

Interview with an Entrepreneur

Conducted by: Cynthia Russell and Sarah Scott
Written by: Sarah Scott

The third Tuesday in November is National Entrepreneurs Day, so this year, two of our employees, Sarah and Cynthia decided to sit down with our own Entrepreneur, the President of Avant Insurance, Cole Leitch.

Cynthia: So, why did you choose insurance as a career?

Cole: I initially got into it because my dad owned a brokerage. I started in the business sitting in a windowless basement sorting through old files, then around the age of 13 got a promotion to clean the toilets. But then I really got into it. I started to appreciate the nature of what we do and the client service side. As I was licensed, I started to really develop a good relationship with the clients.

Sarah: What was your original mission at “Avant”? Has that changed?

Cole: No not really. We wanted to be able to provide a local independent insurance brokerage option. Our mission is to provide a client first “people before profits” brokerage. Many of the places I had worked at and that I am familiar with put profits before people, and I don’t really agree with that.

Cynthia: How did the name “Avant” come about?

Cole: Diana (Vice President & wife of Cole) and I were sitting around planning the business and our values, what kind of things we want to communicate with our business. “Avant” means “before” or “ahead of” in French, and Diana speaks French fairly fluently, I speak a very little bit of it, but being in Winnipeg, with a sizeable French speaking community, I felt it a very fitting name. With it meaning “before” or “ahead of”, that is when you want to talk about insurance; before something goes wrong. I don’t know how the exact conversation came about (to name Avant) but it was really about the representation of when we want to be dealing with our clients. And the graphic designers like the “AVA”, how it looked together. I’m not artistic at all, but they really liked it.

Sarah: Can you describe a typical day for yourself?

Cole: *Laughs* There is no such thing as a typical day anymore. Over the last year or so, as we have grown our team, a lot less of my time is spent with specific client duties and a lot more is spent on coaching and training

others. Looking at our systems, and how I can make our teams’ lives and jobs easier, more efficient, and less stressful. Listening to problems, helping solve those problems, or empowering people to solve the problems on their own, which is something we’ve been working on. Rather than me being the problem solver, I want people to feel like they can solve the problems. A lot of my day is spent working on the business as opposed to in the business. That is where I’m most valuable now. We have people to do the client service, reviewing renewals with clients, and things like that, who are a lot better at it than I am, so we should let them do that, and I’ll stay out of their way.

Cynthia: What would you say motivates you?

Cole: Hmm.. There are a lot of things that motivate me, but specifically for Avant, justice I would say. What I mean by that is, I feel like there are many people who spend a lot of money on their insurance; home, auto, and commercial, and they are not getting what they need. Not the service, advice, or coverage they need. What motivates me is to help the people who aren’t being taken care of.

Sarah: What has been the most rewarding moment since starting Avant?

Cole: There have been a bunch. When I know someone is capable of something that they don’t think they are, then they do that thing on their own without my help. That’s rewarding. Michelle (Executive Account Manager at Avant) is a good example of that. When we bought John Fehr 3 years ago, she had just started to get into Commercial Insurance. Now she’s handling accounts that she would have never expected to be looking at. Seeing people we work with have their careers and opportunities grow, and giving them those opportunities grow, I love that.

Cynthia: What do you hope clients of Avant take away from their experience with our company?

Cole: That we care. That we truly take their business personally. That’s the biggest thing for me. Whoever that client is, we are truly doing for them what is best, and that we care about their wellbeing. At the end of the day, I want them all to know that we care.

Sarah: Are there any mistakes that you wish you could have avoided when starting Avant?

Cole: We don’t have enough time to talk about all of them. *laughs* There are always mistakes, always things that you wish you could do better.

Sarah: How about, what advice would you give to people facing those types of mistakes when starting a business?

Cole: Acknowledge them and deal with it right away, Ignoring something that isn't going well won't make it go away, but make it a bigger problem.

Cynthia: What is your favourite aspect of being an entrepreneur?

Cole: Now, my favourite thing is watching people grow. I have gotten to the point in my career where most of the value I can provide is in helping our team, and growing their careers. Just working with our team to help them all individually, professionally, and personally is my favourite part.

Sarah: So this kind of ties into that, but what does success mean to you as an entrepreneur?

Cole: Happy people. High rating on our Office Vibes (internal office surveys), high rating and reviews from our clients. That is success to me. It really energizes me when we get good Google reviews or Facebook recommendations. That's what I strive for.

Cynthia: What advice would you give for being a good leader?

Cole: Listen. Have conversations with as many people on your team as you can, and make sure that the people in charge with leading people are listening as much as they can to what their employees wants and needs are. Just listening to your team.

Sarah: Was there ever an "Ah-Hah" moment when creating Avant that confirmed to you that you were on the right path?

Cole: The first time I got a phone call from a client that I didn't directly deal with telling me how well they were handled and how great their interaction with us was. I realized that "okay, yeah, this is working."

Sarah: One final question, what does the future of Avant Look like to you?

Cole: Well hopefully pretty bright! We have fairly aggressive growth plans. In the last 4 and a half, almost 5 years, we've grown almost 900% since our first book of business. So we are looking at continuing to add the right people who truly fit our values. I would like to get the

reputation as being the brokerage who puts people first and takes care of people, both client and team-wise. I want people to talk about Avant and know that every time they are dealing with our company they know that they are being dealt with fairly and honestly.

Sarah: That's great!

Cynthia: That's all we have for you, would you like to say any final words?

Cole: When starting Avant, the big thing I observed was insurance companies, big international entities, banks and credit unions buying up insurance brokerages, and there weren't many local brokerages left. The whole goal and motivation for Avant was to have the ability, knowledge and markets to compete with these big brokers, but the decision making, the money, stays here. We will continue to do that, we continue to revisit our values and make sure they are being met and followed through. Those core values are what motivates our business on a daily basis.