



On the Record: Pfizer Leaders Share Career Advice for Young Professionals

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Payal Sahni did not expect – or plan -- to work for a multi-national corporation.

In fact, when a college professor asked her if she'd ever considered a corporate career, she replied, "absolutely not."

At the time, Sahni was pursuing a graduate degree in psychology. She believed corporate America was "stuffy" and "political," and "wanted nothing to do with it," she says. But she told her professor she was open to exploring and applied for a summer internship at Pfizer, a pharmaceutical and biotechnology company.

"To my surprise, the people were amazing," Sahni says. "I also very quickly learned that the intake interviews I did in psychology were very similar to the interviews you do when

you have employee relations issues or are interviewing job candidates. And I realized there were lots of opportunities at Pfizer for people who are not scientists. There's a philanthropy group, finance, marketing, human resources, communications."

When Pfizer offered her a job at the end of her internship, Sahni accepted. Today, a bit more than two decades later, she is Pfizer's Chief Human Resources Officer, responsible for global talent strategy, diversity and inclusion, total rewards and colleague experience.

As a former psychology student, Sahni is acutely aware of the importance of mental health. As a Pfizer leader, she's positively affected the mental health of tens of thousands of people.

"Because of my psychology background, I know that if your mind is not in the right place, it's really difficult to bring your best to whatever you're doing," she says. That awareness helped her effectively lead a global workforce during a pandemic that disrupted traditional ways of doing work. "If we want people to do their best work, we have to make sure they have all the tools and resources they need in order to be their best selves at work and at home," Sahni says. "That is so critical, and that's why I was so excited to launch our first Wellness Day earlier this year."

Be Open to Unexpected Professional Opportunities

Pfizer leaders all had to start somewhere, and many have fascinating stories about their professional journeys. Often, it's a lot like Sahni's experience: choosing to follow the unplanned path and finding fulfillment in unexpected opportunities.

Like Sahni, Sally Susman, Pfizer's Chief Corporate Affairs Officer, didn't initially plan a corporate career, either. Driven by a desire to make the world a better place, Susman spent six years working on Capitol Hill as a legislative assistant before transitioning to a job in the United States Department of Commerce.

"I went into government because I was motivated, as many young people are, to do good and have a positive impact on the world," Susman says. "I learned a lot and believe I was helpful in researching potential legislation. I ultimately made my career in business, though, because I felt I had even greater opportunities to be a force for good and be helpful in society by working for a strong public-facing company like Pfizer."

Being part of a large company can give employees countless opportunities to contribute. "We are all complex creatives with many different facets of our personalities," says

Susman. “It’s ultimately up to us to not let ourselves be put in a box.”

Make the Most of the Professional Opportunities You Get

Sahni and Susman each challenged their own career preconceptions. Changing career direction can be a frightening prospect, especially for young professionals. It can also be the first step on a professional journey toward a long career with nearly infinite opportunities for growth.

“Getting out of your comfort zone can help you develop new skills that will allow you to be even more effective when you work in your areas of strength,” says Frank D’Amelio, Pfizer’s former Chief Financial Officer and Executive Vice President, Global Supply.

It's one of the many reasons Pfizer encourages its employees to seek out development opportunities, helping them to gain exposure to, and experience with, other areas of the company. One way employees can make the most of these opportunities is by applying for a secondment—scaling back one's own role to fill in for a certain amount of time for a colleague who is on temporary leave, such as maternity leave or caring for an ailing relative.

D’Amelio encourages young professionals to surround themselves with incredibly talented people and seek jobs that give offer exposure to senior staff. “Early in my career, I volunteered for special projects, especially those that included a bit of visibility and exposure to senior people,” he says.

When an opportunity presents itself, he tells young people to “do everything possible” to maximize the moment.

“When those moments come, you need to knock the cover off the ball. You have to crush it. Slam Dunk. Hit the ball so hard that when it goes over the fence, it’s still going up,” D’amelio says. “These opportunities can make careers.”

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Hear more of the advice Sahni, Susman, and D'Amelio offered to Pfizer interns in the 2021 "Something's Brewing" LinkedIn Live video series developed by Nia Dawson and Megan Harnaga.

Something's Brewing: Episode 1: Sally Susman

Something's Brewing: Episode 2: Frank D'Amelio

Something's Brewing: Episode 3: Payal Sahni

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