April Marroquin: Thank you so much for tuning in to the Simon Bizcast. For today's episode on Simon Stories, I'm joined by my classmate, Brigitte Zambrano, senior HR assistant at University of Rochester's Office of Total Rewards of the Human Resources Benefits Office. So, Brigitte, thank you so much for joining us today. I feel like it was just yesterday that you and I had a conversation about your interest in the PMBA as we call it for sure, the Professional MBA program here at Simon. I want to start with what motivated you to pursue this degree.

Brigitte Zambrano: Yeah. Thank you so much for having me. It's really an honor to be able to talk about my experience so far in this program. I am currently working for the University of Rochester in the HR benefits department. I'm a senior HR assistant. And so when I joined the HR department, I just really wanted to have a plan in mind, and whenever I look up to leadership, just a different strategic thinking that they had and those skills that I wanted to further develop, I always saw that they had that higher education. So I think that's one of the main reasons of I was inspired to keep on advancing my career. I mean, an MBA can definitely provide those, those skills to keep on advancing. I want to keep on advancing in HR—the different people that I have also met—the different backgrounds and industries—it definitely gives you opportunities to network. And I think that's another reason why I really wanted to start my MBA to be able to build those connections, or maybe in the future be able to talk to them. I also really app specifically chose this MBA program because it's one of the most diverse programs. So I really wanted to incorporate my different experience that I've had. I'm not from the United States, I'm Peruvian, and just to be able to have that different perspective and put it in practice in this current business industry is something that I really wanted to further explore. I also think, I mean, ultimately, I want to keep on developing on a personal level, just to be able to have more of that critical thinking skills that I, I want to keep on advancing. I want to be able to adapt to new situations, just develop more of that leadership skills that I'm still not there yet. So I can bring them both in my personal, as well as my professional life. It's something that motivated me to pursue this program.

AM: I remember having those conversations with you as you were thinking through taking that next step and, and it was really impressive to me that you're wanting to continue, of course, your education and enhance your toolkit, but you also have a really unique educational journey. You completed an IB diploma in Peru, as you mentioned, you're Peruvian. And then you also went to Korea—your undergraduate degree you completed in South Korea. So how have these diverse academic experiences now here in Rochester influenced you on your perspective on business, human resources and, and management in general?

BZ: Yeah, I mentioned, I am from Peru and I did pursue my undergraduate degree in hospitality management in South Korea. So I have moved around a lot but I think just bringing those different experiences have helped me [become] the person that I am today. Just developing that cultural sensitivity just to be able to have studied in different countries, it definitely just enhances that understanding for that different diverse perspective. That is a very valuable asset that you can bring when you are in HR or just in any industry to be able to have that cross-cultural communication. I think that it enhances the collaboration that you have with your peers. I also think that I was able to adapt better and be more flexible by bringing different perspectives. I do think that the unique—the educational system, for example, in Korea was very much team based. And I think that's something that really helped me to look more into human resources, because human resources is very much about like working in a group environment and be able to bring some ideas just for a mutual purpose for the employees, for example. I think that my, the Korean education system helped me with that. When it comes to the International Baccalaureate, it was very similar to the American education system. I also appreciated that because we did a lot of case studies there when I was in high school. And like that was I had a good foundation to start in my undergraduate and my master's because of that, because I had that basic knowledge of business and just how even my classmates were from different parts of the world. I think that's what really inspired me to keep on pursuing that academic
experience elsewhere. So, just to be able to have that skill and be flexible and adapt in different environments, I think it's something that has helped me in my current role and in my future role.

**AM:** I love that. And I especially love your emphasis here on cultural sensitivity, which I think is really important. When many people think of an MBA, especially here at Simon, they may think accounting, they may think economics, they may think finance. And having that emotional intelligence is really important because you're absolutely right. I mean, think of a place where you, where you don't work with other people and having the ability to work with others I think is really important. And funny enough, being able to be not only, you know, able to, to speak the language that will make people successful in an office setting, but also literally speak other people's languages is also really impressive, Brigitte, I commend you on that. It was funny, we were at a happy hour recently, I started talking Spanish and it was surprising to you, and then we had a 10- to 15-minute conversation in Spanish, which I really loved. We even, you know, I contemplated doing this podcast in Spanish, but maybe that's a different session. How do you think that your multilingual, you know, abilities have benefited you or you've been able to carry that into your field of human resources? Or how do you plan to kind of leverage them further in your career?

**BZ:** Yeah, I mean, I'm glad you asked this question because I mean, that's a big example that like the most recent example was with us to be able in that networking events that we had, I think that it definitely improves the connectedness that you have with your peers. To be able to speak different languages I think nowadays is very important because we are—I feel like different companies are now like seeing talent abroad and to be able to have different people and be able to work together, I think it's just that's the beauty of it, just to have that effective communication. That's something that is very important as well in HR, just to be able to interact with employees and different managers or leadership. To have that diverse language background, it's very important. It definitely allows for a more clear and effective communication overall. I did have to use, for example, in my current role, I had to use the Spanish language in some situations, and I feel that the employees feel more empathy from me and just feel more understood. So that's something that it's always conveyed when you have that skill. Going back to cultural sensitivity, I mean, just having an understanding different languages, it definitely goes hand in hand with understanding different cultures. In HR a cultural sensitivity is crucial to be able to keep on fostering that inclusive and supportive work environment that all employees desire. Just to also improve their attention, for example, in an organization just to be able to bridge that cultural gap. It's very important and, and that's why being multilingual is important. One more thing I would also mention, like outsourcing employees—I feel that more organizations nowadays are looking at talent from different countries just to have different perspectives, and within human resources, it's something that I believe can become a trend just to so that we can have a more effective and as well as inclusive work environment for everyone. So I believe that being multilingual has definitely helped me through my resources and will keep on helping me for my future career.

**AM:** Absolutely. Yeah, I, I think so as well. And we talked about, you know, of course, you're from Peru, you went to, to South Korea for education that probably was quite the adventure transitioning across the world. Do you have any memorable experiences or any kind of challenges you faced while you were adapting to a whole new culture and education system.

**BZ:** Yeah, I mean, definitely my biggest concern from moving from Peru to Korea was the language barrier. But thankfully when I, when I joined my university, my previous university, they just opened an English track, so I was very fortunate to be able to do that. But I did take some classes, bilingual classes, that were both taught in English and Korean, so that was definitely one of the biggest challenges for me, because the professors in Korea can be strict sometimes, but they were a little bit more flexible with me. But, just to be able to stay flexible when you go to from a different country or like just the change in cultures or the educational system, I think that you have to be prepared to
adapt for all the unexpected changes and challenges. Having that flexibility and resilience are I think essential qualities when you navigate new cultural and academic environments. You also always have to keep an open mind. You know that you're going to new territory. It's a, it's a new beginning. So it is very important for you to keep an open mind and, and just know that even if you're not used to those specific methods or way of teaching, just know that you have to embrace it and respect the differences. As long as you're receptive to those new things, then you will be fine and you will be able to adapt perfectly fine.

AM: Absolutely great advice there and switching gears a little bit because we've been talking about your educational background as a human resource professional. The field of HR is ever changing. We're seeing lots of things happening in the news and things like that. What are things that you know, trends or changes in the field that you find exciting or maybe challenging? And how do you think that this this MBA will equip you to address these changes?

BZ: I think one of the biggest changes that not only applies for HR but for all the industries is going to be that digital transformation. I mean, the AI that we currently have that I do believe will help improve the processes. In HR we have so many processes going, from recruitment to benefits enrollment to employee engagement. We have so many processes that I think that this the new technology, like for example AI, will definitely help us to have those opportunities and be able to over overcome any future challenges in a better way or a more effective way. So I think that we, I mean, for example, like I had some data analytics classes this past semester that I think has—I don't know why I feel like it has shaped my brain to be more, to think more strategically. And I even when I talk to my husband, like all the things that I say, I formulate things different and I have just that perspective that I think was lacking before I joined that program. So I think that the digital transformation and will definitely help me and, and I'm just very glad that even if those classes, you know, they can be hard for someone that doesn't have, for example, a quantitative background. And I'm very grateful that I had them. So that I think that part of the MBA has definitely helped me so far. I mean, I'm only in my first year here, but another trend that I am very grateful for is definitely that hybrid arrangement or remote work that after I think after COVID, everything changed. Just to be able to have that, that new flexibility—I mean, as an HR professional, I'm very appreciative of this. And I think that a lot of people around my current organization, they really feel supported in this way because it is important especially for the hybrid schedule because it's important to maintain that productivity as well as feel supported. So I think that hybrid arrangement definitely has the best of both worlds. And I think that with this MBA, I want to keep on fostering that that culture and in virtual settings because it's becoming more popular nowadays and to be able to implement those remote work technologies, it's something that I am looking forward to—being able to adapt better. Another trend like I already mentioned was definitely the diversity and inclusion. It's something that we have to keep on promoting and I am very glad that this keeps on coming up. Especially with being in Simon I have found a friends and classmates from different parts of the world and I'm very glad that Simon really fosters that environment because I feel that culture of belonging that to be able to engage. I think that this MBA can also help me with that, just to be able to develop more of those projects or research in HR that's something that I'm looking forward to as well.

AM: I love that. I think, you know, those three areas are things we're seeing, you know, in any industry, right? And, and human resources is really fundamental to a really efficient workplace and ensuring that people feel welcome and feel a part of a community. So, I really commend you on that and you're absolutely right. The first one that you mentioned about analytics, you know, the classes at Simon teach you how to think differently. Of course, you're going to learn the concepts and the theories, but I think it was in our class together, Corporate Financial Accounting with Professor Vivek, one of his last slides was “I hope I taught you how to think and think differently.” And so, I'm
glad that you and I are on the same page there and then that resonated with you, because I absolutely agree.

So, one of the things that we talked about was you know, networking and connecting with others and you definitely mentioned that has been important to you and it's often cited as a crucial element of an MBA program. Can you share any story or instance where networking with within your MBA cohort and maybe, you know, outside with other students with open new perspectives or opportunities for you?

**BZ:** Yeah, I mean, definitely when I joined this program, that's definitely one of my reasons for pursuing an MBA. I have attended a few networking events so far and, I mean, it's been wonderful just to be able to hear the different perspectives or experiences from everyone. It has enriched my experience so far. I definitely feel that I have not taken full advantage of it yet because it's still so early in the program, but I can remember an instance where I attended a pre-semester—I think it was a session or an event—and I heard one of my peers’ experience and she was mentioning that throughout Simon she developed different friends and be able to network and she said how much she had to grow professionally, how her skill set has changed for the better. And a classmate offered her a position for their company. So I think that's one of the things that really motivated me to just keep on looking forward. So those type of opportunities, just to be able to have that professional growth—and what better than a classmate to reach out to you or, or vice versa. I think that they get to know you on a deeper level when you're in class. I just think that we can definitely have that supportive community that, that fosters that, that lifelong success. So, yeah, I do think that networking is definitely crucial in the MBA.

**AM:** And it's hard as you mentioned that you're taking advantage when you can, it's hard to do all the things because there's so many fun things to participate in and to be involved with student organizations. And you know, the Part Time Advisory Council is the leadership organization for our part time students. It's hard to do all the things and you're doing such a great job of balancing everything. But that's one of the common questions and if you could, you know, think back to maybe when you were considering the program, probably one of your questions of how am I going to manage my time efficiently? So tell us how, how you do it, how are you managing—you’re working full time, you’re a student and, and of course you’re an individual with diverse interests and you mentioned you have a husband—you’ve got you know, things going on in your personal life. But how do you manage it all? Do you have any tips for prospective students?

**BZ:** Well, I'm not going to lie in the beginning. It was a lot. I mean, being a full time worker and part-time MBA student, it is a lot. So it's definitely a challenge. Being out of school for a few years and then coming back to that environment, it's something that, I mean, it was expected but unexpected once you're there—I don't know if that makes sense.

**AM:** Yes. [laughing]

**BZ:** When it comes to the student part of it, something that has really helped me is I actually created a study group. I have a very tight relationship with my current study group where we all are friends. I mean, at the start of the assignment experience we all did a, a strength evaluation, I believe it was, and I could tell that my strength was more in the communication and interpersonal. And some of my from the people from my study group, they had more of that analytical skill. So I think that's the beauty of it. Like we just bounce off ideas and we help each other in areas where I'm not probably not that good at or for example, I don't have that quantitative background that some of my peers do. And we meet almost every week, on Saturdays, we book a study room and we just go for it. Sometimes it's like from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. especially when we have midterms or a project to do. But I'm very appreciative that we have that because we hold each other accountable. So that's definitely
something that I would recommend if you are more of a team-based person. If you're a team player, I would recommend creating a study group when you join the Simon MBA. I would say also take advantage of the tutoring sessions that have definitely helped me a lot. Because like I mentioned, I do not have that quantitative background but to be able to just reinforce that and, and maybe look deeper into a specific topic that I'm not really comfortable with. I have been very appreciative and they have really helped me in some of the classes that I was not very confident with. So that's I guess a tip for prospective students: to create a group and take advantage of the tutoring sessions that Simon offers.

I would also say on a personal level, if you think that it's getting to be overwhelming, seek support. I mean, there is support from your family, support from your classmates and even your employer, and let them know and make sure you are very transparent that this is as much as you can do and make sure you delegate your tasks. I mean, if you have children, make sure you ask for help. I think that's very important to always keep that in mind, while practicing self-care, which is my next tip. Make sure that you definitely prioritize yourself. Whenever you can try to exercise or spend time with your family, focus on your mental well-being, because like I mentioned, it can be a lot. I mean, the first semester for me, I was feeling overwhelmed because like I mentioned, I was out of school for so long. But then I talked to my peers and they were all feeling the same. So I was not alone in the boat. So I had them, and we were all helping each other and we were like, “you know, we’re going to get there” and that’s how I think that study group was created because we were all like, “am I always feeling like this?” And they were like, “no, it’s just we are not used this, this is like a new territory for us.” So to be able to have that support, I think it’s crucial. After the first semester, we were fine. But yeah, and also stay organized. That’s huge—make sure you have a planner because the assignments, all the meetings, and appointments, they can catch up on you. Make sure you definitely have a to-do list or a planner. I started using my planner daily because I needed to keep up with all the different events that I was having in my life. So make sure you keep organized and you and that you have clear goals of what with what you want to do with this MBA and most importantly, celebrate every achievement! If like, I don’t know, your first midterm exam went well, make sure you celebrate it. Just celebrate the small milestones, and I think that it will improve your experience overall. I think those are my tips.

**AM:** I love that. I really like the celebrating the milestones part especially, I think it’s so important and having the network and support system will make that easy as well when you’re sharing, you know, here’s what I got on my final and people can kind of you know, give you a high five for it and make you feel like you’re taking steps in the right direction. So I love that. Also, I’d love an invitation to the study group. I’m just kidding!

**BZ:** Yes, you’re invited. [laughing]

**AM:** I’ll bring snacks! [laughing] But I love that. I think what’s also so important, the strength assessment that we send out to folks is Clifton Strengths, where you’re able to kind of hone into what is it that makes you unique and what kind of contributor you are in a team. And so you’re aware of that and, and yes, the staff do a really good job of making sure that you’re complimenting your team. They do select the teams for the core classes, but for electives, of course, you’re kind of able to make choices there—building your brand and networking and connecting with people and being a good student and a good kind of teammate is really helpful as you are going through your core classes and kind of building your brand and reputation in the program, so that you have really great teammates in your elective classes and to your point earlier, potential employer and opportunities that may come with that as well.

I wanted to, to round out I, I appreciate, you know, your tips there. Those are really great. Looking to your future, how do you envision your career path evolving after the professional MBA program? Are
there, are there any roles in, in human resources or, or maybe other areas that you're aiming to move into within, within the field or outside?

**BZ:** Yeah. Well, I do think I would want to stay in human resources. I think since I was in undergraduate school I was always interested in that and now that I am part of human resources—I know that I want to stay within this industry. With an MBA, I would definitely aim to be part of the strategic HR leadership. I just think that, I mean, roles such as like our business partner or like maybe a manager position. Those are right now the roles that I'm looking forward to. But I mean, I also interested in HR consulting. I'm still not choosing my electives yet, but when I do, I want to make sure that I choose electives that are in the consulting track, like strategy or like operations. So that aligns more with my goals and I think that especially in consulting, it's definitely an industry that's growing even more now. I definitely wouldn't mind if I do HR consulting after I graduate, or maybe just keep on with the specialized role. I really enjoyed my current role in benefits. I just to be able to maybe deepen the current tasks that I have or functions that I have. I wouldn't also remove that option, but mainly it would be the strategic leadership.

**AM:** I think you'll, you'll do amazing in that, for sure. Well, thank you, Brigitte so much. I do have a fun question, as we usually do a, a fun kind of—it's not an icebreaker, because it's at the end—but we'll do some fast questions that I'll throw at you just to kind of round out the session today and again, thank you for all of your tips and things that you've shared about your experience and background and your current progression through the professional MBA program. So ready for the questions?

**BZ:** Yeah. I'm ready!

**AM:** Ok. What are your go to snacks during study session?

**BZ:** Oh, well, I definitely love my granola bites and I don't know if this is a snack but coffee. I love lattes, so granola bites and coffee—just make sure you keep it healthy. So yeah, those are my go to.

**AM:** That's always a good suggestion, caffeine and something that's going to keep you energized in a healthy way, right? We don't need the sugar crash later on. I do always appreciate the executive lounge here at Simon being open in the evening to go get an espresso. That's very, very helpful. Awesome. What do you always carry in your backpack for class?

**BZ:** Well, definitely a water bottle, my laptop and of course, like I mentioned, my planner. I cannot live without my planner.

**AM:** Keeping it healthy with the water bottle. Last question, what app on your phone has been the most useful during your studies?

**BZ:** Hmm. Well, I mean, I'm using Slack a lot. A lot of the assignment events are promoted on Slack, but not only that, but you also have that open communication with any maybe tutors that you're working with. So, Slack has been one of the apps that I've been using the most. I also use my Outlook calendar, just to keep track of all my activities or any assignments, and also YouTube. So I can revisit anything I wasn't clear on in class. I watch videos to reinforce any material that I learned.

**AM:** I love that. That's a good tip. I have Blackboard, my app that I go to all the time for class, but I like those suggestions too. Well Brigitte, thank you so much. I appreciate your time today and for
those of you listening who are interested in human resources, hopefully, this is painted a, a nice picture of, of the potential there and what you can learn and similar experiences. And Brigitte, hopefully you’re open to folks reaching out—

**BZ:** Of course.

**AM:** We can definitely connect those prospective students to someone who is currently in the professional MBA program in a human resources role. So, thanks so much, Brigitte and thank you all so much for tuning in to this episode of Simon Bizcast.

**BZ:** Thank you, April.