

THE FUTURE OF WORK

**Interview with
CHRIS YOXON
CHIEF EXECUTIVE
FORAY MOTOR GROUP**

Wilson's
Solicitors



PROMOTING FROM within as often as possible helps with employee retention because it's the clearest indication to staff that they have a real chance for career progression, says Chris Yoxon, chief executive of Ford dealers Foray Motor Group. "We try not to recruit from outside unless we have to."

The current service director, for example, started as an apprentice, while HR manager Sarah Glasby started in payroll and did such a "cracking job" that she was promoted to HR manager after taking professional qualifications. Glasby, who reports to Yoxon and is part of the management team, says: "People moving up means they have real knowledge of what goes on under them. They can say 'there's nothing you are being asked to do that I haven't done before.'"

A reason, Yoxon suggests, why staff turnover is only around 6%. The company has 450 staff spread over ten sites across the south and west. Yoxon joined in 1997, when the company had just two sites. Funding from Ford enabled him to buy it from the founding family and expand. Turnover is now £130million.

Attitudes among staff have changed since he came on board, Yoxon says: "When I first came, some of the staff used to call family members Mr Tony and Mr Nigel. It was like being in the

retail sitcom *Are You Being Served?* There even used to be a tea trolley."

Now, in terms of pendulum swings, employee attitudes are somewhat different. HR manager Glasby comments: "At interviews, whether it's vocalised by candidates or not, their question is 'what will this business do for me?'"

A series of meetings was organised by Foray Motors to encourage employee engagement - not just with the company, but each other. "Van drivers, parts pickers and admin people don't always talk to each other but they do rely on each other," says Yoxon.

One of the things to come out of the meetings was that people expect regular appraisals and to be thanked when they have really made additional effort. It isn't just the sales staff who receive bonuses, but that wasn't flagged up as being as important as the knowledge that what they have done has been recognised by the company, adds Yoxon. "When staff are engaged they do a better job, so a business can then aim to get a critical mass of people who are engaged because that will influence the company culture. There are times a department manager will say that doesn't matter as long as people do a decent day's work and I have to say 'hang on, it does'. So, strangely, sometimes it's about having to convince managers."

The company has about thirty apprentices, but only about a third of the workshop apprentices go on to become full-time employees, says Yoxon. "A lot of others struggle to transition from school to work. They don't seem to realise that if they misbehave at work they won't keep getting more chances like they did at school. We will say 'clear off' if we have to. We've had apprentices saying that they don't want to do mundane work like sweeping the workshop."

Another challenge is continuing to provide motivation and career progression when the business has a flat management structure. With all the managers home-grown, they've been through training courses run by the Institute of Leadership and Management. Glasby says: "One of the benefits of that was to get everyone in a room together to share ideas. It works fantastically and people have got to meet their peers and colleagues and build a tight-knit team among geographically diverse managers who might otherwise have felt isolated."

What concerns Yoxon is the government's propensity to engage in what he sees as social engineering at a company's expense. "Pensions auto-enrolment has been a time-consuming nightmare," he explains. "The government's desire to get people to save for their old age is laudable, but it expects businesses to

take on the organisational responsibility." The company is mitigating the extra time spent on pensions by upgrading the payroll and HR computer system so that branch managers can handle their own holiday arrangements locally.

There's another reason which underlines the need for good HR systems, adds Glasby. "If there is a conflict with an employee, I make sure I did everything right, but the file is proof of it," she says. "Systems have to be robust because they provide the only safeguard for a company in terms of demonstrating that it followed the correct procedures."

Yoxon adds that if it a dispute does get to the stage where a date is set for an employment tribunal, he wouldn't settle out of court. "So many employers make a payout, not because they think they're in the wrong, but because it's easier and cheaper. But I will contest it if I feel we're in the right because not to would cast doubt on our integrity and I think we would lose some respect from our employees."



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