

Case Study

ROK plc

“We don’t do human resources here, we do people,” says Helen Walpole, when quizzed about her unusual job title of ‘people leader’ for the south west region of national property repair and maintenance specialist Rok plc. It’s the first clue that Rok is different from the average, run-of-the-mill building firm.

“All our front-line people, carpenters, plumbers, bricklayers - what the building sector usually refers to as ‘the trades’ – are directly employed by us and all of them have the same employment terms and conditions, plus benefits such as sick pay, pensions and paid holidays,” explains Walpole. In a sector characterised by sub-contracted labour and a veritable gulf between white and blue-collar staff, Rok clearly ‘walks the talk’ when it comes to employee welfare.

It was this enlightened employment policy that first led Walpole to join Rok in 2006. During her first two years Rok continued its strong, six year growth record. But towards the middle of 2008, the economic downturn, an especially brutal one for building, property and construction, had an impact on Rok’s business. Forecast revenue would have to be revised downward in line with trading volume decline, putting pressure on costs and requiring Rok’s board to take prompt, decisive action.

“We had to remove £20m of costs from our business and that inevitably meant some redundancies. For a company with such a progressive employment record it was particularly painful and we decided we would do everything to prevent a second wave of cuts,” explains Walpole.

That meant thinking and acting differently, fortunately one of Rok’s strengths. First came the strategic re-focus to down-weight Group revenue from the larger-scale new build commercial market and grow income from more profitable, smaller projects, such as school extensions, and property maintenance and insurance claim repairs.

“We decided we needed some kind of professional sales team to grow business in this area. It may seem obvious to anyone outside our sector but it was pretty radical; construction doesn’t generally have proper sales people, says Walpole.

“The market was there for a people-centred company like ours with a strong service ethos. But we needed to move quickly to achieve our goal of employee re-deployment instead of layoffs. The sticking point was that this was new territory for us and we weren’t sure how it should be organised. There was no-one inside the business with the right sales management experience and we didn’t have the time to recruit. We needed an interim.”

Fortunately, Walpole had worked with BIE Interim in her previous HR role at C-Mac, a global micro-electronics business. In that case the business needed an interim financial director to urgently prepare a subsidiary business for sale.

“BIE delivered on a very tough brief on that occasion, so although Rok’s need was entirely different, I was confident enough to challenge them a second time.”

The appointment of interim sales expert Nigel Lanch was made without any face-to-face meetings; the entire recruitment process taking place remotely by phone, adds Walpole.

“It might sound as if we were taking unnecessary risks but my initial conversations with BIE’s Amanda Johnston gave me a great deal of confidence in the calibre of people they would offer. Amanda is a former private sector HR director herself and I felt I was talking to someone who was not just an interim specialist, but someone who really understood our business situation and the sense of urgency.”

Starting in November 2008, the challenge set for Nigel Lanch was to assess Rok’s existing people and resources; to then make recommendations for how to establish a sales capability for the lower cost services delivered by the five offices in Rok’s south west region. The financial target was £6m revenue growth within 12 months. Lanch takes up the story:

“What I first observed at Rok was that the key to increased new and repeat business was customer relationship development specifically focussed on smaller schemes. But Rok’s existing organisation had only generalists. And people who should have been spending time with customers were being distracted by other activities such as administration, sales support and marketing. Their reporting line to the local business leaders only led to further distractions.”

Nigel Lanch also noticed potential in an existing Rok employee, Sarah Walkup, and one of his early recommendations was to appoint her as the first of five, dedicated ‘small scale work’ sales managers. Lanch then worked closely with Walkup to create the rationale for a new, dedicated sales team including an organisational chart and the support it would need. This included Rok’s first-ever telemarketing function, charged with capturing more repeatable work. Lanch also recommended other crucial changes. First, that Rok refocus its existing ‘sales’ organisation away from being predominantly what he describes as ‘young, enthusiastic and lower-cost’ towards fewer, more experienced people who were proven relationship-builders. Second, that all sales people were directly accountable to a dedicated sales manager rather than one of the five south west regional business leaders. This, he believed, would allow them to spend more time relationship building and ultimately lead to improved sales.

By January 2009, Lanch had secured a mandate from Rok’s senior leaders to implement his plan and by April all five sales managers had been appointed. While it’s too early to judge the ultimate success of the new sales team in hard financial terms, for Walpole there are some early, positive indicators.

“The first team we set up in Plymouth is already making good progress and that’s the result of having a clear plan, the right structure and all the components in place for success. Nigel facilitated that and very quickly too. It would have taken us at least twice as long and increased the risk of failure if we’d tried to do this on our own. Then there’s the legacy of new skills and new ways of thinking that Nigel left behind. You can’t easily measure things like this in pure financial terms but they’re all very important factors and have contributed to what I’d describe as a very positive second experience of using interim experts from BIE,” she concludes.

About Rok Plc

Rok Plc is a property repair and maintenance specialist with £1bn revenue and around 5,000 employees nationwide. Its aim is to differentiate itself by becoming a customer relationship-driven business, delivering high quality services particularly in areas such as affordable housing, insurance repairs, education and health care where the company frequently works in occupied premises.

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