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NEBEL CROWHURST
CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER
REWARD GATEWAY





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THOUGH STIFLED BY CONVENTIONAL LEARNING AND EXAMS AT SCHOOL, NEBEL WAS MAGNETICALLY DRAWN TO COACHING AT AN EARLY STAGE. THROUGHOUT AN ILLUSTRIOUS CAREER, SHE HAS MADE LEARNING THE CORNERSTONE OF HER APPROACH TO HER OWN ADVANCEMENT, WHILST CHAMPIONING THE IMPORTANCE OF SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP AND GROW. NOW, AS CPO AT REWARD GATEWAY, SHE IS DETERMINED TO GIVE BACK AND GUIDE HR PRACTITIONERS WITH THE KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE SHE HAS GAINED.

"CAREER PATHS DON'T HAVE TO BE LINEAR -
A SLOW STEADY CLIMB UP A LADDER - SOMETIMES,
THE MOST REWARDING OPPORTUNITIES COME FROM
TAKING RISKS AND STEPPING INTO THE UNKNOWN"

NEBEL, CAN YOU TAKE US BACK TO YOUR EARLY LIFE AND HOW YOU FOUND YOUR WAY INTO A CAREER IN HR. I was born in Brighton and my heritage is a mix of British and Middle Eastern, which is reflected in my unusual name. As a child, I was quite shy - which surprises people who know me today - but I had lots of friends and an unwaveringly loving and supportive family. School wasn't always the best fit for me, especially as I moved into secondary school - traditional academia wasn't my strength - and my performance during my GCSEs was far from stellar. I scraped through and unenthusiastically chose to attend college, where I opted for an essay-based course in childcare. By the age of 18, I knew university wasn't for me. So, while many of my friends were heading off to university, I decided to go abroad and work. I spent time as a rep in the French

Alps and worked in Greece during the summer, experiences that I consider my equivalent of university. I learned a lot about life, working with diverse groups and experiencing different cultures, which were pivotal in shaping my future career. I returned to the UK and found myself working in hospitality. I became a bar manager, qualified as a licensee through the British Institute of Innkeeping and had a door supervisor licence. While this environment was fun at the time, I knew it wasn't a long-term career path for me, so I decided to explore my next steps. I shifted back into the travel industry, where I initially worked in sales for a tour operator, moving quickly into trade sales, working directly with travel agents, which was my first real introduction to training. I became the southern regional training manager, teaching travel agents about our products and taking them on educational

trips abroad. This exposure to training is what led me into learning & development and that's when HR became more firmly on my radar. After a few years, the company I was with planned to relocate and I was given the choice of taking redundancy or moving up north, but I chose to leave and find a new role. I landed a position with a smaller tour operator selling holidays to Asia and China in a similar role, but it was Virgin Holidays that marked a significant shift in my career.

At Virgin Holidays, part of Virgin Atlantic, I transitioned into L&D, I started designing onboarding programmes progressing into leadership development and talent programmes. During my time there, I was involved in HR beyond just L&D, especially in areas like employee relations, restructures and talent

acquisition. I was encouraged by my HR Director to pursue my CIPD qualification, something I never thought I'd do, given my academic history. But I took the plunge and completed my Level 5, followed by a Level 7 master's degree in HR. The experience taught me that you don't have to follow a traditional academic path to succeed. After seven years at Virgin, I moved on to River Island, heading up talent development. There, I helped the company navigate through their major shift from traditional retail to e-commerce with the rise of online shopping. Over my five years there, I built a people experience function from the ground up, which included; L&D, talent acquisition, internal communications and employee engagement. The role grew significantly as the business did and we won several awards for our efforts. However, the commute was two-and-a-half hours each way and that really took its toll so I knew it was time for a change.

That led me to a very different role at Roche, a global pharmaceutical company. While the pharma industry was not something I had planned for, in terms of sectors that attracted me, I was intrigued by Roche's progressive approach, particularly in adopting agile working. I was appointed HR Director for the UK&I and just as I settled into the business, the pandemic hit, Roche played a critical role in producing lateral flow tests and antiviral drugs, so the pressure was immense. It was a very challenging yet fulfilling time, knowing that our work was directly contributing to the pandemic response was compelling and energising. After the pandemic and with three years at Roche under my belt, I took a critical look at my career objectives and decided that large global corporations were not the best fit for me. I needed to make an impact that I could see, instead of a tiny dent in a huge organisation. Over time, my overriding reflection is that the scale often made it difficult to create the change I set out to achieve. I took the decision to join a smaller company, this time in the education sector, where I was appointed VP of People. I spent a short time in this role as it didn't quite align

with my career goals and so after nine months I moved on. Fortunes shined bright and an opportunity at Reward Gateway came up - a company I had known for years as a prospective client - and I had always admired their style and culture and very happily joined as Chief People Officer in 2022. In May 2023 the big headline event for us was being acquired by Edenred for £1.11bn, which was a massive achievement for a company that started as a founder-led startup. Since the acquisition, I have worked closely with the CEO and leadership

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team to navigate forward, stabilise the business and integrate Reward Gateway with Edenred. I have to say, it's been the most exciting and rewarding journey of my career. This interview has given me the chance to look back and I see that my career has been a series of unexpected turns, but each step has contributed to where I am today. The point is, career paths don't have to be linear - a slow steady climb up a ladder - sometimes, the most rewarding opportunities come from taking risks and stepping into the unknown.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR ROLE IN THE M&A IN MORE DETAIL AND HOW YOU PLAYED A PART IN ITS SUCCESSFUL OUTCOME. I had prior M&A experience earlier in my career from my time at Virgin, where I played a part in the acquisition of a series of businesses, so I was familiar with the process, particularly when it came to the post-acquisition integration and transition. But this acquisition was

significantly different, mainly because it came somewhat unexpectedly. We were only 18 months into our current round of investment and the plan had been to wait another three to four years before exploring exit opportunities. We were approached by Edenred and after a period of exclusivity and due diligence, we decided to move forward. One of the first challenges we faced was the need for complete confidentiality. Since Edenred is a listed company, we had to keep the potential deal under wraps from our people. This was particularly difficult given I was still fairly new to my role as was our CEO at the time. We were trying to build relationships and establish credibility and suddenly we had a huge secret project taking up most of our time. People were questioning why we were so absent and meeting behind closed doors and as someone who is usually very accessible and wants to be engaged with the team, this was challenging for me. The second challenge was the speed of the process, we only had a short, three-month window to complete the deal, which is fast for a transaction of this size. The pace was intense. I thrive in fast-paced environments, that said, the level of intensity would not be sustainable long-term, so we had to manage the pressure and keep ourselves well. Often in M&A deals, HR is brought in late on, but I was involved from the very beginning and our CEO truly valued HR's role in this process. I was a key player in preparing all the people-related data for meetings with our private equity partners and prospective buyers.

HOW DO YOU COMMUNICATE WHAT IS GOING ON TO PEOPLE, SO THAT IT IS SEEN AS A POSITIVE AND THEY ENGAGE? M&As are stressful and exciting and keeping things confidential until the deal was finalised made communication difficult. We had two comms plans ready - one for a successful acquisition and one if the deal fell through. Thankfully, the deal went through and by the next morning, I was in London, preparing to communicate with our global teams via a film crew. The moment we announced the acquisition, there was a mix of shock

and surprise, but also a sense of relief from the leadership team, as people now understood why we'd been so distracted and we could finally be transparent with them. We made sure the announcement was celebratory with both internal and external communications. Once the initial excitement settled, we faced the real challenge of integrating two businesses and cultures. From the start, we wanted to be as present as possible, so our CEO and I conducted a global "Great Connection" tour, where we visited all of our offices - from the UK to Bulgaria, the US and Australia - sharing the backstory, discussing the future and answering any questions. It helped us connect with people, be authentic and continue to make them feel part of the journey. Even after the tour, we kept the momentum going with regular in-person and online events to update teams on strategy and progress.

DESCRIBE THE SCENE ONCE THE DUST SETTLED AND WHAT THE PLANS AND OBJECTIVES WERE. Once the deal was finalised, the focus shifted to integration and the main goal was combining Reward Gateway and Edenred technology and migrating clients onto Reward Gateway's platform. We worked on bringing two sets of clients together, which had its challenges, but we made steady progress. From a people perspective, we conducted a TUPE process to integrate employees from both companies into one legal entity in the UK. The legal part was relatively straightforward, but the real challenge was blending two very different organisational cultures, it has taken time and effort to unify the teams, align benefits and ensure people felt equally valued. A big part of the integration was creating a cohesive work environment. We moved into new offices in both the UK and the US to have everyone under their respective roofs, helping to foster a sense of unity. Leadership teams in each country were also blended to ensure that all regions felt represented in the decision-making process. We focused on creating an inclusive atmosphere where there was no "us vs. them" mentality, but it took significant time to achieve.

CULTURE IS SO IMPORTANT WHEN TWO COMPANIES MERGE. WHAT IS THE BEST APPROACH TO MAKE SURE PEOPLE FEEL COMFORTABLE AND ONBOARD? Culture is essential for creating a sense of belonging, because if people don't feel aligned with a company's values, they won't stay. From the start, we aimed to combine the best aspects of both companies, recognising that both Reward Gateway and Edenred have very different cultures. We wanted to create a new environment that took the best of both cultures, without implying that one was superior to the

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other. Leadership, of course, plays a crucial role in setting the tone for culture. We blended leaders from both companies to create a cohesive leadership team and this mix helped demonstrate that we were committed to a unified vision that valued both parts of the organisation. We also encouraged open communication by fostering a safe space for people to share their concerns or suggestions. We avoid anonymous feedback because it's hard to address issues if we don't know who to speak with. Our approach is to ensure people feel safe enough to voice their opinions openly. I believe it's essential to address issues directly - so people feel heard and valued - rather than letting concerns go unspoken. Ultimately, it's about creating an environment where people feel they can speak up and contribute to the company's evolving culture. This takes ongoing effort, but it's crucial for long-term success.

TRANSITIONING FROM A SMALLER, MORE AGILE COMPANY TO A LARGE, STRUCTURED ORGANISATION MUST BE

DIFFICULT. HOW DO YOU MANAGE THIS SHIFT? It's a delicate balance. Small companies tend to be more agile, able to shift quickly, but they may lack the foundational structures needed for long-term growth. Larger organisations bring more bureaucracy, layers of approval and slower processes. The challenge is integrating the best of both worlds. Every growing company needs to evolve and with growth, the need for more structure is inevitable. Realistically, while small organisations are quick to adapt, they may not have the processes in place to scale efficiently. Larger companies though, can feel slower and more cumbersome. Some employees thrive in this environment, while others might find it too restrictive and choose to leave. In the past couple of years, we've managed to keep our turnover at just under ten percent, which I'm proud of, given the scale of the changes. For those who have left, it's often for the usual reasons, career progression or finding a better fit elsewhere. New hires, however, don't have to struggle with any legacy issues, which helps maintain a healthy mix. Adapting to change in larger organisations is challenging - more layers, policies and procedures - but our goal is to ensure people have autonomy and can innovate. Success in this kind of environment relies heavily on leadership style and maintaining a culture where people feel empowered to contribute.

HOW WELL DO YOU COMPETE FOR TECH TALENT IN INCREDIBLY COMPETITIVE MARKETS? Tech talent is, of course, in high demand and those with the most desired skills command higher salaries and better packages, so retaining talent is a constant challenge. What helps us is our employee value proposition and the environment we offer. Tech professionals want opportunities to learn and grow, so having programmes in place to support their continuous development is critical. If you create an appealing EVP that aligns with what tech professionals value, growth and learning - and align that with a supportive environment - you can attract and retain top talent. That's been a key strength for us, so while the

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competition for tech talent is fierce and will remain so globally, we've managed to do well in retaining our people, by offering a strong value proposition. Like all businesses, we're mindful of how AI and other new tools are impacting the workplace and the way we operate and the evolution of technology is nothing new. We've seen it happen before - take the advent of the internet, then Google and social media for instance. These were once seen as disruptive and now they're integral parts of how we work. AI is just another phase in this ongoing technological evolution. Tools like ChatGPT aren't something to fear, they are enablers, making our work more efficient by automating administrative tasks and freeing up time for more human-focused and strategic work. No matter how advanced technology becomes, the core of what makes organisations successful is people. AI will help us be more efficient, but it won't replace the human connection, creativity and emotion that drive business success. For HR specifically, using AI to handle repetitive tasks allows us to focus more on the people, helping employees thrive and grow. In the current environment, I think AI should be embraced as an opportunity rather than feared. It's an efficiency tool that empowers employees and enables them to focus on more meaningful, impactful work.

WHY DO YOU THINK SOME ORGANISATIONS ARE REVERTING BACK TO MORE TRADITIONAL OFFICE SETUPS? It's surprising how much this issue is still debated. We've had years of technology enabling remote work, yet there are still divided views on how we should work. From my perspective, it's about treating people like adults and using common sense. Each company and workforce is unique and so the best approach is to listen to your employees and understand their needs. For most people, autonomy in choosing when and where to work is important. That said, there are roles that require physical presence, like frontline jobs, but even in these positions, with some creativity, you can offer flexibility. In my view, a blend of in-office and

remote work is the ideal solution, the key is creating an environment where in-person collaboration is purposeful and meaningful. We've invested in new office spaces in London and Boston, because we believe in the value of face-to-face collaboration. However, it's about finding the right balance and understanding when it makes sense to bring people together. Mandating office days just for the sake of it doesn't add value, it's about being intentional with in-person interactions. Additionally, we now recognise that employees have diverse needs, including neurodiverse individuals, who may require different working arrangements. It's important to create an inclusive environment where everyone feels comfortable sharing their needs and asking for accommodations.

"I DO STILL FEEL SOME DISAPPOINTMENT WHEN I SEE HR BEING REACTIVE, OPERATIONAL AND TRANSACTIONAL, RATHER THAN TAKING A MORE STRATEGIC ROLE AND BEING TRUE PARTNERS"

WHAT IS THE FORWARD-LOOKING PLAN FOR YOUR BUSINESS AND WHAT ROLE DO YOU PLAY IN ACHIEVING IT? Our people strategy is aligned with our broader business goals. We believe in agile HR principles, so while we have a three-year vision, we remain flexible to adapt as the business evolves. The foundation of our strategy is ensuring employees feel engaged, appreciated and excited to come to work. A key part of our strategy is making the workplace a place where people feel connected, valued and motivated. We focus on employee engagement, recognition and wellbeing because we know that when people feel appreciated, they're more likely to be engaged and productive. It also helps with retention, which is crucial for long-term

success. We work with other organisations to help improve employee engagement and create better workplace environments. One of the areas we've focused on recently is fostering appreciation in the workplace. It's not just about offering discounts or perks, but about creating a culture where people feel genuinely valued. Our mission is to make the world of work better, both internally and externally for our clients. We aim to lead by example, sharing our insights and strategies with other HR professionals to help them create better workplaces too. I strongly believe in the importance of learning from others. Sharing ideas and best practices is vital in HR and by looking outward and collaborating, we can continue to improve and adapt to the changing landscape of work. In the end, our goal is to make a great place for employees to thrive, grow and feel appreciated.

DO YOU FEEL THAT YOU HAVE FAITH IN THE FUTURE OF HR AND ITS CAPACITY TO MAKE A POSITIVE IMPACT? Yes, I do believe it's improving. However, I do still feel some disappointment when I see HR being reactive, operational and transactional, rather than taking a more strategic role and being true partners within the organisation. I think that's where we miss opportunities to truly impact the business. The role of HR should be more than just implementing policies and handling administrative tasks, we have to be the ones driving change and lead initiatives, that not only support employees, but also move the organisation forward in meaningful ways. I've noticed a real mix of examples in the HR world, good and bad. Personally, I try hard to stay well-networked within the profession and I spend a lot of time outside of my organisation connecting with other HR professionals, exchanging ideas and experiences. In my experience, when you meet someone who is also really progressive and passionate about driving HR forward, it's incredibly inspiring and you can see firsthand the impact HR can have when it's done with skill, innovation and passion. But on the flip side, it's equally disappointing when I come across someone who's still stuck in that

traditional HR mindset, where the role is seen as just writing policies, managing hiring and firing and waiting to be asked by the leadership team to carry out tasks. We cannot afford to be in that space anymore, we need to be proactive, forward-thinking and constantly evolving. The good news is, I believe the balance is shifting more toward strategic HR and progressive practices, with more organisations realising the value HR can bring as a true partner to the business. That's a positive shift, but at the same time, I know there are still many HR professionals out there struggling within more traditional structures, but when HR is viewed through that traditional lens, leaders don't recognise its potential as a commercial driver and as a key factor in business success. However, I am genuinely optimistic that things are improving.

YOU BEGAN YOUR STORY WITH AN AVERSION TO CONVENTIONAL STUDY AND EXAMS, THEN YOU WERE DRAWN TO L&D LIKE A MAGNET AND NOW YOU ARE AT THE TOP OF YOUR PROFESSION, CHAMPIONING THE NEED FOR CONTINUOUS LEARNING. It's been quite a journey! It's definitely not a conventional path for sure. I never really enjoyed traditional education and I think that's why I was initially resistant to the idea of exams and formal studies. But as life went on, I discovered my interest in learning and development. It was one of those moments where I felt a genuine calling and found myself enjoying helping others learn and grow - whether it was through growing new skills or personal development. That was when I first started to really understand the power of learning and its ability to transform individuals and organisations and that has been phenomenally compelling. It took time, but as I developed personally and as a practitioner, I realised that my interest in learning could extend into a career in HR. The more I explored, the more I saw the intersection between supporting individuals' growth and fostering a healthy, thriving organisation. HR seemed like the perfect space for me to channel my passion and curiosity and, looking back, it feels like it was always meant to

be... admittedly just not in the way I expected at first! Reflecting on my career, I think the key is finding something to truly care about and, when you find it, it can develop into a real passion and you don't want to stop moving forward. It drives you to keep asking "why", to keep exploring and to always search for ways to make a meaningful difference. There is a real privilege in being able to work in a field where you feel like you're adding value and where what you do has real meaning and purpose. HR is one of those fields where you can have a direct impact on people's lives and that's an amazing thing to be able to say. For me, every step

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along the way has been a result of curiosity. I've always been someone who wants to know more, understand more and be open to new ideas. Whether it was the L&D space or HR, the more I learned, the more I realised that there was so much to discover and contribute to. It wasn't about following a traditional route or conforming to a set structure, it was about constantly evolving, learning and connecting with other people. That's how I've grown personally and professionally. In my mind, that's the key to it, being open to growth, to learning and to new experiences. If we stay curious and willing to listen, we just naturally keep growing. Fundamentally, HR is not just about following a set of rules or standard practices, it's about understanding people, the business and the world around us and that's what keeps me excited about what's next. As for my personal goals, I want to continue contributing to the success of my current organisation. But I'm also excited about the broader impact I can

make in the HR space. I'm involved in a variety of other projects, like supporting Macmillan with their people agenda and serving on several HR advisory boards. I believe that by engaging with multiple organisations, I can help influence positive change in a wider capacity. In the future, I don't see myself staying in one organisation at a time. My next step is going to be a bit different and I'm looking to step out of the traditional single-organisational model and work with multiple companies in a fractional capacity, supporting them in their HR journeys. I want to help drive positive HR agendas in various businesses, especially those that are open to progressive and innovative ideas.

THAT SOUNDS LIKE A REALLY EXCITING NEXT CHAPTER. WHAT WOULD YOU SAY YOUR MAIN ASPIRATIONS ARE AS YOU MOVE FORWARD? My main aspiration is to continue to inspire the evolution the People profession. I want to show that HR is not just an administrative function, but is a vital part of the business that drives growth and success. We need to continue pushing HR to be seen as a commercial driver and an integral partner in achieving business outcomes, not just a support function. At the same time, I want to focus on making a positive difference in people's lives. Ultimately, HR is about fostering a culture where everyone feels valued and appreciated. If I can contribute to that, I'll feel like I've made a meaningful impact. For me, it's also about continuing to be a learner, a connector and a catalyst for change. HR is constantly evolving and I want to be at the forefront of that evolution. I want to help shape the future of HR, ensuring it's a force for good that truly helps businesses and individuals achieve their potential. Finally, on a personal level, I want to continue to challenge myself. As I step into new roles, work with different organisations and expand my reach, I hope to keep growing both professionally and personally. There's always something new to learn and I want to keep embracing that.

FOR FURTHER INFO
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