

THE FUTURE OF WORK

Interview with
FRANCOISE WOODWARD
GOOD ENERGY GROUP PLC

Wilson's
Solicitors



THE TITLE OF people and culture director already existed when Françoise Woodward joined AIM-listed Good Energy Group in 2014. Which was just as well, since she would have been very unhappy about being called human resources director. "The term human resources has connotations that people are something to be used," she says. "It comes from a 1980s school of thinking, and is completely illogical for our brand, which is about doing business in a better way, always remembering our customers are people."

And a desire to do business a better way has to extend beyond the product, Good Energy generates, buys and sells only 100% renewable electricity from UK sources, including independent wind and solar projects, as well as 'green gas' which contains 6% biomethane. The company also owns solar and wind sites in Cornwall, Dorset and Yorkshire, and has invested in the planned tidal lagoon in Swansea Bay to further diversify its sources of renewable energy.

"We recently did research among customers, and what was really interesting was that while they were drawn to us principally because we are all about 100% renewable energy, another reason was our broader ethical way of doing business," says Woodward. "I think there's a good reason why that ethical approach has to extend

to employment. It's pretty difficult to reach award-winning levels in customer service without treating employees as if they are customers as well, because they also have a choice of whether they want to be with us."

That means, says Woodward, that the company's ability to attract new customers has a link to its ability to attract new staff. And that's crucial, since staff numbers have doubled to 320 since Woodward joined. As the business grows (turnover is north of £90million), she says the focus is on investing in the kind of talent "which has the ability to develop and adapt as the business grows, taking us five years on."

The company gets a lot of speculative approaches from potential staff – which Woodward says is the acid test of having a good employer brand. Notably, they get 100 applications for every job in R&D, reflecting the growing interest in the environment and in related degree courses. "There is a huge talent pool," says Woodward. "The issue is the industry's inability to provide roles for enough of them. More government support for research into renewables and future energy networks is needed to ensure this talent pool is not wasted."

As a significant player in the renewable energy market, Good Energy have had to challenge the status quo of an electricity

system built around fossil fuels, which, says Woodward, has taken significant determination, adaptability and resilience from their people. "We have always been a natural magnet for those who are interested in the environment and who want to work somewhere entrepreneurial," she explains. "A business like ours will want to hire people who are creatively inclined and able to think differently, who are change ready rather than change resistant."

The young generation of employees in particular is well aligned to that attitude. "The 'why?', the 'what is the company's purpose?', is really important to them," says Woodward. "They want to work for something that is makes a difference. My generation, GenX, is seen as out for themselves, at least in theory, but young people have a desire for meaningful work. They don't necessarily want to progress upwards for the sake of it, but they do want to acquire skills which allow them to have a real influence on their world."

Because the current generation is very technology enabled, businesses face the challenge of having on board the technology that at least matches what employees access personally, says Woodward. "At the very least, they must have started the process of going from rusty to cutting edge, and use those

who are tech savvy to help the change process," says Woodward.

She says Good Energy spend a lot of time building company values, "from the bottom up and the top down. They're not just stuck on the wall. We really use them at every touch point."

Part of her role is "heavy stewardship" of the internal communications function to ensure these values are "drilled in". The internal communications function works closely with marketing and external communications, but reports to her so that internal comms can be aligned with what's going on externally with the brand. "With every change a company makes it has to communicate, communicate, communicate," she says.

In the recruitment process, Good Energy look for evidence that applicants are aligned with the company's values. "Because we look for determined people who are genuinely motivated by our purpose," says Woodward, "we ask candidates what they might have done in their lives that shows some resilience in the pursuit of something they are passionate about, so they will enjoy working in an environment where those attributes are fostered."

The company uses social media in "everything we do", largely for marketing

and generating brand awareness. On Twitter, the company is the second most followed energy company behind British Gas, with 36,000 followers. It has 25,000 followers on Facebook and nearly 7000 followers on LinkedIn, which Woodward says is "massive" relative to the size of the business. A "large and growing percentage" of recruitment is done directly through LinkedIn and the company website.

When Good Energy use recruitment agencies they try to treat them as an extension of the business. "We recently had them in for drinks and a presentation of our strategy and to meet our senior people," says Woodward. "They said that was something they hadn't come across before."

"But we believe in working in partnership with other organisations and we prefer to use local suppliers where we can. It's greener and we build on the value of locality."

Applicants are put through work-based assessments, meaning they might be asked to do things at interview that they would undertake in their appointed role. The process might include role play that is carried out twice to measure the 'before' and 'after'; people who can learn and change are considered to be a safer bet.

"It's important not to hire just for what they will do when they join us but for when the role gets bigger," says Woodward, who heads a thirteen-strong people team. "So we're looking for people with potential. People with potential already know what they're good at and not so good at, and that self awareness is something that we're looking for."

There's some psychometric testing, "with care", more to validate hiring decisions than as a decision maker in its own right.

Good Energy are a living wage employers, accredited by the Living Wage Foundation, and their staff packages include healthcare, life assurance, sports and social activities, a cycle to work scheme, share save initiative, and a green car scheme. It all means that turnover of staff is much lower than the UK average at less than 20% per year.

Leadership development programmes aim to encourage the determined, change-ready mindset that Woodward is looking for. One exercise involved asking staff to address various dilemmas with the values of the company in mind. "One example was that they are joining a new team and can see ways to improve it but the team leader doesn't see any need to change," says Woodward. "How would they approach that scenario?"

"Relatively simple exercises like that can be very useful in developing skills. We want to cut out the management-speak theory and get to what works. I try to keep it simple and pragmatic and related to what people are doing in their jobs. That kind of tool-kit gives a framework for kind of one-to-one conversations that we know are likely to occur."

And the intention is to re-develop the appraisal system to encourage a more collaborative approach among staff. "What we know from the science is that if you hook reward too closely to performance ratings it will lessen honesty," says Woodward. "So we are trying to pull these apart. We've been largely driven by collective success anyway but bonuses are likely to become more collective, which will make people more honest about their own performance."

Regular surveys show that the business has an 82% staff engagement rating, which Woodward is delighted with, as the target is 80%. "I have never seen the like of some of our scores in any business I have worked at."

The gender split at Good Energy is about 50/50 and, unusually, that's all the way up to the top including the board. "This really started by us having a female CEO who is genuinely committed to

the benefits of a balanced and inclusive work place," says Woodward. "Hiring senior women has a huge and positive effect on the gender balance throughout the whole workforce as it demonstrates, better than any words on a page, that we are an employer where everyone can contribute and play a part."

According to Woodward, the more balanced and diverse the leadership, the less likely that there will be unconscious bias in selection and promotion decisions throughout a business.

"We think it's also important that benefits like flexible working are encouraged for everyone and not just seen to be a particular benefit for women," she says. "One of the broader reasons in the UK that there may not be enough women at senior levels is that men can't get flexibility at work, so caring for dependents falls more heavily on women," she points out.





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