



James Barrett of Michael Page Technology talks with **Richard Steward**, group IT director of PZ Cussons. Richard joined PZ Cussons two years ago with an impressive track record of nine years of IT leadership with global bakery and beverage brand Sara Lee. Previously, he cut his teeth in the high pressure world of financial services in the City.

PZ Cussons has a rich heritage stretching back to 1879, when two Georges (Paterson and Zochonis) set up a trading post in Sierra Leone. These far flung beginnings set the direction of this diverse and wide-reaching organisation. PZ Cussons operate globally and has leading brands in many domestic markets across the continents, including PZ Cussons Nigeria – the largest subsidiary of the group, trading for over 100 years.

In the UK, the organisation moved to its impressive new offices near Manchester Airport two years ago. The hiring of Richard as group IT director and the site move were part of a step change in PZ Cussons' development. The business strategy is to drive the growth and profile of their enviable portfolio of brands which include; Imperial Leather, Carex, The Sanctuary Spas, Charles Worthington and the recently acquired St Tropez.

CAN YOU GIVE AN INSIGHT INTO YOUR CURRENT ROLE?

I joined PZ Cussons as they clearly were, and are, a business that is going places. We have a high profile range of global household brands and the plans for the new site were further demonstration of the natural evolution. The business ethos is that of a measured entrepreneurialism, both organic and acquisitive growth, across diverse locations and sectors at a healthy pace.

I was tasked with designing and implementing a five year IT strategy which would provide a world class function that would support our growth and diversification. For the first year this was a process of delivering key technology programmes to ensure we support the business strategy with best in class solutions – for example we partnered with Cable & Wireless to provide a high-speed, next-generation, fully-converged communications network across our many international sites. I also spend time understanding the business strategy and operational needs. Whilst our business continues to grow, we must be aware of the challenging trading environment for all organisations. As such, a key objective of my role is ensuring the IT capability and competencies drive agility into the business so we are best placed to react to external business factors.

WHAT ARE THE KEY PRINCIPLES YOU APPLY TO YOUR BUSINESS?

I follow two key principles. Primarily, it is critical to approach the IT strategy from a business perspective; if you enter the boardroom talking like a technology guy then you will only alienate your colleagues. As a result, my first six months in the role were focused on

understanding the various functions, personalities and businesses. This stakeholder engagement is key to my management style and I actively encourage all my people to engage with their counterparts across the business. In my first role at AXA, I even had a period where I moved from a business analyst role across to a time as an underwriter which certainly opened my eyes to some interesting business processes!

Ultimately, technology is there to enable the business so if you are not in the business and part of the business, then you cannot be helping to drive the business strategy.

Secondly, I have always followed an entrepreneurial approach to my career. I always knew I wanted to be in business – I just did not know what that meant. Having grown up through a number of different organisations, sectors and structures I have learnt that a can-do attitude and an eye for business opportunities are more important than expert technical knowledge or a stellar academic record.

I look for strong candidates with the right motivation and core competencies who can overcome the perceived hurdles of sector or technology vertical. That is why PZ Cussons has been such a fantastic fit. There is a clear desire to push the boundaries whilst taking accountability and this is demonstrated by our CANDO values (Courage, Accountability, Networking, Drive and Oneness).



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WHAT IS YOUR VIEW OF TALENT MANAGEMENT IN THE CURRENT CLIMATE?

For me, it has always been the focus to find the right people who fit my ambition and working style over qualifications and certifications. I look for candidates who can demonstrate they have made a difference in previous roles. They need to demonstrate that they can put business first and use developed listening skills to understand the needs to key stakeholders so that technology can deliver the service or platform to enable the business.

Developing talent internally is equally, if not more important, and this has been a key initiative at PZ Cussons. We have a number of diverse locations and cultures in our group and this diversity has been a foundation to our success. Advances in technology have allowed us to overcome logistical barriers to share experiences, ideas and knowledge – the launch of a new interactive intranet has greatly helped develop the global togetherness of the business.

I also advise IT people to own their own development. You must always be striving to learn and improve. Observe positive behaviours around you and replicate it, similarly learn from the mistakes of yourself and others. Ultimately, you can only gain an objective view of your style and ability from somebody else. Therefore, identifying and agreeing to work with an inspirational mentor is highly advisable, also taking advice from experts in the coaching and recruitment field can improve your chances of success.

WHO HAVE YOU FOUND INSPIRATIONAL IN YOUR CAREER?

I am a big admirer of Richard Branson. I find his successes, and even his failures, inspirational to the extent that I have his quotes at home to keep me focused. I feel he embodies the entrepreneurial spirit I identify with and demonstrates that if you see an opportunity to do something better than the existing business solution then you should believe in yourself and go for it.

AND FINALLY, WITH SUCH A FAR REACHING GLOBAL ROLE, WHAT DO YOU DO TO RELAX?

Well, apart from spending quality time with family and friends, the one activity I find most relaxing and beneficial to my health is Bikram yoga, which is essentially practising yoga in a large 40c sauna! I started this after injuring my back whilst snowboarding a few years ago, and after trying everything from kickboxing to Tai Chi, a friend recommended Bikram yoga and I have not looked back. In fact, I fully expect to still be practicing it when I am 90!

CONTACT



James Barrett is an associate director of Michael Page Technology. For a discussion on the marketplace or for support with IT recruitment, call **07920 110849**.



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