

Interview with Amanda Williams

Head of HR, Quorn Foods

When Amanda Williams joined Quorn Foods in 2013, the business was experiencing its best year yet in terms of growth and opportunities to expand its customer base. In this interview, she talks about Quorn's talent retention and attraction strategy during a time of business reorganisation, the challenges of managing employee wellbeing overseas, and the satisfaction of working for a company with a dynamic culture.

You joined Quorn Foods almost 18 months ago. What is your overall remit as Head of HR?

Primarily, my role is about making sure that the HR agenda is aligned to Quorn's business strategy. Quorn is over 30 years old and many of its employees have been with the business since the beginning, which brings huge advantages in terms of knowledge and competency, but also some challenges around bringing fresh ideas and new ways of doing things into the business. The organisation is going through a period of change, associated with our ambition to be the first ever \$1bn meat alternative business. HR is central to these changes and my role is about finding a balance between utilising the experience that already exists here, and combining that with new people and new ways of doing things to help the business achieve its long term goals.

What was the biggest challenge you faced when you came in and how did you overcome it? What will dominate the HR agenda over the next 12 months?

The biggest challenge was trying to understand the food manufacturing industry. Although I'm experienced in HR, I've never worked in food manufacturing before so I had to work hard to understand how it operates, what capability it needs and also where to get it from. I had to draw on internal and external resources for help. At the moment, my attention is focused on Quorn's international agenda. The business opened an office in the USA in January and we are currently in the process of setting up a small team in Germany. My team is helping to ensure that our overseas

colleagues are embedded into the business quickly. We make sure that the necessary support is in place so that they can focus on developing the Quorn brand internationally, while at the same time, ensuring they are culturally aligned to our UK business.

You joined Quorn Foods amidst the horse meat scandal during which time the business experienced significant growth as consumers sought alternatives to meat products. From an HR perspective, how did 'horse gate' affect you and your team?

The growth wasn't entirely attributable to horse meat, but rather due to the determination of the team to deliver the strategic plan that the business had developed since being sold by Premier Foods in 2011. HR had to make sure that the business had the capacity to meet that growth. Having the front line roles in place and the necessary management capability within the organisation was a key aspect of that. Managers need to be dynamic, with the ability to drive performance through motivating and developing people effectively. It was crucial that the business was able to balance the pressure of meeting the demand for Quorn, without allowing that pressure to negatively affect its employees. That continues to be a key challenge for HR. Quorn's growth projections are still aggressive and we are working on a number of strategies to ensure our employees feel valued and supported. For example, we have a number of wellbeing interventions in place, including occupational health provision and an Employee Assistance Programme. We also have a quarterly employee recognition scheme to recognise employees who have made an exceptional contribution to our business.

What challenges are there with regards to talent attraction?

Quorn's factories and offices are located in North Yorkshire and Norfolk, both of which are challenging geographical areas to recruit into. However, as our brand strength has grown, increasingly people want to work for us and geography is becoming less of an issue. In the production side of our business, we need engineering skills which are also sought outside of food manufacturing, particularly by companies operating in the oil and gas industry. Our plan to address these challenges is to focus on developing our own talent, which we hope will be an effective long term solution. This is especially important, as we also need to counteract the additional issue of an aging workforce. We're developing apprenticeships and entry level roles in our engineering functions, so that young people can develop and have fulfilling careers with us, at the same time as providing the business with the skills it needs for the future.

Is Quorn looking at flexible and home working as part of its talent attraction?

Yes, we do have to be flexible around our working practices and our philosophy is about delivery rather than location. For example, our CEO lives in Manchester, and travels to London and other locations to meet the needs of the business. We also now have employees who live in London, Glasgow and Cambridgeshire. Clearly, some functions need people to be on site, but we try and be flexible about where people work if it means that we get top quality talent. In functions that require intellectual delivery, being in a particular

Quorn is on a steep growth trajectory and the opportunity to be part of any business that is growing is obviously very attractive.

location is less important. This, however, requires strong leadership and management to ensure that delivery remains on track. We need to make sure that people working remotely have got appropriate technology so they can be effective and have a network of colleagues to draw upon for support; a network that makes them feel part of the Quorn culture.

Why should people consider working for Quorn Foods?

There are lots of reasons why people should consider us as a place to work. Quorn is on an ambitious growth trajectory and the opportunity to be part of a growing business is exciting. There is also the chance to be part of a global brand, as we develop our international footprint. On a local level, a successful business that



Amanda Williams

contributes to the regional economy will be attractive to some. The type of people who tend to thrive here enjoy fast paced environments and are comfortable without a huge corporate infrastructure to support them. I believe the culture and values of the organisation play an integral role in supporting the company's ability to achieve its goals. When employees relate to a company's values and culture, their engagement with the business will be considerably stronger. Quorn's culture is a dynamic and 'un-political' one, which in my view is partly due to our ambition and the commitment of our people to achieving it. The talent and expertise of our longer serving employees combined with that of our newer people is a powerful mix. All of these things combined make Quorn Foods a great place to work.

You've spent almost two decades in HR. How has the role of the HR professional changed during that time? Are there any HR trends that you're particularly interested in at the moment?

In the past, HR was far more transactional and widely considered to be an administrative function. In contrast, nowadays it is a challenging function that influences business delivery by ensuring that the organisation has the right capability to deliver its goals. The last five or six years have been very tough for businesses, especially those having to deliver mass redundancy programmes. HR's role in these interventions has helped to demonstrate how we can add value in delivering business change. However, as businesses have begun to recover from the recession, HR has started to focus on growing capability rather than shrinking it, which does demand a different mindset and skills. Current HR trends are about taking a more holistic view of people. For example, the ageing workforce means we have to be more creative about how we engage and manage older workers. Effective resource planning and performance management systems, alongside wellbeing strategies and flexible working practices, will be high on the agenda, as tools to tackle this challenging question. On a personal level, I'm interested in how the balance between employee, shareholder and customer interest continually shifts. During the recession, people were just grateful to have a job. However, as the economy continues to improve, I think there will be an increased tension between shareholders who expect good returns on their investments, customers who want good value for money, and employees who want to secure decent levels of reward. It will be interesting to see how this all plays out over the next few years.

You have a USA office now. Managing the wellbeing of employees overseas is a new dimension to your role; how much of a learning process has it been so far?

Managing employee wellbeing and engagement overseas is challenging due to practical considerations such as time differences and infrastructure. The American employment legislative framework is different to ours, so we decided for these reasons to engage an outsourced HR provider to support us. Another important step that we took was to ensure that we provided a good induction programme. Our American team spent a period of time at our UK office, learning about the business and meeting their UK colleagues. This was essential to support them in becoming effective and we will embark on a similar exercise with our German colleagues when they come on board in the near future.

In terms of HR best practice what companies do you look to for inspiration?

I think the work that Northumbrian Water does is exemplary. We should be proud in the North East of the work that it has done around employee wellbeing. In terms of employee engagement and general great HR practice, Northern Rock's transformation to Virgin Money after the financial crash is an excellent example of how a company engaged and transformed its workforce during a really tough time for the region. My other inspiration is the supermarket chain Iceland, which was one of the first organisations I worked for. Its employee engagement practices, culture, and values are outstanding.

What keeps you interested outside of work?

My family is really important to me. I've got a teenage daughter who is growing up quickly and time with her and my husband is very precious, so I try to make the most of it. I'm involved in my local running club and am training (not very successfully) to do a half-marathon. I also do some coaching and mentoring in my spare time as well. I'm working with a couple of HR Directors in other businesses and I've also recently completed some mentoring with a group of teenage girls, who benefitted from working with some strong female role models. I consider myself to have been very lucky and it's my small way of giving a bit back.

