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# Linda Cooper

It's always interesting to note at what point employers decide they need a dedicated HR resource. In the case of mortgage and financial services distribution business Firstfolio, HR has been part of the team since day one. From 2004 to 2007, the publicly-listed company was known as Affiance; since 2007, it's been known as Firstfolio. Linda Cooper, general manager human resources, has been with the company since those early days, after several years in other professions and roles, including logistics and sales in a multinational shipping company, and account management at McCann-Erickson. Although she's been in HR for over 10 years, Cooper believes that early career diversity has helped with her understanding of broader business issues.

"It's been a while since I worked in those other areas but when our marketing manager talks about a strategy they want to deliver, I understand the basis of it from a practical point of view, not just a people point of view. I think that assists when you are sitting with the executive team - it enables you to contribute to the conversation at a different level."

From 35 people in 2007, the company has grown to 140 nationwide. Likewise, in 2007 the company had one billion dollars in loans under management; today that stands at \$21bn - a 76% growth rate. "The organisation has evolved year-on-year and will continue to do so. That in itself creates quite a unique culture," says Cooper.

Indeed, since 2007 Firstfolio has completed 10 acquisitions, four of which have changed the business significantly. Cooper has focused her efforts on cultural integration.

"We often buy smaller businesses, typically those of 10-20 people. Quite often they are suburban-based businesses, so we're very mindful of the impact that acquisition can have on people, that it wasn't their original choice to work with us. There's a strong focus on bringing those people on-board. We talk about being 'on the bus', so we want all our team members to know the destination of that bus, to ensure they want to go along with the ride." Cooper and the executive team are very aware

of the people cost to the business. "We're a service business and we rely on the IP of our team members. As a service business, the cost of our staff is 60% of our total cost - that's quite considerable. We need to ensure we're making the right choices and maximising the benefits of that," she says.

Cooper adds that the tolerance-level impact of disengaged staff is not high in a SME. "If we have 10% of our staff disengaged and that has a P&L value of \$1.2m, that's significant in a small business," she says.

"We do focus on what is best practice and how to get it right. That's how we make our investments. We're currently working with SHL, who lead that talent assessment space, by conducting a bespoke project with them to create a pre-screen around cultural fit. We're also looking at what 'good' looks like in our business and how we can build talent from within. Typically, if you look at SHL's client base it's more the Macquaries of the world, but we understand the importance of it. That's an area we're willing to invest in, in order to get it right."

When asked about the challenges facing HR professionals in SMEs, Cooper says resourcing and budgetary constraints have an impact, as well as "the onus to ensure the programs you scope deliver".

However, Cooper does not feel pressured to compete with the big players when it comes to attraction and retention; she's aware of Firstfolio's distinct offering and is very clear about this setting the company apart.

"Where we've had staff come from larger companies, it doesn't always work - as some staff prefer that very structured environment. Others prefer what our environment has to offer, which is more hands-on, broader, and provides the ability to have input and see the results of your actions quite quickly. There are certainly areas - like remuneration - where we can't compete but generally it's one component of an overall offering. Quite often it's about being in a business like this, which is growing rapidly, and the understanding that that brings opportunity. Maybe you don't get that in larger organisations."

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 - Linda Cooper





### In my experience...

The one people management tip that I would share with leaders in larger organisations would be...

Don't forget the people when developing the process. I think there's a danger in larger organisations that the process becomes over-engineered and the focus then becomes about the process rather than the people who engage with it. Sometimes that can discourage action and innovation, so where possible, think small.

Cooper cites an example she heard from one staff member who had come from a larger corporate. That company had a very structured way of making an improvement suggestion - it had to be logged online, then go to a committee, then it had to be evaluated - so the feedback then was "it became too hard".

However, Cooper does not want to "big company bash" because she understands the complexity of making changes in these companies, the layers of messaging required and the dilution of the original message as it moves through the organisation. "I have a lot of empathy for someone trying to drive change through a 30,000-person organisation. The logistics would be extremely challenging," she says.

Although it remains a relatively small company, Firstfolio has in place some innovative HR practices. 'Firstfolio Dreams' is an engagement program tied in with the company's belief in innovation and 'thinking outside the square' when it comes to engagement.

Employees complete a formal proposal and outline why a particular cause is important to them and why they would like Firstfolio to support them. Dreams can be local or international and the support provided is in the form of travel and accommodation, any costs associated with working with the charity or NGO, full salary for a four- to six-week period, and any living-away-from home expenses. This year, for example, a breast cancer survivor asked Firstfolio to support her in working with the Cancer Council to train as a facilitator to run 'living well after cancer' workshops. She spent time in Tamworth and Dubbo. Another staff member, who was passionate about stopping child labour, went to Romania and worked for six weeks teaching English to children.

"It broadens the horizons and understanding of not just those who take part, but our other staff, too. Part of the program is the commitment by those staff members to update us via blog about their experiences and then present back their experiences," Cooper says.

"We believe that modelling innovation drives innovation," Cooper adds.

"Our business partners acknowledge that Firstfolio is innovative. But I think it's a cultural attribute and state of mind that you consciously need to foster. The important thing to note around Firstfolio Dreams is the underlying strategic objective that the employment experience matches the experience of the corporate brand, that there is synergy between the two, and it seems genuine."