

Resourceful humans

Human resources is a 'bout much more than payslips and leave forms, discovers Frances Martin. The Human Resources Institute awards highlight innovative HR practitioners and the contributions they make to their organisations' performance.

WHENJAN MOTTRAM (pictured above) told Tim Miles, her new boss at Vodafone, that he'd be spending quite a lot of money and a week of his time playing characters from the movie *The Matrix* he was understandably unnerved. After all, not everyone looks good in leather. And if the offbeat presentation - meant to inspire staff about the company's strategy - missed its mark, Miles risked slow death by sniggers.

But Mottram, Vodafone's human resources director, convinced him the risk was worth taking. She argued that if the mobile company's funky external brand was going to succeed, it had to be replicated internally, too. Vodafone would never bore customers with dreary PowerPoint presentations, so why treat staff that way~ And could Vodafone expect staff to reinforce that fun, energetic brand in dealings with customers if their own experience of the company was stifled in suits droning on about EBIT?

That the strategy worked is evidenced by the fact Mottram still has her job - but the presentation got great feedback from employees, too, she says. In fact, Miles instructed Mottram "to totally ignore him if he ever questioned the value of such an undertaking in the future", she says. And in November last year it also helped her win the 2002 HR Person of the Year Award, handed out by the Human Resources Institute of New Zealand (HRINZ). The annual HRINZ awards aim to boost the profile and credibility of human resources professionals, and to reinforce the message that these days good human resources isn't about sorting out holiday pay and personal grievance claims. Instead, the best practitioners are striving to play an integral part in developing and implementing their employers' business plans.

The institute saw Mottram's effort to align Vodafone's internal and market brands as a great example of human resources' potential as a strategic business tool. Another example is the recruitment website developed by Massey University, which won HRINZ's 2002 HR Initiative of the Year Award. With three campuses, a staff of 2700 and 400 positions advertised a year - 40% of them academic jobs that must be advertised internationally- recruitment is a big issue for Massey, says the university's manager of strategy and projects, Bill Kimberley.

In 1999 Kimberley, colleague Bronwyn Bayliss and consultant Alan Howard began working on a web-based recruitment system that could handle the whole process, from the initial recruitment request, to processing advertising orders, to tracking applications and generating management reports. Since implementation, their home-made system - baptised Impel HR- has cut the time to hire by 30%, says Kimberley, who headed the project. Going online caused a drop in paperwork, allowing Massey to reduce human resources administrative positions from six and a half to four. And new recruitment advertising processes slashed advertising costs per position by 35%, saving the university \$600,000 a year. User feedback has been consistently positive, with satisfaction levels above 90%.

Reducing the paperwork allowed Massey to shift budget from administration to high-level human resource work, Kimberley says. "We've created a new position called an HR associate, which is a trainee adviser. We've got three that have come fresh from university to learn hands-on. But we've only been able to do that because of this reallocation of resources."

Despite all the potential benefits, Kimberley initially had to overcome staff resistance to ImpelHR- "Some were openly sceptical of the reliability, security and utility of computer-based information systems. In many cases, this view was based on negative experiences with other computer systems." So before Kimberley did anything, he had to get buy-in from Massey's executives and his own human resources team.

The rollout proved so successful that Auckland University bought and installed ImpelHR last year, and Massey has had enquiries from about 15 other organisations. "We didn't design it as a saleable product but we've had so many positive comments we've got no doubt it can be used elsewhere."

But while Kimberley was able to dangle the carrot of cost savings to win management support, much of the strategic work done by human resource practitioners is harder to quantify. Take Mottram's efforts to transform Vodafone into a "values-based organisation". How do you convince the chief financial officer there's pay back in spending money on something as esoteric as that? Mottram's approach seems to have been tenacity - she joined Vodafone's predecessor in 1992 and has been through six bosses. And she makes appoint of describing her ideas in terms of what they can do for the business, not just for staff.

The values programme gets staff to identify the things they really care about - what gets them up in the morning, Mottram says. Vodafone then lays out its values, and staff are able to 'join die dots' where the two match. The outcome is to show staff how they can go for the things they really care about through Vodafone, she says. And she believes there has been a financial outcome through lower staff turnover and higher morale. "We've dropped from a turnover in the high 20s four years ago to about the high teens now. I estimated that's saving us \$8- \$10 million a year."

There is a financial reason for creating a good corporate culture, she says. "Competitors can replicate technology, systems and processes but not culture. So if you develop an organisational psyche where people feel valued, supported, fairly treated and can have some fun, you have a powerful basis to deliver value to customers." And ultimately that leads to economic value for shareholders.

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