

# THE FUTURE OF WORK

Interview with  
**MATT MAIN**  
**THE UNLIMITED COMPANY**

**Wilson's**  
Solicitors



A LOT OF THE traditional criteria for recruitment isn't relevant when the main thing you're looking for in candidates is that they are "nice people". For Matt Main, MD of retailer The Unlimited Company, which sells premium living aids and mobility products, and HR director Lowri Eastgate, what's most important is that applicants are able to strike up an empathetic relationship with customers.

On the one hand, an ageing population meaning increased demand for the kind of product the company sells; on the other, there's a growing interest in more 'rewarding' careers.

"We are a company which improves people's lives and our relationship with our staff is key to making that happen," Main explains.

"This business is entirely people-centered rather than process led. When I first joined we talked about what behaviours we wanted from an employee. We wanted people who were kind; nothing was too much trouble for them. To be able to create relationships with customers, their conversational ability is most important, rather than having experience in selling our products before."

"What we're looking for is personality first and skills second," affirms Eastgate.

"If they have all the experience but are not easy to talk to they probably won't be right for us."

They tend to be self selecting, in the sense that it's not necessarily the usual kind of retail employee who will apply – rather it's likely to be those who have direct experience of disability issues, who are genuinely excited by the company's activities. Eastgate gives the example of a woman she interviewed for a store manager position. "She told me about her dad having been in hospital and how she had an epiphany when she was helping people on his ward. When you have these big events you feel you want to do something with your life that has more meaning, and this is a trend with the new generation coming into the workplace."

That search for meaning applies to Main as much as anyone. He says of his current job, which he started in 2015 after twenty-four years in food retail: "What I do now is changing people's lives. I've seen customers become emotional as now they can get out of the door and go down to the shops to buy milk. Now I can do what I love, which is retailing, but with a more social purpose."

One of the first things he did when he joined was to spend several days talking to employees in order to establish an identity for the company's spirit and

vision. "We asked them to tell us their story, how it felt to work here, what management was like. There were a lot of similar comments and some key points came out: in particular, people liked helping and were happy to go out of their way to do so. They would know, for example, that if Mrs Jones doesn't come in for her regular purchase that something might be wrong. So they might go to personally deliver them to her and then find out that she's fine, she's just got a cold."

A common theme was that Unlimited people enjoyed learning. "If we can break down barriers to learning, you can change your employees' lives and the lives of customers," says Main. "So we don't accept the words 'I can't'; we will find a way to make sure someone can."

For all that, working in this specialist sector of retail does require in-depth product knowledge, which means typically, the company's training programmes are more bespoke and take longer than in other areas of retailing, says Eastgate. "It's vital to have things in place so that employees can access learning. All of our training materials are available at any time on one platform. It means we can identify the best learners and the ones who engage the most often, and reward them."

She believes that people like to learn as quickly as possible and this is aided by frequent repetition. She refers to a productivity technique made famous by comedian Jerry Seinfeld, who said writers should make themselves out pen to paper every day, marking off every day with a cross on a calendar to create a 'chain' that they aim never to break. "If you do something enough times in a row it becomes the norm," she says. "For example, I love the idea of us having five-minute podcasts about how to measure someone for a chair, then asking verifying questions to make sure they have understood it."

The Unlimited Company (previously known as Independent Living) were formed in 2003 and acquired by 'everyday health plan provider' Simplyhealth (whose premises their head office shares) three years later. The company has grown organically and by acquisition and by early 2017 had seventeen stores.

One of Main's priorities has been to make sure the stores are suitable for the type of customer they serve. "Most of them did not have automatic doors," he recalls. "There was one where I couldn't even get down the aisles as an able bodied person," he says. The idea is to treat customers as people rather than patients and the focus is on how the company can help them stay active. "We



want to get rid of the stigma associated with age and disability," Eastgate says.

One of the challenges for the business is increasing brand awareness, which, say Main, will also serve to attract potential employees. A particular point of difference – and a challenge – is that Unlimited are not a traditional retailer. They have to offer advice – online, over the phone, at home as well as in-store, plus do home assessments. That means recruitment needs to encompass not just sales staff but also occupational therapists, so training has to be available for the continuing professional development of clinicians.

Another difference from traditional retail is that e-commerce side is relatively new in this sector, with less than 20% of sales made on line. Main's sees online as one of a variety of "access points" through which people can engage with the brand and observes: "Traditional retail managers have found it difficult to get their heads around this when they have been used to being measured in sales per square foot." He says that in order to assuage the traditional retail manager's fear of the online, web sales made in a particular area are attributed to the local store.

The style of management has to be different as well. "I'm not a great fan of

the Victorian approach," says Main wryly. "When I started my career we simply did what we were told or we would be out of a job, but now companies are trying to connect with their employees. I see myself as having temporary custody of talent that being loaned to us. My job is to engage with colleagues and candidates so they will want to buy into the story."

The business has a "huge" involvement with charities, and Eastgate says this is something else that really excites his colleagues (the company doesn't use the word 'staff'). "The younger generation are very clear about who they want to work for. They want clarity, transparency and honesty and they want to know that their employer acts with integrity.

"The businesses that fail will be the ones that take advantage of staff and cut their way to deliver profits; ultimately they are the ones that will be unsustainable. If they don't act with integrity, the customer will punish them by not shopping with them or not as often, and it will be reflected in the calibre of people that the company is able to employ."

At The Unlimited Company, everyone gets the new 'living wage' as a minimum, and there's a scheme whereby the company matches whatever sum an employee

saves towards a deposit on a house or towards student loan repayments. "These are huge benefits and more meaningful than a bit of discount or even bonuses," says Main.

There are also opportunities for flexible working. Main himself likes to manage his home and work duties in his own way so understands why other people would as well. "I spent a year seeing my wife only at weekends and that's not OK.

"People are looking for more flexibility and we are not particularly precious about when they start as long as the job gets done. As long as customers don't suffer, there are no rigid hours as long as employees manage that within the team. Pushing back against the attitude that 'you're five minutes late' actually means you get better commitment from people. For me the flexibility of being able to do my job role well, but also do my family role well, will help me perform in every part of my life."



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