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When people are the bricks and HR strategy is the cement: how HR evolved from an administrative duty to a strategic need

A quick online search tells us that HR websites dictate that investment in talent management, employer branding, recruiting for mindset, strategic planning and flexibility are the HR trends to keep an eye on in 2019¹. A significant part of the business landscape in Belgium seems to keep on running behind the facts when it comes to HR. At Ogilvy Social.Lab, these are the pillars that form the fundament of our Talent Management approach, as we are very conscious that HR is not just an obligatory side note in a company, it is part of the strategy, structure and culture.

Unity in diversity is essence

The crowd at Ogilvy Social.Lab in Belgium (130 people) is characterized by diversity. There are 16 different nationalities in the agency and 25% of the management is coming from abroad. The typical South-African flair with which our CEO Rob Hill is running the show, floats through in the pleasant and informal way in which everyone communicates with one another. Most members of the management are sitting on the floor with other employees to contribute to the team spirit.

Being 'Social at Heart' is a unique and very modern marketing approach, which is attractive for clients and prospects. That is the reason why we manage to attract that much talent from around the world and to find a common ground in every unique individual in the company. Our employees are our ambassadors and this mindset is their voice.

Differentiation is the path to progress

I cannot count the times anymore that headhunting companies complained about the lack of differentiation between Belgium's agencies. It was one of the factors that motivated us to distinguish ourselves from competition both in company structure and company culture.

From the believe that brands need agencies that bridge Advertising, Activation CRM & Direct Marketing, Digital, PR, Social media and Media we transformed to a fully-integrated agency where we bring all these capabilities together with Social at heart, fittingly per client and brief, to develop integrated dynamic content strategies that make brands, sales and customer value grow. This is a unique positioning in the Belgian agency landscape.

Our company culture is partially determined thanks to the recruitment strategy. We aren't looking for people that fit within the current company picture, we are continuously on the

¹ Source: De 5 belangrijkste HR trends voor 2019 (<https://www.itzu.eu/nl/nieuws/de-5-belangrijkste-hr-trends-voor-2019>). Consulted on 3 September 2019

lookout for people that have the skillset and mindset to help the company evolve and that have the audacity to let their voice be heard. Where other agencies mostly focus on the skillset, we prioritize the mindset. Relentless curiosity, change embracers, agile collaborators, passionate professionals and impact driven actors are all part of Ogilvy Social Lab's DNA and state of mind and are indispensable characteristics to function in the company. The skillset is focused on a strategic, creative, innovative, end-to-end, digital/social mastermind.

Our business model is to rent brains and hearts to our clients.

From reactive to proactive

In the last few years, the position from the HR department in our company has evolved tremendously. We moved from a reactive and administrative approach to a proactive and strategic approach. Where we used to be mainly a department on the side in a support function, we are now a significant part of the management, the company strategy and the company culture.

We are continuously investing to stay ahead of HR trends. Artificial intelligence for example, where algorithms based on social behavior could predict that a candidate is the perfect match for a given vacancy, is rising. We are currently investigating the opportunities but also consider it to be trending to go back to the most human approach possible. Technology is great, but HR is a discipline in which the people need to remain the center.

Find me, grow me, keep me

Turnover is one of the most significant problems that all agencies are facing. Job hopping has become part of the working culture, but I have the feeling that people seem to question their work and the (lack of) satisfaction it gives them, way too easily. They often don't even reach the end of a learning curve or don't spend the time needed to investigate their growth possibilities within the company they are in. At Ogilvy Social.Lab we try to counter that by speaking to every single employee on a regular basis. "First-impressions" interviews take place a few weeks after a new person's arrival to serve as an evaluator on how they perceived their first experiences in the company. "Stay" interviews happen randomly to avoid "exit" interviews and were put in place as a result of the finding that people usually only share their complaints and grieves when it's already too late – after their resignation. Where it used to be frustrating for us to realize that we could have helped them quite easily if we would have had a conversation in time, we now ask our employees proactively how we can improve their position in the agency during these stay interviews.

To further support this, the HR team works very hard every day striving to be the best safety net we can be. Where HR used to be mostly focused on recruiting, we have gone way beyond. Finding the most talented people with the required mindset is only the first step on the path. Once we have hired a new person in the company, we start fueling the growth of this person. We do this by global and local trainings in alignment with their manager and with Performance Management, consisting of a 360 feedback twice per year. To make sure that we can keep our talents in the agency, we have clear salary & function grids, active conversations about career paths and incentive policies. Besides that, flexibility and work-life balance are top priority in the well-being of our employees.

In brief, our pillars are: Find me – Grow me – Keep me.

Millenials and give-and-take

The generation that we hope to reach and to change their job-hopping mindset most, are the millennials. They have very specific characteristics and we try to adapt accordingly to be able to keep them within the company for a long-term journey together. Millenials are committed, driven hard workers but they pay a lot of attention to win-win deals and they live according the mindset 'I want everything, and I want it now'. We try to meet them halfway on condition that flexibility comes in both ways. Millenials are mostly focused on training & development, autonomy, work-life balance and flexibility. I am convinced that we are already doing quite well in the first three and I am confident that I will be able to say that about the flexibility in a short time too.

Playground at work

Ogilvy Social.Lab Brussels is known for being a young crowd of talents. The incredible expertise from the seniors combined with the young talents' eagerness to grow individually and together with the company generates a great dynamism in the agency. 'Work hard, play hard' might be a cliché, but is definitely being put in practice and with the HR team we are supporting that sense of togetherness with several initiatives. Seasonal drinks, all-inclusive team buildings of several days with the entire company and per team, a kitchen with a beer tap... we search for every reason to kick off a party and the people consider it as their holy duty to make every edition count.

You Matter

The "You Matter Week" is the practice of what we preach.

The initiative focuses on four pillars of well-being and self-care: Move better, Feel better, Eat better and think better. The week provided activities and workshops to the employees to improve their well-being. From yoga classes to workshops about nutrition, stress management and aromatherapy and from healthy meals throughout the days and a smoothie bike to massages and a zen room for in between meetings... we had it all. The week was a great success and we are already looking into the possibilities for a next edition.

To summarize, HR became an indispensable chapter in the story of Ogilvy Social.Lab. We are aware that we still have a long way to go, but the team is working very hard every day to be out there for every single one in the company and to grow together with individuals, departments and the company as one whole. 'Social at Heart' is not just a tagline. It is our strategy, our mindset, our fuel and our DNA.