

Exploration of some of the 7 concepts identified as constituting a “circular” HRM

Business case: PORTWEST (Ireland)

Portwest is a global manufacturer and innovator of workwear, safetywear and PPE. Established in 1904, Portwest is the fastest growing workwear company in the world with a global distribution network and customer service staff in over 130 countries. Portwest is a family owned business and continues to be managed by the 3rd generation of the Hughes Family. Innovative production and design by an in-house team of experts lies at the heart of the Portwest advantage. Employing over 4,500 people worldwide, Portwest has a team of world class designers who specialise in flame-resistant and high-visibility workwear, hand and foot protection, PPE and wearable technology. Market leaders in safety, Portwest’s award winning team is constantly researching the latest trends and innovations which meet and exceed customer’s needs.

Interview: Deirdre Clarke, Human Resource Manager, Portwest

Date of interview: 28th June 2021

Context:

Portwest has sales offices in 6 global locations (UK, USA, Australia, UAE, Ireland and Poland) and customer support staff in 130 countries ensure unrivaled customer service is never far away. In addition, Portwest has 6 international warehouses (Ireland, UK, USA, Australia, UAE and Poland) with a line fill rate of 97% guaranteeing excellent stock levels at all times. Portwest give a no risk proposition in an industry where safety is paramount

Concept 1

The design of ‘work practices’ and ‘work spaces’, emphasising maximum positive impact on a worker during his/her employed experience

“So I guess with Portwest, we are in lucky situation, we have brand new buildings across all of our global functions which are wholly owned. So this means we have full control over the design of those buildings, our factories, warehouses, etc. So I can say, from the point of view of the company that, yes, the workspaces that we have are conducive to positive working practices. They will be bright, open spaces and they’re all collaborative environments. So in general, there, we wouldn’t have too many individual offices, mostly, it’s open plan, where a team can collaborate

across a provider or whatever, are working in a big open plan office where you might have 20 or 30 people, and split into teams, and who can literally turn around and ask each other a question. We also focus on passive learning. You're not being taught something formally, or whatever, but you're just learning by existing in that space picking up nuances, you're picking up the culture and that's where we see the value of the open plan environment. Even a lot of our directors, our senior managers, even the company owners, apart from the very, very senior directors, would actually sit in open plan offices with their teams as well"

Concept 2

Processes of understanding and responding to the needs of workers to optimise redeployment within the same company

"we have introduced over the last two or three years a graduate, and an international graduate program. They come to head office, they train in our head office for about six months, we put them through a Future Leaders Program, and we include our own existing employees on that program, as well, we take maybe a group of 15 or 20 people that we think will be the future leaders of the company, including our new graduates. So that means the graduates are learning from say, existing experience, and the whole group is benefiting from the formal training. So then when they're trained, and when they've had time, six days, six months in the company to be able to get to do some shadowing in each of the different departments, then what normally happens is we evaluate each individual and kind of see, okay, where are they best placed to go. It's not just about skills, it's about the person. When we know them and we can say yeah, I think they are best placed go to Europe, they are best based on Australia, we know the culture in Kentucky is small, but different, we'll send them to Kentucky and if there's maybe one that shines through as being a stronger graduate, you might put them on your most challenging project."

Concept 3

Supporting the reintegration of a worker so he/she, following a period of leave (short/long term) can continue to be employed in his/her original function or in a new role within the same company

"For Portwest this is a project that we have in progress. We believe that best practice would involve exactly what you're asking there about, when somebody comes back, how do we support them? As a first step we have introduced a very good handbook that sets out policies in place. We will be reviewing that handbook in the wake of COVID-19 and we will be introducing a lot of new things like this right to disconnect as well as items like reintegration."

Concept 4

The mentorship of a worker who is considering leaving the company (e.g. due to retirement, or the completion of a project) to apply their skill-set in a different role within the company (e.g. proactive use of skill set prior to retirement, or re-orient skill set to a new project)

“If there was a specific project, we probably would, it would be unusual that they'd have more time duration on their contract, to be honest. Having said that, I can see where you're coming from. So say, for example, we might get back to our graduates maybe, or whatever, you might have them going out to set up a new factory, for example, and the likelihood is that when they finish setting that up, that they will return to head office for another project, or when they finished setting it up, they would just then transition into maybe the managerial position for that site. It would be kind of unusual that they work on a long term project and then not have anything to do with it at the end.”

“This may be more relevant to our product development department where you're designing a range. So that's going to have a brochure, it's going to have a brand new concepts is going to probably take, I don't know, maybe a year to develop a product but when that project would be over, there would naturally be another one to follow us. So I guess yeah, maybe this concept it just not as relevant for Portwest.”

Concept 5

Categorising the skill set of workers with a view to planning and implementation of worker-centred strategies that optimise the categorised skills sets within a company ecosystem

“When we formally set up our HR department we began to catalogue some basic training in digital format, everything was paper based before that. That has given us a lot of advantages in terms of being able to quickly refer to information on an employee this is something that we would like to expand. At present, we don't have a portrait where we capture the skill set, as opposed to training somebody, has come through. It's something we will probably look into for Portwest - this is something that is new to us and we are learning from engaging with you on this project!”

Concept 6

The prioritisation of human centred optimisation, or, in other words, flexible working conditions, over contractual obligations

“Here I would say, culturally, we would be very pro-employee and we would probably just keep a very gentle eye on the contractual obligations. We have had very,

very little reason to have to pull out a contract and reverse that. We're very lucky, we would spend no time on disciplinary issues or having to pull people up on contractual obligations or anything like that, it's just not part of what we need to do import rice, which is fantastic. So that means we can get on with projects and best practice. We just get on with making sure that's Portwest is good place to work. We would genuinely have a good focus on employee wellbeing for example we've won the "Great Place to Work" Orange Award and IBEC Award which are both very focused on wellbeing. However many factors contribute to wellbeing. For example a high trust environment, your communication within the company and thanking people. We always try and put the employee first and if somebody comes to you with a question we take the time to engage. We don't measure employees minute by minute - we just don't think like that at all. It's a case of give and take, and everybody willingly gives their time when it comes to the employees and the line managers would willingly accommodate people if there was an issue."

Concluding remarks

Deirdre Clarke is curious to learn about what other companies are doing to promote Circular HRM practice and believes that the development of a framework shaped by the seven concepts discussed will be hugely beneficial to the field.