



THE MILLENNIAL'S CHOICE

A NEW ERA FOR HR

ENGAGING TALENT THROUGH COMPANY CULTURE

Company culture. Corporate buzzword or the framework for driving an organisation? Founder of PALO IT, Stanislas Bocquet, tells us why we ought to get on board with the culture revolution.

Arriving at the slick downtown premises of one of Hong Kong's premier co-working spaces in Causeway Bay, you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd stumbled into the city's latest hidden, ultra-hip café. There are lattes, MacBooks, leather couches, high-top benches, floor-to-ceiling windows, rock tunes playing over the speakers – the full package.

It's young, stimulating, vibrant. But this highly curated space is also, of course, a workplace. Certainly an appropriate setting for rapidly growing company PALO IT, a digital technology disruptor, with a forward-thinking company culture that is at the forefront of everything it does.

Clear vision, strong values

A sleek, modern office is one thing. But according to PALO IT's Founder, Stanislas Bocquet, it's the attention to vision and values that is most important for attracting the next generation of talents.

"We're living in a time where everything is changing so fast and company culture must shift to reflect that," he explains.

How this translates to his own company is clear. "Quite frankly, I started the company because I have a belief that we can, whatever our level, transform society to build a better world. But also it's to create a place where people can express themselves, develop their skills fast, build their confidence and find a way to have a positive impact in their life."

It's bold, uncompromising and even a little daunting as a prospect. But as Stanislas explains over the chatter of our busy surrounds – punctuated frequently by the hiss of an espresso machine steaming fresh milk – talents are increasingly looking to engage with employers that have a vision which matches their own. "When we arrived here [in Hong Kong], everyone told us that people are only interested in

salary and titles. In fact we found the opposite to be true," he says.

Not only are talents looking for the right vision, they're increasingly seeking new ways to work which incorporate greater flexibility, autonomy and transparency. "We used to think it was just millennials who wanted this kind of culture. But in our experience it applies across all age brackets for both local and international staff. Personally I can't imagine working the same way I did when I started my career 20 years ago."

Driving performance

The result is five core values – caring, courage, sharing, positivity & self-improvement, delivering awesomeness – which are embedded within an agile organisational



PALO IT is a fast growing international consultancy founded in 2009, specialised in human-centred design, agile software development and the transformation of forward-thinking companies.

300+ experts

9 offices worldwide

27 nationalities

30M USD turnover (2016)

structure leveraging flexibility, transparency and collective intelligence.

Admittedly all this may sound a little too good to be true. Let's not forget the various initiatives for both personal and professional development like regular meetups, yoga sessions, cooking classes, parties and training seminars. A two-day meetup in Phuket was the most recent on the cards.

It means that personal life can be easily intertwined with working life; a point that many young staff enjoy, explains Stanislas. But not everyone has the time or desire to do so. "It's totally up to the staff. There are plenty of people with families or other passions outside work and we understand the balance that needs to be made."

Some may regard these ideas with scepticism. Happiness at work is great, but how can you balance the 'touchy feely' side of business with actual results? A modern workspace resembling a private café is 'cool' but can you actually get any work done? Can work really be rosy all the time?

Yes, the ideas may raise eyebrows but the logic is clear: Place company culture at the forefront of everything you do as a way to drive performance. Similarly: differentiate yourself from the competition to attract the best talents. "The recruitment process is very important. When we recruit people we try to figure out if they share our values and vision. It's essential as this is the main driver of our growth and how we interact internally."

This isn't to say there haven't been growing pains along the way.

"It hasn't always been an easy path! But we've taken the time to find the right model

and perhaps the one we've found is not necessarily adaptable to all organisations," Stanislas admits.

Previously he'd tried simply asking employees what should be improved. "That was not a good way [to do it]," he laughs, as people tend to focus on problems rather than positives.

Last year, with an operational overhaul in mind, he gathered the company's 200 employees together for two days. This time the approach, named 'Appreciative Inquiry', was to ask employees to express



Stanislas Bocquet, Founder of PALO IT

their personal dreams – "everybody would write a sort of fairy tale," he explains – and how this would translate to their ideal vision of the company. No timeline. No restraints.

The gathering resulted in the creation of concrete initiatives including a new career path model, a new organisation model into 'Hives' and 'Swarms', the PALO IT Academy, the PALO IT Impact Lab and the PALO IT Incubator.

Some ideas have been more difficult to implement than others. "As part of the new governance model we decided to become transparent at all levels in terms of turnover, margin, salaries and overall strategy." A big challenge no doubt. "At the beginning you can imagine that opening up the salaries to everyone frightened some people. But after almost two years now, I'm glad to say that everyone is very involved," he says.

Agility & an impactful organisation

So can we expect companies with long histories and rigid structures to embrace a more open and agile company culture? "I would say that they have no choice!" he says with a smile.

"Of course these companies can't just transform overnight. But I think leaders are starting to understand the need to change and adapt. The fact is these old organisations face a challenge to attract and retain talents due to the bad perception of their company culture."

While it may be a stretch to think that all companies can mimic the success of certain startups, reflecting on company culture should be a priority at all levels.

"Expectations are no longer the same. When I was starting my career our main focus was money and power. Now it's more and more about having a good work-life balance," he says.

Ultimately he expects the next generation will need to feel that their company has a positive impact on the world. "I believe we [at PALO IT] are an actor for this and that's why we attract the right talent. Of course though, it's easy to have a great idea but what will you propose to deliver it? That's the challenge." **E**