

# Jules Smith

Head of People Services - Virgin Money

Jules Smith has followed her dream and risen to the top of her profession. In this interview, she shares with Nigel Wright what has driven her to succeed during her twenty-year career. She also discusses her passion for employee engagement and its direct link to positive customer outcomes.



## What initially lead you to a career in HR?

I decided to pursue a career in HR when I was fifteen years old. My father worked in senior corporate roles at Greggs and I knew I wanted to follow in his footsteps somehow. He explained to me what each department at Greggs did, and personnel and training immediately piqued my interest. I did some research and subsequently chose a route through education, culminating in a CIPD qualification, that helped me enter the HR profession.

## How has the role of the HR professional changed during the last 20 years?

Significant changes occurred within HR during that period. At the start of my career, it was a policy, procedure and administrative function. By the late 1990s, however, the HR business partner model had become more prominent. HR practitioners began driving business outcomes, rather than just employee outcomes, and became recognised as a key part of the senior leadership team. Basically, taking on a more commercial and strategic agenda. This expanded again in the mid to late 2000s with the emergence of HR 'centres of excellence.' Organisational development, reward and pay, resourcing and talent planning etc. started having more influence within the broad HR discipline. During the last few years, there has been an employee engagement revival. As HR evolved into a more strategic function, it perhaps neglected its role as 'supporter of the people.' HR practitioners have since realised that great employee engagement drives the best possible customer outcomes.

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## Jules Smith – CV >>

2016 - Present

**Virgin Money**

Head of People Services

2010 - 2016

**GE Oil & Gas**

Head of HR Europe

Head of HR - UK & Ireland

Global Head of HR / HR Integration Leader -  
Wellstream

Global Head of HR - PII

2008 - 2010

**Muckle LLP**

HR Director

2004 - 2008

**Orange**

Head of HR

2003 - 2004

**Johnson & Johnson**

HR Manager

1999 - 2003

**Provident Financial**

HR Project Manager

1995 - 1999

**PKF**

HR Consultant

skills. PKF decided to expand its HR consultancy service, and my boss gave me the opportunity to move into a fee-earning consultancy role. This was a real stretch for me and an opportunity to see how to apply HR practices in different commercial environments. I've since always enjoyed 'getting under the skin' of the businesses I've worked for, finding ways where I can make a difference. When I first join a new company, I invest time to understand what 'makes the business tick.' The best way to do this is to get close to customers, as well as getting to know how the business is measured financially and what influences financial success.

**Gender diversity at board level remains a big issue in the public and private sectors. What advice would you pass on to other aspiring female leaders?**

My advice is to be confident, as well as forthright and explicit about what you want at work. I am reticent to generalise, but as a woman I know I have struggled to be those things and learned the hard way. I almost lost out on a role which ended up being pivotal in my career by not putting myself forward and saying 'I want this job.' It was only when my HR Manager took me to one side and told me I was in the frame for the role, that I felt confident putting myself forward. By not coming forward earlier, it appeared I didn't want the job and I very nearly lost out.

**Which recruitment campaigns have stood out as being the most interesting or challenging in your career?**

At Orange, we had high staff turnover in the call centre and it was challenging to fill vacancies. Shift patterns were the main issue. Orange designed working hours to suit its customers but the shifts were not necessarily convenient for employees. We created a campaign called Your Time which solved this issue. It involved building shifts based on different 'lifestyles' and then targeting people in those lifestyle groups. Targeting students, for example, to fill weekend shift vacancies. Something Orange had previously never done. We tailored early morning shift advertising messages to appeal to retirees. In addition, we created school-run and term-time shifts, designed specifically for parents. The campaign was a big success and won

a national award.

**What technologies have been the most 'disruptive' to business practices during your career?**

The virtual workspace has, and will continue, to disrupt the way people work. I experienced the cutting edge of this technology at GE. The business uses the Cisco TelePresence programme for cross-country collaboration, which enables a fully immersive video conferencing experience where remote employees feel like they're in the same room. It's impressive and I expect this, as well as tools like WebEx Connect, Skype for Business etc. to become more widely used, especially as the flexible working trend becomes more entrenched.

**After four years at PFK, you joined Provident Financial and took on an international remit for the first time. How valuable was gaining international exposure early in your career to your subsequent global roles?**

My experience since, until recently, has largely been in international roles, so I would say it was incredibly valuable. Working in an international business does two things. Firstly, it makes you more aware and understanding of cultural sensitivities. Secondly, it trains your brain to think differently. The HR Project Manager position at Provident Financial was my first leadership role

**What have been the most important aspects of your career to date that have helped you to climb the ladder?**

I have worked with and learned from some amazing people over the last twenty years, gaining new experiences that have challenged me. Right at the start of my career, for example, I learned that HR has a significant commercial role to play. That helped 'set the tone' for how I approached my various roles. After leaving university I joined PKF, a mid-tier accountancy firm, as a personnel and training officer. It was a generalist HR role where, for a few years, I got to develop a broad range of

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and included a one-year secondment to the Czech Republic, as well as responsibility for developing HR functions in South Africa and Poland. I created a performance management system for use across multiple countries. It tested my abilities because I had to consider the impact it would have within different cultural settings. Putting myself in other people's shoes and learning about other cultures and ways of life. It's daunting and takes you out of your comfort zone but is ultimately rewarding. My advice to anyone is if given the opportunity, embrace it. You'll learn quickly and it will help shape the rest of your career.

**You've worked in a variety of sectors: consumer products, financial, legal services and telecommunications. Do you have a favourite?**

I've always taken opportunities as they've come up. I've never specifically targeted a sector nor do I have a favourite. Moving between B2C and B2B, however, was a valuable experience. Links between employee engagement and customer outcomes are less clear in B2B. Influencing and educating people on the positive impact employee engagement can have on overall service performance, and the bottom-line, posed a genuine professional challenge. Moving back into a B2C environment following many years in B2B, though, was refreshing. I'd missed having a genuine connection and empathy with the customer. Rather than the sector, I would say that I prefer working in larger corporate environments. The infrastructure and networks you can build are incredibly supportive. There's always lots to learn too.

**How important are business networks in the HR community?**

It's easy to become insular and absorbed in your own organisation, so I believe in the value of building networks. They allow you to step out of your own company and learn how other businesses are tackling similar issues to yours. Furthermore, in the North East, many companies only have one or two HR professionals. It can be quite a lonely exist-



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ence, so in those contexts, networks are hugely beneficial for professional support. You also make some great friends.

**In the 20 years since you began your career have you established basic rules – lets called them 'Jules's rules' – that you try to adhere to in your professional life?**

I have five: Be true to yourself; get comfortable with being uncomfortable; have humility; invest in positive relationships; get under the skin of your business. Leaders must act with authenticity, humility and show vulnerability. Getting comfortable with being uncomfortable is important as we must be adaptable and resilient in a changing world. I always find that when I am feeling uncomfortable, I know I am about to learn something.

**What people, companies or business models have inspired you during your career?**

Two organisations I'm privileged to have been part of are GE and Virgin Money, both have offered

valuable and diverse professional experiences. At GE, I gained global exposure and had access to some of the best, and most renowned, leadership thinkers in the world. I find Virgin Money's ambition and the way it does business compelling. There's a desire to be different and to make a difference. I have been fortunate to work with some amazing people. My first HR boss taught me how to be a commercially and customer centric HR practitioner. I have also had the privilege of partnering with some brilliant business leaders who involved me and taught me a lot about running a business, which extended beyond the HR agenda.

**What kind of leader are you? How do you get the most out of your teams?**

I like to think I am an inclusive and supportive leader, I certainly try to be. My aim is to help people understand their purpose, let them deliver what needs to be done, supporting them when they need me. I try to lead in the way I want to be led. Honesty and fairness are important as well as regular feedback and coaching. I enjoy building and leading teams and am proud to see some of the people I have supported over the years go on to do some great things.

**Where do you see yourself in 10 years?**

If you'd asked me that question 10 years ago, I would have given a definitive answer. Now, I view my career as a series of experiences and learning opportunities. I don't aspire to any position or stature within a company. Learning, growing and experiencing new and different things is important. And of course, making a difference.

**What do you get up to outside of work?**

My partner and I recently moved to the Northumberland countryside, which is perfect for getting outdoors and walking our dog, Woody. Running is also a new hobby of mine. I did the Great North Run for the first time this year and raised £3000 for Women's Aid. I've not quite got the running bug, but I try and run a few times per week.