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Brown attracts new talent with killer smile

MediaCom's first worldwide chief talent director, Helen Brown, tells *Arif Durrani* how she plans to establish a global HR network across the group

Examining a mutilated corpse, spread-eagled on a cold slab, does not draw obvious connections with the profession of human resources, but for MediaCom's newest arrival Helen Brown, the links are there.

The former talent director of marketing agency Iris has long held a fascination with investigative pathology and, since the beginning of April, has been conducting her own internal examination of sorts on the UK's largest media agency and the global network in which it sits.

Brown's new role has coincided with her 40th birthday celebrations and, as far as life changes go, becoming MediaCom's first worldwide chief talent director is up there with the best of them.

During her time at Iris, she worked alongside the founding partners and helped develop the agency from 60 to 600 people. But WPP's MediaCom brand is currently home to almost 5,000 people in 110 offices around the world – that's a lot of PDRs (personal development and review meetings) in anyone's book.

"After four years at Iris, it was time for me to look at a different challenge," says Brown, who was approached by a headhunter on behalf of Stephen Allan, chairman and chief executive of MediaCom Worldwide. "After initial talks with Stephen and [chief finance officer] Simon [Tray], I quickly fell in love with the entrepreneurial spirit of MediaCom."

Before stepping foot in her new London office, the seasoned strategist had already mapped out objectives for her first 100 days and initial 12 months. These include standardising PDRs across the group and developing leadership and mobility programmes within WPP.

Working with the regional HR

CV

2009
Worldwide chief talent director, MediaCom

2006
Group talent director, Iris

2005
HR director, head of people, Iris

2002
Managing partner, Draft London

1999
Managing director, I-D Media

1996
Various art director and designer roles, publishing groups

Lives

Peckham Rye

Family

Married, aged 40

Loves

Theatre, comedy, Club Gascon, horse-riding and crime fiction

directors in more than 80 countries, Brown will also be responsible for establishing the agency's first HR network, with responsibility for harnessing best practice and skills across the group.

It is perhaps surprising that the brand responsible for global billings in excess of \$13bn last year, which sits at the heart of WPP's buying behemoth GroupM, has not already established such a community.

Sitting in a striking blue dress, the new recruit who really was set to become a pathologist before her chemistry grades let her down, says her role was "always part of Allan's worldwide game-plan to attract and retain the best talent", following his own global promotion last year.

Internal development

It is apt that Brown was appointed by Allan, who is himself the product of many years of internal development since joining The Media Business, which later merged to become MediaCom, at the tender age of 18. Yet doesn't his story, along with those of many other senior executives who have been with the business since the merger in 1999, suggest MediaCom does not need an HR specialist like Brown?

"In the past, we have operated as local offices of excellence. Now we are acting more collaboratively and encouraging people to move around," explains Karen Blackett, another agency stalwart who joined through the merger with TMB before being named MediaCom's EMEA chief operations officer in 2008.

Blackett says the movement now possible within the agency reflects the way the world – and MediaCom's clients – has become more global, adding: "Now is absolutely the right time for Helen to join us."

For her part, Brown says she is

well aware of the challenges that lie ahead. Each MediaCom agency is individual, with different HR needs that reflect their own particular size and life stage. She will also need to take the cultural and social differences within the different markets into consideration and be aware she is operating in the shadow of a near-global economic downturn.

"It is no longer viable to retain people through remuneration alone," admits Brown, who believes this challenge can be offset by offering clear, structured career paths that span years, not months.

Brown recalls Blackett telling her the reason she has stayed with the agency is because there have always been opportunities available

whenever she felt ready for the next challenge. Brown believes this approach can form the basis of a "mobile network of brilliant talent" around the world.

Staff retention

But MediaCom's staff retention is already known to be among the best in the business, with a churn rate of less than 20%. Perhaps more of a challenge is how it sets about attracting new recruits, which Brown says starts with "effectively communicating the true breadth and depth" of agency roles within schools and universities.

She already sits on the IPA's Training and Development Board, and is a strong believer in investing

Brown on...

The importance of creativity
In the past year, the MediaCom team has undergone creativity training to encourage people to challenge the work they do and the way they do it. Our Freshness scheme is designed to keep staff stimulated through subjects as diverse as tattooing, photography, wine-tasting and jewellery design.

If I ran the company... This global initiative is an opportunity for the workforce to say what they think. The whole workforce, in teams of five or six, presents to

senior management about what they would do if they were in charge – and the best ideas are implemented. This scheme has been responsible for the company bar, free breakfast and fruit, and an inspiration day.

Media-land There is a fabulous mix of incredibly bright, entrepreneurial people, who are open and down to earth at the same time. This creates a compelling, dynamic mix, which is not offered by many other industries.

in future careers. When it comes to recruiting, she is also an advocate of social networking sites such as LinkedIn and external headhunters.

"Recruitment in the UK has also been boosted by MediaCom's inclusion in *The Sunday Times*' Best Companies to Work For listing," says the new talent director, who saw applications rise by 50% when former employer Iris made the list.

There is no doubt Brown has arrived to make a difference. She's cast her net wide, but knows she has to be realistic about how much one person can achieve. But anyone even considering dismissing her as just another HR bureaucrat should be mindful that her current recommended read is called *How to Kill Your Friends*. ■

It is no longer viable to retain people through remuneration alone