

ORIGIN: *Connecting Culture to the Modern-Day Workplace Through New Technology*

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Melissa Hardy-Giles

Melissa Hardy-Giles is in a win-win situation: a member of the Red Rock Indian Band in northern Ontario, Hardy-Giles is the president and CEO of ORIGIN, a company she launched in 2009. ORIGIN provides innovative virtual reality technology to its clients, the majority of who are Indigenous peoples and communities. As Hardy-Giles shares, “Getting to work with communities and getting to see impacts on individuals and families as a whole and communities as a whole ... [gives her great satisfaction.] And it’s awesome to be able to promote our own Indigenous culture for a living. It’s awesome because I get to share cultural teachings through virtual reality with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people across our nation.” Hardy-Giles realizes the work ORIGIN is doing is vital. “Of course, it’s an important role to be a facilitator in bringing resources to the community,” she said, “[a]nd it allows me to be a role model as well for those

who may not see themselves following a traditional career path. We're changing lives and that's the whole jive for me. And that's our whole why. It's like there's too many negative things that are out there for our youth right now. And to be able to motivate and get them excited and trying to guide them on their career path, is most rewarding."

After working for a decade at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay as a senior administrator and human resource practitioner, Hardy-Giles and her husband Paul founded Hardy Giles Consulting (HGC) in 2006 the precursor to ORIGIN. This company specialized in creating innovative approaches and solutions for training and planning. "The freedom got me excited," Hardy-Giles said of having her own company. "But at the same time the freedom to help people and kind of make my own boundaries and my own rules of how I wanted to do it, there was no holding back at that point." One of HGC's first projects was working on a life-skills training program in Hearst, Ontario. Hardy-Giles knew it was necessary to incorporate some form of technology into that program: "Just because our communities are remote, they shouldn't be left outside when it comes to technology. And a lot of times they are, just because getting bandwidth and everything up north is really, really hard." HGC brought in heavy equipment simulators and training to communities via a mobile classroom. The simulators were replicas of the machines utilized in the construction industry. As Hardy-Giles notes, "This was our way into helping our communities to be a part of different types of construction projects that are happening all the time in our northern communities."

Turning now to ORIGIN that has received its share of praise for the way it has conducted business since its inception. The company has also gotten much more recognition since it created ImmersiveLink, a virtual reality platform, in 2019. "That was basically to take a step further of being able to interact and be a part of the training rather than just seeing the Virtual Reality productions," Hardy-Giles said. She also knew her company could provide various educational aspects: "We realized the power of our reach and that's when we decided to launch a cultural library so at the same time, whoever has our headsets and who has subscribed to our ImmersiveLink library will also be educated and have the opportunity to be educated in how diverse our culture is" (Stranger, 2021). Using Virtual Reality, ImmersiveLink allows individuals to take part in life skills programs. They can quickly acquire skills in time management, budgeting, and self-care, allowing them to prosper in their lives. ImmersiveLink also allows clients to reconnect with their roots via Indigenous cultural knowledge workshops led by Elders and Knowledge Keepers. As Hardy-Giles explains, "I wanted to do something to support reconciliation. With the type of reach we have in regards to helping communities or organizations or even big corporations, I always like to add some cultural awareness on the side and be able to educate them at the same time. So, we have cultural teachings as well."

Hardy-Giles also realizes plenty of educational work still needs to happen. "The increase in discussions we see around reconciliation is still somewhat new," she said, and "[w]hile there may be a lot more messages on social media and more topics covered in the news, there is still a lot of progress to be made towards meaningful action. In 2009, before I started ORIGIN, reconciliation wasn't something that was talked about so openly" (Hardy-Giles, 2023). However, she is thrilled to be making valuable

contributions to society: “My personal motivations when running the company, is I just believe in helping people. It’s just amazing that we’re able to make a living helping people and breaking down barriers and being trailblazers. We get sucked up so quickly by big corporations that I knew we needed to be on these platforms and share our knowledge and also share Indigenous skills across Canada.” And it is only fitting that she incorporates Indigenous perspectives into the company’s work: “Indigenous perspectives are ingrained in me. They’re ingrained in my DNA. So, it’s only natural that it drives my intentions with staff and drives my intentions with the Nations we work with. Indigenous culture is so rich with traditions. And we go beyond what anyone sees at a powwow.”

ORIGIN’s work is now rather far reaching. “Obviously we service communities,” Hardy-Giles said. “We’re in over 1,000 schools in Ontario alone and for the past few years now, we have broken into big corporate. Just like the rest of the country, more and more people are giving us a spotlight and wanting to hear what we have to say. They’re opening their hearts to some of our teachings and how they can incorporate them.” Hardy-Giles is fully aware ORIGIN can provide teaching opportunities for people across the country: “Our outreach with our career experiences was so vast that we knew it was a perfect opportunity to educate Canadians on our Indigenous culture. Even myself, an Indigenous person from (Red Rock Indian Band), I’m learning a lot about our culture from our knowledge keepers because it is so diverse and there are so many knowledge keepers out there” (Garrick, 2021).

Hardy-Giles is proud of the projects that ORIGIN has undertaken over the years. These include Operation Innovation and Operation Playground. With Operation Innovation, the company worked alongside members of more than 40 communities, engaging more than 400 Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and training more than 80 people in heavy equipment operation. About 80 people were connected to careers via this program, while about 60 others were referred to other training programs. With Operation Playground, three playgrounds were constructed in northern Ontario communities. In the spirit of reconciliation, more than 100 youth (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) were consulted, and, along with some family members, helped rebuild playgrounds that had fallen in disrepair. “I think the difference is they were a part of it,” Hardy-Giles said of the interest in the projects. “Their families had their hands in there. And the children had their hands in there.”

Two more notable initiatives ORIGIN has been involved with are the Indigenous Perspectives Program and Operation Innovation 2.0. As Hardy-Giles explains, for the Indigenous Perspectives Program “[w]e engaged 400 youth from 32 First Nations communities. We connected these youth to Knowledge Keepers and Elders and this introduced storytelling. The way we incorporated technology was we taught the youth how to use 360-degree video equipment (captures a view from every direction) in order to story tell.” For Operation Innovation 2.0., Hardy-Giles and her team “trained and certified 50 employment and training partners to engage Indigenous individuals in a variety of career roles. We’re quite busy but we’re always trying to train people to train people rather than just delivering it on our own. I like to think we’re arming people with this information so they can use it.”

ORIGIN has grown over the years to the point where the company now has 14 employees, five of whom identify as Indigenous. “When we started the company, we wanted to create an environment that reflects our work, projects, and innovative approach to career exploration,” Hardy-Giles said. “We take great pride in our ability to attract and retain Indigenous talent who have the same vision in making meaningful change in Indigenous communities. We are fortunate that all employees share the same vision and enable us to lead this important work. It is important to the overall success of the company in reaching our goal that the team is passionate about working and supporting bringing opportunities to Indigenous communities.”

Hardy-Giles said her company is constantly assessing its own performance: “Similar to most organizations, we have implemented a series of systems and processes that enables the company to review goals and progress annually. This includes systems supporting products and services, operational processes, and human capital management. From these activities we set goals and objectives that align with overall company objectives for all staff members. Staff members are able to take ownership of these goals and use them as clear milestones when it comes to executing day-to-day activities.” And it’s not just staff input that is considered as customers and prospective customers are also approached for feedback to help drive the development of resources to support the company’s growth. As Hardy-Giles explains, “This growth will allow us to set higher goals and objectives to continually expand on the impact we are able to make as an organization.”

Hardy-Giles is aware that ORIGIN has become a huge success. “First and foremost, success is reflected in the meaningful outcomes that are the result of the work we lead,” she said. “We have worked with over 100 First Nations and have increased the number of Indigenous community members participating in projects operating in their respective territories. This confirms that our workshop offerings, the use of heavy equipment simulators, and Virtual Reality resources are the blueprint to meaningful engagement that leads to meaningful outcomes.”

Despite ORIGIN’s successes, Hardy-Giles believes there is a critical issue facing successful Indigenous economic development these days—access to and control over resources. “These resources include but aren’t limited to land rights, tools, investment funds, trained workforce to support these initiatives, proper education, and training, and so on,” she said. “These issues are especially prevalent in remote communities where they lack access to even basic necessities including clean drinking water.” Hardy-Giles added it can be challenging to make change, especially without some funding: “For example, when we look at accessing education and training, it comes with many barriers. Not only can it be challenging to physically get to communities, but it’s also costly and time consuming. Many cannot invest into this type of education or take time away from their current jobs to attend the training. This is why when it comes to building out training for Indigenous job seekers, it’s so important to understand their background and adapt the training to meet their needs. Some may also not have received the same types of career support that is offered in the public-school system. They may not even know of all the jobs that exist that may be of interest to them and meet their skillset.”

ORIGIN officials have also encountered other challenges. “Some challenges that employment and training teams may face in communities we’ve worked in include getting job seekers motivated and actively participating in opportunities available,” Hardy-Giles notes. “The element of virtual reality and the heavy equipment simulators are a great tool for bringing attention and interest to the workshops. Our workshops offer a lot of interactivity and the element of integration between Indigenous culture and career is something that sets them apart from traditional training methods. So, once people attend the workshop, our facilitators are able to get them out of their shell, having fun, and getting them excited about pursuing their next role.” Hardy-Giles acknowledges there has been new programming created to support Indigenous job seekers, but that it sometimes lacks an Indigenous perspective: “When new resources are being designed and implemented, the key is to look at it through the lens of who will actually be participating and making use of these programs.”

The bottom line is that Hardy-Giles had a plan and has managed to make it work—big time. “Melissa Hardy-Giles, the brains, and the muscles behind ORIGIN, founded the company with an aim to give the communities skills at a grassroots level and be self-sustained; the teachings of the seven grandfathers guiding the way. Her belief was that everyone has a unique and valuable set of skillsets, and it must be cultivated in the population to create more opportunities for the Indigenous population in Canada. The forefathers’ teachings, valuable as they are, could be left behind if it wasn’t adapted to the world today. The answer to that adaptation was already in Melissa’s mind: tech implementation” (Natesh, 2021).

Hardy-Giles also has some advice others seeking success might wish to consider. “One of the most important things someone can do for themselves is understand what their core values are,” she said. “Anything that you build or are working towards should be built around core values: whether they are company or individual driven, they are the foundation of who you are. These values will drive you where you want to be. This again ties into connecting back to your culture and understanding traditional core beliefs and what you feel resonates with you.”

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