

*A company must have a clear sense of its own identity before it can attract and retain the right people. Confidently defining and explicitly communicating your firm's identity is a prerequisite for guaranteeing employees' commitment and loyalty. At Nokia, HR places particular emphasis on its signature experience, which consists of a network culture and employee participation, to ensure the engagement – primarily emotional – of curious, friendly, and adaptable people.*

# The Corporate “Signature Experience”: the Key to Attracting and Retaining Top Talent

Focus based on What It Means to Work Here by **Tamara J. ERICKSON** and **Lynda GRATTON**, *Harvard Business Review*, March 2007, and on an interview with **Karsten HETLAND**, vice-president of human resources, Customer & Market Operations, Nokia (Finland).

## Three job offers...

Three companies with distinctly different induction processes offer Sally a job:

### WHOLE FOODS MARKET

At this fresh food supermarket chain, new recruits join an independent team for a three-month trial period. Team members then vote for or against the person's permanent recruitment.

### TRILOGY SOFTWARE

In this software start-up, Sally would work very intensely on a series of creative projects. Management would monitor her work and her ability to carry out assignments very closely.

### THE CONTAINER STORE

Before being allowed to take up her post, Sally would have to follow a demanding training programme. She would have to complete 235 hours' formal training during her first year with the company.

**How does a person make the right decision? What sort of information do these different induction processes give Sally about the professional experience she would have in each of these companies? Find out at the end of this article...**

**W**hat magic formulas do companies that attract and retain the right people possess? “They don't have any,” respond Tamara Erickson and Lynda Gratton. Indeed, they have found that what such companies have to offer is actually quite varied. Some offer higher than average salaries, while others do not; some have standardized work processes, while allowing their workers the freedom to work as they would like, and so on. Nevertheless, these companies have one thing in common — a distinct identity. They have developed a genuine

“signature” that conveys to potential employees what it is really like to work at their company. Erickson and Gratton present five fundamental ways for companies to establish and communicate their core identity — the real key to finding and keeping the right people.

## 1. Target specific types of people

A company must clearly define the particular appeal of its “employer offer” whether this concerns remuneration, the work environment, flexible schedules, and so on. The company can then attract people whose essential professional aspirations it

can satisfy, thus ensuring high motivation and performance. For example, low-cost airline JetBlue does not offer salaries that are any higher than average. However, it does provide excellent working conditions and flexible hours, factors that are stressed during recruitment.

## 2. Preserve organizational traditions

Some companies' core identity is rooted in ancient traditions. The Royal Bank of Scotland has maintained a custom that goes back to the 19th century. It consists of an executive management meeting that is held every morning from 8 to 9 in order to review the previous day's business. In addition, the bank has built its success upon continuous pressure to produce results. “There are plenty of jobs for people who need a good cup of coffee in the morning while reading the newspaper—but not here!” proclaims the HR manager of RBS. By openly presenting its strong personality, RBS sends job candidates a strong message. People who join this organization must have a taste for competition and constantly strive for maximum efficiency. ...

... 3. Share your stories

Goldman Sachs makes no secret of the fact that job candidates must go through an intense test of endurance that includes 10 to 30 interviews. The aim is to attract people who are capable of building networks and working together in a team to remain up-to-date on market news and evolution.

4. Cultivate company culture

Employees must be continuously receptive to messages (verbal and non-verbal) that help them to understand corporate culture. A worker's lack of involvement is sometimes due to a gap between a person's expectations and their actual job experiences. The culture of Whole Foods Market is rooted in teamwork, and it favours processes that promote cohesion. As a result, there are collective rather than individual bonuses. A person who wants to be accepted by their colleagues knows that they must

BIOGRAPHY



**Tamara ERICKSON** is president of the Concours Institute, a business strategy think-tank for senior executives. She holds an MBA from Harvard University, and her research focuses on demographic changes in business organizations and worker-company relationships.



**Lynda GRATTON** teaches Management Practice at London Business School. She is a respected authority on worker-company relationships, and her latest book is *Hot Spots: Why Some Companies Buzz with Energy and Innovation – And Others Don't*, Financial Times/Prentice-Hall, May 2007.

prove themselves capable of cooperating and contributing to team initiatives.

5. Have the courage of your convictions

"The suit is too big for some people," admit

managers at Exxon Mobil as they speak about people who have left the corporation. Companies with a strong corporate identity do not abandon their convictions, even for people who may be brilliant but who would not be able to fit into the organization's particular ways of doing things. The nature of Exxon Mobil's activities requires the application of strict communication procedures and tough security regulations. And these considerations sometimes take precedence over a worker's creativity. But that is the price of the energy industry giant's very distinct identity. ■

Based on the article *What It Means to Work Here* by Tamara J. Erickson and Lynda Gratton, *Harvard Business Review*, March 2007.

... Three distinct signatures

WHOLE FOODS MARKET

If Sally likes her independence, she will not be welcome here. Team work and group effectiveness are what count. The peer vote on whether or not to hire someone is not intended to ensure that a nice person joins the firm but rather to ensure that new recruits will be effective team members.

TRILOGY SOFTWARE

If Sally does well under pressure, is interested in rapidly developing a wide variety of skills, and likes the idea of remaining relatively autonomous, this company should fulfil her expectations.

THE CONTAINER STORE

The thorough training programme implies that the company foresees long-term collaboration with Sally and will offer her good opportunities to develop her career.

# Nokia's Signature: Engagement and Achievement

Interview with **Karsten HETLAND**, Vice president HR, Customer & Market Operations, Nokia (Finland)

How would you describe employee engagement at Nokia CMO, and how do you measure it?

There are two components to employee engagement, one emotional and one rational. Rational engagement is related to company performance, career potential, and personal evolution. Emotional engagement depends on whether people feel good about being in the company. Do they feel enjoyment and fulfilment? Do they feel a personal connection with

company leaders? The combination of the two types of engagement translates as employee loyalty. Both are crucial, however the emotional component carries more weight. Openness and responsiveness are fundamental qualities at Nokia. They are part of the corporate DNA and feel wholly natural. We carry out an annual global employee survey to measure employee engagement, and we follow up with additional "pulse" surveys in specific geographic areas or

business units. Surveys not only enable HR to gather information, but above all, they give employees a feeling of belonging and an opportunity to participate in improving ways of working. We want people to look forward to this survey, and the 82% response rate (direct + indirect employees) implies that we have been successful. Survey content is updated regularly; the latest revision was done a year ago. Leadership is also crucial to foster engagement, and our leadership ...

... model must also undergo continuous renewal. True Nokia leadership should resemble that of a Formula 1 racing team; everyone should feel that they are a part of the winning team, even if they were just toting tires they put their own mark on the winning car. It is important for people to look at their leadership's engagement and see their own reflection.

**Does Nokia provide new recruits with a "signature experience" that translates this focus on engagement?**

Yes, we do, and this experience is achieving together through networking and cooperation. During the induction process, a person's team leader sits down and share with a new hire who he or she would benefit from meeting. This might be anyone, anywhere in the corporation. Together, the leader and the hire develop a list of names, and the person is expected to get in touch with them and get them involved in his or her induction process. The list expands as the new person moves along, with new peers and colleagues suggesting yet others to get to know. The team leader checks up on who has been met and how the new person expects to benefit from the contact. In sum, you start building your network from day one and continue to do so during the entire induction process—and throughout your career. Hierarchy is only one way of working. It is generally more important to know and connect with the right, most relevant people regardless of the organizational level. We are capable of candidly describing the work environment at Nokia. We have an open, network-based culture and a non-political atmosphere. People here are driven by engagement and an urge to achieve; their goal is to be part of a winning team. It is important that we be clear about our cultural characteristics and that they not come as a surprise.

**Who is the "ideal" employee that this signature experience helps to reveal?**

We are looking for people who effectively engage socially in addition to being professional skilled. People who can form and build relationships, and who function well in a variety of environments. These things may be more or less important depending on a person's job, but it is

## BIOGRAPHY



Norwegian-born **Karsten HETLAND** holds an M.A. in psychology from the University of Oslo and a MBA from Henley Management College (U.K.). He began his business career at Electrolux, where he held different HR positions before becoming managing director of the corporation's Danish Professional Appliance subsidiary. He subsequently became corporate head of human resources for Danish telecommunications operator TDC. He joined Nokia in 2004 and is currently head of HR of Customer & Market Operations (CMO), the corporation's global channels and supply chain unit. Hetland thus ensures HR support for business strategy through

organizational development, optimal staffing and competence development, and remuneration. The Nokia group employs 40,000 people of 120 nationalities. In 2007, first quarter net sales amounted to 9.9 billion dollars. Or: Net sales in 2006 amounted to EUR 40 billion

nevertheless a thread that runs through the entire organization. Of course, we also focus on technical skill; relational skills are crucial but hardly enough. Innovation and productivity requires a combination of profound technical expertise and personal receptiveness. We recruit both experienced people and recent graduates, but we have recently been emphasizing structured graduate recruitment. A structured system is necessary in order to get the best people, so we have been building relationships with universities as well as pursuing more informal recruitment channels. We are increasingly using "viral" techniques, where we reach out to people that Nokia members have recommended because they believe they will fit in well.

**What kinds of practices do you use to foster overall employee commitment and enthusiasm in the long run?**

This is an ongoing challenge, and the catchword here is "participation". For example, self-nomination and open opportunities are common practices. People can apply for available positions or ask to participate in a project they are interested in. More specifically, in May Nokia held a 72-hour "Nokia Jam", where the entire workforce was invited to participate in a global discussion on strategy, values, and leadership. 13,000 people signed up to participate in the virtual discussion; 9000 logged on and posted ideas and engaged in discussions. People expressed their

ideas, shared observations, and discussed concerns. We are currently reviewing this information.

On a smaller but still quite significant scale, during spring we went through a value renewal process, we organized participative cafés or workshops in 16 locations across the globe. 2500 people took part in the Nokia Way Café events destined to produce the employee viewpoint of who we are. We ended up with 4 new values—expressed with new wording and a novel tone—that reflect our current situation and shared goals for the future. These values include among others, "engaging you" and "achieving together". In fact, it is just as necessary to engage employees as customers. Ideally, we will engage both in exactly the same way and on the same levels. Our industry is currently in the middle of a transitional phase. Telephones are being replaced by mobile devices where voice transmission is merely one of its numerous uses. New services, new ways of selling, and new ways of engaging people are all emerging. Do we know our current customers? Yes and no. Do we now have the right people in our company? Yes and no. Both our customer and our employee base are changing as engagement becomes even more collaborative, social, participative, communal. To capture new needs, we will need an employee group that includes curious, social, achievement oriented people who are active participants in the changing world around them. ■