Leading the Talent of Tomorrow

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Cover Story

Leading the Talent of Tomorrow

As ManpowerGroup has evolved to try and better serve the global talent needs of the future, Mara Swan, this year’s HR Executive of the Year, has helped to bring that change into clear focus.

By Tom Starner

As a young woman about to enter college, Mara Swan’s dad told her it was time to decide what she wanted to do with her life. His options, to be blunt, were not very ... well, optional.

“Being ‘old-school,’” he said could he be either a teacher or a nurse, definitely not my two choices,” says Swan, executive vice president of global strategy and talent at Manpower Group, and Human Resource Executive’s 2012 HR Executive of the Year. “There were thousands of occupations I could choose, but for some reason, I knew then I wanted to be a labor negotiator.”

Swan followed her muse, getting her bachelor’s degree in business from the University of Buffalo and then picking up an MBA in industrial relations at the University of Minnesota. Soon enough, Swan took her first job, working for Miller Brewing Co. as a personnel assistant and eventually rotating through a number of HR positions at Miller.

“I have always been interested in human behavior, especially listening to both sides of the story,” says Swan, 52, who—seven years ago—came to ManpowerGroup as senior vice president of global human resources after serving as chief people officer at Molson Coors Brewing Co. for several years. “You could say human resources is a natural fit for me.”

Understatement? Without a doubt. Since entering the HR world, Swan has accomplished much. Apart from HR professional associations and speaking engagements, she was named a Woman of Influence by the Milwaukee Business Journal in 2008 and a Woman Worth Watching by Profiles in Diversity Journal in 2010, the same year she was inducted into the Wisconsin Business Hall of Fame.

Accolades aside, Swan will agree that her most impressive business accomplishments have taken place during her seven-year tenure at ManpowerGroup, the $22 billion, Milwaukee-based global staffing company that provides recruitment and assessment, training and development, career management, outsourcing and workforce consulting to 400,000 clients worldwide. To make that case especially convincing, Swan’s HR leadership position at ManpowerGroup—with its 31,000 employees in 3,900 locations spanning 80 countries—includes marketing, strategy, risk management, communications, innovation and corporate social responsibility—a sextet of responsibilities encountered by few CHROs.

Swan’s impact has been undeniable. In March 2011, for example, ManpowerGroup unveiled the company’s next evolution with connected yet differentiated brands (adding three new ones, ManpowerGroup, the parent entity; Experis, the professional resourcing brand; and Manpower Group Solutions, the HR-related outsourcing services brand) to better help clients navigate talent complexities they face in what ManpowerGroup has dubbed the “Human Age.”

As ManpowerGroup defines it, the Human Age is a transformation wherein talent has replaced capital as the key competitive business differentiator. Basically, to meet today’s Human Age challenges for clients, ManpowerGroup initially needed to make major changes internally, especially among its global leadership ranks via a new organizational model that was anchored by collaboration.

According to Jeffrey Joerres, the company’s chairman and CEO, Swan’s influence proved critical in developing the structure of the ManpowerGroup Collaborative Organizational Model, a massive companywide training and communications effort to move the company from a siloed organization to a collaborative one.

Her contributions don’t stop there.

• Swan initiated and led ManpowerGroup’s global Unleashing Potential program, which focused on the role of leadership by helping leaders be better coaches to grow, develop and “unleash” the potential of their people through specialized internal training and coaching programs.

• She was the driving force behind the company’s unique Candidate Experience program, which demonstrates the company’s value to candidates and, by extension, clients.

• In 2007, when the company opened its new world headquarters building, Swan was the executive “mastermind” behind the 1,000-employee move from four different locations to a new $64 million world headquarters in Milwaukee.

As it is for any leading organization, says Joerres, maximizing performance and competence is high up in his company’s hierarchy. As such, its development philosophy is based on what it calls the “Three Es”—Exposure, Experience and Education—as well as the notion that current leadership is responsible for developing the next leadership generation. Unleashing Potential, he says, allows ManpowerGroup to “imbue leaders and people with new capabilities,” and the results of this can be seen in the improved alignment and accountability of the organization’s people to its strategy.

For example, as part of the program, participants learn—through role playing and peer coaching with fellow program participants—how to seek a better understanding of their people’s motivations and expectations and therefore learn how to best coach them on how to be successful in their role—in a way that contributes to the execution of the company’s strategy. They also learn how to
give and practice giving direct feedback, both positive and constructive, in order to more effectively coach and manage performance against goals and objectives.

“For me,” Swan says, “success is based on the ability to tap into what is important, because every company is different and you need to sort that all out. People want to do their best, be recognized and work for someone who cares about them.”

For the Candidate Experience program, Swan and her five-person HR team (there are 200 in her HR department as a whole) developed a consistent strategy at every global location—from creating warm and welcoming branch environments to perfecting the way ManpowerGroup recruiters greet and engage candidates. “Candidate” is the ManpowerGroup term for potential employees being recruited for clients. Once they are engaged, they become one of the three to four million associates working worldwide at any given time.

“The staff at all branches were trained to understand candidates’ needs, better manage their expectations and personalize their experience—all criteria for how the company now motivates and incent people to drive desired behaviors and results,” says Swan. She adds that the program is also used when redesigning branches worldwide, to reflect the company’s values and brands.

“We had three months to train 20,000 people worldwide,” says Swan. “It is a self-sustaining program, but we had to measure it and control it. Most of all, we had to make sure our managers are consistently delivering that experience, no matter which office a candidate walks into.”

For the massive 2007 headquarters move, Swan led and engaged a cross-functional team that successfully drove every detail of the complex project, effectively managing everything from designing the contemporary working environment to planning the grand opening.

“Best of all, Mara turned the move into an opportunity to deepen the company’s sense of employee engagement,” Joerres says, noting that, during nine months of employee focus groups, Swan and her headquarters-move team involved employees in discussions about informal meeting areas, desk chairs and a range of other critical workplace issues.

Swan also ensured every detail of the new headquarters would reflect ManpowerGroup’s commitment to environmental sustainability. The building became the first Milwaukee site to achieve Gold Status under the United States Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification process.

What’s the secret sauce within Swan’s string of successes? Joerres invokes an interesting sports analogy when getting to the heart of why ManpowerGroup’s HR executive has separated herself from the pack time and time again.

“Mara is like one of those special hitters in baseball, guys like Ted Williams, who can see the spin of the ball and can take it to left or right field,” he says. “She can clearly see the pitch, read the pitch and know where to hit the pitch.”

“Pragmatic Execution”

Joerres, naturally, isn’t the lone member of the Mara Swan fan club, as most who know her ascribe to her an almost preternatural ability to see things clearly and react accordingly.

Toronto-based Tammy Johns, a Swan direct report and senior vice president of innovation and global workforce solutions, has been with ManpowerGroup for 20 years. She has seen many changes. She has not, however, seen a CHRO like Swan.

“Her strength is that she brings is clear, pragmatic execution,” Johns says. “Mara can take the most complex things and make them quite simple. It’s really a gift, being able to clearly understand the scope of very big programs and break them down so they can be done logically.”
Leading the Talent of Tomorrow

About the Competition

Since its inception, the HR Executive of the Year award has been presented to 24 recipients, while 79 individuals have now been named to the HR Honor Roll.

A panel of five judges reviewed this year's submissions and based their selections on the following criteria: the candidate's ability to handle significant problems in the human resource field, the candidate's role and/or success in establishing the HR function within their organization, the candidate's management skills as demonstrated within the HR function and the candidate's contributions to the HR profession.

The HR Honor Roll competition was divided into two categories this year: Organizations with fewer than 7,500 employees and organizations with 7,500 or more employees. This year, two HR executives are being recognized in the under 7,500 employees category and one HR executive is being recognized in the 7,500 employees or more category.

Judges for the 2012 competition included Dennis Donovan, vice chairman of Cernerus Operations and Advisory Co. and the 2003 HR Executive of the Year winner; Fred Fouad, director of the Human Resource Policy Institute and professor of management policy at the Boston University School of Management; Dr. Jac Fitz-enz, president of the Human Capital Source; Susan Meisinger, author, speaker and consultant on human resources, and former president and CEO of the Society for Human Resource Management; and David Shadovitz, editor-in-chief of Human Resource Executive.

While no one will make the case that Swan’s HR prowess is the only factor in that performance, it certainly is one of them, says Joerres.

“McAra is a very bright person, but that just gets you out of the starting block,” he says. “She also has the ability to create, through knowledge and listening. Mara has an incredible sense of urgency, believing that if it can be done today, do it today, not tomorrow.”

Joerres make no bones about it: HR has played a pivotal role in ManpowerGroup’s success. Of course, for a company that offers talent as its No. 1 product, that makes complete sense. But even so, Swan’s coming to ManpowerGroup has sparked a new direction for the company’s HR strategy.

“HR needs to be the heart and soul of the company and, at the same time, needs to drive results,” Joerres says. “You do that through the people and that takes a bit of alchemy, not a one-size-fits-all approach. With Mara, when I asked her to take on these challenges, I got back even more than I expected. If you don’t have finance and HR locked into your strategy, success will be very hard.”

Looking ahead, Swan says that the complexities of today’s business environment mean ManpowerGroup will remain focused on building as much agility into the organization as possible. That means HR’s prime challenge will continue to be increasing the depth and breadth of contrasting skills required, including strategic and tactical skills, conceptual and action-oriented skills, etc.

“We will keep leveraging collaboration and technology to drive innovation and productivity,” she says. “Our job is to ensure we have the leadership and talent to make that happen.”

So, with all her career successes, has she ever pondered hiring leaders to HR for the business-operations side of the house? Not even tempted, Swan says.

“Business line leaders I’ve worked with have tried to recruit me, but I always say no while they tell me I am wasting my life in HR,” she says with a laugh. “I am passionate about HR because I love what I do. To me, I can make a better impact in HR than anywhere else in the company.”

In fact, when Joerres initially asked Swan to take on that broader role of responsibility for areas typically outside of HR (marketing, risk management, etc.), her first words to him were “Are you crazy?”

As she puts it, “I didn’t want to get too caught up in a lot of nontraditional HR responsibilities because I am very independent,” she says. “But in the end, I just want to know what is best for the organization.”

Mission accomplished.

Send questions or comments about this feature to krellettes@hr.com.