

Trust, integrity and credibility: The making of an HR role model

Reward Gateway's chief people officer, NEBEL CROWHURST, talks to Millicent Machell about her journey from product training to HR supernova



Nebel Crowhurst's CV is jam-packed. Alongside her current role at HR technology company Reward Gateway, she headed up HR at healthcare company Roche during the Covid-19 pandemic, led people's experience at fashion retailer River Island, and worked her way up through Virgin Atlantic.

She's also on the board for cancer charity Macmillan and the professional network London HR Connection. She is a mentor for the CIPD, and a close friend to many of HR's biggest names.

But that wasn't how it started. In 2004, Crowhurst took a sales job at travel agency Thomas Cook.

She began working in product training, which eventually led to learning and development (L&D). The difference between training and L&D is still a point of passion for her: "Training, in my opinion, is a more transactional experience. For example, starting in a new role or with a new company and learning the how-to stuff on specific tasks or processes. Learning and development is far broader, taking into account behavioural change, and understanding human motivation and drivers.

"Leadership training' is simply not a thing in my book. 'Leadership development', yes, and training to learn a new transactional process, yes. They are very different things."

Crowhurst's stint in L&D pushed her to explore other parts of HR, and other sectors: "Early in my career, if you'd have said to me 'where will you go?', I would have said I absolutely would stay in L&D. But the more I learned about the wider impact of HR, the more I got involved in different parts of HR.

"I have since made some really conscious decisions about the types of environments I worked in. I didn't want to stay stuck in one setting."

Through her moves between travel, retail, healthcare and technology, Crowhurst's key learning was to maintain her values. "Regardless of sector, people are people," she says. "Because of that, no matter where you are, you should maintain core values about how you show up in HR – trust, integrity and credibility. You need to care and show compassion, even when it's turbulent, even when it's hard."

CV

November 2022 to present

Chief people officer/chief
appreciation officer
Reward Gateway

March 2022 to November 2022

Vice president people
INTO University Partnerships

September 2019 to March 2022

People and culture director
Roche

June 2017 to September 2019

Head of people experience
River Island

May 2015 to June 2017

Head of talent
River Island



Reward Gateway was acquired by employee benefits company Edenred in 2023

She begins building every people strategy the same way – but this is no cookie-cutter approach: “Every organisation is unique. What works in one business may not work in another. But what informs that is listening. Employee voice is the way I build out a people strategy, no matter where I am.”

Listening is also Crowhurst’s antidote to what she sees as good HR work’s enemy: jumping to conclusions. “It’s so important not to make assumptions,” she stresses.

“As you progress in your career it’s easy to think you know what’s going on, but you still need to ask good questions and truly listen to the answers. As I’ve moved through roles in different areas of my career, a big challenge is to keep allowing the time and space to truly listen – whether that’s to stakeholders, leadership or people in the business.

“Especially when entering a new industry, don’t make assumptions of what needs to be fixed, and what’s good and what’s not. While

HR principles are translatable, you also need to know about the organisation you’re in.”

Crowhurst’s business sense has served her well throughout her career. She has used it to build a reputation as a business enabler, rather than a cost centre.

“I’ve always had a keen interest in the commercial side, probably because I started in sales. Also, when you work in organisations that are not always the most profitable, you have to work harder to demonstrate value.

“Throughout my career I have had to really crunch the numbers to make sure that when budgets are cut, it’s not my people and resources that are the first to go. Unfortunately, HR is often seen as a cost centre, and it takes some creative thinking to see how you can correlate business performance with HR metrics.”

Crowhurst is a key proponent of evidence-based HR practice, which has

shaped her goals at Reward Gateway. The business has recently launched a three-year people plan, which includes targets around measuring success and demonstrating a link between what HR invests in and how the business is performing.

Reward Gateway was acquired by employee benefits company Edenred in 2023, creating considerable upheaval. However, Crowhurst’s team has still managed to achieve targets around lower turnover and recruitment cost savings, as well as evolving the company’s benefits and pay strategy.

They have saved £2.61m through a new in-house recruitment model, and achieved a 78.7 engagement score. This comes alongside a 13% year-on-year increase in business performance. The key to all this was communication.

She says: “People need to feel informed about what’s coming next. We helped the leadership team work on how to communicate to create a combined structure. With strong leadership and communication, people have the confidence to either get behind it, or decide it is time to go – which is also totally okay!”



"You can be the best CPO in the world, but if you don't have a good relationship with senior leaders, your job will be impossible"

As always, Crowhurst maintained a focus on employee voice. She adds: "You need to make sure that people feel safe and trusted to speak up if they feel you haven't communicated effectively, or if they have feedback. HR is very present at Reward Gateway; we're very accessible."

"I have people messaging me from all departments, countries and levels. I always say: If people don't voice their problems, I can't fix them."

As an HR technology business, there is a particular pressure on Crowhurst to be a model for their clients. Reward Gateway's HR team is often invited to clients' team meetings, conferences or events. "If anyone asks: 'What are you up to at Reward Gateway?

What can we learn from it?', we will always respond," she says.

One of the things that Crowhurst uses to deal with the pressure associated with this, is her network of trusted peers. "I am really privileged to know some of the people I know, and to be able to message them if I'm stuck," she explains.

"I put the effort in and go to events, or join groups. It's nice to share my own ideas, and and know I have people to lean on."

She also emphasises the importance of relationships in the senior leadership team: "You can be the best CPO in the world, but if you don't have a good relationship with senior leaders, your job will be impossible. I dedicate a lot of time to this."

"Although having data to justify your decisions is really important when presenting to senior leaders, general trust also goes a long way," she says. Primarily, though, it is Crowhurst's strategic approach which defines her attitude to HR.

On this, she says: "I would love to see the profession move away from reactive, traditional practices and onto value-add, strategic ones."

"I get frustrated at hearing people say: 'HR deserves a seat at the table'; at the end of the day, that's our doing. It will come with a true understanding for the commerciality of our organisations and broader, truly strategic thinking. HR needs to show we are not just hirers and firers." **HR**

Five things I can't live without



Family Nothing in life is more important than those you love

Books Anything from chick lit to business psychology. I dream of writing my own book, so watch this space!



Yoga and anything mindful that calms my busy mind



Music It gives me energy and can lift my mood



Handy wipes Anyone that knows me, knows I have a bit of hand hygiene OCD, so I always have a pack in my bag!