

Lisa Charles Jones

Group HR Director, LSL Property Services Plc.

LSL Property Services is one of the UK's leading providers of residential property services. Following the UK market's emergence from recession in 2010, LSL's brands, which include Your Move and Reeds Rains, have experienced consistent growth and latest figures from its house price index indicate that the housing market across the country is moving in the right direction. Nigel Wright Recruitment caught up with Group HR Director Lisa Charles Jones who explains that in a sector where the customer expects first class service, finding and retaining the best talent has always been the biggest challenge they face. >>

very people and customer focused?

I wouldn't say it was deliberate but I would definitely say I enjoy it more. I've been here nearly ten years - I've never worked anywhere for that long before - and I think it is the fact that I enjoy working with the type of people we employ here. They're my kind of people, with huge personalities, 'can do' attitudes and lots of energy. I have previously worked in a very unionised environment which tends to drive a massive 'us and them' culture and I found that less enjoyable

Your early career was in retail: Are the recruitment challenges in the property sector different at all to those in the consumer retail sector?

It's easier to train someone in a retail environment. We are still looking for people who are great with customers and who can problem solve etc. but because we are helping clients deal with their biggest asset, we really need staff that can hit the ground running. That means we are usually looking to hire experienced people with estate agency backgrounds, whereas in a retail environment you can take people from a bigger pool. That makes estate agency a challenge because there are only a certain number of people who have got experience in working in estate agency. We think there are maybe 50,000 of them - but that's an estimate based on the fact that there are around 14,000 estate agencies. But if no one is taking on new staff then how does anyone get any experience? That is definitely a big challenge for the industry as a whole.

In terms of your own career, was it a deliberate choice to continue working in a sector that is



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Would you say, therefore, that everyone in LSL Property services is moving in the same direction?

It certainly feels like we're all on the same team and we're all in it together. I mean obviously we've got people with different roles and different salary bands etc. but it's not segmented into 'this is what you do and this is what I do', we all work well together and get the job done. I prefer working in this way; I'm not a fan of hierarchies.

Over the ten years that you have been in your role at LSL, what impact would you say you have had on the culture of the business?

We were still owned by another business when I first started and HR was very safe and risk averse. We focused more on how to avoid Employment Tribunals rather than how we were going to get the best performance. We also had a lot of HR people back then and their role, through no fault of their own, was to be like

the policeman of the organisation - called in to clean situations up. The only way to change this culture was to basically remove that element of HR completely and give responsibility for people issues back to line managers. The culture we have got now is really driven from them and that separation.

The UK housing market reached its low point in 2009. It must have been an extremely challenging time for those working in the property sector. What do you and the business feel you have learned the most from that experience?

One of the things we did well was anticipate and react earlier than most, to the downturn in the market. Although I don't think anyone could have predicted the extent of it. I remember meetings where we said we were going to budget for a million housing transactions in the next year on the basis that the market had never dropped below one million before. In the end, the actual number was more like 575,000. Job cuts were inevitable. We did react faster than our competitors and that has stood us in good stead..

And what about internally at LSL, did you find that you had to perhaps re-build trust in the organisation?

I think we were really lucky because the press did a lot to make what we were doing believable. Often within an organisation, when big changes are announced, it is followed by some cynicism. But the downturn was so well documented; it meant that everything we said had credibility behind it. We were creative and innovative to reduce costs rather than just staff cuts. Any cost saving initiatives were inclusive, from the board down and there was definitely a feeling that we were all participating in riding the storm.

What personal learning's did you take from that period?

The people here are really resilient and as a group, they never cease to amaze me with how positive they can be. Everyone will rally around. There were some people who reacted negatively due to personal circumstances but on the whole, I think, if you do it properly and treat people with some dignity and respect, it tends to go quite smoothly.



Where we will continue to add value will be to make sure that the right people are in the right jobs, there is a good level of motivation across the business and people are rewarded correctly.

Signs are pointing to a revival in the property sector – what are the key challenges and opportunities for LSL and its brands moving forward?

Commentators say that the property sector probably won't bounce back completely until 2013. The knowledge of that fact allows us to plan and invest accordingly and that is half the battle. We're hoping to be able to grow incrementally during that period so that we can be prepared to grow market share when the property market improves.

LSL's brands include Your Move, Reeds Rains, e.surv and First Complete: Is there a consistent 'employer brand' across the different companies? How do you manage this?

As an employer, we don't have one consistent employment brand. Each business has an employment proposition that is aligned to its own goals and market segment. This enables us to align each employer brand with the consumer brand and ensure that the approach is harmonious. This is really important as we are a people and service business. The training for branch staff is owned by the brand, it is not organised centrally. We have all of the courses that you might expect – inductions, how to sell courses etc. But each is aligned to the brand

Lisa Charles Jones: CV



2003 - Present

Group HR Director
LSL Property Services Plc.

2007 - Present

Board Director
your-move.co.uk

2007 - Present

Board Director
Reeds Rains Ltd.

2000 – 2003

Regional HR Manager
Comet Electrical Stores

1997 – 2000

HR Manager
United Biscuits

1994 – 1997

Regional HR Manager
House of Fraser

1991 – 1994

Staff Manager
Texas Homecare

values of each business. Each business has a slightly different culture.

LSL is soon to be listed on the FTSE 250: from an HR perspective, how you demonstrate value to shareholders?

From an HR perspective things won't change that much. There will be a lot more governance and more scrutiny from the shareholders interested in what we do, but on a day-to-day basis not a lot will change. Where we will continue to add value will be to make sure that the right people are in the right jobs, there is a good level of motivation across the business and people are rewarded correctly. The challenge will be, as we get bigger, to manage our overheads and investment to ensure we build shareholder value.

The LSL career site states that the property sector is where 'the customer expects first class service.' How do you assess that kind of quality in potential employees?

We do a number of different things. In our call centres for example, we are trying to get away from focusing on where people have worked previously and instead concentrating on skills, such as a person's ability to deal with difficult customers. Our problem with estate agencies, however, is we can't do bulk assessment exercises as the numbers of recruits don't warrant it. Our line managers are skilled in selection techniques and are good at identifying the best people who can deliver a great service to our customers. Within surveying, we already employ the best surveyors available, and we have a very low attrition. Surveying is more about identifying potential and keeping the teams motivated.

Why is attrition so high in the estate agency side of the business?

The problem of attrition is consistent across the industry. Even the most prestigious estate agencies still experience 40% attrition. To some extent you have to accept that in a market where there are so many independents, the opportunities to switch companies are greater than in some other sectors. We have a comprehensive plan in place to ensure that we are keeping great people and their experience, and that we are progressing those with potential. It tends to be people who have joined

within 6-12 months that leave. If we can keep them for over a year, they tend to stay longer term. We have some staff have been with us for 40 years! So we also need to understand why people stay.

You are a member of the executive board at Your Move and Reeds Rains – what are the board dynamics like?

Both Boards report to the Plc therefore its very governance and finance oriented ensuring we meet our obligations to our shareholders. Our operational meetings are full of debate and idea generation. The boards are similar because they are made up of many of the same people. We have a very participative culture and one where challenge and debate is normal.

Gender diversity on boards is such a big issue at the moment – is it on the agenda at LSL?

There is only one female executive director on the plc board and we have just appointed one female non executive director. On the Reeds Rains Board, there are two of us and there is only one on the Your Move board. It is something that we're looking into but I think it's a really complex issue. I'm glad that I was appointed to the board because of my skills and ability. One of the issues is the fact that in the UK there are not enough women in senior management roles ready to make the step up, so that's really where the problem needs to be addressed first, otherwise people are going to be making the jump before they are ready.

What's your view on the role of social networking in HR and Recruitment?

We are still experimenting with social media for recruitment and discovering what works for us and our sectors.

What other trends in HR are you interested in at the moment?

Gender diversity is a big interest; also the proposed changes to executive remuneration governance. Some of which is clearly best practice and other elements may be more difficult to implement. The other big issue for next year is pension reform and how we plan to manage the automatic pension enrolment scheme.

You started your MBA this year – what learning's to hope to be able to implement into your role at LSL?

The MBA has been useful as a tool to invigorate my thinking and expand my knowledge. The networking opportunities are also invaluable.

Outside of work?

I run and I enjoy spending time with my daughter – we enjoy shopping together at weekends. I don't have a lot of time between work and the MBA at the moment!

Where do you look for inspiration?

I think Alison Traversoni, who is our executive director for surveying, is an inspiration – she's been on the board for a year and she has quickly quashed a lot of preconceptions - she's only just turned 40, she has kids, her husband is a stay-at-home Dad and she's not a chartered surveyor. She worked her way up from an administrative role and was with the company when it first started over 20 years ago – I even think she helped to carry the desks into the office! What she has achieved is fantastic. She sits in what is a very male dominated world and on paper she probably shouldn't have got to where she has got. She's basically smashed the glass ceiling!



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