

Human Resources Magazine

The commando approach to management

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By hiring an interim manager to establish its new global brand, Getronics got things going quickly and gained time to look for the right full-time candidate. By Steve Smethurst

It's been said that the most common reasons for appointing an interim manager are the management of an acquisition, creating a culture change or turnaround, accelerating momentum, crisis management, as cover for sudden departures or to manage start-ups and closures.

When internal-branding expert **Aniko Czinege** did a five-month stint as an interim at the Dutch ICT company, Getronics, in Amsterdam recently, it was for several of those reasons – an acquisition had created the need for a culture change, momentum needed to be injected and there was the potential for crisis.

Getronics, a company with 11,000 employees, acquired Wang Global, a US company with 22,000 employees, in May 1999. Wang had once been on a par with IBM, but had fallen away. Partly as a result of this, the newly merged company decided that its management board and headquarters were to be based in Amsterdam. Subsequent restructuring meant that there would be over 30,000 employees in 44 countries – although service partnerships extended this to a total of more than 130 countries.

The new-look Getronics stated its vision to be 'one of the leading ICT solutions and services providers in the world'. This meant they needed a people strategy to become the employer of choice and a brand strategy to establish Getronics as a global brand so that people were aware of what the company stood for.

Someone had to be responsible for making this happen, and that someone was Czinege. A senior consultant at the communications consultancy, Banner McBride, she was handed the role of vice-president internal communications, on a five-month interim-management basis. Her task was to gain support for the newly global brand, set up a communication programme to encourage the various countries to adopt the brand, establish the credibility of the new board and achieve consistent communication both internally and externally.

Czinege was brought in by the managing director, Andrew Shaylor. He decided on an interim manager to get the process going quickly and to gain time to find the right person to take on the role full time. Czinege has a wealth of internal communications and branding experience and had

previously worked with TNT on a similar project. ‘The great thing was that everything was up for grabs,’ recalls Czinege. ‘We had a blank sheet of paper and we knew where we had to get to, but mapping it all out was going to be a great responsibility. And the five-month timescale was making it feel like a crisis.’

The goalposts kept moving

When asked if there were other crises along the way, Czinege reflects before answering with a smile, ‘Erm, yeah, quite a lot, really.’ It seems that the goalposts had the habit of moving frequently. ‘Daily’, in fact. ‘The biggest thing,’ she says, ‘was giving people the confidence to go back to their countries and say, “You’re getting this – and you need to put time aside for it.” Getting them to make a commitment wasn’t easy. It was a case of making things look real and solid, when really everything was just work in progress. At the communicators’ conference we held, not surprisingly, their reaction was, “It sounds great, and we will trust you, but if you let us down...” They didn’t know who we were, so you couldn’t blame them.’

As Czinege was getting up to 100 emails a day and promising to respond within 24 hours, it was a constant juggling of priorities.

She moved to Amsterdam – the company rented an apartment for her and her working hours were a minimum of 8am until 9pm, and sometimes 7am until midnight – and she travelled back to the UK at the weekends. ‘To be honest, it was quite difficult,’ she says, ‘even if you left early on a Friday, you wouldn’t get home until at least 10pm – and the flights were usually delayed.’ It will be a tale familiar to anyone who uses the windy Schiphol airport on a regular basis.

Nor did her problems end there. ‘It was the year 2000, we had the millennium bug to worry about. I had to meet my boss in the evenings, because we never had time to talk in regular working hours. He was trying to drive so much through, that I needed to be up-to-date with what he was doing and thinking. I had to grab him and just say, “Right, what’s changed, what’s different, what needs to be communicated?”’

‘You have to know what the priorities are in a role like this,’ says Czinege, ‘what are the things that would really make a difference, and what would simply be nice to have.’

Overall, her programme’s objectives were to build understanding and support for the new vision and brand; increase pride and confidence in the new company among all employees, increase alignment between internal and external messages about the new Getronics; and win the commitment of the top 220 management team, country managers and communication managers to their role in internal communication.

Czinege appointed a project manager to help her with the workload. ‘She said she’d never worked as hard in her life,’ says Czinege with an embarrassed laugh.

You’re always learning

For someone in an interim role like this, the important thing to remember, stresses Czinege, is that you’re always learning. ‘When it’s particularly stressful, you tell yourself it’s really good for your cv. I even learned to read Dutch, if not speak it.’

The latter hit home one icy wintry night. ‘I couldn’t find my apartment. I must have been pronouncing the name of my street wrongly and everyone I asked was saying, “Oh, I don’t know where that is, sorry.” It was so cold and I couldn’t get home. I must have asked at least six people...’

Of course, it wasn’t all bad, recalls Czinege, ‘because as an interim, you often feel you’re not really part of the team, but when I left they gave me a lovely cake, a present of a Getronics atlas that everyone had signed, and they took us to Amsterdam’s best restaurant for a meal. They even sent me some classical music tapes at Christmas, so I still feel part of Getronics – whenever I see a taxi with its advertising, or on planes, I think, “Wow, I know all about that.”’

And was her time there a success? Czinege launches into an anecdote to explain. ‘Someone from the advertising agency we used was picked up by a Getronics driver at Singapore Airport. He actually knew all about ‘building futures’ [the new corporate branding]. Never mind all the measurement, conference feedback and the figures coming back – if you’d asked me before we started what my measure of success would be, it would be unprompted positive feedback from someone like a Singaporean driver.’