



Michael Page Executive Search work with leaders who regularly express an interest in what other organisations are doing within their HR functions and who are key players in business. With this in mind we are conducting a series of features with leading HR Directors to share information within the industry.

Ellie Rich and Paul McNamara met with **Esther O'Halloran, HR Director of PAUL UK** to learn more about the business and her approach to HR. Esther is a passionate and engaging leader who has successfully progressed her own career and also mentors up and coming HR professionals.

PAUL started as a small family bakery in 1889 in Croix near Lille in Northern France and has grown over four generations to be a leading name in France now trading in 27 countries. They have been in the UK for ten years and currently have 27 stores and last year served 777,504 retail customers.

What are the current and future business priorities for PAUL?

The main priority is our ongoing expansion. In the UK, we plan to open between 10 and 12 stores each year for the next 3 to 4 years. This follows a period of consolidation during the recession when we halted our growth until September 2010. We want to eventually move out of London into other UK cities. This growth is combined with the need to maintain our performance and standards in existing stores. We also want to continue to take the PAUL brand forwards. Our aim is to make the PAUL brand iconic.

Who are your main competitors?

Our competitors differ throughout the day; in the morning we are competing against the likes of Starbucks, Costa and Cafe Nero; at lunchtime stores including Pret and EAT but also M&S and the supermarkets. For cakes, Patisserie Valerie, but for bread we have no direct competitor and we are first and foremost a boulangerie. PAUL maintains the traditional Artisan labour intensive methods of bread-making that have been handed down the generations.

What are the business challenges?

- Ensuring we get the right sites for new stores is critical to ensure the best possible return on investment. Even being on a different side or end of a road can make a huge difference as people generally take the same route each day to work and will tend to form a routine.
- On the people side, engaging with staff and continuing to develop our service culture is a key focus; and the fact we use traditional French product names is an additional training challenge.
- In relation to our brand, we need to strike a balance between being true to our heritage and also being innovative. We have just hired a new Brand Director to help grow our brand.

“ I have taken a common sense approach and made it right for the brand. ”

What have you been focusing on in HR?

I have now been with PAUL for four and a half years and when I joined there was no HR function as such, so I have set this up and hired a small team. We have put in place the policies, procedures and guidelines. With my background in Operations I know the importance of keeping things simple and using the right tone and language so our policies are in a question and answer format. We have enhanced our benefits such as maternity, paternity, company sick pay and holidays. We have recently hired a lot of new managers and have been focusing on management training. It is exciting to get back into this again.

What's on the agenda for HR in the next 2 years?

We are in the process of developing a competency framework that links to our 'parfait PAUL' behaviours. This will all tie in to our performance management process. It is our aim to make succession planning more transparent. We will also be developing a bonus structure rewarding the focus on service, standards and a people culture where we truly embrace a positive 'can do' attitude throughout our business.

What do you look for when you recruit someone?

I always look for attitude and personality. Do they smile? Do they look you in the eye? Do they want to learn? It is a challenge. We have high standards at PAUL. Less than 5% of applicants are successful in getting a job.

What is your favourite PAUL product?

In the morning, nothing beats a PAUL croissant straight from the oven, with a coffee. I also love our mini macaroons and our plain flute (baguette). We also have a new product coming soon which will be something great (truly ooh la la!) but I can't say anything more at the moment.

What is your biggest learning to date?

Where possible deliver a message face to face; don't send an e-mail. Too often people take for granted that a communication has been understood because it has been sent out. Go back and check something has been understood. When I am out in stores I am constantly asking questions and checking people's understanding. I am a curious person. I spend half of my time in stores, as do my team.



Contact

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What is your biggest achievement to date?

I have been very fortunate in the last three businesses I have worked in, to have the opportunity and autonomy to set up the HR function from scratch (EAT, Space NK and PAUL). Having come from a grounding in Operations, I have taken a common sense approach and made it right for the brand. I have been able to prove the value HR can add when it is done right. One of my proudest moments was a CEO and main investor who had been previously cynical, saying that now he understands what impact HR has.

“ I always look for attitude and personality. ”

Who has been a role model to you?

My all-time hero is Coco Chanel. She came from a poor background, built a business and set a standard for women in business. She was a great female entrepreneur who set a standard for others to follow. I adore her clothes and her red lipstick is my trademark!

What advice do you give to someone starting out in their career?

I always recommend people find a networking group outside of their own organisation. I mentor people through their career through the 'Women 1st' programme. Women are the backbone of the hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism industry, making up nearly 60% of the sector's workforce – but only 6% of senior Board executives, half the national average. I am currently mentoring an individual in HR and supporting her with her professional development.

What's your motto in life?

Never give up – you will get there in the end. Keep your sense of humour.

Career History

2006-present	Paul UK – HR Director
2005-2006	Space NK – Head of HR
2004-2005	EAT Ltd – Head of People
2001-2003	Pret A Manger – Head of Recruitment & Retention
1999-2001	Whitbread – Recruitment & Retention Manager and Operations Manager
1988-1992	H&M – Retail Management roles

Education

MAPD	Human Resources University of Westminster
BA Hons	Fashion & Textiles University of Gloucestershire

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