

# Source

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## diving in

developing HR in a rapidly-growing, entrepreneurial business

### Reportage from the HR forum in May

Following a successful six month trial, The White Company Resourcing Centre launches with ResourceBank this month. The HR team at The White Company has been instrumental in ensuring the correct processes and people are in place to help the company to evolve as a major luxury brand, as HR Director, Jane Perks explained at ResourceBank's latest HR Directors' Forum.

Speaking to an audience of over 50 HR Directors at the Institute of Directors, Jane Perks likened The White Company to a swan – to all appearances calm

and serene, yet paddling furiously beneath the surface. As the company's HR Director for the past three years, she is well placed to make the comment.

The White Company is well known for still being owned by founder Chrissie Rucker. But even those interested in the retailer for business reasons, rather than a love of its soft white bath sheets, cannot fail to be struck by the serenity of the branches, and the people. Indeed, as Jane said, customers often pop in just to relax.

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Jane Perks, HR Director – The White Company

“It’s harder to add structure to an entrepreneurial company, but it’s necessary. Small organisations have that family feeling, but when they become bigger, the owner no longer recognises people. It’s hard to keep that small organisation feel. Communication is key – staff need to understand everything.”

Jean Gerrard *HR Business Partner*  
Aliaxis

“For a very small, new business, The White Company has come a long way in a short time. They know what they do well, and intend to do lots of it. When they get it wrong, they put it right. It’s about continuous improvement, and having HR and the owner aligned. You don’t often get that level of alignment or consistency of message.”

Claire Silvester *HR Director UK*  
Vector Aerospace

“What struck me was that when you have a small entrepreneurial business, the key decision-makers will end up making all of the decisions. What impact will this have on the other staff? A small business will be more autocratic, relying on certain people. Bigger businesses are more consultative.”

Geoff Hall *Head of HR Operations*  
World Duty Free

Much of the ethos of The White Company stems from Chrissie. Having put in place her management team, led by Patricia Alford Burnett, Chrissie’s remaining involvement is focussed on marketing and product development. However, her vision of The White Company still extends beyond shops and products to the type of employee she wants. A vision best summed up, in her own words, as ‘lovely people’.who deliver the very best customer service.

Not many HR Directors would be up to the challenge of providing ‘lovely people’, but Jane clearly is. While she may well see the typical White Company employee as lovely, she told us her staff also need to have brand empathy, relevant experience and a passion for serving our customers.

With years of corporate HR experience behind her, Jane knew she wanted to join a privately-owned company. When she joined The White Company she faced an unusual proposition - that of the small company that had grown quickly, perhaps without the right framework or processes. Famously founded by Chrissie Rucker in her future sister-in-law’s attic, The White

Company today boasts 800 staff, supported by a six strong HR team.

Jane told us how, when she joined the company in May 2007, it was a multichannel retail proposition, selling instore, online and by telephone. Yet the mindset was still very much that of the mail order origins. Managing Director Pat Burnett was new (although not to Jane, the two having worked together at Wallis) and the infrastructure was clearly inadequate to support the growth aspirations for the business. One early lesson was that problem solving had been managed on an ‘all dive in and sort it out’ principle – fine in the short term, but impractical in the larger business. Having started out on such a small scale, The White Company lacked the HR basics – policies, procedures and rules – essential to create the right framework for managing the growing number of employees.

Jane set to work. Apart from the HR nuts and bolts, she knew the company’s greatest challenge was to manage the transition from an owner/founder-run business to a bigger corporate operation – without losing that entrepreneurial feel. It was

a case of adding structure without losing flexibility and achieving the all-important multi-channel approach.

As HR Director, much of this fell within Jane's remit. She started by recruiting The White Company's first Retail Director, Gary Temprell, along with ecommerce talent and experienced retail people. With Gary, she recruited store managers for the 10 new stores opened in 2008, the company's busiest year in terms of expansion. Although they had a clear idea of the type of manager they wanted, Christmas 2008 was to prove a peak season too far. As sales quadrupled, a couple of the newer recruits were overwhelmed by the volumes and decided to leave. The concept of 'lovely people' was tweaked to ensure managers were equipped to deal with the challenging Christmas peak.

Prior to Jane's arrival at The White Company, training was ad hoc, despite significant investment. There were no development programmes or succession planning. But she and her team worked hard to create structure around training and, mindful perhaps of the Christmas 2008 scenario, introduced the Assistant Manager



development programme. There are now a dozen people on this programme, working their way through a series of 'building blocks' on topics such as commercial skills and managing under pressure. The White Company is now confident that it can bring people up through the organisation, rather than relying on external candidates for more senior roles.

Three years into the job, there have been significant infrastructure changes, for example, the introduction of a new systems platform and a restructuring of warehouses and contact centres to create operational efficiencies and improved customer service. From an HR perspective, the development of an employee handbook, and the creation of a policies and procedures manual for managers has provided the nuts and bolts required. But most importantly, Jane is proud that Learning and Development is firmly on the agenda with a number

*Some of our guests enjoying the champagne.*

of leading edge development programmes across the business.

While the learning curve has been steep, Jane acknowledges the lessons she's learnt. Being patient is key, she says, as is the need to adapt. And keep the end result in sight – as she emphasises, "journeys can be more circuitous than expected." Build a strong, aligned team capable of supporting every area of the business, and get the basics in place. Communication and learning and development are crucial when it comes to employee engagement.

Asked how the company keeps innovation alive while adding structure, she said: "People want to grow and improve – they are passionate about the potential of the brand, so innovation is still very strong, we are a creative business and our teams are all driving for the future."

# recruiting in (or is it out of) a recession

During his masterclass, “Recruiting in (or is it out of) a Recession” at the European HR Directors Summit, Richard Pearson, Managing Director of ResourceBank, presented a compelling business case for outsourcing recruitment to a single supplier. He explained the value of RPO, both in terms of improving the candidate experience, finding high calibre candidates and freeing up time for the HR team to focus on other business priorities.

Richard said, “Whilst companies may have fewer vacancies to fill, they still need to get the best candidates for the job. They need to have strong processes in place to communicate well, both with successful candidates and the large volumes of non-successful applicants. An outsourced recruitment provider can take a huge amount of pressure off the in-house HR team, whilst delivering excellence in recruitment standards and acting as an ambassador for your brand.”

## next forum

The next HR Directors’ Forum will be held on Thursday 30th September at Mallory Court, Leamington Spa.

Sonia Sharples, Head of HR for Poundland, provided further insight. “If your organisation is not recruiting a huge amount, the HR team may not have the right skills to recruit. A dedicated outsourced recruitment team will have the right skills and processes in place to help you with your recruitment needs at all times.”

Richard firmly believes the time has come to re-evaluate the in-house resourcing function. He concluded, “If HR Directors have a genuine desire to do things differently and improve their current offering, outsourcing could provide the answer. It’s a viable option which is worth exploring.”



Richard Pearson,  
Managing Director – ResourceBank

Forum Photographs: Mark Anderson (www.photobart.co.uk)

## news...



ResourceBank are delighted to welcome ASOS, the leading online fashion retailer as a new client.

Our small onsite team is focused on recruiting key IT skills into the business at this crucial stage in its development. The project, launched two months ago, has already seen placements into the business and

extensive advertising to raise the profile of the ASOS brand in the recruitment marketplace.



Vector and ResourceBank partnership has had a busy couple of months. Our most recent success has been in the management and delivery of their Apprenticeship Recruitment Campaign for both Gosport and AlmondBank in Scotland. Two assessment centres in May resulted in 10 offers being made.



recruitment solutions partner

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