

# Innovating change at Thomas Cook

## Managing IT human capital to encourage a culture of innovation

*How do you get the ball rolling on corporate change? With a new CEO at Thomas Cook Belgium in 2007, putting innovation at the centre of the company's culture became a priority. But as Geert Sinnaeve comments, "That's easier said than done". An encounter with Jef Staes, author of "My organisation is a jungle" and "My manager is a hero", resulted in the company implementing innovation teams. But low satisfaction with the IT department – both among staff and (internal) customers – led Geert to look even further into Jef's concepts, and the Innovation Agility Index was introduced into his department, putting theories into practice.*



*Geert Sinnaeve, IT Manager, Thomas Cook Belgium, first presented this case at the BELTUG Innovation and Talent Management session, on 14 September, 2010*

## CHALLENGES

### Innovative ideas come from everywhere

"Breaking down the walls against change is hard and takes time", says Geert. "We needed a single framework to communicate the process". Jef Staes' 'Red Monkeys' provided that framework. Instead of shooting down these confrontational, innovative ideas, they are encouraged and given to pioneers and creatives in the company to get off the ground. Thomas Cook set up an innovation team that is responsible for identifying the ideas and seeing that they are realised. The innovation team does not create the innovation ideas; instead it provides a forum where everyone in the company can openly make suggestions. "We have a web forum, an Innovation Week and a management forum."

Just as importantly: "The Red Monkey concept gave us a common language of change to use throughout the company. It's an easy symbol to remember. This meant that we could understand each other, even across departments."

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*Geert Sinnaeve, IT Manager, Thomas Cook*



Thomas Cook Belgium is part of Thomas Cook PLC, one of the world's leading leisure travel groups, with operations in 21 countries. This company has a total of 31,000 employees, a fleet of 95 aircraft and a network of over 3,400 owned and franchised travel stores.

Thomas Cook Belgium (TCB) includes several different companies: Thomas Cook Travel Shop and Neckermann Travel Shops, Thomas Cook Airlines and tour operators Thomas Cook, Pegase and Neckermann. TCB has 1.8 million customers and more than 1000 employees.

Thomas Cook IT Belgium mainly supports TCB, but has also expanded to deliver services to Thomas Cook PLC's East/West business segment. This includes The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. It has grown from a team of 30 in 2006 to about 100 in 2010, 60% of whom are internal employees.

## SOLUTIONS

### **'Roles' not 'jobs' stimulate personal motivation**

But the new framework didn't solve all the difficulties in the ICT department. "Staff satisfaction was low. To innovate, people have to be passionate about what they are doing." The Innovation Agility Index provided part of the solution. "We used it to assess people's progress and to create 'roles' to replace 'jobs'." Unlike jobs, made up of tasks, roles relate to objectives. To further encourage personal motivation, flexible workspaces, hours and home working were implemented. "IT staff satisfaction rose from a below-company average of 38, to an above average 66 – and some teams were even higher. Our ICT department was transformed from a 'dumping ground' for problems to an active force for innovation.

## LESSONS LEARNT

### **Know where you're going and talk the same language**

"Using a single communication framework had a big impact. For example, we all have multiple roles, each with different objectives. By explaining which role we are fulfilling at a certain moment, others understand why we act in a certain way."

To succeed at change, Geert insists: "You have to know your goal from the start – or how will you get people moving? And never give up! It's two steps forward and one back, but you will get there if you keep going."

However, Geert also notes that there will always be people who cannot learn to be part of an innovation-centred organisation. "You might be able to develop some understanding in these people, but you have to be prepared that it may never happen."