



“Success for me is when you have achieved outcome through hard work and have gained valuable experience while striving for that outcome.”

Laura Xiao

Operations Director, Workstem HR Management System
Hong Kong SAR

After nearly a decade working on the front line of the import-export trade sector, Laura Xiao is now the Operations Director at Workstem HR Management System, a leading cloud-based payroll and human resources management system supporting international clients. She left her native China, travelled to the United States and – supported by a Hinrich Foundation scholarship – earned an MBA from the Thunderbird School of Global Management in Arizona which specializes in global trade education.

With her MBA in hand, she accepted a job as the Executive Assistant to the CEO at Global Sources, a leading B2B multichannel media platform in Asia. While there, she was put in charge of a struggling business segment and was able to improve revenue significantly. Laura shares her story and about how she built her rewarding career in the world of global trade.

Laura Xiao dreamed of an international professional life from the time she was a young woman. To help ensure she'd have opportunities outside of her home country of China, she became fluent in both English and Spanish.

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She moved to the US and earned an MBA from the Thunderbird School of Global Management, a top-tier school for leaders in global trade. There, she honed her talent for creative thinking and developing effective solutions to complex international business problems. She was able to apply these skills on her next job and significantly rejuvenate a struggling trade facilitation business segment. For Laura, continuous learning is the key to success in the ever-changing world of cross-border trade. Read on to learn more about her work and how she continuously upgrades her skills for career growth and personal success.

What do you love about your career in global trade?

I enjoy connecting with people from all over the world. Through the conversations with them, I learn about various trade practices, which aids in my continuous learning.

I also get a sense of achievement from helping others to find ways to improve their businesses. In my current role, I have the opportunity to find innovative solutions and provide services to help small and medium-sized companies (SMEs) working in the international arena.

How did you develop your passion to work in international trade?

After completing high school, I attended the University of International Business and Economics (UIBE) in Beijing and pursued a degree in Commercial Spanish. While at UIBE, I also took courses relating to international trade and was fascinated by the benefits it brings to people, businesses and nations. The seed was planted in my heart to further explore global trade.

My dream to work in trade came true when I landed my first job in 2004 with a state-controlled, listed company in Shanghai which handles the exports for dozens of Chinese textile and fashion brands producing including men's suits, women's fashion, underwear and home textile products. The company was formed because many factories could not obtain an import / export license on their own, nor did they have the capacity to conduct international trade themselves.

While China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, it wasn't until 2005 that quotas placed on textile exports were lifted. So, the company relied on overseas factories including one it owned in Honduras, which was not impacted by the quotas and handled a large percentage of exports to the Americas. I was hired to manage communication with this factory and to coordinate with other factories in China. This job really taught me about how products are manufactured and sold worldwide.

After the quotas were lifted in 2005, the company decided to close the Honduran factory and focus on domestic manufacturing. It was then I left and took a job with a Spanish company. At the time I joined, they did not have a China presence. I was hired to set up a representative office in Shanghai and work with agents to import high-quality yarns which were sold to Chinese factories making high-end garments for European and American brands.

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Ultimately, I chose to pursue a Master of Business Administration at the Thunderbird School of Global Management as it is famous for its excellent trade curriculum and vast professional network. The program taught me techniques

for improving research and better evaluating international market opportunities. It also enabled me to travel abroad and meet new people, which enriched my life and changed my global perspectives forever.

Please share some of your achievements in trade after your master's program

Later, I was given the opportunity to be the Executive Assistant to the CEO in the Hong Kong office. In this role, I was able to learn all aspects of the business.

After earning my MBA, I was offered a job at Global Sources, a leading B2B multimedia platform that connects exporters across Asia with importers around the globe. I started as a management trainee working in Shenzhen in buyer services, supplier customer service and sales. Later, I was given the opportunity to be the Executive Assistant to the CEO in the Hong Kong office. In this role, I was able to learn all aspects of the business.

In 2015, the company underwent a major restructuring, and I was promoted to the Head of Market Development for Gifts, Home and Hardware verticals. We were tasked with building a strategy to revive a US\$35 million per annum business segment which had been on the decline.

We put a lot of effort into studying global market trends, such as what consumers were buying in which markets, price points and the trade policy environment. We studied trending keywords and best-selling products across multiple eCommerce platforms.

This informed us as to which categories and brands retailers would be keen to sell. We also went to multiple import/export and ecommerce exhibitions worldwide to identify who is manufacturing the products that brands and retailers are selling.

Based on our findings, we developed a new strategic direction and worked with our team to help them understand which suppliers should be the target customers for our online and trade show services. In addition, we educated suppliers regarding how to innovate and transform to meet the needs of overseas markets.

Using everything I learned from my academic and professional experience, I was able to implement some new strategies that grew revenue for the segment by 15% in just the first year.

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What are the growing career opportunities in international trade?

International trade is more than just negotiations and closing deals. Various teams need to collaborate to make a manufacturer, supplier or brand successful. I would identify the following as growing career opportunities in international trade:

- Marketing roles involving content writing, social media marketing, search engine optimisation (SEO), data analytics and marketing tools utilisation, among others

- Trade and supply chain finance positions, especially those involving blockchain technologies
- Roles relating to secure cross-border payment systems
- Technology specialist roles focused on improving work efficiency, and sustainability in manufacturing and logistics
- International trade educators & subject matter experts

How should one stay up to date on the latest trends in global trade?

First, I would encourage graduates to stay on top of trends by reading international news on a daily basis. That will help broaden their perspective and keep current. Secondly, build a network of people working in different parts of the global trade value chain ecosystem and learn from them.

How can trade leaders make a positive impact in the world?

There are three ways leaders can make a positive impact in the world:

- Senior leaders can invest to educate more people about global trade and how it can help drive business growth sustainably
- They can keep on top of trade-related research that organizations like the Hinrich Foundation provide, and influence the creation and implementation of better trade policies within their companies and trade ecosystem
- Business owners can look into how to invest in sustainability-related initiatives to drive business growth while addressing societal and environmental issues

What are some common misconceptions about the trade sector?

When people think about international trade, they only think about the “buy” and “sell” portion rather than the entire industry chain and greater ecosystem.

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Most people not involved in the sector simply don't understand how many different parties are involved, or how complex and fascinating the trade industry really is.

There is also a need for improved levels of trade-related education. The recent launch of the world's first International Trade Rankings will allow those passionate about pursuing a career in global trade to find the graduate-level programs that are teaching the skill sets that employers are looking and that the industry's future depend on.

I wish I had that Rankings when I was looking for my master's – but I got lucky and studied at the top-ranked program in the 2023 International Trade Ranking edition!

About the Hinrich Foundation

The [Hinrich Foundation](#) is a unique Asia-based philanthropic organization that works to advance mutually beneficial and sustainable global trade. Sustainable global trade strengthens relationships between nations and improves people's lives. We believe the most effective way to advance sustainable global trade is to invest in informing and training the people engaged in trade.

It supports research and education programs that build understanding and leadership in global trade. Its goal is to build a network of next-generation trade leaders by partnering with universities and corporations across global value chains.

Its team of global trade experts and practitioners apply their deep knowledge and experience in trade, economics, policymaking and education to deliver the Foundation's programs. Key initiatives include:

[International Trade Rankings](#)

Created in partnership with educational rankings expert QS, the International Trade Rankings provide a data-driven list of the world's top international trade-related graduate programs

[Hinrich Trade Educators Center](#)

The Trade Educators Center provides educators and students access to a collection of free classroom discussion guides, reading lists, whitepapers and videos focused on real-world business and policy scenarios

[Global Business Scholarships](#)

Annual scholarships awarded to people with a passion for pursuing or advancing their careers in global trade through master's study at Georgetown University, London School of Economics, Nanyang Technological University, INSEAD and the University of Auckland.

For more information, visit hinrichfoundation.com

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