

Talent Strategy

Understand the Tech and Partner Up

How digital helped a legacy multinational become a modern employer

AMROP INTERVIEW

With
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Group Operations
Chief Transformation
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Leaders For What's Next

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How digital helped a legacy multinational become a modern employer

Today's top talent leaders are facing unprecedented pressure to digitize fast or fall behind. Whilst most clearly recognize the case for change, barely a third feel confident about digital HR applications such as analytics and AI (KPMG 2019). Many are taking slow and painful steps.

What are the growing pains and successes experienced by HR strategists on the front lines of change? How can talent pilots map a route through these unpredictable waters?

Whilst it's safe to say the transformation journey is always a necessary one, it is critical to design the right strategy and drive it through in tandem with the best possible IT collaborators. This, according to Isabelle Sonneville, Group Operations Chief Transformation Officer of the French insurance multinational, AXA.

In this exclusive Amrop interview, Isabelle Sonneville reflects on her seven year digital path as CHRO of AXA Belgium. She tells Amrop that on taking over, the organization was in need of radical transformation.

"My initial challenge at AXA Belgium wasn't to digitize HR for its own sake, but to help the company become a modern employer that could attract talent while at the same time reducing labor costs through optimization."

The roots of AXA can be traced back to its early 19th century origins as a small mutual insurer based in Normandy, France. Today, AXA is the world's second biggest player in its operating sector, employing 170,000 employees in 61 countries, serving 105 million clients, protecting property, people and assets.



About Isabelle Sonneville

Following her Masters in Law at the Catholic University of Louvain and Masters in European and International Law at the Free University of Brussels (VUB), Isabelle Sonneville dedicated the first chapter of her career to legal practice, including a stint as a 'Lawyer Without Borders' in the context of the Rwandan genocide trials.

She subsequently re-directed her focus towards human resources, holding senior positions at Swiss Life before moving to AXA in 2011, where she is currently Group Operations Chief Transformation Officer.

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Amrop: Did you feel pressure to digitize from above or did you personally identify it as a necessity?

Isabelle Sonnevile: Digitization was a consequence of what the Board expected from me when I took over. And the first example of this modernization process was that we moved our offices from outside Brussels to the center of the city. This was a good opportunity to move to laptop and hot-desk working. Obvious now but not so obvious 8 or 9 years ago. Remote working, digitally managing employee performance, managing compensation reviews.

What made a difference when we moved was that we decided to invest massively in the technology. To have the most up to date tooling to work remotely, to become really paperless, and to move to activity-based working, meaning no one has their own office any more, not even the CEO. I think we were quite old fashioned, which you could feel when you entered the old building, and too expensive to run. So we went through a serious transformation, including a social plan. We needed this transformation internally to reduce costs, and outwardly too, to maintain the confidence of our clients. So we followed the same road map for both.

Did it work immediately?

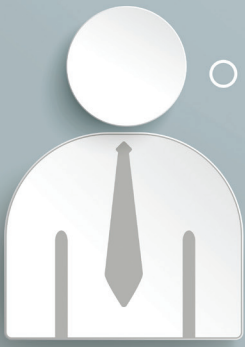
Yes, we drastically reduced fixed costs in the move to the new building. But you need to have a very good business case to convince the company to invest in HR tooling. In HR we are never where we want to be. At group level we invested a lot in digital HR platforms and there is still a way to go to improve the daily experience of employees and managers.

Why?

Because the tools are not always user friendly, especially those produced by the big players. Nevertheless we managed to review the HR IT architecture, and tried to implement user-friendly tools with our core systems to improve the user experience. The journey to become digital in HR is a difficult one, but questioning the way we work and the way we used our premises, going paperless, were all integral. And making huge investment in HR tooling you also need good collaboration with IT, between the HRD and the CIO, to make it work.



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My life changed when, helped by my CEO, we started to look into the IT-HR architecture — so I invested myself in understanding what that means - which tool is talking to which tool. And tried to make sense of and simplify this spaghetti-patchwork of tools we have today. Because otherwise buying a new tool and trying to connect it to our existing framework leads to chaos.

What did you find problematic in the digital HR tooling you implemented?

As an HR person I was not the most up to date with the tech-legacy, or with a deep understanding of the IT back office. It's difficult to find someone with good technical knowledge and HR to support you and bridge the gap. My life changed when, helped by my CEO, we started to look into the IT-HR architecture — so I invested myself in understanding what that means - which tool is talking to which tool. And tried to make sense of and simplify this spaghetti-patchwork of tools we have today. Because otherwise buying a new tool and trying to connect it to our existing framework leads to chaos.

So I learned a lot by digging into this architecture, hand-in-hand with IT. For example, we decided to replace our time management tool, the way our employees record their time and vacations, we negotiated new rules with the unions, and we plugged the new tool into our core HR system. And that worked well.

We also decided that instead of having many different ways to ask a question to HR, we would invest in a new HR portal. All administrative questions could then be asked through this portal, through a kind of search engine or bot, which would then provide you with an answer in most cases. What was new about using a portal was that we could analyze the questions and find ways to iron out issues that kept recurring.

This is part of what it means to go digital — the satisfaction of both the manager and the employee are increasing. As a manager you increase your capability to answer questions in the right way and so it improves the perception of good quality of service.

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Is there a downside to the decrease in human interaction?

Yes, but you face an even bigger issue when you do not have good tools and at the same time reduce personal contact. Big dissatisfaction is then guaranteed. People became highly frustrated when they didn't get a good answer or even reach a human being. My conviction is that even with a great digital tool, you also have to put in place levels of human interaction. For example, in our new Brussels premises, we had a kind of service desk. Beside our IT desk we had an HR desk, meaning that someone can always talk to a human being in HR face to face. Or at least ask through the portal to have a face to face, or through Skype, depending on your location and situation.

Were there any instances where the tech didn't work as well as you hoped?

Yes sadly, the core HR system has turned out to be not as user-friendly as it seemed to be in the demo. Actually, most of the HR performance management systems do not offer a high level of intuitive handling or speed!

At Group level, we are reviewing the process to simplify it to the maximum, and in parallel work together with the provider to improve the user experience on the tool itself.

We know that we can learn a lot from our data, but for that to happen it must be good data. It is terrible to discover that the data coming out of your systems is not clean enough. For example, absenteeism can be anticipated from good data. Good data, thanks to predictive analysis, is part of the future of digital HR, and again it starts with good tooling and increased awareness at company level for data quality.

What's the learning from this experience?

One thing would be to have much stronger commitment from the provider from the start. Everyone uses Amazon to buy a book, or Uber to book a taxi, but when it comes to a performance management tool it's a nightmare. There's some way to go before we get to where we'd like it to be in digital HR tooling—we need them to be better designed and more user-friendly.

Linked to this is the importance of the data, which in HR is increasing. We know that we can learn a lot from our data, but for that to happen it must be good data. It is terrible to discover that the data coming out of your systems is not clean enough. For example, absenteeism can be anticipated from good data. Good data, thanks to predictive analysis, is part of the future of digital HR, and again it starts with good tooling and increased awareness at company level for data quality.

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What do the new digital tools do for recruitment? Is there an expectation that machines will solve the recruitment problem?

There are fantastic tools, and at AXA we have some great ones in place to attract candidates, and to improve the user experience when they apply for jobs. Also we make a lot of use of LinkedIn. This is an activity that has seen a huge evolution in recent years. But having a good portal and front end to attract good people does not necessarily mean you have the tooling at the back end to do the right follow-up. If you have good contact with candidates throughout the hiring process you can be sure their experience is good up to the “onboarding”. Then it depends on your capacity to offer a good digital onboarding experience to the newcomer.

So this can be very frustrating when you see what some smaller companies are able to do with new tools on the market, compared to the limitations we larger firms face due to legacy, or lack of investments at company level. To lead us through that problem effectively you need people who can master HR and IT, or at least are able to make the link, co-build the business case and unleash the necessary investments.

Is there such a thing as an IT-HR joint specialist?

Yes I believe so, but I lost a lot of time looking for such a person. In the end, I managed to progress by digging into the HR digital architecture, with a lot of support from IT specialists willing to help HR, and good project management. Then together we managed to win the money for new tooling.

What’s your advice to talent strategists when it comes to digitization?

Firstly, the HR person must make sure they understand what digitization is about — don’t leave it to IT.

You need to invest yourself in understanding your tooling, from a technical point of view. And to have in your team the right people to help you in that. Ideally this means an HR specialist with an IT background, with project management skills, and who is very good at building relationships, i.e. between HR, IT and Finance.

To be convincing to the CEO and CFO with your business case as to why you cannot continue on your current path. And understand that you cannot do this without being hand in hand with IT. Without IT you will struggle to convince the Board.

In a nutshell, digitizing HR is about understanding the tech and having the right partnerships. With partnerships, I mean, not consultants doing high level analysis, but “hands-on” specialists — both on the HR and the IT side - who are both willing to bring HR to the next maturity level.”



In Summary

7 digitization keys for digital talent strategists

In a nutshell, digitizing HR is about understanding the tech and having the right partnerships.

1

Don't leave it to IT

Personally invest in your technical understanding, and take ownership.

2

Work with IT to build the digital business case

This must speak to both CEO and CFO, presenting the downside of business as usual

3

Bring a T-shaped profile onto your team

The ideal blends HR and IT knowhow, project management and relationship-building (HR, IT, Finance). Otherwise be prepared to roll up your sleeves and learn from the specialists.

4

Dig into your legacy architecture, and simplify before you buy

Bringing in a new system or tool in the hope of grafting it onto an existing framework is a recipe for spaghetti.

5

Lock down commitment from big providers

No matter the size and punching power of your organization, this needs to be in place up front. It will take foresight and negotiating muscle.

6

Preserve the human

Emphasize both face-time and a user-friendly interface. A reduction in human contact combined with a rise in under performing tools will almost certainly backfire.

7

Keep a keen eye on data quality

The old adage of 'rubbish in, rubbish out' is more relevant than ever if you are to leverage digital predictive power.





About Amrop

With over 70 offices in all world regions, Amrop is a trusted advisor in Executive Search, Board and Leadership Services. It is the largest partnership of its kind.

Amrop advises the world's most dynamic organizations on finding and positioning Leaders For What's Next: top talent, adept at working across borders in markets around the world.

Amrop's mission: shaping sustainable success through inspiring leaders.

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