learn that I've been in

the military for 17 years, am an expert marksman and was deployed to Iraq. It makes me feel like a unicorn. So I guess my advice would be find a place that makes you feel like a unicorn because of your service, not in spite of it.

Why did you decide to sit for the APR exam and what do you think the benefits of being Accredited are?

I decided to sit for the exam because I wanted to show that my experience as a military public affairs professional translated well to a civilian communications career.

What are the issues that you hear concerning the PR profession, as well as trends? Also, what's top of mind when you speak with peers and colleagues in the public affairs sector?

Measurement. No matter what area of communications it is, it's still difficult to accurately and powerfully quantify success in a way that allows us to evaluate and

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adjust programs accordingly. The lack of measurement also makes it difficult to compel others to believe in the power of what we do.

What challenges do you face in your day-to-day job as a communicator?

Getting people to prioritize communications.

You've been a member of PRSA since 2010. Why do you think it's important to be involved in organizations that focus on networking and continuing education?

Belonging to a community of communicators helps us remember

that we're not alone in our challenges to progress communications in our organizations. PRSA is filled with peers who I can learn from, rely on and geek out about “comms” with. (Yes, I just ended a sentence with a preposition.)

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What do you think the outlook is for the soon-to-be PR graduates or new practitioners?

In corporate communications in particular, social media has found a place in businesses — not just as an outward reaching tool. At Thomson Reuters, we have a social-media-based Intranet that creates an online community for our employees. It's not just important to know how to use various social media, you also must know how to strategically use it.

What advice do you have for new pros? What's the best advice you've ever received?

The fewer words the better. And, let go of what doesn't serve you.

What is the most important thing you've learned about PR during your 17-year career?

It's less about what you want to say and more about what others want or need to hear.

What's the best part of your job?

Helping people develop communications plans that help them achieve their desired outcome, whether that's moving from a Waterfall to an Agile methodology, solving complex business problems via internal crowd-sourcing or raising money for a nonprofit. 1

Getting to Know...

Melissa Boatwright, APR

Any 3 dinner guests, past or present — and what would you have to eat?

Michelle Obama, John Elway and my high school English teacher Mr. Holt, who passed away about 15 years ago. I wish I could show him that his faith was well placed. We would have wine and cheese, or pizza.

Favorite movie?

The best movie I've seen recently while on a plane is “Dallas Buyers Club.” Confession: If I had the time, I would waste an entire day watching the complete “Harry Potter” series from start to finish.

Best place to travel?

My husband and I visited Australia a few years ago and have considered moving there ever since.



Managing Editor Amy Jacques interviewed Melissa Boatwright, APR, for this month's member profile.