

**PricewaterhouseCoopers:**  
embedding a shared vision in  
a network of individuals,  
and in a sector perceived to  
be homogeneous

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How a global consultancy created a working environment that encouraged and enabled its staff to see their role as something more than providing business solutions.



**pwc**

## KEY INSIGHTS

- In response to a perception of 'sameness' in its sector, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) embarked on market research to understand and monitor how the organisation was perceived.
- Establishing the credibility of the research results – both positive and negative – was key to enabling acceptance of the findings.
- Initial feedback indicated that PwC needed to work on building its relationships. Clients wanted more than business solutions – they wanted a dialogue.
- PwC has embedded its organisational vision into its culture, partly by understanding how to communicate its organisational identity, and partly by making corporate social responsibility the way it does business, acting as a role model for the sector, and investing fully in staff development.
- Gaining 'buy-in' from the partners – a very autonomous set of individuals – was essential to make its identity work.

## BACKGROUND

PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) is one of the world's largest providers of assurance, tax, and business consulting services. It audits 30% of the FT Global 500 companies, along with similar proportions of similar indices around the world. In 2010 the worldwide gross revenues of its network of firms was \$26.6bn (£16.7bn). PwC has member offices in 766 locations in 154 countries and employs over 160,000 staff, of whom 5% are partners and 76% are client service staff, with 19% being practice support staff. PwC UK was placed fourth in *The Sunday Times* survey of best companies for which to work, and amongst other global accolades, PwC Australia was recognised as an Employer of Choice for Women.

The election of a new senior partner in the UK in 2008 created an opportunity for a new statement about the kind of organisation that PwC wanted to be. Ian Powell was elected from a platform of wanting to work somewhere that was about more than just making money. When the senior partner elections came up in the US a year later, Bob Moritz gained the post from a similar platform.

## THE CATALYST FOR CHANGE

In PwC's industry, some would say that all organisations are the same. This was the starting point for researching how the organisation was viewed by its clients and also the clients of its competitors. A further reason for this research stemmed from the culture of PwC, namely its relentlessly high standards and the need to prove what it says. It has therefore continued to conduct a large amount of external reputation research over recent years.

## LISTENING TO THE BAD NEWS AS WELL AS THE GOOD NEWS

The results of PwC's first reputation survey in 2007 yielded positive messages, such as the consistency of the quality and technical competence of staff and their work. However, there were harder messages to take on board in relation to PwC's attitudes, how it treats clients and the widely-held view that all firms in the industry are the same.

After the first survey, the team responsible had to work hard to ensure that subsequent surveys were more credible with the leadership of partner firms. They brought in independent experts to run the surveys and engaged with the territory teams to define the appropriate sample framework for each territory. This ensured better staff engagement with the process and its outcomes.

To increase engagement further, when PwC receives survey results now, it does not just publish the results, but also presents recommendations for solutions to the issues they raise.

As Moira Elms, PwC Brand and Communications Leader, explains:

“Marketing people need the good news, because that’s what they use to market us, so we aim to meet with both the leadership team and the marketing people to discuss the findings and solutions, so that the bad news doesn’t get swept under the carpet.”

## UNDERSTANDING PWC’S DISTINCTIVENESS, AS INFORMED BY THEIR RESEARCH

The fact that PwC conducts extensive reputation research is indicative of the organisation’s aim to represent something more than being technically competent and making money. It wants to be a role model and enable its staff to develop to their full potential. When running for election, the current senior UK partner Ian Powell said, “I don’t want to preside over an organisation that is profitable but selfish. We need to be willing to do the right thing by our people, our clients and the communities in which we work.”

Like most large organisations, PwC has had a corporate responsibility programme in place for years. However, what has changed more recently is a shift from this being viewed as a separate programme to the way business is generally conducted at PwC.

In practice, this means that PwC collaborates with organisations that have synergies with its own activities, such as youth employment or education. Furthermore, its support is about more than just giving financial aid on a year-by-year basis – PwC will share its expertise and skills, and offer mentoring and other support as appropriate. When it does donate money, this will be guaranteed for a specified number of years, so that the recipient organisation can plan effectively, with advance notice given if it is not to be renewed.

One of PwC’s long term partnerships is with the Globe Theatre in London. For more than ten years, the Our Theatre partnership has reached over 4,500 children from some 50 schools in south London. The theatre’s education department uses Shakespeare as a means to help students develop key skills such as confidence, effective listening and collaboration. In related initiatives, PwC staff volunteer in local schools to assist with reading and at the Globe on teacher training days. The programme is so successful that a similar scheme is now running at Manchester’s Exchange Theatre, again supported by PwC.

## DEVELOPING AND EMBEDDING THE PWC EXPERIENCE

PwC had an expression – ‘the PwC experience’ – which is a contract between the organisation and the individual, whether they are a partner, an employee, a client or a member of the community. The organisation now wanted this ethos of corporate social responsibility to be part of everything it did.

For example, PwC decided that it would not take work for revenue and to maintain its market position, if it was damaging to communities and/or did not fit with what it wanted to be as an organisation. Working with its leaders to this end, it developed strong client acceptance procedures monitored by teams in each country and an overall framework to shape how the organisation works across its territories.

Convincing leaders across the PwC network to buy into this approach to the work they would and would not take was not easy. Partners like to feel they can be autonomous and free to be entrepreneurial in their own areas. A significant driver for the leadership accepting this new positioning was the competitive environment. When faced with a rival business going all out for growth/scale to replace PwC as number one in their market, the partners could see that this was a good alternative – being top for talent and integrity rather than for size. This means that there are now times when the company will not pursue particular clients or accounts.

## GIVING PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYEES A COMPELLING PROPOSITION – THE CHANCE TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

As PwC developed its approach to clients it was simultaneously creating an opportunity that appealed to the discerning, talented pool of potential staff that it targeted. Working for PwC does not just offer the financial and status benefits of working for a respected, global network, it also gives employees the chance to make a difference to others.

PwC encourages its staff to use their core skills to help organisations that could never afford their time and raise awareness of all the opportunities that are available. In the UK for example, there is a PwC team who go out to organisations like schools and third sector organisations and find out what their employees might be able to do to help.

Staff time is allocated to assisting these external organisations. Employees set themselves targets which are tracked and discussed with their managers, who also obtain feedback from the places where they work. Some employees also have their own projects that they are passionate about and PwC can offer some match funding. Between officially-sponsored projects and personal projects, around half of PwC’s UK staff are involved in community projects. Crucially, PwC’s communities programme involves its staff in areas using their professional skills rather than many large companies’ rather more traditional, slightly random approach to community service.

## INVESTING IN STAFF DEVELOPMENT

PwC conducts an annual global survey of staff and asks explicitly whether people are proud to work for them. Since it began its new positioning, the figure has risen from 82% to 96%.

Equally, PwC values its staff highly and invests hugely in staff development based on a 20:70:10 theory that people learn 20% through coaching, mentoring, informal groups, discussions and feedback, 70% through working experience and reflecting and 10% through formal training programmes, that it is important to put effort into all of those approaches.

The importance PwC UK places on developing its staff is reflected at all levels. It has devoted a lot of time and effort to activities for its partner leadership group designed to increase personal self-awareness and understanding of what it means to be a leader in this organisation.

On a global level, PwC runs leadership sessions designed for territory and global leadership teams to focus on how to best execute the PwC experience in a manner that drives results – both personally and as a leadership team. The aim of the workshop is to accelerate the process of enabling its leaders to lead change in a way that delivers the PwC experience. Each leader walks away with an actionable leadership plan that will be supported locally.

## EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

PwC worked hard to put in place policies and procedures and training as part of a commitment to equality and diversity. Progress and improvements were minimal, however, until PwC realised that some areas, such as its appraisal system were subjective and could be open to bias.

As a result PwC embarked on a development programme to show people their personal biases. The organisation worked with external experts to educate people about the ways in which their mind works – via implicit association tests and cognitive illusion tests – to prove to them that their decisions are affected by bias. This made it easier for staff to admit to their preconceptions and the training gave them techniques to help uncover their own biases and assess their decision-making.

## COMMUNICATING INTERNALLY

In such a large, global organisation, it has been important for PwC to create a sense of ownership amongst its staff. Constant communication has been key to bringing everyone on board with PwC's new positioning, but it is not enough to only communicate from the centre. According to Moira Elms, PwC Brand and Communications Leader, the same messages need to be repeated throughout the PwC network, "Bright people tend to think that when they've sent out a communication, next time they need to say something different. Actually you don't. You have to communicate and communicate, putting the same thing in different ways and different places. And when you are sick of saying the same thing you're just starting to get through the barriers to people actually reading it and retaining it and understanding it. So we've been really disciplined about communicate, communicate, communicate."

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