



ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2006

The combination of top flight speakers and the Venice location resulted in capacity attendance at the 2006 AHRMIO conference. Registrations were closed well before the event and delegates from more than 40 international organisations crowded into UNESCO's conference facility in the beautiful Palazzo Zorzi on the 19th and 20th of September.

Despite the tempting alternatives offered by the location, delegates listened, commented, disagreed and networked their way through eighteen hours of packed programming over the two days of the event.

“TGIM – thank God it’s Monday”

Building a working environment where people in international organisations look forward to Monday morning as much as they do to Friday afternoon was the ambitious challenge to HR set out by the President of AHRMIO, Roger Eggleston. He set the scene for the conference, unveiling an agenda built around the twin themes of “competing for talent” and “getting the most from talented people”.

“Lack of trust kills knowledge”

Said world acclaimed Knowledge Management guru Larry Prusak from Babson College. Prusak, recently voted one of the ten most admired knowledge leaders in the world, riveted the audience with a PowerPoint free *tour de force* on how physical and emotional environments can foster or kill knowledge.

A society based on trust, openness and plurality accounted for the difference between the economic success of South Korea and Nigeria – countries with essentially the same in GDP per capita in the 1950's.

“The only competitive advantage today is the search for and appropriation of new ideas”

In the face of the demonstrated fact that openness and plurality lead to the generation and implementation of ideas, Prusak appeared to strike a chord with the audience when he suggested that most organisations today “... *enjoy the cultural norms of the court of Louis XIV*”. They pondered whether he was offering some hope to international organisations when he said “... *occasionally an organisation, facing death, will open up for a while*”.

Prusak spoke a lot about workspace “... *it's hard to have a good idea in an ugly environment*”. Too many buildings today reinforce the organisation principles originally established by the church and the military of “command, control and fear”. There is no mystery in why major successful organisations choose to locate themselves close to the best universities, close to each other and maximise shared space. “... *knowledge is in the air*” he suggested.

Good ideas are not enough – developing a culture where ideas are adopted is crucial. He explained that organisations might be able to buy in outsiders with bright new ideas ... but those who know how to get ideas implemented know how to build coalitions, trade alternatives and are trusted “... *the only people who can turn ideas into reality tend to have been around the organisation for 10 to 20 years*”.

“Technology alone will only make the world more like it is ... faster”

Prusak challenged reliance on technology over culture. He explored the Clinton/Blair notion that by providing every child with a laptop, they could rise out of poverty. In the absence of a supportive social context he suggested most children would sell the computer. *“...social norms trump technology every time”*.

In the race for ever more sophisticated business technology he challenged the HR community to *“... stop spending money devising ways to make the organisation look like it’s learning”*. Citing e-learning and institutional knowledge capture initiatives as the key culprits he said. *“Do something useful ... give your money to charity”*.

In the world according to Prusak - generating ideas everywhere and ensuring organisations have the capacity to absorb them is the answer. How? Openness, trust, the physical and organisational environment, fostering discussion, getting “new ideas” and “experienced implementers” together, promoting internal and external networks would be good places to start.

“No such thing as a free lunch”

The temptation to indulge in too much pasta was minimised by a series of concurrent lunchtime workshops and discussions. Participants had the opportunity over the course of the conference to attend two from among the five alternative sessions offered:

- *The FutureWork survey;*
- *LifeWork balance;*
- *Newly available grading software;*
- *HR’s role in risk management; and*
- *Mentoring.*

Extremely high attendance levels combined with animated debates demonstrated the success of mixing pasta with PowerPoint.

“UN Brand Value hits Rock Bottom”

Suggested Mike Watras, the CEO of New York based corporate communications company, Straightline. He told delegates that the UN has the lowest brand value score he has recorded over 20 years in the business. It was of note that his company had refused to conduct a similar exercise for ENRON. He believes strongly in the mission of the UN.

Watras stressed the importance of the effective communication of an organisation’s strategic intent to internal and external stakeholders and using staff as “brand ambassadors”. *“It’s people that carry the brand flag”* he said citing the role of positive employee engagement in the turn-round of Continental Airlines over the last 10 years.

Watras’ presentation provoked a heated debate in the conference – particularly with the many UN participants present.

Views were mixed:

“Ask someone from Sierra Leone what they think of us rather than someone strolling down 1st Avenue” and “350,000 job applicants a year can’t be wrong about our reputation” on the one side.

On the other ... *“How can you build a brand strategy when you don’t have an organisation strategy?”*

Everyone did agree however with his assertion that the UN doesn’t tell its success stories in the field well enough in the battle with a media obsessed with highlighting the UN's problems.

HR Management success by Stealth?

“There are evil and uninformed people who ask why we have an HR function at all”

... said Hanneke Frese of Frese Consulting who is also an International Board member of ESADE Management School in Barcelona.

Frese closed the first day by animating an interactive session involving Jan Beagle from the UN, Paulo Gallo from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and Anthony Beattie, former UK Ambassador to FAO, WFP and IFAD in Rome.

Introducing the discussion, Frese told the audience what it took in her view to be a great HR professional.

FRESE's TOP TIPS

Improve professional know-how

Understand your organisation

Long term vision – short term pragmatism

A passion for creating a better place to work

Do big and small things to improve HR's image

Tell the truth - and respect confidences

Be humble enough to ask naïve questions

Be courageous and fair when it comes to ethics

Don't lose your sense of humour

A wide ranging discussion was provoked by the audience. HR measures of success; rewards versus punishments for HR risk takers; and success by stealth were amongst the issues debated.

The suggestion that HR success could often be achieved by stealth was countered by the proposition that HR people need to be more up front about the importance of their role in delivering organisational success.

Competing for talent in “aqua alta”

As conference participants dried their feet after tramping through Venice's infamous “aqua alta” – UBS' Group Head of Human Capital Management, Sandy Campbell, opened day two by talking about the bank's move from “talent taker” to “talent creator”.

Campbell ran through an impressive series of UBS initiatives to hire the best and develop them through an internal market for talent. Anyone contemplating writing a recruitment and retention strategy could do worse than getting the UBS template from AHRMIO!

“Getting as much objectivity as possible into selection” is one of Campbell's key concerns. UBS hiring systems are nothing if not comprehensive, moving through application, on-line testing, shortlisting, business interview and assessment centre in their attempt to attract the best and minimise hiring mistakes.

He plainly struck a chord with his audience when he said -

“We've got a Rolls Royce of an HR tool but too few line managers know how to drive it.”

One participant stressed the need to get recruitment right saying that in his organisation less than 10% of entrants didn't make it beyond probation ... but a success rate of more than 90% still cost the organisation £ 2.5million a year in failures.

Putting play to work

Cliff Dennett, Founder and Managing Director of Cliff Ltd, asked participants when was the last time that they had to tear an employee from an e-learning package after six hours on the screen because someone else wanted a go. If

you've played "The Sims", you'll know what he is getting at.

In the fastest moving session of the conference, Avatars [on-line virtual bodies for readers over 30 with no children] were created and mercilessly destroyed as Dennett, together with Mike Johnson of the FutureWork Forum, explored the potential of using lessons from the most successful of today's interactive games to engage staff in learning. The World Food Programme has already recognised the potential gaming offers.

Five million people have already downloaded WFP's FoodForce game

For those with less than the \$300K minimum it takes to create a top class s(t)imulation programme, Dennett made a very practical observation:

... "Young people with a problem don't want to be told they can enrol on a course in six weeks - they want to press the "Help button" and solve their problem NOW"

Informal learning & natural apprenticeships

"70% of learning in an organisation is informal ... that's a lot to leave to chance"

... said Susan Stucky, founder of SPG and developer of "Wild Knowledge™".

The problem is not that people aren't learning – the problem is that they're not learning the things we want them to learn!

Stucky told participants that understanding and directing the informal learning that takes place in organisations is the key to success. Her "360°Design" observation-based methodology helps organisations understand the exact nature of the thousand of transactions that go together

to make up the informal system by which staff learn how to do their jobs effectively. They can then make interventions into the process to improve the direction and quality of learning.

Leadership – "itsa kinda magic"

Shay McConnon was clearly not awarded "top speaker" award by the Academy of Chief Executives in the UK for nothing. Nor is his membership of the Magic Circle a surprise when you see him perform.

McConnon electrified participants with a combination of magic, psychology and insights into the practice of effective leadership.

"The fact is that 75% of people quit people and not their jobs. This must mean that a lot of the \$60bn spent on leadership development in 2004 was wasted."

It might be worse in international organisations where, in the words of the Eagles hit "Hotel California", staff can "check out but never leave".

The basic thesis that underpins McConnon's message is a simple one developed whilst working with children with behavioural problems. Great leaders understand how each individual would like to be treated ... and then treat them that way.

***Great leaders are great in a crisis
... NO
... great leaders don't have crises!***

McConnon came full circle with Larry Prusak who opened the event. Prusak credits the church with donating the command, control and fear approach to organisation design. McConnon cites a flaw in New Testament thinking by suggesting we should treat people as we would wish to be treated ourselves –

“wrong” he says ... treat them as *they* wish to be treated.

His message is more potent than this – he addresses the dangers of appeasement; explores methods of understanding how people wish to be led; and focuses on the early identification and resolution of problems.

... on a personal note

This AHRMIO conference was the first I had attended since hosting and opening the very first one six years ago. The Association and the conference have come a long way in a short time.

“The AHRMIO conference now represents a “must go” event for HR practitioners in international organisations.”

It is very rare that the calibre of speakers attracted by AHRMIO is available to relatively intimate audiences of one to two hundred. It is a credit to the Association, and to the work its members do, that the best speakers in the world plainly enjoy interacting with an audience different from the standard “corporate fodder”.

As conference Rapporteur, I got to talk to many of the attendees and all of the presenters. So what were the most memorable thoughts and ideas for me?:

“Telling stories works” – the very best speakers get their message through not by lecturing but by telling stories. In international organisations we are often not well understood because we communicate in Governing Body style papers rather than in human stories.

“The way people learn isn’t like it used to be ... in fact it probably never was” – people learn most of what they know (good and bad) informally and not from

their boss or those on the organisation’s training faculty list. The best value investment of a small training budget might well be in this area. Particularly so as people are becoming more critical about the technological and entertainment divide between what is commercially possible and what is delivered “on a budget” in formal programmes.

“Trust is the most valuable commodity in employee engagement” – without trust we can’t work cooperatively. The key difference between organisations that are greater, and those that are less, than the sum of the parts – is trust. Unfortunately, trust is a commodity that is much easier to lose than it is to gain.

“Theory changes nothing” - most decent HR people have a clear idea of what needs to be done. Many know how it should be done.

... but it’s doing it that makes the difference.

Looking forward to 2007 as the AHRMIO conference crosses the Atlantic for the first time since 2002, it would be logical for Europeans to ask “can we afford it?”. The question is probably “can you afford not to?”.

Alan Wild