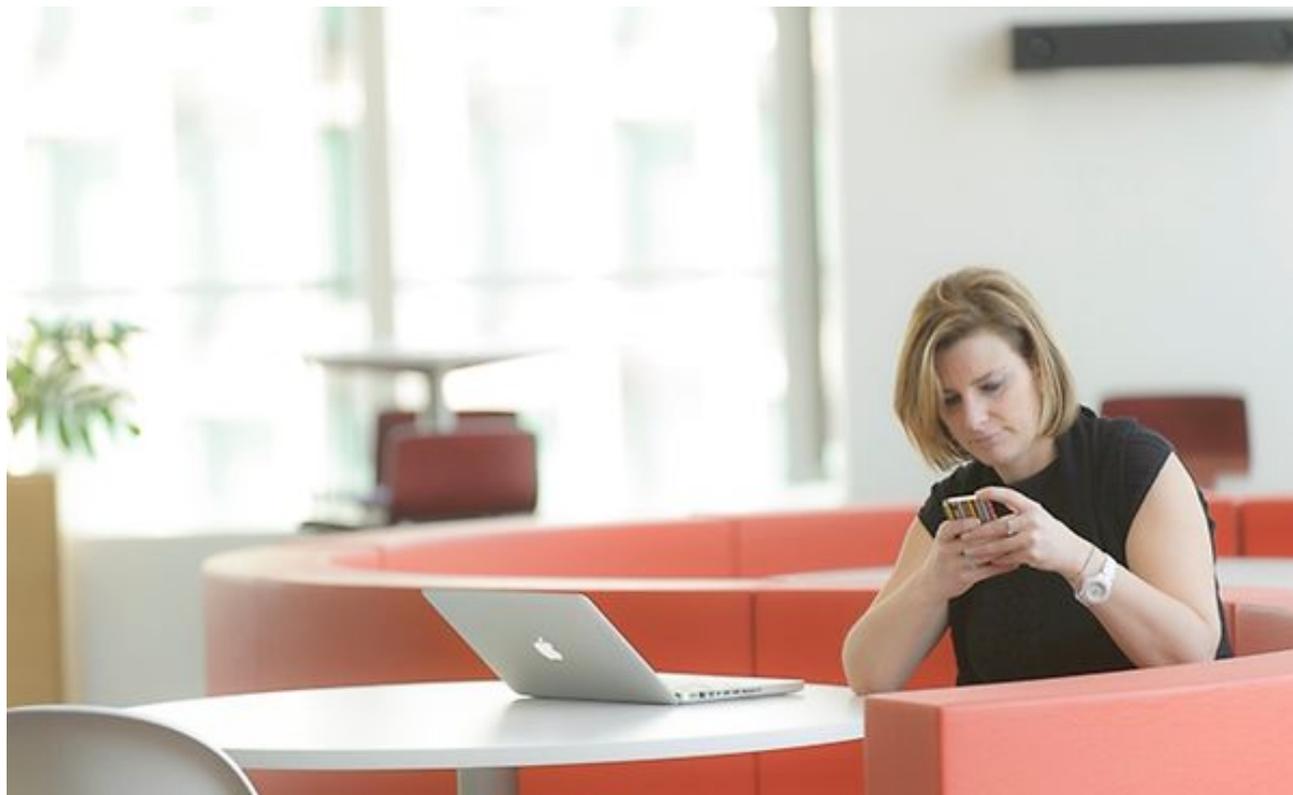


Luxemburger Wort

Interview with Laurence Vanhee

Why making your staff happier can be good for business



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Interview by Andreas Adam

From 2009 until 2013 you were "Chief Happiness Officer" for the Belgian Ministry of Social Security. Why had this position been created and what was your job description?

My official position was General Manager of the Personnel and Organisation Support Department and as you can imagine, I wasn't so happy with it. The function is Human Resources Director but I never considered people as resources, neither as a capital. I prefer by far to talk about "human patrimoine", which is a much more respectful and sustainable view about men and women who are living and working within our organisations. And when I read about the CEO of Zappos, who was Chief Happiness Officer, I said to myself "wow, that's what I want to do! I want to make people happy!"

What's your background? Did you invent the "Chief Happiness Officer"?

I'm an Engineer in Business Administration (HEC Liège) but I ran my career has been in

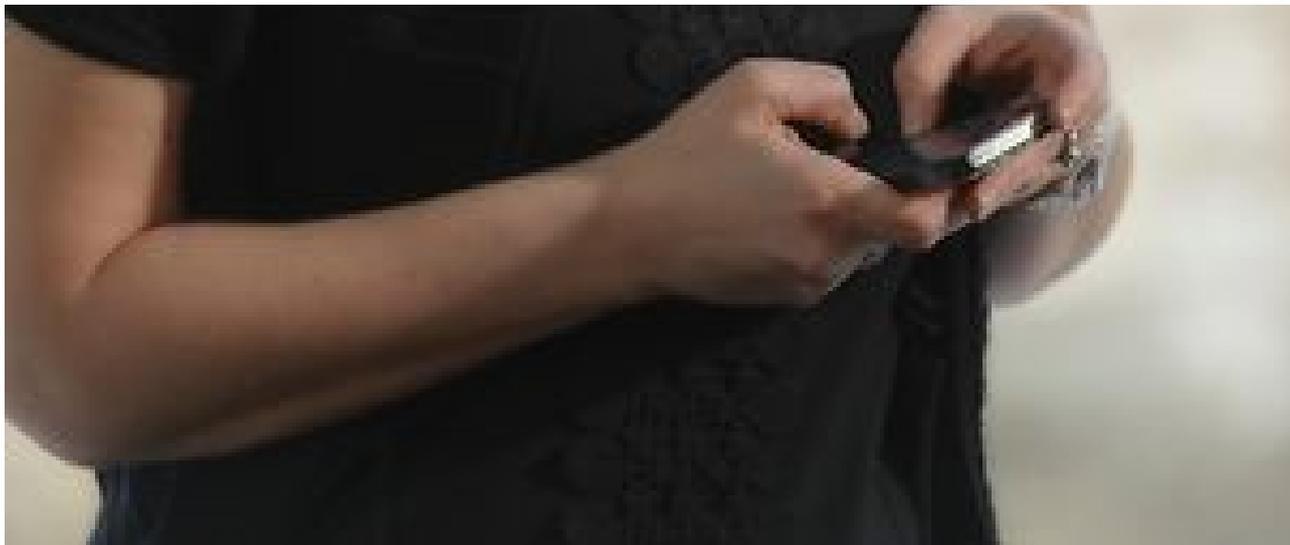
Human Resources. I have both a strategic and pragmatic approach to HR. The HR function can't exist for itself and by itself. We are there to make our colleagues' life - managers, employees - much easier. We are there to smooth the way we work. We exist to create the conditions so all the internal stakeholders of the company can find their own path to happiness.

According to different media reports you "revolutionised" the Ministry. What exactly did you achieve?

The ministry went through a thorough organisational turnaround in order to change its culture from control to trust. A large internal team of volunteers led by Tom Auwers, GM of Strategic Affairs and inspired by Frank Van Massehove, the Ministry President, redesigned the global work environment.

They proposed seven desks per group of ten people, they introduced in 2008 the ability to work from home, they sped up the e-filing and e-working processes.





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My team's job was to stabilise all these changes, to train managers to become real inspiring leaders, to simplify all the boring HR processes, to introduce the collaborative platforms, to stimulate the use of social media, to let people know where, when and how to live and work at the "office", to build new relationships with unions, to set up team objectives and collective evaluations and many other projects.

We achieved unbelievable financial results (more than 9 million of savings per year, we decreased energy costs and maintenance costs by 50 percent, printing cost by 84 percent), operational results increased by 20 percent at least thanks to team objective settings, ecological results (decrease of energy use by 50 percent and use of only green energy, encouraging public transport use), and social results (increase in engagement from 17 percent to 88 percent, 75 percent decrease in staff turnover, 26 percent decrease in absenteeism, 50 percent of women in leadership positions, 39 percent of women in the highest positions and not a single strike day).

What was your strategy?

I set up a very simple formula: Freedom + Responsibility = Happiness + Performance

I set up a very simple formula: Freedom + Responsibility = Happiness + Performance. We consider people like adults. We trust them and we give them the freedom to choose their working conditions (time, place, devices, roles, ...). We ask them to be responsible for their choices and to be respectful to their colleagues' freedom, which they quite easily did. Being treated like an adult, having plenty of choices, being praised for your added value, playing the team, all these elements contribute to your happiness. And as many research has proven, happy people perform better.

So, the performance was higher and stimulated more trust, more freedom, more entrepreneurship, more happiness and thus greater performance. It's a virtuous circle.

How was the new "Chief Happiness Officer" perceived? Did people take you seriously right from the beginning? How did you cope with these reactions?

Of course, I had to face a lot of jokes and sarcastic comments. I was considered as a Sparkling Unicorn or a Care Bear. Happiness at Work wasn't a hype topic five years ago. And even less in the public administration. But once I was able to make the link between people's happiness and their performance through very concrete positive KPI's (Key Performance Indicators), people started to be curious and to listen carefully to what made our success.

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Why did you leave the ministry and what have you been doing since then?

I left once I was convinced that the mission was accomplished, my team was fully mature and autonomous. I left two years ago and I've not been replaced! My team is still doing a fantastic job but without leader. To me, it's my greatest victory. Since then I set up Happyformance, my consulting firm, and we are helping companies to go through positive sustainable transformations which are optimising people's happiness and companies' profit and performance.

On Thursday, November 12, you'll be in Luxembourg attending a conference from the "Fédération des Femmes Cheffes d'Entreprises". What can participants expect from the "Happy Leader" conference?

They first of all will find some inspiration in the business case of the Belgian Ministry I worked for. It's not about making a copy/paste but about being enthusiastic about some small parts of this big project. They will also learn about the pillars of happiness at work and the important role they can play in their employees' happiness and performance.

Happy people are two times less likely to get sick

And, I hope they will be happy. Happy people are two times less likely to get sick, six times less likely to be absent, nine times more loyal, 31 percent more productive and 55 percent more creative. And happy people make happy customers who make happy shareholders. All top managers are dreaming about it. Let's make it happen!

[Click here to find out more about the happy leader conference in Luxembourg on November 12 \(http://ffcel.lu/fr/agenda/event/ffcel-conference-happy-leader-parce-que-je-le-vaux-bien\)](http://ffcel.lu/fr/agenda/event/ffcel-conference-happy-leader-parce-que-je-le-vaux-bien)

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