

Putting the human in HR with Lee Watts

 By [Shan Raddiffe](#)

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Human resources is generally considered the 'babysitters' of the corporate world. Besides the hiring and firing, they tend to the new employee integration and overall employee wellness, while functioning in the thankless task of mediator and buffer between staff and management... And yet are often looked upon as an unnecessary department - until something goes wrong or somebody needs something.

I chatted to Lee Watts, recruitment and people analytics manager for online travel company, Travelstart, about his role at the company, and being recognised as one of the leading lights in the industry by the Future of HR Awards.

■ *Tell us a bit about yourself and how you got into HR?*

I would describe myself as someone who is simply trying to do well. I have been working in high performance People (HR) Teams for almost 10 years, all of it within commerce and e-commerce business sectors.

I began my career abroad, working initially in short-term capital growth-based investments as well as large off-plan property developments. Around 2008, the global financial crisis put a massive strain on those industry sectors and it provided the perfect time for me to pivot into a new arena, an area where I knew I could make a significant impact based on a plethora of underwhelming experiences with the HR professionals I had dealt with in the past.



Lee Watts

The last two years at Travelstart has been fantastic, a company who, in my mind, is an employer of choice. The realm of possibilities ahead of the company and its employees seems endless and it is exciting to part of that!

■ *What do you love about your job and do you really wear a flak jacket to work?*

I have a great job, I get to cross collaborate with all the different teams at Travelstart every day. Therefore having a unique view on how these talented, driven and determined individuals, who are employed here, go about lifting travel, tech and e-commerce limitations by building or creating solutions in line with our companies vision to "Fix travel in Africa".

It's great for employees to understand their purpose and is a real luxury when you see the magic happening as a result of that clarity and transparency. After all, an organisation is a bunch of people grouped together with a particular purpose, working towards a particular outcome. People are at the centre, and I love that.

As for the flak jacket, *haha...* maybe on a Monday!

■ *What is a common misconception about your job/department? Explain it in a meme.*

Human Resources



What my friends think I do



What my mom thinks I do



What my wife thinks I do



What society thinks I do



What I think I do

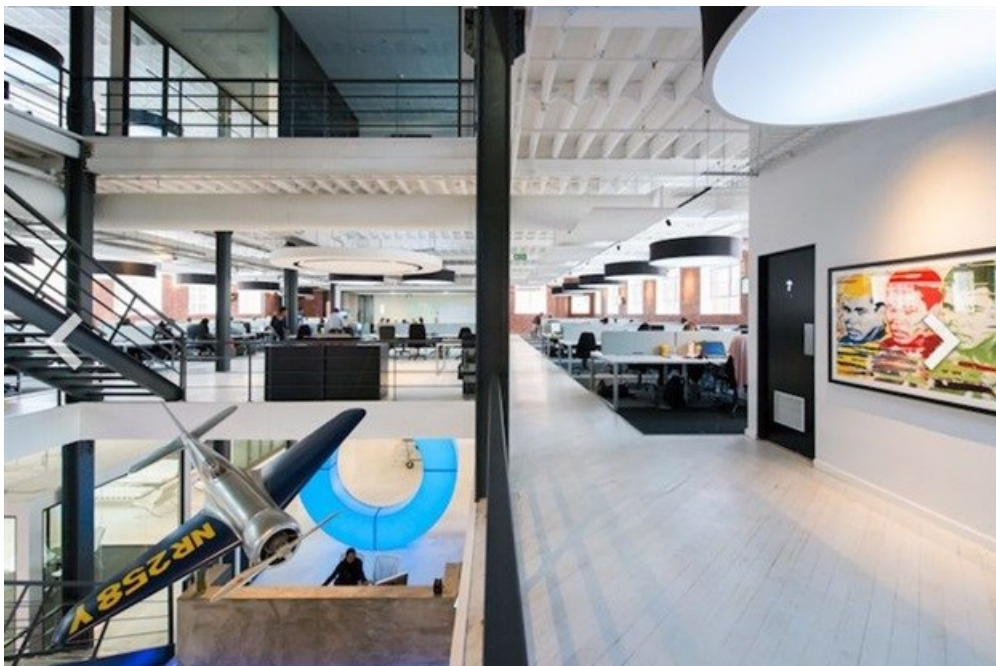


What I actually do

■ **HR generally catches a pretty bad rap in company hierarchy and there's this impression that you're only good when someone needs something from you. Have you or fellow HR professionals ever felt this to be true, and how can we go about changing this perception?**

Yeah, so I remember several situations in my career where colleagues and I would discuss what it was like to work in HR "then" and HR "now" (bearing in mind majority of my HR career has been in attraction, recruitment and on-boarding)... As for the bad rap, I'm not sure it was unjustified, as it was more of a babysitting administrative type function that provided limitations to innovation.

There are still large parts of the HR responsibility tree that are laborious and time-consuming and seem insignificant to the greater mission and vision of a company because they are largely misunderstood, but whether it is liked/accepted or not, when you dig a little deeper, it becomes absolutely critical in creating robust processes and facilitating the mitigation of risk on both employee and employer. Documenting everything from recruitment, onboarding, development, retention and even separation creates quantified feedback to all stakeholders.



Travelstart offices in Cape Town

But HR “now” is way more fun because as technology has evolved, so too has consumer behaviour, and it therefore literally changed the world forever with options aplenty for the customer. This meant that businesses have been forced to adapt and deliver innovation with greater speed, and higher levels of satisfaction. With hard-to-find, finite skillsets required by business to grow and reach its full potential, there is a definite “war” in the open market regarding the acquisition, development and retention of top talent.

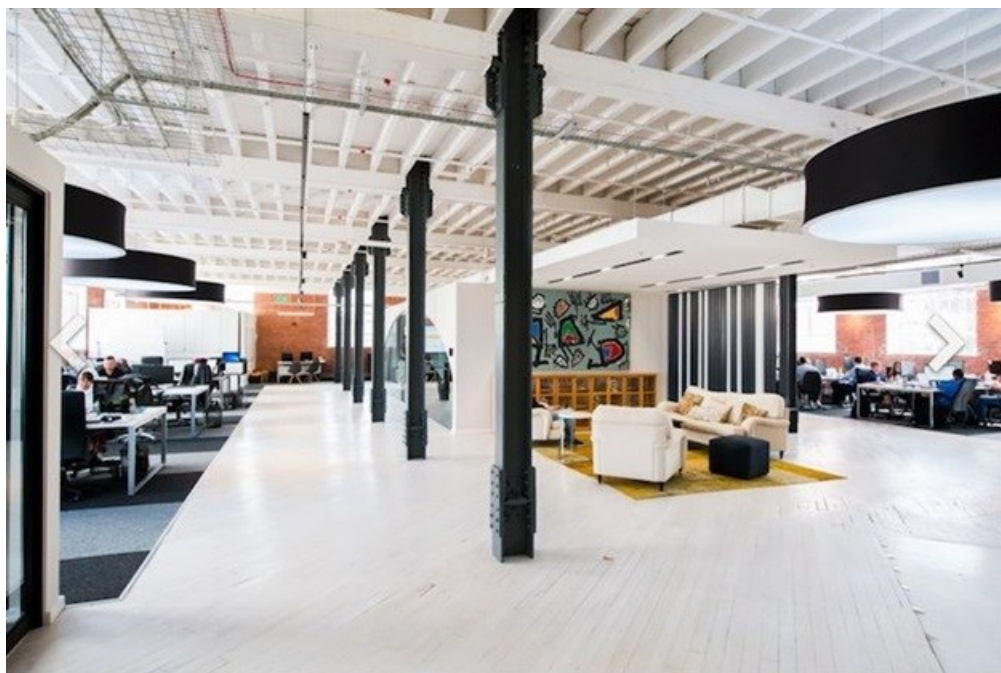
With that being said, I believe the traditional perception of HR is changing (all be it not at the speed it should be) and the great HR and People Teams have earned more gravitas in that they are being consulted more by business.

Management is not an HR issue, it’s a leadership issue and HR has a part to play in that.

■ ***What is the most challenging part of your job and what have you learned from it?***

The People Team at Travelstart is quite blessed in that we have strong leaders, who are also excellent managers. The speed of delivery is high and you are encouraged to fail - it creates faster learning. It is a reflection on how the company trusts the teams’ judgement. We also have a ton of self-managed teams and cross-team, in some instances cross-company collaboration with several other businesses all within the Travelstart family.

In my career, some of the things I have learned are that people very rarely remember what you said or did, but that they remember mostly how you made them feel. Now, I stole that from Maya Angelou, but it is true and with HR as with most things I would think, the road to success can be a lot longer than you initially imagined. Angela Duckworth talks about the power of passion and perseverance, and how it can take an extraordinarily long time to become an “overnight success”.



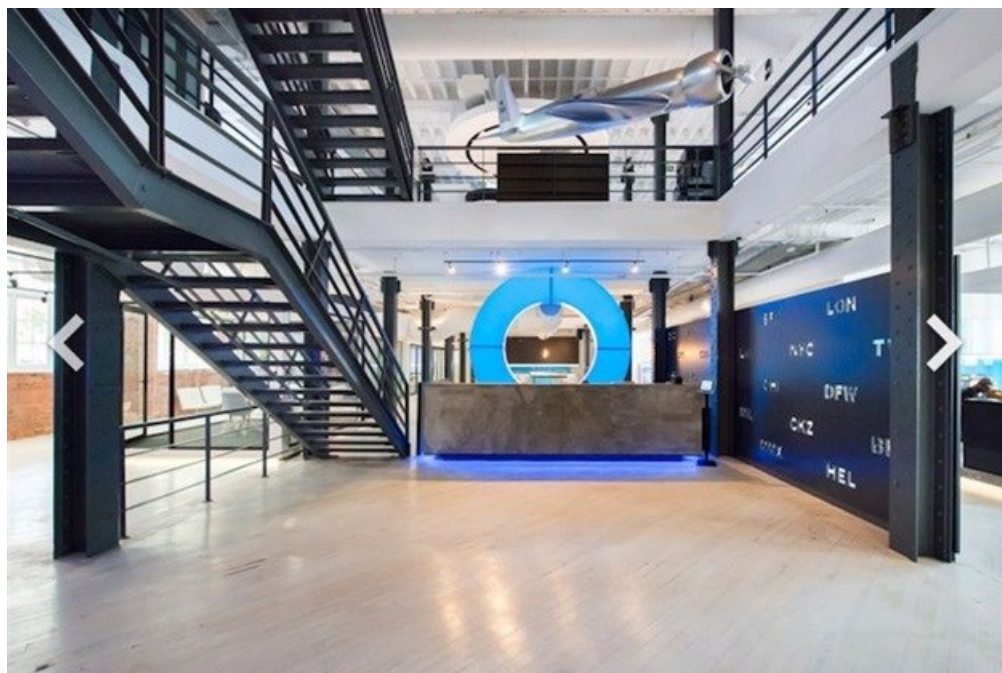
At Travelstart, we have a book club and we meet every quarter to discuss the book on the agenda. This has been a catalyst for me as an individual reading more. Books like Adam Grant’s *Givers and Takers*, or *Originals*. The catalyst and magnum opus were Laszlo Bock’s *Work Rules!*... even a cheeky book we read called *Legacide* by Richard Mullholland was excellent for leaders and entrepreneurs. All of this is valuable IP, valuable insight. It is like nectar to HR.

The *biggest* lesson I have learned in the last two years is “Speed is the ROI of execution”.

Our CEO, Stephan Ekbergh hosted three evenings for budding entrepreneurs, where one of the evenings he said, “Ideas are great, but they mean nothing... Ideas need a host... It’s all about execution.”

■ ***Tell us some of your favourite new ways of finding new recruits?***

I like meeting people at events like DisruptHR, Silicon cape talks, Net Prophet etc. Online through LinkedIn, Slack, referrals. If a good developer/BI/designer refers a new recruit, that's a great sign - they are basically putting their reputation on the line too... Those are good recruits.



■ ***The bigger your staff contingent gets, the more difficult it must become to maintain the company culture. Tell us a little about your process, and what advice can you give to start-ups that are suddenly facing a rapid staff expansion?***

It really does depend on the type of business; HR has to be more dynamic these days, there cannot be a one box fits all. In fact, get rid of the box completely. If it's tech, go with self-organised, self-managed teams, add some guidance plus loads of coaching. That would be my advice. HR people get worried with a non-rigid structure. Our CIO gave a brilliant analogy at the recent DisruptHR Cape Town, which depicts our own lives as a cross-functional team. We go to work - that's one team. We go home to our family, that's another team. Maybe we are part of a running club, that's a third team. We go to church, that's a fourth team; yet we are part of all of them and contribute in the manner we do.

For larger companies, of course, organograms, governance, risk committees, audit trail creation etc. - all of these things can be administered still using this analogy. The big boys like Google, Uber and Netflix make it work. It comes down to this statement: "If your employees have joined for the right, meaningful reasons, and your organisation speaks to those reasons, you are winning."

■ ***Last year you were a finalist for the Future of HR Awards – what does this recognition mean to you?***

It was nice to be recognised even although I didn't win it in 2017. I was, however, informed a week ago I am a finalist for 2018... so maybe this year... but that's how it goes at the Oscars!

ABOUT SHAN RADCLIFFE

Shan Radcliffe is the editor of Bizcommunity HR, Education and Legal.

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