

“Network, plan your career and show potential and current employees that you’ll help do the same.”

In this guest article, Klaas van der Leest, V.P. of Sales for Attenda (a leading European managed services business) talks about the importance of managing your own career and making sure that your potential and current employees understand that you’ll help them do the same.

About Klaas van der Leest

Graduate of Cranfield University. Klaas has worked for Perstorp, Nortel Networks, Logica, Dimension Data and is currently VP Sales at Attenda Ltd. Born in the Netherlands, graduated as an agricultural engineer and decided to further his academic skills with a Master Degree and ended up in IT services early in his working career. Since graduating, Klaas continued to invest in his professional skills and was recognized as a Chartered Marketer in 1998 and more recently as a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing in 2007.

About lessons learned

As an ambitious student, I managed to drag myself from the Friesian clay in the north of the Netherlands. Whilst a beautiful, agriculturally rich part of the Netherlands, it was not re-known for huge employment opportunities and academic enrichment for a Frisian within the Netherlands is probably easier abroad.

Culturally probably not dissimilar to Yorkshire, I set on my journey to the UK and ended up at Cranfield (Silsoe College) with circa 50 different nationalities on a single campus. Never in my life again have I been so close to attending a United Nations assembly! Great friendships were struck, cultural awareness grew and of course we studied for parts of the day. Academically, we were exposed to the great in marketing and management, Kotler, McDonald, Shapiro to name but a few. However the biggest lessons learned came from Professor Hill who on the first day, introduced many of us to two monumental phrases. As he summarized his opening speech, he told a large congregation of wannabe Masters, that being smart, intelligent and bright would make little difference in the real world if we could not get to grips with the following:

- *“it does not matter what you know, but who you know”*

and

- *“plan your work, and work your plan”*

Little did it mean at the time but all become apparent once I started real work.....

About being stuck in the middle

Whilst I applied and experienced differentiation at the educational track, it quickly became obvious that in working life this was no different. Soon after starting work, it was evident that planning was key for successful completion of tasks and you would probably be more efficient if you used your contact network in appropriate ways. Professor Hill probably never imagined that LinkedIn was even conceivable (for those who have never used it: www.linkedin.com). At the end of the day LinkedIn is just a tool and many individuals have build up great contact books without it but the message is still the same.

At company level differentiation is paramount as well and in my six years at Logica I witnessed a truly fantastic company “becoming stuck in the middle”. Logica grew in revenue and headcount terms in both organic and inorganic ways. Despite efforts to become a global player, it was overtaken by either pure play, niche players (e.g. Axon in the SAP arena), the large global SI companies (e.g. Accenture, IBM etc.), the fast growing Indian offshore companies (e.g., Infosys and Wipro) and the focused strategic management companies (e.g. Bain, Booz Allan).

Despite numerous acquisitions in recent years, which bulked up the headcount and revenues in continental Europe, Logica has become stuck in the middle. No clear differentiation in any industry, region or delivery model. The recent appointment of a new CEO will hopefully turn Logica back into the icon it once was, although it may have to reconsider its global ambition.

At career level the same applies. I see many candidates who have become stuck in the middle as well. Because they did not plan ahead, they have ended up in roles lacking further breadth / opportunity or have become victims of re-organisations. Pro-activity at candidate level is critical. Remember; headhunters can not make decisions for you, they can offer you choices but these should only be made as part of a plan. Ask yourself the question; "What is John Smith PLC all about"? What are the milestones for success and how will you know when you have arrived? How do I prevent from becoming stuck in the middle?

About focus

No company will knowingly chose for the stuck in the middle position and when I was introduced to Attenda in late 2005, it's focus soon became apparent following a series of meetings with the executive team. Attenda is a leading European, UK based, pure play managed services business focused on running, securing and optimising critical, day-to-day IT operations for clients. The company operates and manages business critical systems to ensure that they are "Always On". Attenda focuses on UK mid-market companies, local government organisations and ISVs. It has 138 active clients, all of whom can be referenced. The company is unusual among competitors in that it focuses exclusively on managed services for critical IT operations. Attenda provides these services to UK mid market enterprise clients (typically FTSE 100+ companies) and local government organisations, with each of whom it typically has a 3-5 year, annual revenue-based contract. Attenda, which was founded in 1996 and today has ca. 170 employees, has been successful in executing organic growth, driving consistent 15-20% p.a. organic revenue growth. Being clear on positioning in the market is paramount from a competitive perspective – both for prospective clients and employees. Focus drives the right kind of behaviours and outcomes for all parties: short, medium and long term.

Bringing it together

If you are reading this article as a possible candidate, know what you want from your career and understand what is good for your own "PLC". Once this is clear, plan your work and work your plan. Part of your plan has to be your network – work it and make it work for you. Remember it is about the who rather than the what you know! If you are recruiting, planning works in the same way, at Attenda we have a clearly defined process, and as we are competing with many blue chip companies, selling the Attenda values and focus is a key differentiator. Despite some economic down turn, recruitment will remain a two way sales process and, a candidate recommended through a colleague or friend is likely to turn out a better hire than a faceless CV from a job board.

As a parting shot, one of my colleagues recently introduced me to another grand statement when I recalled my university experiences as described above. In the networked economy, it clearly matters who you know, but perhaps even more importantly, "*who knows you*". You better start planning fast!

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