

Modern Workplace

Written by Elizabeth Horscroft

Bringing meaning into the workplace

Is it possible to capture peoples' imagination, improve lives and make money at the same time?

The people at YSC, a corporate psychological consultancy founded in 1990, may have the answer. After conducting global interviews with 10,000 mostly senior managers on a range of business issues, they have concluded that it is entirely achievable.

In fact, bringing meaning to one's brand both for staff and consumers is the best way to survive in a highly competitive world, says the company's managing director Gurnek Bains.

"We get meaning from work. We spend 40 to 60 per cent of our waking lives at work, as opposed to anywhere else. So that's important," said Mr Bains, a psychologist by training. With the help of his colleagues, he has compiled his findings into a book entitled *Meaning Inc.: The Blueprint for Business Success in the 21st Century*, which sets out nine attributes of successful companies, referred to as Meaning Inc companies.

In brief, they are companies that have a sense of purpose which makes people feel there are changing society; the courage to be ground-breaking; an innovative approach to benefits and treatment of people; a culture allowing people to be themselves and make a difference; a rigorous approach to evaluating performance; clear and grounded values which are lived through thick and thin; a concern for the environmental and societal impact of business activities; an excellent reputation; and an excellent long-term performance with a preparedness to sacrifice short-term gains if their achievement conflicts with their core purpose and values.

According to Mr Bains, companies are increasingly moving in the direction of Meaning Inc due to four forces in the global marketplace.

Firstly, what people want from work is changing and, increasingly, people connect their lives with their work.

"Quite a lot of institutions that gave people a sense of belonging are in decline: church, family, trade unions, national identification. People move around all over the place so work has become one of the few connection mechanisms that connect you to society," Mr Bains said.

Next, people now want to work for a company they can be proud of, whether it is pride in what they do or what the company stands for.

One example is Orange, a mobile phone provider in Britain that has iconic, popular advertisements. When a journalist asked Mr Bains to comment on why, at an Orange call centre, he found engaged and vibrant employees doing monotonous tasks, Mr Bains replied that it was this sense of belonging to something important that put the spring in their step. They were not being paid more than their peers at another company.

Another of the four forces moving companies towards Meaning Inc is that what customers want is changing. The rise of the socially conscious consumer means people don't just want goods, they also want their expenditure to benefit society.

The third force – what drives success – has changed, too. In a change that will resonate in Asia, Mr Bains said relationships in business were something that western companies lost sight of in the strictly transactional marketplace of the 1980s and 1990s.

"Creating positive internal and external relationships with trust, empathy, respect and understanding," Mr Bains said, would yield business results.

Finally, there are increasing social and political pressures affecting businesses today. For example, Mr Bains asks us to consider the plight of the CEO. Normally a role lending itself to talk show jokes about expensive shower curtains and headlines about prison terms, being a CEO in today's world is apparently not what it's all crack up to be.

Lately seen as the bad egg, chief executives are rated just above journalists in most popularity polls, joked Mr Bains. Yet, after thousands of in-depth and personal interviews with some of the world's leading CEOs, Mr Bains said that when you lifted the lid, many of them felt anxious and guilty about the way they were conducting business to please shareholders.

Disillusioned CEOs don't feel good about their jobs and don't want their legacy to be simply that they raised share prices during their tenure. Tenures, on average, are getting shorter and invariably end badly.

Meaning Inc ideas can become a CEO's key driver for change. In most cases, YSC works with CEOs and senior managers on a step-by-step process to identify how to move the company forward.

"There is payback in terms of increased business engagement and increased performance," he said, noting that this process usually took two to three years to fully implement, but that the gains came fairly quickly.

One of their success stories is Sainsbury's, the supermarket chain in Britain which turned to YSC for assistance. Mr Bains led one session with the board and worked on establishing the company's purpose and values.

YSC has a questionnaire it has developed since 1990 that evaluates how well a company is doing in that area.

Mr Bains emphasised that the CEO and senior management must buy into any changes a company makes. This was not a programme solely for the human resources department to implement; it must be integrated into the very fibre of a corporation.

A second session was then called to bring the board back together to review what happened in the interim and decide what will need to happen with the firm's leadership. These ideas were then taken back to the business.

It would have been easy at that point for the board to say "we've done it", but, instead, they said, "we've still got a way to go". So, they gathered a third time and

identified to where that should be. They called that third meeting, "Making Sainsbury's Great Again – Part Three" and it is an example of how critical it is for a company to see that creating meaning is a journey.

Relevant to companies in Asia battling the war for talent, Meaning Inc offers wide-ranging benefits – firstly, in the area of recruitment and retention.

Companies successful in this area are those that have tapped into what inspires and motivates their workforce. This can often take the form of a strong corporate brand image that workers can be proud of.

"This is one way to differentiate yourself, and since it takes a long time it is not easily aped or copied," Mr Bains said.

Also pertinent in Asia is Mr Bains' findings that top down hierarchy isn't sustainable in the long term.

"Top down hierarchy stifles initiative and creativity," he said. There is a lot to lose if you don't give people autonomy and a chance to make an impact."

On the positive side, culturally, both Chinese and Indian societies had long-term views, said Mr Bains, who is Indian. Yet in business, Asians tended to make the easy short-term decisions, which were readily available.

As a central tenet of Meaning Inc, leaders who have the courage to take a medium or long-term view will be the ones who build the iconically successful companies of the future.

"Executives who connect with these deep values are most likely to build the businesses from this region that flourish on the world stage," he said.

Meaning at work, as it turns out, makes a lot of dollars and sense.

MARKET UPDATE

Written by Jessie Hui



From manufacturing to education and insurance, opportunities are rising

Illustration: Stephen Case

Good times bear fruit

The Hong Kong job market grew by a healthy 22 per cent in the second quarter from the same period last year.

This was achieved despite consistent concerns over the rising cost of doing business in Hong Kong as wages

pick up, and worries that the city's comparative edge was being eroded by the poor air quality, as well as a rising work quality on the mainland.

Local white collar workers are still viewed by employers as more competent and reliable than their mainland or Singapore counterparts according to market watchers, which explains the boom.

The latest jobs survey carried out by the *South China Morning Post* and advertisement monitoring services provider admanGo, recorded 71,084 jobs advertised in the second quarter – a 22 per cent increase from the 58,201 posted in the second quarter of last year.

The survey tracked job vacancies advertised in six major recruitment publications on a monthly basis.

In the first six months of this year, 135,543 vacancies were advertised, a rise of 20 per cent from 112,991 posted during the same period last year.

Recruitment activities slowed down in April (20,650 jobs) after an active month in March (31,834 jobs). However, the rest of the second quarter saw steady growth from 22,799 jobs in May to 27,635 in June.

The trading industry came back significantly in the past three months after a slow start to the year – the number of jobs advertised has jumped by 46 per cent from 4,750 in the first quarter to 6,936.

Sector-wise, jobs offered by the manufacturing industry increased by about 20 per cent. Vacancies in the education and training industry have risen from the first to the second quarter of this year from 3,621 to 4,536 – a healthy 25 per cent – probably due to higher demand for continuing education, and hiring by institutions for the new academic year.

Banking and finance/investment, normally a booming field, dipped in the second quarter by 0.06 per cent in the number of jobs advertised. However, the insurance industry is seeking more people in the second quarter than in the first quarter.

Slowed hiring in the second quarter in industries such as advertising/PR/design, hotel/catering/restaurants and industrial/engineering, have been attributed to seasonal adjustment from the dynamic first quarter, when people were more willing to change jobs after receiving their annual bonuses, market watchers said.

In terms of job function, accounting/finance/insurance, merchandising/purchasing, as well as administration/clerical/secretarial positions are on the rise compared with the first quarter.

Looking ahead, recruitment experts are optimistic about the job market in the next six months.

"There will still be intense competition for talent throughout Asia for the rest of the year," said Guy Day, regional managing director for recruitment group Ambition.

"The buoyant economy has led financial services companies in Hong Kong to expand. Employees are more willing to jump ship for more lucrative offers, forcing employers to find replacements."

Ambition recently released a report on mid-year recruitment market trends for the commerce and industry and banking and financial service sectors in Asia with findings from 50 decision makers from 50 companies.

The report showed that, compared to the same period last year, base salaries had gone up by an average of 5 per cent for people who stayed in their jobs, while salaries had risen up to 20 per cent for those who switched jobs. In return, employers generally expected staff to assume a wider range of responsibilities, or to work longer hours.

Mr Day said employers had to offer high salaries to attract talented people, which contributed to the rising cost of doing businesses in Hong Kong.

Looking ahead, Mr Day warned that if the proposal to increase the maximum amount of monthly salary to which MPF applies was passed by the legislative council, it would further increase operating costs.

He said Singapore had continued to be a strong competitor for Hong Kong in the war for talent.

Senior executives with families are increasingly interested in moving to Singapore where the quality of life seems to be better

Guy Day Regional managing director, Ambition



"Senior executives with families are increasingly interested in moving to Singapore where the quality of life seems to be better as it offers cleaner air, better outdoor living and more residential space," he said.

"Some financial institutions are relocating their regional head office and senior executives from Hong Kong to Singapore."

But Hong Kong still had advantages, such as a simple and low tax system, and career opportunities, he said. For employers, companies were still willing to

hire local people because of their high quality of work and familiarity with the Hong Kong and mainland cultures.

"In the eyes of [Hong Kong property] developers, Hong Kong-trained staff are more reliable, competent and capable than their mainland, Macau or even Singaporean counterparts," said Kenny Suen Wai-cheung, managing director of real estate broker Vigers Asia-Pacific.

The property/real estate/security industry is one of the major providers of jobs. Mr Suen said the industry had a high demand for skilled labour, especially those with two to three years of postgraduate experience.

"Generally speaking, more and more professional people are needed in the Hong Kong market," he said. "There have been a lot of new construction projects since the outbreak of Sars in 2003.

Therefore, there is an increasing demand for professionals such as architects, surveyors, project managers and property managers.

"Hong Kong has also become one of the most important IPO hubs. Private enterprises from the mainland have been queuing up to get listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange. There's a big demand for valuation surveyors to do asset appraisal for these companies," Mr Suen said.

He believed the shortage of professionals in the industry was getting worse because of the booming property markets in the mainland and Macau.

"There is continuous construction of new hotels and luxury property projects, especially in Macau. Many of these are developed by Hong Kong developers. They are more comfortable with a Hong Kong team to work in the mainland and Macau," Mr Suen said.

As a company caught in the war for talent, Mr Suen said he had had to offer increases in salaries of up to 40 per cent to retain the right people.

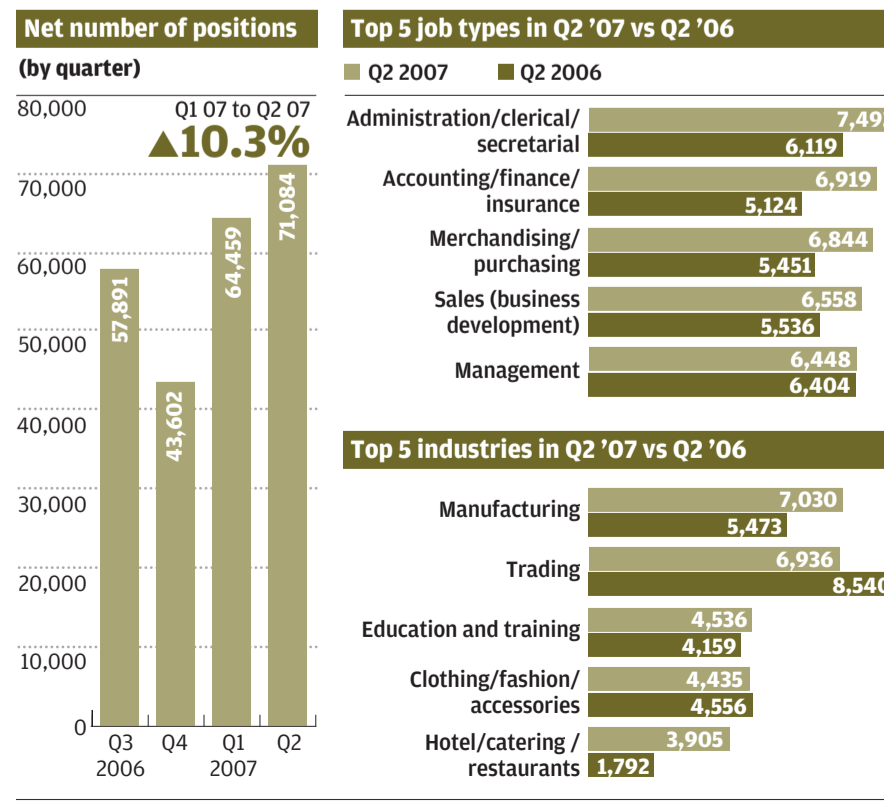
According to a survey conducted by employment services provider Manpower, job vacancies in the third quarter are expected to grow, albeit at a more modest rate.

The survey covered 810 employers in Hong Kong and 52,000 employers worldwide to gauge hiring intentions for July to September.

One in four employers in Hong Kong expect an increase in staffing levels for the third quarter, while the majority of employers do not expect to change their current number of staff, the survey found.

Deborah Morgan, director of Manpower's Hong Kong operations, said: "The results ... indicate a softer hiring pattern in the labour market for Hong Kong than in the previous quarter, which is reflected through most of the Asia-Pacific region.

"Nowhere is this more apparent than in the transportation and utilities sector, where employer hiring plans are considerably weaker than three months ago as well as last year at this time."



SCMP GRAPHIC

SOURCE: SCMP/ADMANGO



UK food retailer Sainsbury's turned to YSC for assistance.