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The restructuring that resulted in a giant order

When the giant consulting firm Accenture realized that they risked losing billion SEK deals because almost all of their consultants wore a tie, they had to rethink their strategy. Four years later, they have turned the company up-side down and given women more space – for the sake of the business.

During fall 2010, they had had enough. The issue had been discussed for a long time. In fact, it had been discussed for several years. However, it was now obvious that there was no turning back. They could no longer deny facts. Something had to be done.

One woman and 20 men had been accepted to Accenture's trainee program. That simply was not good enough, and it made them think through the issue thoroughly.

"It made us ask ourselves: what is the overall situation within our company?", said CEO Carl-Peter Thorwid.

2010 was a negative year also at the top of the company: Out of 55 partners, only 4 were female. Therefore, Accenture began a proper evaluation of the gender equality within the company. They went through everything from recruitments and promotions to parental leave in order to get a good grip of the situation.

How does Accenture act as an employer? Are we an equal employer? At what level of the organization does the inequality start? And in what part of the organization on the path towards partner does the company lose female consultants?

"We wanted to get facts in order to be able to evaluate this issue", said Camilla Rundberg, Nordic Equality Lead at the HR-department.

In order to do this, they needed an extensive insights platform. In addition, they needed a platform to build arguments from:

"One objective for the collection of all data was to be able to show the organization what the situation looked like, the reason for why we had to start this change process. Because we are doing it for business reasons", said Carl-Peter Thorwid.

It would turn out to be profitable. But let's not rush this through.

In 2011, they started off the change process by arranging two workshops for the management team. They did not have to go far to find arguments. Other parts of the company had recently presented a report, showing that the success of the 358 best performing companies in the world could be explained by diversity.

"Mixed groups of consultants are very important for client relationships. It gives us different angles, the possibility to talk to clients in different ways, and it makes the interaction nicer. It looks weird if

five men run through a sales presentation, especially if the client's representatives are female", says Carl-Peter Thorwid and highlights that this is not an unusual situation.

To drive this development project in a transparent and clear way was also something that they started with at an early stage.

"We had the courage to tell our employees: this is what we are going to do. We made an open commitment and presented updates regarding the initiative on a quarterly basis. In the beginning, nothing happened to the KPIs. I did however present all activities and results to our employees, and said that we were convinced that we are doing the right things. It took almost two years before we started to see positive results in our KPIs", said Carl-Peter Thorwid.

Already at an early stage, it was clear that they had failed in their recruitment process. Out of 100 newly hired employees, 35 were women and 65 were men. Women also had to wait longer for promotions compared to men, and this resulted in an outflow of women as they got more senior.

"We also replaced senior women with men", said Carl-Peter Thorwid.

It simply leaked all the way down and the result was less women at the top.

When they examined the recruitment statistics, they saw that only 20 percent of the applications came from women. However, 35 percent of those hired were women.

"So we were pretty good at hiring those that we found. We did however not find many enough", said Carl-Peter Thorwid.

To address this, they started to specifically search in female networks. The recruitment firms got the task to present 50 percent candidates from each gender. In addition, all employees were educated because it is the team and the future colleagues who are responsible for the final stage of the recruitment process.

"It is important that women interview women, since the persons conducting the interviews often are looking for personal characteristics that are similar to themselves", said Carl-Peter Thorwid.

During spring 2011, they hired a consultant to examine their own behavior in the recruitment process. They knew that all candidates got the same amount of time to present themselves during interviews. But how was the situation in the internal meetings, when they discussed which candidates they should hire?

They started to time the length of the discussions they had about different candidates.

The results showed that they spent 32 percent more time on discussing male applicants, compared to women. Men got 60 percent of the overall meeting, whereas women only were discussed 40 percent of the time. When they summarized female applicants, they spent 2.5 minutes, whereas men were summarized for 4 minutes. It also took them 7 minutes to make the decision not to hire a woman, compared to 11 minutes for deciding not to hire a man.

During 2011, a number of additional measures were initiated.

They were not satisfied with addressing just the recruitment process, and started to screen the evaluation of employees, the division of roles within the organization and the delegation of work tasks. The results showed that women often had support roles.

One of the most important insights was found while examining those who decide about promotions and the allocation of roles and projects. The consultant Kristina Franzén did not only measure time spent on each person in these conversations, she also studied what types of words were being used.

“While discussing men, we focused more on potential rather than performance. The language was more forward thinking: ‘His performance is good – what can this lead to?’”, said Camilla Rundberg.

“Women were however only evaluated by their performance”.

In addition, female employees were compared to other women, just because they were women. And men were compared to men.

Carl-Peter Thorwid and Camilla Rundberg looks at each other and begin laughing. It all feels absurd when they look back at it.

“We are frightened when we look back at this. Despite this, we know that we were not worse than others”, says Camilla Rundberg.

This explained another phenomenon: men either performed extremely well or extremely badly, they either had a 6 or a 1 on the performance scale. Women were placed in the middle, between 3 and 4.

Because men were evaluated on potential rather than performance, they were also given projects with a greater potential. This resulted in higher points when they succeeded. Women never really got the chance to show their full capabilities, since their potential was never discussed and since they therefore never got to be a part of the more dynamic, more difficult projects.

By 2011-2012, the overall picture was clear. It was in many ways a major setback for the company’s internal image. Evaluation, examination and measurements are natural parts of a consulting firm. It is obvious that they should be done objectively. They now had to face facts that showed that everything but objectivity had decided how they manage projects and HR.

“Saying that evaluations are subjective is like cursing in church. We always strive to be objective in our evaluations”, says Camilla Rundberg.

At the same time, nobody should be surprised. The organization is made up by human beings, and human beings think and feel, they are subjective.

What the company did was to admit this – and initiate measures to solve the problems.

They did however not do anything revolutionary; they did small efforts where negative things had been identified. For example, they created guidelines for how employees should be presented in individual performance meetings. The same bullet points are used while evaluating all employees – nothing else. Another countermeasure is a specialist in all evaluation situations: where an employee is given the role of a gender advisor, focusing specifically on the diversity perspective. All top managers have been trained in how to assume this role.

“We make sure that women are not solely given roles they are comfortable with, because then they are not challenged hard enough. Men are often hungry and take more space, we must be aware of the fact that this is a male behavior”, Carl-Peter Thorwid said and stresses that the gender-stereotypical behavior is also gets stronger through peer pressure.

“Men think that they have to show themselves. Women think they are expected to hold back”.

They also stick to these requirements when it comes to hiring new employees: there should always be as many men as women to the final phase, the women should be searched for where women can be found, there should be a high level of transparency in presenting the progress to employees, repeated training, and observation of one’s own behavior.

In 2013 they once again timed the recruitment meetings. The difference was now negligible. The evaluations of the employees have also changed:

When the company in 2010 ranked its top-30 list, 30 percent of the men and 22 percent of the women were top ranked. In 2013, 26 percent of the men and 29 percent of the women were top performers.

“It is now a fact that more women than men reach the top. This is because we have given the women roles where they have the possibilities of reaching the best grades”, Carl-Peter Thorwid said.

This is also the case when it comes to promotions:

In 2010, 26 percent of the men were promoted but only 19 percent of the women. In 2013, 14 percent of the men and 16 percent of the women saw themselves being promoted.

“This is one of our most important implementations”, he said.

Carl-Peter Thorwid and Camilla Rundberg are proud of their achievements; to have dared to question the structure within the company and changed its culture. The numbers are speaking for themselves, but Camilla Rundberg also sees additional proof supporting the progress. One was when a male employee told her that he couldn’t laugh at “those” (sexist, editor’s note) jokes anymore: “I can’t even do it with a client, for the client’s sake”.

“Then we have really succeeded with shifting the values”, Camilla Rundberg said.

And this is also positive from a business perspective.

“We have also, without doubt, won new business deals thanks to increased diversity. We won a multi-million dollar deal this fall where they explicitly said that it was due to our diversified team”, Carl-Peter Thorwid said, and further added that the deal was about running the business function of a large company.

But they aren’t done yet, he stresses. With a staff turnover of 15 percent one can never relax.

“But we have begun the change process and are now done with the fundamentals.”

And the change process has been recognized at a global level within Accenture:: last fall, Accenture Sweden won the Accenture group’s Global Diversity & Inclusion Award.

In Sweden they have 950 employees. Across the globe, they have 289,000 in 200 cities in 56 countries. The ripples on the water have great potential.