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Encouraging passion as a competitive advantage: a new HR responsibility

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*"One person with passion is better
than forty people merely
interested."* E. M. Forster

1 – The changing and challenged world of work

All European industries will agree with the fact that they are working in a fast-changing world. In many sectors, over the past decade, competition has become so hard that companies have to reinvent regularly their initial business model in order to be able to face changes and ensure sustainability. As a result, some long-standing companies are disappearing, some are merging, new models are arising while older ones are struggling to review their organisation and simply remain in the competition. Globalisation, run for innovation, a tough business competition, short term cycle business approaches force companies to seek flexibility and to constantly adapt their organisational structures, leading inevitably to a transformation of the workplace itself. New forms of organisation (matrix structure for example) have also lead to more complexity (increasing reporting lines and, often, decreasing headcounts). Workforce optimisation along with a post papy-boom demographic context resulted in employees being less to achieve more, and more complex missions with higher innovation and efficiency expectations from their companies, in shorter period of time.

In the meantime, development of firms' representation abroad, mergers and acquisitions have also encouraged the internationalisation of the workplace. Remote work and new virtual communication tools (collaborative intranet sites, forums and blogs, sms and chat instant messaging, video conference, mobile phones with email access, Bring your own device wave – BYOD - etc.) also contribute to changing working habits and to transforming the environment of work. This new version of the work place is the theatre of intercultural mixes and thinner (sometimes blurry) frontiers between private and professional life. We bring work at home or home at work, leaving a question mark on how one is able to balance its private life over its professional life in such pressured business periods.

In these challenging times, a natural human response may be to lean on management guidance. But, leaders also have changed. Indeed, the evolution of structures has lead to a new, and more flat, hierarchical arborescence. The manager role is requested to be multi-functions. Managers are strategic, administrative, leader, operational and instead of being seated in the office next door they are sometimes sitting in the country next door. The role is

more complex and dealing with many priorities, so finding time to spend (not only physically) with the team can be very difficult for all layers of the management pyramid. Workload, unfortunately, often place them as employees before placing them as managers.

Organizational complexity, accelerating transformations and economic pressure inevitably lead to confusion and pushes employee to look for a meaning in what they are doing. If taken as a dramatic fatality around which employees have to adjust, it can lead to a destabilised, demoralised and/or disheartened workforce, with all the negative impacts this has on the work itself (contagious demotivation, less performance, efficiency...). But what if, on the contrary, this situation was taken as an opportunity for success? What brings one employee from persevering and considering these changes as an opportunity rather than as a fatality? And what can HR do to influence such mind-set for the benefit of corporate successes?

2 – More than just well-being, a need for passion at work

The global search for a meaning in work and critics towards a dehumanised workplace has positioned the subject of well-being at the heart of many researches, studies and, consequently, at the heart of HR concerns and actions. Indeed, the expected level of commitment at work is important and organisations have acknowledged the fact that it is “key” to keep employees “happy” in order to entertain this level of commitment. Performance and efficiency are much higher within companies where employees feel well at work as they are able to perform their job, work longer and stay longer in the company (less turn-over). In fact, well-being would be responsible for 25% of the variance in individual performance (Wright 2010).

Many companies, nowadays, dedicates a part of their (or their entire) HR policies to “well-being” at work. Ergonomic work places, mood indicator surveys, caretakers’ offices, child care centres within the work place, relaxation spaces, team building events, etc. have been put in place in order to encourage well-being at work. But is providing well-being opportunities at work enough to lead to well-being and to face such ever-changing business world? Is well-being at work sufficient for one to boost his/her long-term capacity to adapt, to inspire creativity on the long run?

It is also our responsibility, as HR representatives, to find new (or adapted) levers for efficiency, innovation and before all that, for motivation. Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, once said that “*you have to have a lot of passion for what you are doing*” and that “*the ones that are successful loved what they did so they could persevere when it got very tough*”¹. Talent and skills can be developed in an environment where it is pleasant to work. It facilitates efficiency and performance. But long-term successes, competitive innovation and long-term perseverance are enhanced with passion. More than only focusing on well-being at work, companies should encourage passion at work.

Taking this fast-moving complex business environment as an opportunity for transformation and success is hard enough to be supported with passionate employees, who believe in the strategic direction and values of their own company. I personally believe that passionate employees are a competitive advantage. But how can HR influence this concretely?

¹ Steve Jobs, interview performed at a Digital Conference in 2007, www.youtube.com/watch?v=PznJqxon4zE

3 - How can HR help encouraging passion to create long-term success?

Oxford dictionaries describe passion as “a strong emotion, a thing arousing great enthusiasm” which is, most of the time, barely controllable if not reasoned. Passion is also defined as “a strong inclination or desire toward a self-defining activity that one likes (or even loves), that one finds important, and in which one invests time and energy” (Phillipe, F.L.; Vallerand, R. J., Houliort, N., Lavigne, G. L., & Donahue, E. G. 2010). Applied to a modern business environment, being passionate about an occupation seems to encourage focus on its achievement, its success and imply that the purpose of the occupation itself corresponds to the employee inner values or serves a cause in which she/he believes. HR has a leading role to play on three dimensions to encourage passion at work (towards the job, the company, its purpose and strategy).

The first dimension is the corporate identity: by being able to provide a favorable work environment offering the possibility for passion to express itself. A favorable work environment is, in such terms, a culture resulting from the alignment of a company's interests with its employees' self-identification to these interests. The HR function has an important role to play in corporate culture definition. To be able to generate self-identification and to drive passions, corporate values should be based on what is real (values should be defined by employees their selves) and turned towards a goal, a shared ambition (supported vision & strategy). Once defined these values should be reinforced, as guidelines, in all HR activities: recruitment processes, integration programs, internal/external and top-down/bottom-up communications, communication tools, work space organisations, trainings, etc. After all, employer branding is an internal matter before being a window towards the external job market.

The second HR dimension is fundamental in order to release and identify passion within the company. Recruitment is a “key” strategic activity which can lead to the success of an organization. It is an art which hunts talent and experiences and on which the company's performance can count. To be able to count also on the energy of passionate employees, recruitment should be adapted as an art which focus on finding mind-sets before experiences. Therefore, HR professionals should implement recruitment processes and profiling approaches focusing on detecting motivations and inner values and assessing levels of adherence to the corporate culture of the company. Only once the inner motivation matches with the company's identity and culture, recruiter could proceed and evaluate skills and experiences.

Leadership would be the third essential dimension aiming at guiding passion on the long-run. Corporate values, supportive and creative mind-sets will encourage passion. But passion must be entertained and reasoned to remain balanced and sustain. Passion at work must be controllable not to cause any diseases (no work-life balance, burn-outs, etc.) and should be driven wisely (inspired) by chosen representatives of the company's culture. Therefore who, better than the managers, could bear the responsibility of such “guardians”? Dave Ulrich considers that one of HR main roles is to “ensure that managers understand the critical link between employee motivation and organisational performance and how this link can be sustained” (Ulrich, D. 1996). A clear definition of management expectations and margin of manoeuvres should be communicated to these “passion leaders”. Naming the role differently could even perhaps influence awareness around its responsibilities and impacts on the team's inspiration. An even more serious attention should be paid to their selection. More than only their talent and mind-sets (as proposed above) it is their level of positivism, their charisma and adherence to the corporate strategy which should be assessed.

By recruiting passionate mind-sets and giving them the environment of work and the leaders they need to express their talent, I believe that the HR function will fundamentally contribute in helping companies making a difference in the competition. HR professional should be the first passionate employees of a company and they should be using this energy as a strength on which their company can count to make passion contagious.

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Source :

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