



# HEADWAY

NEWS AND VIEWS FROM **AHEAD**  
PART OF THE EUROPEAN EXECUTIVE SEARCH NETWORK



**CANDIDATE FEEDBACK VIA FEDERAGON P.2 ► STRATEGIC PLANNING IN A CRISIS P.2**

**► EUROPEAN HIGH POTENTIALS... P.2 ► A NEW WORLD OF WORK? P.3**

**► REVIEW: REFLECTIONS ON CHARACTER AND LEADERSHIP P.4**

## ► A DEFINING TIME FOR HR

**'Bad times have a kaleidoscopic effect on the way you manage your organisation.'**

*Jan Van Acoleyen, Barco*

◀◀◀ HR matters enormously in good times, say gurus like Jack Welch. But it defines you during bad.

In Belgium, this is already acknowledged by enlightened management. 'Bad times have a kaleidoscopic effect on the way you manage your organisation,' explains Jan Van Acoleyen, HRD at Barco. 'Every choice becomes an essential one, bringing different aspects to the decision table without room for maneuvering. People in and outside your organization will remember your choices and they will act upon it once the crisis is over.'

Today's challenges for HR were the focus of a recent seminar<sup>1</sup> where Geert Noels, formerly Chief Economist of Petercam analysed the six key components of the recent 'perfect storm': an ageing population, globalisation with unprecedented demand in developing countries, new technologies, increasing demand and limited supply of fossil fuels, financial products transferring uncontrolled risk, plus environmental factors creating added strain. Together this all resulted in 'an economy on steroids' on an unsustainable long term growth path. 'The future was predictable, yet few predicted it.'

In response, CEOs and HRDs have had the challenging task of making their companies lean without damaging muscle. 'Compared to previous crises, they are more aware of the people challenge and the remaining shortage of those key contributors', comments Jan Van Acoleyen. 'Having the right people on board is a cornerstone for future success in a world where the environment is less and less predictive and more and more global.'

Looking ahead, some observers foresee that the traditional workweek will change and work-life balance will remain important, resulting in more people opting to work as independent, flexible contractors. Energy will become an important issue and green will be cool. All this will result in more demand for flexible, experienced, out-of-the-box thinking, workers and structures. To achieve all this, the ideal HR manager will be more communicative and able to marry short-term with long-term goals, individual with corporate needs. Some argue that they will above all be a professional facilitator with expert knowledge in certain fields such as social law and organisational design. Others like Jack Welch go further, challenging HR to 'prove its mettle' now but in a 'game-changing' rather than a mere supporting role.

'One thing is sure', adds Jan Van Acoleyen, 'The ability and desire to be a player, to make an impact, to take responsibility, to build bridges across individuals and organisations, as well as to learn continuously will help HR people be successful in the world ahead.'



SEARCH FOR HIGH ACHIEVERS

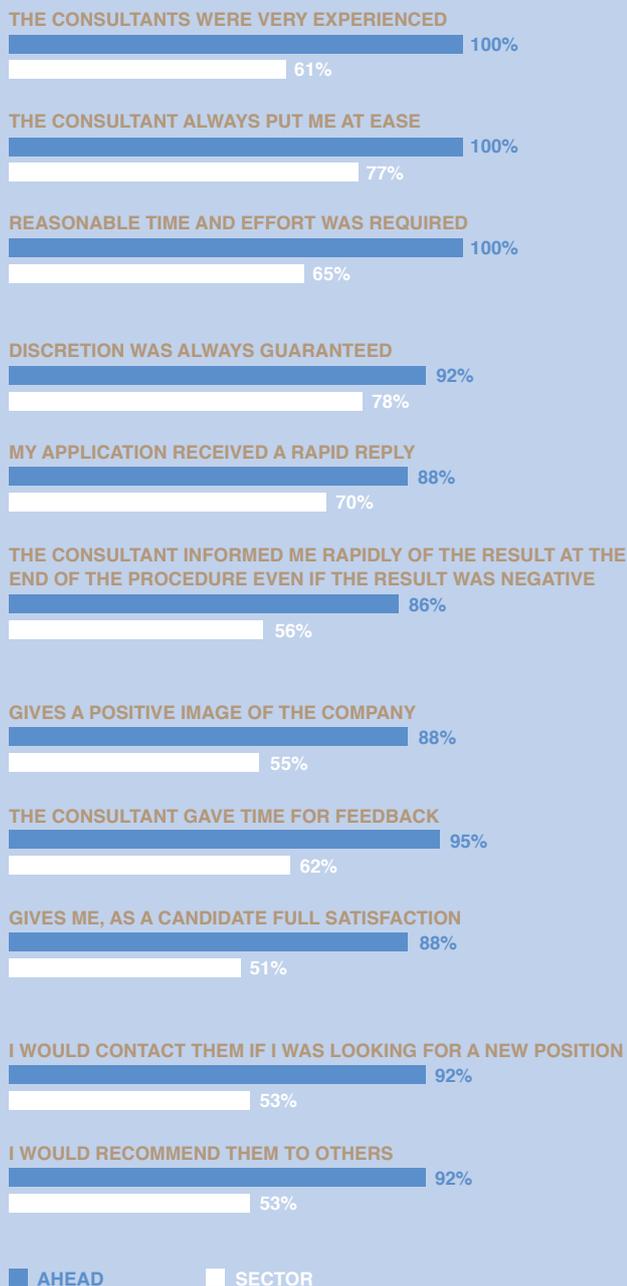
1. HR versus Econoshock, Houthalen, 28 April 2009

## ➤ CANDIDATE FEEDBACK VIA FEDERAGON

AHEAD scored an impressive 8/10 in an annual online survey of candidates organised recently by FEDERAGON, the professional association for this sector.

'This feedback compares well with the industry standard of 6.5,' notes AHEAD's managing partner Guy Vereecke. 'We know from our own research that AHEAD candidates appreciate the way we behave towards them. However there is absolutely no room for complacency when you are seeking to forge lasting relationships with the best.'

Here are some of the most relevant results:



## ➤ STRATEGIC PLANNING IN A CRISIS

In April 2009, readers of the McKinsey Quarterly were invited to describe changes in their companies' strategic planning given today's challenging economic climate.

Over 80% noted differences in their strategic-planning processes compared with last year.

'The change executives say has been most significant is the adoption of a more rigorous approach to approving projects and capital spending, presumably with an eye toward managing cash carefully. Other significant changes include the creation of strategies that are more dynamic, focus on the short term, and that include more analyses.'

- Scenario planning has become much more important this year, but its successful execution has never been more challenging.
- Intensify monitoring of strategies, getting a good fix on key indicators.
- Look beyond the crisis, remaining focused on the long term.

In short, many strategists seem to be rapidly adjusting their planning processes to cope with the changed economic environment. Important as these adjustments may be, their nature also raises a major question in the minds of many strategists: is the crisis atmosphere undermining focus on all but the immediate future? More than 50% of execs worry about not striking the right balance between near-term challenges and long-term strategic priorities. 'The perennial challenge of striking this balance has become particularly acute this year.'

## ➤ EUROPEAN HIGH POTENTIALS...

AHEAD recently took part in research by an MBA team from the Kellogg School of Management on how the European market sees high potential recruitment.

'We found that the age and experience range is generally well aligned with the average Kellogg student (aged 27-33 with 4-6 years' professional experience),' explains Belgian team member Bhupinder Singh. 'Likewise, the skill and performance metrics used for recruiting for European companies resembles the Kellogg recruiting process (eg. demonstrated leadership, career progression).'

Interpersonal skills, strong performance in previous jobs and relevant functional work experience were deemed most important when placing candidates on a path to senior management. When evaluating a candidate's MBA degree, recruiters valued most an international connection, the reputation or prestige of the institution and internship experience. The ranking of the institution by the Financial Times, Business Week etc was important but less so.

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## ➤ A NEW WORLD OF WORK? ATTITUDES IN HIGH TECH COMPANIES...



What's important in your world of work and how can it be improved? That was the theme of an online survey among high achievers in high tech and related sectors run by AHEAD in association with Microsoft<sup>1</sup> in Spring 2009.



Elke Jorens

Results show both similarities and differences in the attitudes of men and women across various parameters. Over two thirds of the 196 respondents felt that their world of work was *well or very well suited* to their personal needs. However, relatively more men (20%) than women (4%) considered it *very well suited*.

- **Job content** was the most important factor generally with over 80% rating it *very important*.
- **Flexibility** was also key, with more women (59%) compared to men (29%) considering it *very important*. Working at times to suit and from home or remotely was significantly more important to women than men. 'Having the opportunity for flexible working and working from home, make part-time hours and career breaks less important,' commented one female employee.
- **Salary** was very important to 43% of men but only 22% of women. That said, it was nonetheless *important or very important* to over 90% of those surveyed.
- Rather more women than men described **corporate culture** and **values, worklife balance and working environment** as *very important*.
- Interestingly, **diversity** in the workplace was *important or very important* to 70% of men, but only 39% of women. The majority of both sexes felt their managers' and colleagues' approach to diversity was *good or better*.
- **Opportunities to grow** were extremely important to men and women equally, as was an **international dimension** in their career. Over 50% of this high tech sample said that their company's commitment to developing them was *good or very good*.
- Rather more men (39%) than women (22%) described their **opportunities for promotion** as *very good or good*.
- However the majority of respondents considered the percentage of **female managers** in their company *quite poor or poor*.

There was consensus between male and female employees across other parameters too. Around two thirds described the **sector image** as a *good or very good* place to work. When it comes to their impression of other employers, high tech candidates of both sexes were more influenced by the **quality of selectors** and first hand contact with employees than other factors like publicity images, success stories of people who work there, and even employer brand. Though 'the way an employer deals with leavers is very important', remarked one. 'They can make or break the company image.'

Not surprisingly in this sector, professional online **networks** like LinkedIn are the most popular frameworks for networking, followed by alumni organisations, particularly academic ones like INSEAD and Vlerick. Generally though, there was a very wide range of different types used by this target group from professional groups like PMI and APICS and 'any seminars for meeting people with the same business interests'.

Similarly there was a wide range of **admired employers** in this sector, particularly those who are 'well known companies and give the impression that they invest in the future and in you.' Microsoft, Cisco, IBM, and Google were mentioned more frequently than others by this sample.

So what else could a future employer do to **improve the world of work** of this high tech group? The diverse range of responses spanned *clearer strategy, better 'human' related factors* like listening, personal development and respect for individuals and '*providing useful services to society and therefore meaning to employees*'. Yet more *flexibility and freedom to perform* was another recurring theme.

'These are interesting findings and in line with our own observations,' notes Microsoft's HRM Elke Jorens. 'In a recent internal survey, our people shared that the flexibility and the content of the job we offer at Microsoft are key elements. We do not evaluate our people on the number of office hours but against objectives. And we develop our software around empowering people to realize their full potential; anytime, anyplace, on any device. This is the new world of work.'

1. Voted Best Employer in Belgium 2008 and 2009 in the Great Place to Work survey

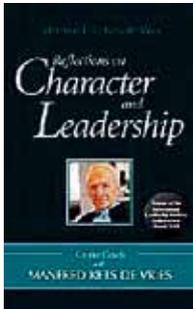


**'I think that companies who focus on people will make the difference. It's interesting how the current crisis exposes poor 'people care' from companies.'**

AHEAD candidate, 2009 New World of Work survey

# ► REFLECTIONS ON CHARACTER AND LEADERSHIP<sup>1</sup>

## ON THE COUCH WITH MANFRED KETS DE VRIES



This book includes insightful studies of personality archetypes and the effects they have on organizational life and culture... and the effects that organisations have on them. Referring frequently to key management concepts, Kets de Vries looks not only at what happens when things go wrong, but also how to create the psychological and organisational space to make sure that things go right.

Among many colourful case studies like Alexander the Great and Robert Maxwell, the author compares and contrasts 3 well known contemporary leaders: Richard Branson, the flamboyant, intuitive and disarmingly friendly entrepreneur who has a corporate culture that highly values creativity and innovation; Jack Welch, who turned GE from a plodding dinosaur to a lean, sharply focused company, featuring in Fortune magazine for many years as the toughest executive in North America; and Percy Barnevik of ABB the softly spoken, intense, philosophical Swede and specialist in data processing and information systems.

Kets de Vries also notes different operational codes between these leaders: Branson is a builder, Welch a transformer, and Barnevik an integrator. All three were unhappy with the way companies are traditionally run and were motivated to experiment with new ways to make them more effective. So each one developed a new concept of how things should be run and a vision of where they wanted to take their companies. The author describes the workplace that they were trying to create as a jazz combo, where people unite to play harmonious music, but with ample room to improvise as a soloist.

‘Although there is no easy solution to the development of leaders in a global age, companies that carefully select and strategically develop people with leadership qualities that are adapted to the new requirements, and use them at all levels in the organisations, will have a competitive edge. To be more specific, organisations that are best places to work pay attention to the values that are really important to their employees. Unfortunately, many organisations - and this includes the global ones – are anything but best places to work.’

Leaders have to provide focus, be seen as decisive, with integrity and honesty – but the most effective also connect with a universal layer of human functioning that prompts people to make a greater-than-usual effort. When leaders somehow recognise the existence of the basic motivational

need systems (for human connectedness or belonging, and exploratory/assertive needs associated with learning and personal growth) present in all human beings, their employees will go the extra mile.

Best places to work make an effort to respond to these needs, and pay attention to 3 key values: community, pleasure and meaning. ‘People will work for money but die for a cause’ as one CEO said. Contributing something to society motivates people towards higher commitment.



*‘People will work for money but die for a cause.’*

Kets de Vries notes that the most effective leaders take on two roles handling both well: a charismatic role (which envisions a compelling future, empowers followers, energises staff) and architectural roles (designing the organisation, setting up structures and formulating control and reward systems).’ Then it requires a cosmopolitan mindset to rise above the specifics of regions and cultures, while at the same time meeting the expectations of followers throughout.

‘An outlook of cultural relativity, excellent relational skills, curiosity and emotional intelligence distinguish successful global leaders. Such leaders also have a strong sense of adventure and are prepared to leave their comfort zone and take risks when needed. Finally, many of them possess a well-developed sense of humour.’

AHEAD agrees with Kets de Vries that ‘the good news is that the leaders these organisations need are out there and their numbers are growing. Leaders with a multicultural background, years of cross-cultural work experience and exceptional global leadership qualities transmit a contagious excitement that puts a company into overdrive.’ He observes that such leaders are already changing the way people work by helping to reframe their attitudes towards work. They are generating a pride that goes beyond the numbers game and overcomes cultural biases.

In creating high commitment organisations, Kets de Vries says that today’s leaders should take heed of Mahatma Gandhi’s image of the best place to live and work: ‘I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.’

1. Reflections on Character and Leadership, Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries, published in 2009 by John Wiley under the Jossey-Bass imprint.

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