

PROFILE OF A CHANGE MAKER

Liz Ellis, Danone Ltd, HR Director

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

I come from quite a varied business background. I graduated with a Physiology degree as my passion was and still is based in science. Hence my natural attraction to Danone! However a career in science wasn't practical for a number of reasons, so my career took me along the path of Finance, Customer Service, Trade Marketing and Sales, across 3 different companies. Whilst in Sales, I realised that although I loved the commercial challenge and directness of measure of achievement, I didn't aspire to become a Sales Director. Looking around, HR for me seemed the one discipline that worked across the whole business that could really drive value and therefore business growth. My business supported my move to HR and I started in HR in HP Foods with an integration project for two businesses. Quite a challenge!

I strive to bring into my role in HR (I am the Danone UK People Director) the commercial reality and disciplines that I learnt in Sales and I really believe that my previous cross-functional experiences have really benefited me in all my roles in HR.

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 Danone?

I have in fact recently changed my roles, previously I was the Human Resources Director for Danone UK (Dairy). But since March 2009, my role is Danone People UK Project Director. Basically I work across the 5 business's in the UK (Water, Dairy, Baby and Medical) to see with the HR Directors how we can drive a talent management agenda in the UK for Danone. A new role and unexplored territory in many respects as the Baby and Medical businesses were acquired by Danone in 2007 and we are still at the start of understanding how we can create value at Country Level in a very decentralised business model of Danone.

Globally Danone has around 80,000 employees and as is global market leader in Fresh Dairy Products and in the bottled water market. In the UK we have just over 1,100 employees and now as a country represent the 5th largest country for Danone in terms of sales and still with a lot of unexploited market opportunities.!

I joined HP Foods in the UK when they had just been acquired by Danone and so knew very little about the group at that time. I have stayed with Danone because I really admire the way the group has always managed the social responsibility it has with the commercial reality of the businesses we are in. Our chairman is really personally committed to this and leads the way with innovative thinking for example bringing microfinancing to Bangladesh working with the Grameem Bank.

In addition, the groups focus on health ahead of other businesses and the clarity around its business vision is really compelling.

We are a globally group that is truly agile and change happens naturally and not from a top down approach. The autonomy the local businesses have is very powerful.

3. What differentiates or defines Danone?

I truly believe our values really define Danone. The everyday expression of these values creates a culture that is truly strong and unique and is completely true globally.

It is really a business that is built on putting people first and as a result generates a huge sense of pride and engagement from the people who work within the company.

The fact that the group is decentralised also leads to real autonomy within the business units. We are 100% responsible for the UK business and its future.

We are also a company that wants to be known as a place where people can grow, regardless of the position you hold in the company. It is great that from a HR perspective you are challenged continuously on the learning and development that you have in place (along with the General Managers!) as there is a huge belief and practise that you do not cut on investment around learning.

And finally our agility, the speed at which change is adopted around the globe, the ability to make things happen quickly and simply and our passion and focus around health.

4. What keeps you awake at night? How would you define the challenges facing your company and your marketplace? What are the top 3 challenges and what are you doing to address them?

Our top 3 challenges are probably not that different from those by other companies.

Firstly we have an ambition to be number one in the marketplace. This means that we are continually driving for double digit growth even in today's market conditions. We have to continually adapt and rethink our strategy on this in order to ensure we are responding to our consumer needs and understand where our future growth is coming from.

Secondly we operate in an area that is tightly regulated in terms of food claims. We have to continue to increase our expertise, knowledge and thinking both at local and European level to ensure that we are building credible claims for our products.

Thirdly, we need to create an awareness of the Danone Group in the UK. We are not known as a company except by our brands – Actimel, Activia, Evian, Volvic and Cow and Gate. This gives us a number of challenges from an HR perspective (sourcing, recruitment) and company perspective. We are continually working on how we can do this well.

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

A big question! For me, it means that we will concentrate more on talent management, development and leadership. We are in a middle of a leadership for all programme where everyone in the company regardless of their position is going through this.

We will be also concentrating and do more of what we did anyway, which is to provide more effective internal communications, spending more time talking to individuals in the business at all levels (we have a breakfast with the GM that all people go to), communicating our vision and strategy and involving everyone in the business on our strategic plans.

And across the UK looking at organisational design, effectiveness and how we can create synergies in the business units that can benefit us in the longer term.