

THE FUTURE OF WORK

**Interview with
JAMES SPRINT
WILTON CARPET FACTORY**

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WHO SHOULD BE responsible for human resource management? Ultimately it should be the chief executive, says James Sprint, CEO at Wilton Carpet Factory. One, because it's intrinsic to the company culture, and secondly, because any leader should be genuinely interested in people.

"The chief executive will set the style and tone of the business and the HR function supports that," he suggests. His more 'directly involved' approach will help as he seeks to reinvigorate the brand, partly to attract new members of staff. The business can trace its roots back to the original weavers who developed and patented the 'Wilton weave' technique in 1741. Today, it sells carpet and other flooring products to commercial and domestic clients worldwide, products manufactured by other companies as well as its own production.

"We're an employer with a long heritage who can offer secure work. Our clients have included the House of Lords, and the United Nations. Some people really get that what they're making could be walked on by the Queen but for many young people, it's just a factory, and we compete with local white collar jobs for staff, so we needed to raise awareness in order to be able to engage with them."

Which is why Wilton Carpet Factory have been investing in its local community

from which their staff are drawn, including the sponsoring of sports teams and supporting local charities, things that will be perceived as positive, especially among those in the younger age groups.

The company has 100 staff, with seventy employed in manufacturing. Turnover is £17million and rising. "The business will grow by 50% over the next five years so we will need more people and specifically we need to make sure that local people are going to be more likely to apply to us for jobs," says Sprint.

Sprint is aware of the importance that social media has in recruitment, not just product marketing. "Do you know what UX stands for?" he goes on. "It stands for user experience," he says, answering his own question, and for there to be a positive outcome the distinction between marketing and human resource management functions are going to become more blurred. For a company, social media has to be about communicating with the workforce as well as the customer."

Interestingly, once Wilton Carpet Factory can get staff, it tends to keep them, with a tradition of family members following each other into the factory to work, with staff turnover very low at less than 5%. Sprint intends to start the company's long service awards up again

as a demonstrable means of thanking staff for their loyalty.

All the carpets are made in Salisbury, with the yarn sourced from a flock of sheep in New Zealand which was specially bred to produce the sort of long thin wool that is the company's trademark. The factory has been working at full capacity all year, twenty-four hours a day, six days a week, and capacity needs to be increased further. One of the things that Spirit has introduced are his weekly briefings for the staff about the company's performance.

He is conscious of the need to offer staff career progression which doesn't have to involve promotion per se. It could be achieved by allowing people to move into new areas of work. "We realised the operator a sample machine in the design studio had very good qualifications in maths so when we got a new piece of software for production planning, she was given the opportunity to move into that area. And we had a guy who had an interest in robotics and he became an expert in a particular machine and so his role was extended to train other people to use it."

Sprint is a big believer in offering flexible working to keep valuable staff. When he discovered that the production planner, who no longer wanted to work

full-time, was about to be pensioned off, he stepped in say that if he wanted to work only two days a week "that's okay, we don't want to lose him. Then there's a guy who can identify what has gone wrong in a machine with 10,000 working parts who had been wanting to go part-time. Either we have to be prepared to make that adjustment or we are going to lose that experience."

When Sprint was appointed chief executive, he duly instigated the departure of non-performers. "The first thing I did was to lose people who were in the canoe but not paddling," he explains. "Whatever it costs, as a business leader you have to do that as quickly as possible. As soon as the team realises that the passengers are out and that those left have a large paddle and are putting their backs into it, the team starts being successful."





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