



## **Interview with Marianne Probst, Head of Human Resources**

Berne, March 2012.

Marianne Probst has been the Head of Human Resources at Swiss Post International since 1 April 1999. She has developed and expanded the HR unit. Until the end of 2004 she was a Board member of Swiss Post International Switzerland. Since 2005 she has been responsible for the entire Swiss Post International Group and therefore sits on the Board of Swiss Post International. With her experience in human resources at company and Group-unit level she has significant influence on the corporate culture of Swiss Post International.

### **"Dedicated employees make for satisfied customers."**

**Marianne Probst, along with several other members of the current Board, you are a veteran of Swiss Post International. How did you come to join the company?**

I joined in 1988 as Secretary to the Chief Executive Officer of Swiss Post and then switched to the HR unit at management level of the PTT companies in 1991. I was able to observe the split into two separate postal and telecommunications companies at close range. The same applies to the formation of Swiss Post International in 1996. I became the first Head of Human Resources of Swiss Post International on 1 April 1999, this function having been initially performed by the Group's HR department.

**What has made you stay with Swiss Post for so long?**

My tasks have always been exciting and varied and they still are. When I started at Swiss Post International, there were 50 people working at the headquarters, and 400 in total. We only had one international office in Milan at that time. So I was able to build up the HR unit from scratch. Today Swiss Post International employs over 1,300 employees in both local and international subsidiaries. We didn't set up these subsidiaries but acquired them as existing companies. From a HR point of view, it is a challenge to bring different national and corporate cultures together under one roof of a large company like Swiss Post and integrate them well into the Swiss Post Group.

**Has HR been managed centrally across all subsidiaries from the outset?**

It was a gradual process. In the first few years at Swiss Post International, I only dealt with national matters. The international locations we took over retained their independence for a long time with regard to human resources. Only in 2005 did we, the Board, decide to manage HR across all our subsidiaries more directly. This involved, among other things, implementing certain instruments and standards, for example measuring employee satisfaction levels and recruiting new employees. We also strengthened HR reporting.

**What are the advantages of managing the subsidiaries centrally?**

Swiss Post sees itself as a socially responsible and progressive employer. This also applies to our subsidiaries both in Switzerland and abroad and as such, the HR managers of the Swiss Post International subsidiaries also strive to follow and implement standards and objectives in line with the HR policy.

In the medium term we are investigating possible synergies with Swiss Post Solutions, the other Swiss Post unit with international operations. For example, we are discussing the possibility of merging HR administration into a shared service centre for these two international units.

**In what way is the Swiss Post International HR unit different from HR units of other Swiss Post companies – apart from the fact that it is international?**

We were pioneers in many areas in the past: At organizational level, Swiss Post International was the first Swiss Post business unit to convert employment contracts to private law in the year 2000. As such, we had to be able to deal with different conditions (public and private law) from an early stage. Then there are also the different employment conditions and practices of our subsidiaries abroad. We are constantly operating in a multicultural environment. Our business has a lot to do with human relationships. After all, it's not only the products but the people behind them that define a business relationship. This means that Swiss Post International has to be open to foreign cultures and values. This requires a good communication culture and a certain degree of tolerance on the part of HR and all employees, in other words intercultural competencies.

And last but not least, we have to speak different languages to make ourselves understood: German, French, Italian and, of course, English.

**What is the difference for an employee between being employed by the Group and being employed by one of the subsidiaries of Swiss Post International?**

There should be none. We wish to be a socially responsible and progressive employer – for all subsidiaries, in all countries. For example we guarantee our employees abroad fair working conditions. Local conditions do of course have to be respected. However, we nevertheless honour our commitment to be a socially responsible employer. Sometimes we may come up with a one-off solution to help in the event of an emergency. For example, we provided financial assistance to a seriously ill employee in Singapore to cover his medical expenses. He could not have afforded this himself.

**What do you look for in particular when recruiting staff for subsidiaries abroad?**

At the international subsidiaries, most staff are recruited with the approval of two local employees, without the assistance of HR Head Office which only helps to recruit for management positions. At management level the most important factors are qualifications (especially market knowledge), professional

experience and social and inter-cultural skills. However, it is also important that he or she fits into the corporate culture of Swiss Post International.

International work experience is an advantage but not essential. What is important, however, is an ability to work in virtual teams, to use electronic communications media and to achieve project objectives, for example, without frequent visual contact. After all, the majority of our company projects are handled by staff who are not in Berne but abroad. And last but not least, because our international corporate language is English, excellent written and spoken English is of course required.

### **How would you describe your relationship with the Swiss unions?**

Even before I worked for Swiss Post International at Group level, I kept in contact with the unions. Just like Swiss Post, we maintain an open, transparent policy with our social partners. For example, I organize annual meetings between our Board members and the heads of the union so that we can discuss current HR matters in a relaxed setting over lunch. A social partnership based on mutual trust is important to me.

### **Swiss Post, and therefore also Swiss Post International, has been carrying out annual employee surveys since 1998. How does the long-term trend look?**

The survey is not a trend indicator, but a management tool. It provides management with an indication of where they need to communicate more clearly, or act in a more exemplary way within their unit. In fact there are cultural differences from one location to another that have to be taken into account. For example, Italian employees see the survey as an opportunity to express their criticism unequivocally. In Asia, on the other hand, we tend to get much "better" results because there it is not considered appropriate to criticize your own company. The survey results therefore always have to be interpreted in the context of the local culture.

### **In your view, what has changed over the years?**

The survey results and also countless personal conversations indicate the following. Our company is growing every year, as is the head count. We don't know everyone anymore, we write more e-mails. This reduces the quality of personal contact between people and many employees regret this.

This is also my experience. I used to call on each employee personally with a birthday card. This was easy when there were 50 employees. Now, however, there are 260 employees at Swiss Post International headquarters in Berne alone. Of course, I do still wish everybody happy birthday with a card. It just takes considerably more time than it used to. But I think it is important to pay attention to these supposedly small things. The positive responses confirm this.

### **Are there any measures with which you respond to the survey?**

In our introduction programmes we promote the "one company notion" in particular – we may operate in many countries but we are all "Swiss Post". In our "corporate culture project" we defined measures to develop this identity. New employees are therefore taken through an intensive and careful introductory phase where they are shown specific ways of building up a good network of contacts from an early stage. Employees of our subsidiaries can also visit one of our Swiss locations to find out more about the "Swiss way of doing things". We find that our rule of placing a mix of people on projects involving multiple countries is very successful – i.e employees from the respective countries, younger employees and those with more professional experience.

### **Are the national cultures stronger than the company's corporate identity?**

Our experiences indicate the opposite. Many employees of the international subsidiaries are very proud to work for a Swiss service company. In Asia, in particular, employees identify strongly with the company.

We try to promote "Swiss" business standards to a certain degree – take punctuality, for instance. We also nurture a foundation of Swiss values. It is evident that quality, competence, reliability and entrepreneurship work well everywhere. All these are attitudes or values that our international employees

are happy to identify with and which they gradually integrate into their daily work. As such, they "embody" Swiss Post, especially when in contact with our customers and that is crucial for the success of our company. On the HR front we assist our subsidiaries, with training courses for example, to help internalize these things more easily.

### **What is special about Swiss Post International's corporate culture?**

We respect national idiosyncrasies when communicating. Each and every person can apply their own style. Ours is a management based on diversity. At global management level we have six women and thirteen men from different cultural backgrounds. We all try to nurture and respect distinctiveness.

Many employees have their own international relationships or even live in a multi-cultural environment at home. This is of course very useful if you work for us. The international approach is part of our work and lifestyle at Swiss Post International.

A further special aspect is our "Think global, act local" attitude. When we acquire a company we usually also take over the local management team which we have already got to know well during the take-over process. This management team knows the local customers, the country, the mentality. This helps us to avoid a lot of the usual teething problems in a new country. In this way we ensure that local resources deal with customers in their own culture and we also make sure that business attitudes are correct and in line with the new circumstances.

### **What is the benefit to the customer of nurturing the corporate culture?**

Straightforward contact among employees increases efficiency. I am convinced that the quality of customer contact offered by a company is linked to the way in which employees treat each other. All relationships are always also personal relationships, be they customer relationships or those between colleagues.

**Do you have any financial proof of this?**

This is always the difficulty in HR. But decades of experience have shown me that we only realize the true value of efficient employees when they are gone. Dedicated and motivated employees make for satisfied customers and therefore a successful company.

**Marianne Probst, thank you very much for the interview.**

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