

## Case Study



### HR reinforcements at Avaya

Avaya was faced with the tricky challenge of relocating 600 staff from eight south of England sites to new high-tech headquarters in Guildford – in just five months. The company, a leading global communications solutions and services provider, called for HR reinforcements. Help came in the shape of interim executive John Stacey, a Human Resources specialist who started work within four days of being introduced to Avaya.

John Stacey was assigned as the HR lead for the project. Working closely with the rest of the Avaya team, he ensured that its “Project Voyager” relocation initiative was kept on course. Geoff Gudgion, Avaya’s business development director for the UK and Ireland, says: “Within a week John was at his desk and he turned out to be very capable. Getting him on board worked out perfectly – it was ideal.”

Avaya’s overarching aim was to take all the staff to its new Surrey complex. Early estimates had pointed to possible employee losses of 20 or even 30 per cent, but by the completion deadline, at the end of August, only six members of staff – less than one per cent – had dropped out. Nicky Lewis, formerly Voyager project director and now Avaya’s operations director, explains: “We had eight disparate communities in the south of England and the move to Guildford gave us a brilliant opportunity to bring everyone together. My objectives were to deliver the project on time, on budget and with minimum staff attrition.

“We wanted to bring everybody with us and we needed a dedicated HR specialist who would work with us to bring this about. We didn’t have the bandwidth in our own HR department and it was vital that we had someone with broad experience who could give us 100 per cent focus. This would have been a great in-house development role, for me or someone else within the team, but we didn’t have the time for someone to grow into it.”

Avaya was essentially a \$7bn start-up. It came into being in October 2000 as a spin-off from Lucent Technologies – previously part of AT&T – which has 24,000 employees worldwide and its global headquarters in New Jersey. Avaya is a major communications solutions provider and the worldwide market leader in enterprise telephony, voice and unified messaging, contact centres and structured cabling systems.

John Stacey’s first task was to draw up a series of HR policies that would drive and support the move from the eight sites – two in Farnborough; two in Fleet; and bases in Ascot, Gerrards Cross and Winchester; plus a newly acquired site in Bracknell.

A key plank of his approach was to set up a staff consultation group – something that continued when all the loose ends of the relocation had been tied up. Lewis was pleased with the way the project went, with John Stacey’s involvement and the legacy he left behind. “John was extremely proactive. He went out and looked for the problem areas, took ownership of them and made sure they were resolved.”

Avaya managers were concerned they might lose key specialist engineers who were busy developing the company's future products and services. Lewis explains: "The most critical thing for us to get right was our people. We did not want to lose one single person. It takes a year to 'grow' one of our R&D specialists. We could not have achieved so much without the focus and experience from someone like John. He is very people-orientated, he integrated very quickly – and he's a nice guy."

At first glance, John Stacey admits that the Avaya project was a tall order because of the tight timetable. On arrival at Avaya, he says: "Morale was low. Guildford was not a popular choice with everyone – although it made sound business sense – and some people felt they were being railroaded into it. There was a lot of rumour, myth and suspicion that this was a rationalisation exercise."

John Stacey has a sound track record in human resources, which culminated in him heading up HR at contract caterers Gardner Merchant (now Sodexo) in charge of 50,000 staff. After five years he left to the puzzlement of colleagues who couldn't believe he was giving up a high-profile job at the top of his tree. But, he says, "it was time for a change. I wanted something different."

"As an interim employee, people listen to you. You are often desperately needed. People will respect your judgement and you can stand outside the politics. I think the Red Adair, trouble-shooter thing is part of it. I can tell people home truths that others wouldn't dare tell them, either from fear or because they will have to work alongside them in the future."

Gudgion says: "We wanted to bring in an HR professional who could take on this project and start running immediately. The danger was that we would lose people. This is a very complex organisational structure. There are lots of business units and although the numbers, in industry terms, were not that high, because the organisation is so complex, we needed someone who could work across the organisational divides."

"We were aware that if this was not handled professionally we might neglect some people and we wanted to make sure we applied the same degree of consideration to all our employees."

"One thing John has made us value is the role of interims. This is the first time we have used an interim. With consultants you feel they are on the outside giving advice rather than doing, and with hired guns you feel they are too junior. "BIE found John for us – efficiently, quickly and with the minimum of fuss – which meant we didn't have to interview a whole series of people. We needed someone who was going to be a real team player, and for nine months John effectively became Avaya."

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