thehut group

Founded in 2004 by CEO Matthew Moulding, The Hut Group are a rapidly expanding multi-website online retailer, offering a wealth of non-perishable fast moving consumer goods. From the latest DVD releases to protein health supplements, each website is tailored towards a specific market. It is the company's ability to run multiple websites from their in-house developed retail technology platform that really sets it apart. With an array of clients that include some of the biggest retail names and a host of recognisable in-house brands, such as zavvi.com and iwantoneofthose.com, The Hut Group are certainly a company on the up. At the heart of this sits CIO Gareth James, a man who is determined to ensure the remarkable growth of The Hut Group continues.

CAN YOU GIVE US AN INSIGHT INTO YOUR CURRENT ROLE?

As the CIO, I'm responsible for developing our best in class retail technology platform which is used to run multiple websites. A key part of that investment in our technology platform are our people. My team is our most valuable asset and we have invested heavily in growing our business, both from a talent and business acquisition view point. The Hut Group is a very modern and progressive company and since my arrival 18 months ago, it's been a whirlwind! Initially, I had to understand what the business strategy was and translate the requirements into a plan. Since then, I have restructured the IT department by increasing the size of the development teams, introduced IT service management and change management. Subsequently, this has resulted in a substantial increase in our headcount from 20 to 100; a significant recruitment drive which I led to make sure the right talent was brought on board to ensure the business continues to prosper. I'm a firm believer that technical teams need to understand the business and be commercially focused. I have implemented an agile way of the IT function operating and I strongly believe that there needs to be close interaction and communication between IT and the business. I want my team to see how their work is impacting on the business, day-to-day. This is something I am passionate about.

It's no secret that the business has been on an acquisition trail. Over the last year I have overseen six integrations which have seen business processes moved onto a new way of operating and standardised way of working.

Lastly, I have responsibility for information management and through investment in business intelligence solutions, we are able to provide quality information to the business.

WHAT ARE THE KEY PRINCIPLES YOU APPLY TO YOUR BUSINESS?

First and foremost, it is imperative that I understand the group's strengths and weaknesses operationally, and align our overall strategy to ensure there is a clear synergy between the business and IT. I have enabled the business to make informed decisions by contributing to the business plans. I do not want to be just a passive recipient of strategy, I look to shape it.

For IT projects, there are some specific key principles I apply. In order for an IT project to succeed it must be broken down into a series of key deliverables and deliver value back to the business. To achieve this, I have adopted an agile approach to running projects. It is my firm belief that if an IT project is left to run for more than 12 months without a return on investment; then it's destined to fail. A series of shorter succinct deliveries have and will continue to produce greater benefit to the business at large.

Finally, everyone must be willing to embrace change within the business, otherwise it will stagnate. After all, you don't know what you don't know.

WHAT ARE THE CURRENT BUSINESS PRIORITIES?

The business has outlined five key priorities. International expansion is at the forefront as we continue to grow the brands. In addition, we look to specifically focus on category expansion, as well as mobile technology, CRM and customer service. Aligned with all of this remains that ever important goal to increase profitability and reduce cost. The technology roadmap is modelled around the strategy. One of our key initiatives is introducing ITIL processes and a service management framework, and we've recruited an IT services director to lead this.

WHAT ROLE DOES TALENT MANAGEMENT PLAY IN YOUR ORGANISATION?

Talent management is taken very seriously within our business and we encourage everyone to take control of their own self development and ultimately, their own career.

I actively mentor and develop senior members of my team and expose them to parts of my role that they don't have. We reward people through internal promotions.

One of the biggest challenges is recruiting high calibre individuals. Recruitment is part of the job I am judged on and it starts with ensuring that the right people are brought into the business in the first place.

When I first joined The Hut Group, we were expanding rapidly and I made sure I took part in every interview of new hires within the IT team to ensure early success. During an interview, I look for communication skills, a great attitude and passion. Not everyone we recruit is a perfect technical match, but once they are onboard, we can nurture and develop their technical skills – personality isn't something you can change!

We are also an accredited provider of NVQ Apprenticeships and offer practical training and workplace experience. Some of our apprentices have succeeded in securing permanent roles.

My team plays an important part in getting our company name in the market and allowing us to become an employer of choice. We promote ourselves through events and conferences, social networking and the team regularly discuss our cutting edge technology, and what they are doing in forums and blogs.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO PEOPLE STARTING OUT IN THEIR CAREER?

Never stop learning. If you do just enough, you won't survive. Your learning will change throughout your career. In my early days it was technical, then management and now leadership. You need to be learning all the time. I would encourage everyone to attend seminars, conferences and actively network.

Make the most of your time and know what you want to achieve. In addition, it is vital that you work in a place that excites you, that you enjoy and where you feel valued.

Find yourself a good mentor. Talk to someone who is credible and good at their job. They should be well respected and knowledgeable. You will get out of it what you are willing to put in. If you make the effort, most people are more than happy to offer guidance and support.

WHO HAVE YOU FOUND INSPIRATIONAL IN YOUR CAREER?

Simon Nixon, founder of moneysupermarket.com. Simon believed in a product that he was behind. It was new, revolutionary and no one knew that it would be successful. He had the strength of conviction to carry it through.

AND FINALLY, WITH SUCH A BUSY PROFESSIONAL LIFE, WHAT DO YOU DO TO RELAX?

I enjoy skiing and get down to the Chill Factore whenever I can and with three young children, I'm looking forward to the first family ski holiday. Recently, I've taken up clay pigeon shooting and hopefully I will be able to take on game shoots really soon!

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CONTACT

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