

PROFILE OF A CHANGE MAKER

Henry Stewart, CEO, Happy Ltd.

1. Describe your own background, disciplines, roles etc that have influenced you most in your current role?

I grew up in Doncaster and Birmingham in a highly political family. There was a strong sense of the need for a more just world and our responsibility to change things. I'd told I went on my first demo while still in my pram. I remember going on a range of "one person, one vote" protests before I reached 10 – I think we re-used the placards for South Africa, the USA and Northern Ireland.

My mother went on to be Labour leader of Birmingham Council and my upbringing left me with a strong sense of ethics, principles and the importance of treating people properly.

I studied economics and after jobs as an economic researcher I helped set up a national newspaper. The idea was that News on Sunday would be a campaigning left-of-centre tabloid. We raised £6.5 million and lost it all in six weeks! I learnt a hell of a lot about how not to run a company.

2. Explain your current role along with some "gee whizz" facts about numbers of employees, scale of endeavour, global spread etc. Why did you choose to work for Happy

Happy isn't huge, with just 40 staff. We have two main divisions: Happy Computers provides IT training (making learning about computers a fun and involving experience). Happy People helps organisations create great workplaces.

I founded it 20 years ago, after the newspaper debacle, and am still Chief Executive. After that experience and then being sacked by a company after 12 days because of "your attitude" I decided I didn't want to work for anybody else again. Instead I wanted to find out how to create a company that was effective, principled and a great place to work in.

Though small we've had some recognition. Management Today did rate Happy as the best company in the UK for customer service. Business in the Community voted us the best small business in the country for "Impact on Society". And, of course, your awards have listed Happy in the top 20 workplaces for the last four years.

3. What differentiates or defines Happy?

In the IT Training space it is creating ways of learning that people enjoy and look forward to and have real impact back in the workplace. A great course is where every person attending feels it was truly focused on their personal needs and they can take it straight back to the office and apply what they have learnt.

In Happy People it is a philosophy based around a belief in people. We know that organisations can become hugely more effective if they set clear guidelines but then trust their people and give them the freedom to find their own solutions.

Our core principle is a belief that “people work best when they feel good about themselves”. If you agree with that (and I rarely meet anybody who doesn’t) it is a logical next step to realise that the key role of management should be to create environments where people feel good. That is the priority at Happy and we know we can and do transform organisations where we make that the focus.

4. What keeps you awake at night? How would you define the challenges facing your company and your marketplace?

I’m lucky, I normally nod straight off! Obviously the recession has caused one or two worries over the last 18 months. Several of our competitors have gone bust or been taken over.

The challenge facing our marketplace is how to help people learn effectively when they often don’t have time to attend the classroom courses that used to be the norm. At Happy Computers we are increasingly looking at options like Learning Clinics, where people book a 30 or 60 minute slot to get help from a trainer on a specific spread-sheet or a PowerPoint presentation they are about to.

But the biggest challenge is how to reach more people. Our aim, a little ambitious, is to change the way people work in the UK – to environments where they can truly realise their potential. The challenge is to persuade Chief Executives that those changes can really benefit their organisations.

5. What will the current recession mean for HR practice in general and you in particular?

It should mean really focusing on motivating your people and getting the most from them. Gary Hamel at London Business School points out that in no country in the world does the percentage of staff actively engaged reach even 20%. Think for a moment of the waste that represents, but also the potential for real improvement in company performance.

And I do see increasing numbers of companies recognising that in HR, or their “people” or “talent” areas to go way beyond contracts and benefits and focus on creating truly great workplaces where people can do great work.