

## Case Study

### **A surprise resignation left Swissport UK in urgent need of an interim chief executive**

***Part way through a turnaround and a major change programme, this leading airport ground services provider successfully overcame a critical leadership test using an interim executive from BIE.***

The surprise departure of a key individual is a perennial management problem; even more so if it's the leader of a business undergoing transformation, as Swissport's Juan José Andres Alvez discovered when the firm's UK chief executive resigned unexpectedly.

Mr Andres Alvez is executive vice-president for the EMEAA region, a job that carries responsibility for 20 countries, including the UK. In March 2010, Swissport's UK headquarters at Birmingham Airport was surprised by the resignation of its chief executive. The timing couldn't have been much worse, as Mr Andres Alvez explains:

"Our UK chief executive had been leading a material turnaround and business transformation programme and we were at a key stage. We needed to find his replacement very quickly. My concern was that his departure could easily become a setback, creating a big distraction and losing us some of our hard-won change momentum.

"One option was to move someone up from senior management but we had a completely new executive team; none of them had been with us for more than six months and I had some doubt this was the best option. We began an immediate search for a replacement, but we knew that might take at least six months. Then our HR director suggested we look for an interim to overlap with the outgoing chief executive and bridge the period until a new permanent replacement arrived."

Paul Duncan was Swissport UK's interim HR director at the time. He is an experienced interim manager who had been placed in a previous role by BIE Interim Executive.

"We had some persuading to do, he says. "Swissport was unaccustomed to hiring interims at this level but the only other option was for Juan José himself to step forward and that would have left him with little time for the other countries under his management. We decided to brief BIE because I knew from past experience that the company specialises in senior level executives only, and I also knew Steve Dengel who runs its Birmingham office."

BIE introduced a shortlist of six quality candidates, further screened by Paul Duncan to three, but it was Robin Dickie who stood out at interview. Dickie is a turnaround specialist with a background mostly in retailing; he has held senior executive positions with Boots, WH Smith and was also chief executive of private equity-backed regional department store chain TJ Hughes, where he doubled profits and delivered record financial performance.

Dickie had only met BIE a few weeks before:

"The introduction came via a former colleague at Boots. He is a highly-regarded guy so I knew he wouldn't just refer me to anywhere less than top-notch. I was impressed by my first meeting with BIE and then soon after Steve Dengel called. His brief on Swissport was very clear, with lots of 'colour and texture'; all the personalities, issues and so on."

For Juan José Andres Alvez, a good fit was the overriding factor:

“Experience and leadership aside, I thought Robin’s personality would make him the best person for the company; he has a critical mindset but also a constructive one. I wanted to be open about the challenges and personalities, the pros and cons; everything, so I spent a lot of quality time briefing him. What stood out was Robin’s ability to see and separate the strategic from the tactical issues.”

Dickie’s start at Swissport mid-May 2010 overlapped the final two and a half weeks of the incumbent chief executive’s tenure; not much time but enough to get what he needed.

“The key things were to quickly fit in, complete the turnaround and lead the executive team so that we could keep the turnaround’s momentum and set the business up for growth. There were lots of efficiency measures planned and the next step was to operationalise these around customers; to pursue their agendas and meet their needs,” he explains.

Dickie had six months but he says working to a fixed timetable makes every day important.

“Working as an interim is like being permanently on a 100-day plan – you develop a strong sense of urgency and you carry people along with that. When I was introduced to this assignment it felt like a ‘sweet spot’; I knew I could do a really good job,” he says.

That initial feeling proved correct, and since Swissport’s permanent ceo search was not producing the right candidates, towards the end of 2010 the company asked Robin Dickie to stay on for an extended period. Under the terms of the original deal, that could have proved expensive but Mr Andres Alvez describes the subsequent agreement with BIE as a ‘sensible and flexible’ one.

Six months into Robin Dickie’s 12-month second term, Swissport re-started its search for a permanent chief executive. Meanwhile Dickie has led the UK business through a significant performance upturn; exceeding its financial targets for 2010, meeting or surpassing five key performance indicators and retaining every major service contract – some on enhanced terms – while winning new ones.

“I had worked with interims before but always through my own network; never before at this level or through an agency, says Mr Andres Alvez.

“I think a good agency like BIE offers two important benefits: speed and quality. Another observation is that a senior interim executive can coach and mentor in a way that’s not possible as a permanent leader; they are dispassionate and a-political. Robin gave us higher aspirations. Although at the start we had agreed ten very clear and very detailed performance goals, he pushed us to go further. I’m convinced that is one of the key factors behind Robin’s success at Swissport UK; it gave us both tremendous focus and the confidence to be better,” he concludes.

-----

#### About Swissport

Swissport International provides airport ground services for around 100m passengers and 3.2m tonnes of cargo a year for around 650 client companies. Swissport’s c34,000 employees operate at 185 airports in 36 countries on five continents. It generated consolidated operating revenue of €1.3bn in 2010 (US\$1.7bn) and since February 2011 has been owned by PAI, the French private equity firm.