In conversation with **Laura Haskins**

Laura Haskins is Chief People Officer for CitNOW Group. Beginning her career in HR over 15 years ago, she has completed a wide range of roles within a people function, joining the CitNOW Group leadership team six years ago.

Founded in 2008, CitNOW Group has been at the forefront of digitising the automotive customer experience. With operations in 82 countries, the company combines innovative technology with deep automotive expertise to deliver solutions that enhance efficiency while effortlessly transforming every customer interaction.

Laura leads the People Team at CitNOW Group, however, as she told me when we sat down to talk recently, a strategic and commercial focus is vital to deliver a people strategy that aligns with business goals.

Laura, what do you think are the key skills that make a good leader?

Good leadership requires a blend of skills including emotional intelligence, adaptability and integrity. A strong leader also communicates clearly, fostering an open environment where team members feel empowered to share their ideas and do their best work. In our fast-paced work environment, the ability to thrive under pressure is crucial, and to be a credible leader, having functional expertise and experience in your field is equally important.

Do you think that the skills that were needed 10 or 15 years ago have changed from a people perspective?

When I joined my first HR role in 2009, the emphasis of the function was centred around adherence to regulations, policy development and largely ensuring business compliance. Consequently, the HR function was operating in a more transactional space, however there's been a considerable shift in this approach over the years with people leaders playing a pivotal role in the growth and success of an organisation.

In recent years the variety of diverse topics such as post pandemic working, the cost-of-living-crises and flexible work (to name a few) have required the people function to be at the forefront of businesses, playing a crucial role in the success of the company. The broad range of focus sees the function now leading the overarching people experience and, together with leadership team, driving workplace culture.

It is more important than ever for people leaders to blend functional expertise with commercial acumen and strategic thinking in support of long-term business performance.

In terms of perceptions, the language used in job titles has changed over the years. Head of Human Resources has now largely shifted to People. Do you feel the perception has changed along with that?

Yes, in fact the first HR Qualification I completed was the 'Certificate in Personnel Practice' which truly shows the evolution of the language we are using today. The later change and trend we've seen in terminology from Human Resources to People, recognises the extension beyond the standard HR function, promoting a more employee-centric and holistic view of the workplace and the people within it. One of our core business values at CitNOW Group is 'We are powered by our people' which reflects this sentiment and our desire to put our people at the heart of our business.

The other thing that's changing, and really rapidly in the last few years, is technology. Has that march forward in technology had a large impact on your role?

Technology has positively impacted communication across a global workforce, whilst also enabling us to streamline HR processes and in turn boost productivity. Advancements in technology have enabled us to broaden our talent pool and improve our capabilities by hiring the very best talent for the Group, regardless of where people are physically based.

We've also seen a positive impact to our talent acquisition processes by leveraging advancements in video interviewing technology for key roles, this has improved the quality of our talent pipeline whilst positively impacting key KPI's such as our time to hire.

In addition, our innovative use of technology has played an important role in the onboarding experience for new starters, from eLearning welcome modules to virtual introductions delivered by our functional heads, we've created a best-in-class experience that we're very proud of.

You mentioned the remote workforce. Do you think technology has enabled flexibility to increase?

Technology has been essential in supporting our hybrid working model, providing the tools and infrastructure necessary to underpin communication, collaboration and productivity of our global workforce operating across different locations and multiple time-tones.

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Virtual meeting tools like Microsoft Teams have become essential for remote communication, helping to keep our team engaged and connected.

Whilst we recognise the positives of remote collaboration, we balance this carefully with opportunities for our teams to interact face-to-face across our office locations. We've seen an increase in the proportion of team members and new hires, particularly in the early talent space, who are eager to spend time in person with their colleagues. Our commitment is to maintain a hybrid approach that values and integrates both remote and in-person work.

What do you think the impact of AI and increased automation will have on leadership roles?

Whilst it's early days, there's no doubt that AI and increased automation will impact many roles, including leadership positions. We are yet to use any HR specific AI platforms or tools however we keep a keen eye on advancements in this space. When the time comes, the focus will be to balance ethical considerations such as ensuring fairness and preventing bias in AI systems as well as safeguarding employee privacy. We have a great opportunity for technology and people to thrive together!

Looking to the future, what do you think are the attributes that will be needed in the next 10 years? Do you think there will be more rapid change and more adaptations needed in your role?

If you reflect on the dynamic nature of the modern workplace, along with the advancements in technology we have discussed today, digital literacy along with agility and change management will be increasingly important.

In addition, we see an increasing focus on sustainability and social responsibilities and CitNOW Group is incredibly passionate about embedding this into our culture and ways of working. Under this umbrella is the requirement for people leaders to ensure a diverse and inclusive workplace. Implementing and measuring the impact of these initiatives is key along with programmes that drive genuine change.

We have implemented a number of forward-thinking initiatives in support of our aim to improve gender diversity in leadership and technology roles, including an established partnership with a like-minded business to provide women with buddy opportunities, enabling connections to a wider network of professionals in a trusted exchange to knowledge share, develop confidence and empower career progression. In addition, we continue to be the proud sponsors of 'Digital Skills 4 Girls', a club hosted at our offices in Code Base Stirling. As the main sponsor of the club, the group's partnership supports girls aged 10-18 in developing new and existing digital skills, promoting diverse pathways for a career in technology.

If somebody at the beginning of their career came to you and said, 'I want to be where you are – I want to do your role', what piece of advice would you give them?

I would encourage anyone looking to pursue a career in HR to understand the bigger picture and take the time to understand the business they work for, this will help in making informed decisions, understand where their role fits in the team structure and in connecting their work to the organisation's direction. Curiosity is also incredibly important, my CIPD qualifications have been invaluable however they are not a substitute for gaining as much experience as possible – there are a number of diverse pathways to develop your skills and experience in HR. Finally, it's important to have a growth mindset and to embrace inevitable challenges as a learning experience!

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Rebekah leads our team of Researchers and Data & Market analysts, overseeing all our search and intelligence activity, partnering with our clients to find their future leaders and solidify their talent pipelines.