





Cirque du Soleil

Bringing Innovation to Life

Seth Kahan *interviews* **Pat Norris, SPHR**

Running off to join the circus has its romantic appeal, but Cirque du Soleil's Pat Norris, director of human resources, knows the practical side of managing the magic.

Cirque du Soleil is no ordinary employer. It is one of the world's largest artistic entertainment companies with more than 5,000 employees from over 50 countries, performing 20+ shows in over 270 cities around the world.

Working in Las Vegas as the director of human resources: Resident Shows Division, is Pat Norris, SPHR. Norris has the distinction of having single-handedly set up the HR function for Cirque du Soleil when they signed on with Disney to do its show, La Nouba, in Orlando.

The curtain went up in 1998, and Norris was there putting things in place, including partnering with Disney, receiving the talent and developing the HR policies and procedures.

I had the chance to catch up with him in Las Vegas and talk about what it is like to direct HR services within such an audacious company and his pioneering experience with a very special show. »

Photo courtesy Cirque du Soleil



Photo courtesy Cirque du Soleil

SETH KAHAN: Pat, what it's like to work for one of the world's most creative and fast-growing entertainment organizations?

PAT NORRIS: We have international headquarters in Quebec, and there we have the people who develop the strategy. Here in Las Vegas, we execute the strategy, and in a business such as ours we have to have a very collaborative culture.

Cirque is a hive. There is activity everywhere. It's all exciting, and it's all about the show.

When I was first hired we were a very different organization. It has been a thrilling ride to get to where we are today, and we are by no means finished. The future is extraordinarily exciting. It is a privilege to serve such an exceptional company.

I have the opportunity to work with world-class artists every day and see them exercise their amazing talents. This is true not just of the performers, but the managers, the directors, in fact every single person who makes the show a reality. They are all the best in the world at what they do.

Since I began with Cirque, we have diversified our show content to stay true to the spirit of the original thrust, but we break new ground all the time.

Cirque is on the frontier of live entertainment. We have gone beyond the original presentations, which were pioneering in their day, and continue to push the envelope on what is possible.

Talent acquisition is critical in an organization like ours. We rely on recruiting the best and most outrageous performers. They have to be able to bring the show to life night after night. They do it with skill and spirit repeatedly, systematically, and always keep it fresh. Every moment in a live show is a discovery of what can be done. That is our magic.

When I provide great service in HR—and that's an innovation unto itself here—it impacts the performers on stage. This directly

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affects the people who come to see the show, and that has an influence on our ability to spread happiness throughout the world and be audacious as we do it.

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KAHAN: Tell me about recruiting and working with the performers.

NORRIS: The artists who come to us often have no idea what it is like to be part of an organization like ours, because there is no other organization like Cirque!

They come from the Olympic world, federations, private gyms and even the street from our Cirque du Monde (literally translated, World Circus).

The people who come to us not only have amazing talents, they have internal assets. For example, some bring an athletic mindset that is self-motivated. They challenge themselves to perfect their performance. They work extremely well within a team structure.

Others bring a performance mindset which centers on their ability to carry the moment on stage in front of a live audience. They have a keen eye as to what it takes to succeed professionally under that kind of pressure. They know how to deliver their best and do it in a way that conveys powerfully to an audience.

We have two platforms to recruit talent. There is a platform driven by our art talent acquisition group, and we have a casting agency. Interested people can upload their videos on our website and gain an amazing amount of information.

It is the place to go if you want to explore working with us. It will teach you what we are about and how we operate, as well as introduce you to life in Cirque du Soleil with great creativity and bold transparency.

KAHAN: What was it like to open HR in Orlando for *La Nouba*?

NORRIS: When I first started, I was part of the Division of the Americas. They gave me a policy and procedure manual as a guideline, and I put together a set of standards according to U.S. labor law that I thought would make sense to a theatrically-



Photo courtesy Cirque du Soleil



Pat Norris, SPHR

Pat Norris, SPHR, is the director of human resources: Resident Shows Division for Cirque du Soleil. He has been with Cirque du Soleil since 2005. Certified since 2007, Norris has been in HR for more than 14 years, starting out as an HR representative at Universal Studios in Orlando.

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minded person. I wanted it to be easy to understand, accessible. Not a black-and-white policy manual.

Disney is a powerful and unique partner. They run a very conservative ship, and we don't. They require a certain look, a certain style. For example, Seth, you would not be allowed to wear your beard or your earring as a Disney employee. As you can imagine, some of our employees have multi-colored facial hair and varieties of earrings and other piercings.

Everyone had to go through Traditions, Disney's orientation program. They teach you about the history of Disney and introduce you to the way Disney does things. Generally, they require you to dress at least business casual. They actually look over your appearance and instruct you to cut your hair, wear less makeup and meet other image requirements.

When you go through the Disney program, you are required to adhere to the Disney model. I had to go to them and tell them they've brought in an organization that does not adhere to these same standards.

It's not that we wanted to buck their system, but we make a boisterous attempt to celebrate our performers' diversity and individuality. It's part of our brand and it is one of our great strengths. So, here you have this clash of cultures. Neither was wrong; in fact, both have worked immeasurably well.

Sometimes I had to tell them, "You're going to have someone coming in with a nose ring and a pink mohawk today. What do you want them to do? Do you want them to wear a kerchief? The thing is bolted to their nose. It can't be removed."

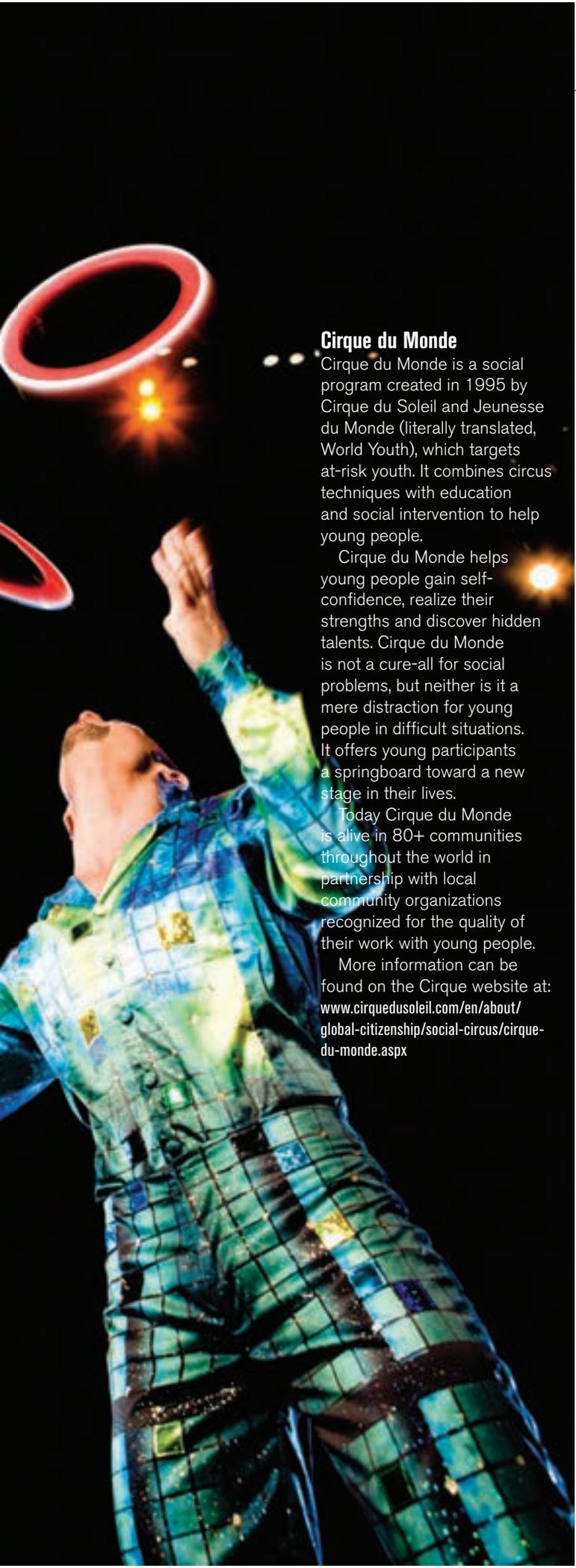
Some of the Disney folks were okay with this and some were not. Sometimes they would send our people away. That was tough.

Disney is the world's largest single-site employer other than some government facilities. Disney World in Orlando is the size of Manhattan, and it has over 62,000 employees. Disney was the company that everyone benchmarked. We were not benchmarking them. We came in and were doing our own things our own way.

Their model of success has worked very well for them. Although we are a very small cog in their wheel, they understand us well and they value us. They know how we contribute.

I was fortunate to have been in Orlando for 21 years at the time. I had real resources in place. I had my basic code set up from my work at Manpower at Universal where I had been for seven years.





Cirque du Monde

Cirque du Monde is a social program created in 1995 by Cirque du Soleil and Jeunesse du Monde (literally translated, World Youth), which targets at-risk youth. It combines circus techniques with education and social intervention to help young people.

Cirque du Monde helps young people gain self-confidence, realize their strengths and discover hidden talents. Cirque du Monde is not a cure-all for social problems, but neither is it a mere distraction for young people in difficult situations. It offers young participants a springboard toward a new stage in their lives.

Today Cirque du Monde is alive in 80+ communities throughout the world in partnership with local community organizations recognized for the quality of their work with young people.

More information can be found on the Cirque website at: www.cirquedusoleil.com/en/about/global-citizenship/social-circus/cirque-du-monde.aspx

Photo courtesy Cirque du Soleil

I had a benefit plan that was created for me under a Canadian model, so I had to start all over. The immigration piece I added was very cut and dry because it was driven by Immigration and Naturalization Service (now called the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services).

KAHAN: What was it like for you personally when you began with Cirque du Soleil?

NORRIS: Even though we have a lot of really smart and creative people, your success here lives and dies on relationship-building. People who have a natural ability to communicate well, who are authentic and transparent, do well here.

You must learn to work your relationships to advance the company and the show. Once I figured that out I knew what I had to do. I had to figure out the culture, figure out when I was going to listen and when I was going to be ballsy and try to influence.

Initially, there was an old-school mentality among some of the original Cirque aficionados. They projected an image that Cirque already did things the right way, but they also knew that we were all about bringing innovation to life, and that meant constant improvement.

I don't speak French-Canadian, and so I was initially looked at askance. I was not readily considered to be part of the culture by some. I had to be patient and persistent. I also was faced with this large challenge. I had to communicate that if we were going to be in this sphere at this time with this partner that we needed to do things a particular way so that we could be successful. That is what I did for the first few years.

KAHAN: What was it like after *La Nouba* launched?

NORRIS: I was with *La Nouba* for seven and a half years. The challenge of being on a show for that length of time is knowing where to find your applause. I found my value to the company in the service I provided to the artists. It was deeply and personally meaningful to me. Relating to the artists themselves was something I took great pride in and found real personal joy doing.

We do not operate like a traditional Broadway show. On Broadway, the cast comes in, they know their lines, they call their places, and they do the show. We run it differently.

Every day between 4:00 and 6:00, our show is constructed on a board. The stage manager knows who can do what, who is sick and who has particular talents. They plug the right people in to do the next show. They literally construct the show.

Then they brief everyone, and they do the show. And they do it all over again before the second show because things change. »

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Someone could be hurt or sick.

If somebody does something silly, egregious, I cannot be a policeman and go and run that person down. I cannot read them the riot act. I cannot say, "You have to follow your contract! You have to follow the rules! You have to talk nice to people... or refrain from whatever interesting act you were engaged in." I am not going to do that. It could ruin the show.

I have had traditional HR people come and say to me, "You get that involved?" Yes, I do. My people require a different level of service.

Let's say something happens, and I have to intervene. That person's going to be on stage! I always have to keep in my mind the most important thing: their ability to be present and bring the show to life.

I have had other HR professionals tell me that a particular person needed to be reprimanded—perhaps, but at the convenience of the show. They would say, "No, no, no! You must communicate to them so they know." My response is, "Yes, you're right. After the show."

I may not feel the applause like I would if I were performing, but it is real nonetheless to me. I am attuned to it; it is just as tangible and powerfully rewarding.

I will find a way to communicate with that person. They have artistic souls. I have to finesse the message, yet get the message across. Most importantly I have get them out on the stage in good spirits.

I sometimes have the pleasure of going to sit in the audience and watch the show after an interaction. I get to watch that person do their magic. Sometimes they can even see me in the audience.

They come back to me after the show and they say, "How did I do?" Isn't that wonderful? I say, "You were great!" And then I add, "But remember that is only one reason why you are here. The beauty you demonstrate out there is amazing and important. But the behavior you conduct backstage is equally important, and you can't do whatever it is that you just did."

They have asked me, "Why did you stay for the show?" I always tell them, "Because I want you to know that I love what you do out there." ■



Photo courtesy/Cirque du Soleil



Cirque du Soleil

Cirque du Soleil is a Quebec-based company recognized the world over for high-quality, artistic entertainment. Since its dawn in 1984, Cirque du Soleil has constantly sought to evoke the imagination, invoke the senses and provoke the emotions of people around the world.

In 1984, 73 people worked for Cirque du Soleil. Today, the business has 5,000 employees worldwide, including more than 1,300 artists. At the Montreal International Headquarters alone, there are close to 2,000 employees.

More than 100 types of occupations can be found at Cirque. The company's employees and artists represent more than 50 nationalities and speak 25 different languages.

More than 100 million spectators have seen a Cirque du Soleil show since 1984. Close to 15 million people will see a Cirque du Soleil show in 2012.