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Telly vision

22 Mar 2007 By Rima Evans

Bruce Robertson, a senior HR director at ITV, sums up his main mission at work: "How do we create something that will surprise the viewer?"

Such a statement, so business focused and that cuts to the heart of operational issues, isn't one commonly heard from HR departments. But Robertson isn't on an orthodox HR journey.

When he joined Granada Productions in July 2004, just after the merger of Carlton and Granada that formed ITV plc, his remit was to examine its culture with a view to promoting it as a great place to work. But the past couple of years have seen Robertson's actual focus centred around innovation: taking the company's capacity for creativity and ideas generation to new heights in a bid to head off the competitive challenges ITV faces.

He has conceived and set up a new research and development (R&D) unit for ITV, "committed to inspiring and igniting ground-breaking opportunities across all areas of the company". It aims to "chart the unknown based on an understanding of what we know today".

While establishing an innovation unit in itself is none too radical, it is unusual for HR to be the driving force behind it. But Robertson is moving with the times. There are few business people or gurus who don't list innovation as one of the principal challenges that today's organisations face. In particular, there has been a rallying cry from the likes of Gary Hamel that HR should make it a priority. CIPD chief economist John Philpott reiterated in a recent issue of PM how crucial creativity was to the survival of organisations when he listed innovation among this year's top five HR issues. "The key task facing us as a society is to innovate – harnessing ideas and knowledge to meet the various economic, business, medical, environmental and security threats that we face," he warned.

Yet, while leading practitioners instinctively recognise they should be driving the quest for innovation (ideas will only ever come from people, after all), how to tackle it remains a difficult question. Robertson, however, is making headway. The 14-person unit he has set up, called ITV Imagine, will work as an internal consultancy to every part of the company. It went live last October with a remit to incubate ideas or concepts from staff and to gather external knowledge and expertise on national and global trends and technology, so it is equipped to anticipate future thinking and develop content ideas.

Unlike many centres of its type, the function will not be deliberately isolated from the rest of the business and put in sole charge of R&D, although it will be housed in a dedicated facility to be opened this month. Robertson stresses that ITV Imagine is an "and", not an "instead", designed to catalyse creativity across the organisation and reignite every employee's potential for ideas generation or new thinking.

"This is a creative business so everyone should have an opportunity to contribute their ideas, including those people not considered to be in a 'creative' role," he says. "I felt we needed to find a way to protect ideas and stop them from being killed off or categorised and narrowed."

And it couldn't come at a better time, considering the announcement this month of pre-tax profits falling to £288 million at the end of 2006, from £311 million in 2005. Executive chairman Michael Grade says ITV needs to be more innovative and take risks. It's a sentiment obviously shared by Robertson, who had been working on this project long before Grade's arrival earlier this year.

Robertson started looking at ITV's aptitude for innovation following a cultural audit he undertook, initially covering Granada but later extended to the whole of ITV. The audit set out to identify what was unique about working there and scrutinised areas including management behaviour, recruitment and career structure, using focus groups with employees, a culture audit tool and one-to-one interviews with managers. In addition, Robertson carried out a benchmarking exercise to gauge how the business compared with others known for their creative flair, such as Apple, MTV, 3M, Disney, Pixar, Google and Adobe.

This research threw up two areas of concern, Robertson says. "The first was around innovation. My focus was thrown on how we were engaging all of our employees in the art of creativity; how suited we were to deliver innovation, given all the significant threats and changes to the media landscape facing us. I found in our business, for example, that, post-merger, a piece of content developed over here was then not being exposed to other parts of the business, so its maximum potential wasn't being explored.

"Yet leading-edge, successful companies had a centralised innovation unit that unlocked silos. They also had a better approach to exploring the possibilities of an idea or product."

The second concern, Robertson says, was around "the important role of diversity in nurturing creativity – and that it is born out of having people from different backgrounds and cultures".

He began toying with the idea of setting up a dedicated innovation resource. His plans were re-shaped during 2005 in response to emerging findings from the ITV-wide cultural audit. Eventually the scheme evolved to something close to its current format and was approved by the board a little over a year ago.

"Behind the thinking of Imagine was, how do we ensure our ideas are stretched to the point that they are made into something that appeals to the viewer?" Robertson says.

This is the million-dollar question for an organisation operating amid the sort of commercial conditions that epitomise why innovation has made such a dramatic comeback on the business scene.

ITV has some pressing challenges: despite it being home to the likes of Coronation Street and Dancing on Ice, one of its core aims is to strengthen its schedule. Its share of total viewing is consistently topped only by BBC One (the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board's February figures showed ITV with a 19.7 per cent share and BBC One with 22.5 per cent). But it must still fight to maintain relevance among a younger audience in order to retain advertisers. And although it has a multi-channel portfolio, including an ever-growing digital presence, the mushrooming of digital TV and shift from analogue – not to mention the plethora of mobile content devices on the market – mean it cannot rest on its laurels.

And these represent only the most immediate industry-specific threats. Robertson points out the scale of change facing the media industry. "My background is in retailing and I witnessed dramatic change there. The only other industry changing at such a pace and level is the media industry." He uses research to back this up, highlighting that a large proportion of the valuable 16- to 24-year-old audience is now spending more time on computers than watching TV. Some 23 hours a week are being spent by them on broadband, much of it on social networking sites. In addition, it now takes 300 showings of one ad to reach the same proportion of an audience that it used to take only five showings to reach 10-15 years ago.

Being able to adapt to this new landscape and eventually being able actively to shape it lies behind ITV Imagine.

Always thinking ahead is a huge preoccupation (not coincidental, of course) of the man heading up ITV Imagine, Pele Cortizo-Burgess. Although the creation of this project has been largely Robertson's baby, his role is still firmly in HR (although he will still act as a consulting director to the senior Imagine team.) As such, he has taken the new title of director of HR, ITV productions, Imagine and worldwide.

Cortizo-Burgess, on the other hand, joined ITV last December from the world of advertising. An account planner lured over from New York to take this job, his strength comes from his discipline of being on top of, and therefore able to predict, key trends.

He has worked with creative agencies such as St Luke's and Goodby, Silverstein & Partners and spent time with Faith Popcorn, a US trend guru (the message on her website is: "If you knew everything about tomorrow, what would you do differently about today?").

He tells PM: "When I first met Bruce to talk about the work he was planning at ITV, I saw it as very in tune with what I believe in: helping people to stay in touch with the changes taking place outside so they can break the mould."

"Imagine is concerned with the same things everyone else in the company is concerned with. How do we ensure an incredibly engaging schedule? How do we make sense of this changing technology landscape? And how do we make sure everyone feels they can contribute to that?"

The unit will offer a knowledge pool of latest thinking, "so if someone asks what is going on in TV, Imagine will come back with the latest cultural trends, or what is happening in technology", Cortizo-Burgess explains.

The Imagine team will be an "eclectic group of people" with different skills so new ideas are approached differently. Seven full-time staff will be joined by creatives from other related industries who want to partner with ITV.

But building ties internally and ensuring inclusivity of ITV staff is seen as fundamental. "We can't come across as a consultancy that has been dropped into the company. After all, Imagine was born from within ITV," Cortizo-Burgess acknowledges. As such, the team structure will include three to four secondment positions for ITV senior managers. Robertson says: "These will be six months long and give staff the chance to spend time with the team."

Work to forge links and ensure Imagine doesn't turn into a unit disconnected from the rest of the business, or perceived as undermining other employees, doesn't stop at that. A culture change programme is under way to inspire and embed a "creative spirit" among staff and line managers and reiterate the value of employees' input.

Robertson admits that initially the idea for Imagine wasn't that well received – a presentation to 130 senior managers last year provoked "a mixed reaction".

"At first Imagine was seen as a threat, potentially displacing other activities or existing investment," he says. "Some people thought it was a message that they were no longer relevant. We had to emphasise that this was an extra resource, not a replacement."

Indeed, since it is hoped that Imagine will be developing ideas largely generated in-house, one of the change initiatives, called Create, is a reinvention of the company's ideas scheme, accompanied by training sessions to support and enhance employees' creative abilities.

"The Imagine team will hold one-day workshops with people from all parts of the business to aid them in generating ideas," Robertson says. This will include practical support to improve the quality of ideas put forward. "We want to make sure everyone can contribute, but we also have to make sure there is a certain level of thought behind people's ideas. Employees will have to put together a written explanation of the idea when formally submitting it. We will put in place the tools to enable them to go through that level of thinking," he says.

And if an idea is accepted for further development, the person behind it will be invited to work on it.

The Imagine centre on the top floor of one of ITV's main London sites will also be a resource for all staff. "It is designed to act as a stimulus but also be functional," Cortizo-Burgess says. "There will be a media wall of about 20 screens, private pod areas for thinking time, interactive media and presentation facilities. People will be able to drop in as they like."

But the real centrepiece of the culture change programme will be a project called Realise, which aims to address the pivotal role of managers and leaders in embracing a more creative environment. Robertson explains: "We are targeting 140 senior managers and want to work with them on a one-to-one basis, as well as in workshops, to help them understand their own leadership role and how they can contribute to the creativity of the company. It will be a kind of awakening piece, helping them to make sense of the world outside and inside."

He adds: "We want to make sure they have the skills to inspire their teams so they can give them the support to be more innovative."

The Realise programme, which is being piloted in the productions and worldwide department this year before being rolled out, will be run by the Imagine team with help and involvement from HR.

Looking back, Robertson admits that when he took the idea for Imagine to people within ITV, a common reaction was: why is HR leading on this? For him, it's not such a great leap. "This is all linked to the psychological contract, which HR should be concerned with," he says. "Times have changed and previously when people had a job for life, that contract was much more basic. Now processes have been standardised and skills homogenised. Organisations have to differentiate themselves so they are great places to work and people come to you rather than somewhere else. Culture and environment are areas where companies distinguish themselves and I think we can apply that element of organisational design to the psychological contract."

He adds: "It just happens that at ITV that is about innovation and creativity. Unlocking that is key to the success of the company over the next five years and is what will continue to make it a unique place to work. This is all HR stuff."

He concludes: "This is a journey. Imagine has its measurements and KPIs and we will be able to track the number of ideas coming through. But it's not necessarily a project where we can predict the outcome."

Cortizo-Burgess agrees: "Imagine will not be a saviour of the company. But it will help it on its journey and hopefully help to keep creating that element of surprise for the viewer."

How can HR promote innovation?

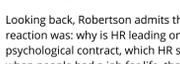
- Ensure you have commitment from your senior team to introduce an innovation model into your business.
- Know your business – ensure you have access to your company's market research and insight into consumers, and use it to review your HR strategy and inform your team.
- Think about how your current organisational design and culture inhibits or allows an easy process flow for innovation – who are the blockers and the supporters? Will your current structure kill ideas before they're given time to breathe?
- Do you have a creativity and innovation strategy in your learning and development function? Should you create one? Do you train people in the art of ideas generation (which shouldn't be confused with brainstorming)? If not, why not?
- Instill a culture of creativity, learning or innovation in your team. Does the team know the art of ideas generation (and protection)? You can't expect others to follow otherwise.

Innovative approaches to innovation

Management innovation is a subject being addressed by the Management Innovation Lab - a venture created by London Business School, and Gary Hamel's management research organisation, the Woodside Institute. The CIPD is also a founding partner of the Lab which aims to work with businesses to carry out ground breaking management experiments

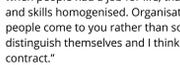
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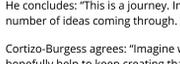
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