



Proud to be a building society



John Wriighthouse

Ellie Rich from Michael Page Executive Search spoke to John Wriighthouse, Divisional Director of Human Resources for Nationwide. A man with great energy, a huge passion for customer service and someone who believes in the importance of underpinning HR decisions with measurement and data.

Nationwide are the largest Building Society in the world and have been operating for over 160 years. They are the UK's third largest mortgage lender and second largest savings provider. They have mutual (as opposed to Public Limited Company) status, which means they are owned by and run for the benefit of their members which now number over 16 million. They have around 19,000 employees across their 1,000 branches.

What changes are you seeing in the sector currently?

It is a challenging time in the sector with a massive loss of confidence and customers wondering whether banks are the cause of the credit crisis. We are also seeing a large amount of consolidation with the merging of key financial services organisations.

Nationwide has grown recently through a series of mergers and acquisitions, including the Portman, Cheshire, Derbyshire and most recently the Dunfermline Building Societies. We are different to a bank - we are a mutual and we are carving a uniqueness for our customers based on trust and honesty.

We exist to put the long-term interest of our customers first, rather than the interests of external shareholders.

How do you go about this?

We have a deep interest in creating an engaged workforce. I believe that engaged employees give better customer service, which leads to increased profit. This is more than just rhetoric. Every year we conduct a questionnaire of all employees which they complete via the intranet, which has a response rate of around 89%. We have been running this for 14 years and thoroughly analyse the results alongside sales data to understand trends and correlations.

“Be brave, have conviction. Just do it.”

What have you learnt from the results?

From our regression of the data we have learnt a lot. One key focus for us this year is on 'leadership'. Interestingly, we have learnt that in reality this is more about management skills, specifically ensuring staff have clear objectives and they are involved in decision making rather than feeling decisions are imposed on them. Another part of this is ensuring Managers are encouraging great performance and knowing what to do when it's not there. Some Managers in the past have avoided the 'difficult' conversations and honest feedback and we are working on our Management Development to support them. My job is to ensure the employees meet the organisation's demands. It is important we win the hearts and minds of employees because they create the experience for our customers who buy our products.



You are clearly passionate about excellent customer service; what organisations do you admire for their customer service?

I once spent a week in the States on a 'Service Excellence Tour' visiting organisations who excel at service, it was fascinating. The Ritz Carlton in New York had a fantastic way of knowing your name when you arrived at reception which made you feel really special. South West Airlines, pre 9/11, had a different and wacky approach with singing staff dressed like Indiana Jones! Stew Leonards supermarket are really impressive. They have a 'University of Stew Leonard'. The important thing is to learn from everyone, but then to take an approach that is right for your own organisation.

How have you gone about integrating the businesses you have acquired?

Carefully, because it is important to protect the reasons we wanted to acquire them in the first place. When we rebranded the Portman it happened overnight – all branches, systems and uniforms. It was a major effort. We had branch closures where there were two sites locally. Our 'pride' values have been launched into Portman and the team have adopted them and are loving them. For Cheshire and Derbyshire we have retained their trading names and products so they still retain more of their own culture and local identity.

What do you look for when recruiting?

We have a clear template in place for hiring into Nationwide and we use a formal assessment process. We look for evidence of specific capabilities. In HR, I look for people who make things happen and drive things through. To be credible in HR you can't focus entirely on 'strategy', you have to earn credibility with the client and support with hands on activities such as recruitment, organisation change, fair treatment at work, employment advice, support and so on.

How do you structure your HR team?

We did have a Shared Service Model but it didn't work for us at Nationwide. It was too big and transactional so we have moved the day to day advice back to the Business Partners who are closer to the client and have a greater understanding of their specific requirements. We continue to have specialists including the Recruitment, Learning and Development, Engagement, HR Infrastructure and Reward teams, as well as the Business Partners. I believe it is important to avoid the faddisms and do what is right for your organisation.

What advice would you give to fellow HR professionals?

Be brave. HR is a lonely world and it takes bravery to stand up and say 'we should be doing this'. Don't be afraid to take a role outside of HR for a period of time and be fully accountable in an operational position. I spent nearly five years out of HR and at the time it can take you to an uncomfortable place but the experience is invaluable.

Education

FCIPD

MA Employment Law and Relations
University of Leicester

BA Hons Business Administration – University of Salford

Career History

1989 – Present - Nationwide

2006 Director Human Resources

2002 Head of Group Training & Development

2000 Head of Personnel Planning & Development

1995 Head of Operations UCB Home Loans / Director of Operations Home Loans

1989 HR Consultant

Pre 1989 Girobank and Natwest

Contact



Ellie Rich leads the HR Practice for Michael Page Executive Search. For a discussion on the marketplace or for support with senior HR recruitment, please call 0121 230 9397