

# An Ethical Company

**An Interview with Brian Little,  
Head of Human Resources, Zurich North America**

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Brian Little joined Zurich in August 2009. Previously, he worked at HSBC Bank as the Senior Vice President of Corporate Human Resources. He spent time at Ameritech as Director of Leadership Development and as Manager of Organizational Learning. He also worked for Amoco Production Company as a Senior Human Resources Consultant. Little has experience as an external human resource consultant working with dozens of companies on performance improvement, team-building, and executive coaching, both domestic and abroad. Little is the Vice President and former Treasurer for the Oakton College Foundation. He has a master's degree from Illinois State University in Communication with a concentration on Organization Development.*



Brian Little

## **How has the HR role evolved over the years at Zurich?**

Years ago, Human Resources was just beginning to move from being administrative to strategic. This is when assessments were starting to be used to evaluate competencies to try to get people in the right roles.

Today, technology does much of the administrative work more quickly, so that has freed up the executive HR consultant to focus on how to improve business operating processes and the business's overall profit. The skills have changed as a result.

## **Is choosing the talent today as much about culture fit as expertise?**

We've been very clear about who we are and what we do and how we do it, and this is important because it attracts the right people. We have a great brand, so people come to us for opportunities. Finding candidates with a shared mindset is really important.

We're a great organization from a teaching perspective. We can take bright people from all walks of life and train them, particularly those who have a good foundation in business and operations, and who understand how to get work done.

We also have a military program that focuses on hiring veterans because we know they have many valuable skills that translate effectively to our business.

## **How critical is it that the workforce mirrors the diversity of your customer base?**

It's critical that we understand our customers well. We have a clear strategy about what we're trying to do. We want to make sure we attract and

retain the very best talent and that hirings are not based on gender, ethnicity, or age. It comes down to making sure we have the right people in the right roles.

Certainly the diversity of our customers is varied and we need to understand their needs and contribute to their overall success.

## **Is inclusion the next step from diversity?**

Diversity is recognizing the different dimensions of a person. We embrace these differences at Zurich – gender, age, race, physical ability, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

Inclusion is making sure employees feel valued and empowered at Zurich. We drive inclusion through culture that empowers our employees to connect.

## **Are opportunities available for women to grow into senior leadership roles?**

At Zurich, we have many women in top roles who are examples that success is possible for women in our industry, especially at Zurich.

We support this by making sure people have individual development plans in place, supportive leadership, and experience relative to advancing their careers.

We design our human resource policies and practices to help a broad range of people. We have to make sure they're comprehensive and available to those who need them. By doing that, we see success not only with women but also with men who have needs that might not have been addressed in the past, like single parenting, for example.

As a result, you see gains in productivity and also in being an attractive company where people want to work.

## **How do you focus the investment that Zurich makes in training its people?**

We are committed to filling our mid-level professional roles and our managerial roles internally whenever possible, and making sure we have the talent pool in place to fill those key roles. We measure this every month to see how we're progressing.

We train those individuals by offering them individual development plans. We put specific training in place for their particular function as well as general training to make sure they have the necessary business skills in place to continue to grow.

We also support external development through conferences and association memberships, and we support people who want to continue their education.

## **How critical is it to track elements such as diversity or employee engagement?**

To become a high-performing company, we have put several measures in place to ensure we're still focused on our goals.

On the people side, we're clear about measuring development plans, analyzing how they're being utilized, and noting when people get promoted to another job opportunity, which is really important to them.

## **How critical is the emphasis that Zurich places on corporate responsibility and community engagement?**

It's very important, and the next generation is looking for it. We have always had the goal of being solid community partners. We want to make sure we provide opportunities for all of our employees to be part of organized community efforts. Our Global Community Week gives us the opportunity to ensure that all of our employees understand how they can connect with that external effort.

As a result, we have succeeded in attracting the next generation, as well as retaining current employees.

## **What excited you about joining Zurich when the opportunity presented itself?**

First and foremost, it is an ethical company. We do our best every day to treat people fairly and equitably. We do a great job of supporting managers and employees who work collectively in a positive way.

We expect people to perform and to work collaboratively as teammates. We value relationships internally. In my role, this provides an attractive value proposition.

## **Do we need to look at the workforce differently today? Are we properly preparing the next generation for the jobs of tomorrow?**

When the employment market was very tight and the selection of candidates was different than it is today, we didn't invest enough as a country and as an industry to ensure that people understood the value in acquiring the skills they needed to be productive in today's workforce.

At Zurich, we regularly attract highly talented people with great skills, but there are still those who have the potential to be part of this great business of insurance if we can spend more time encouraging them.

We have a college hiring program that helps students learn the insurance business from the ground up. We also reach out to our various communities to make sure we can bring people into roles where we can teach them the business and help them work into bigger opportunities. ●