

EOA Regional Networking Event Hosted by John Lewis Partners

Milton Keynes Distribution Centre, Magna Park, MP1

Tuesday 19th June 2018

Attendees – Heather & Tom

Review by Heather Cooper-Harris

This event was hosted at the John Lewis distribution centre in Milton Keynes. Milton Keynes is not a place I've visited often, but I didn't need to worry about finding the venue. Driving along the A421 you pass a massive building – John Lewis MP3, the next turn off takes you into Magna Park and MP2 & MP1, where the meeting was being hosted.

After being welcomed by a friendly receptionist I was shown to the meeting room, complete with pastries and coffee. Waiting for the other delegates to arrive I spoke to a couple of the John Lewis staff already there. Chatting to Terry (I work in distribution.... turns out he was head of distribution!), he said that they were preparing for a busy period; the John Lewis summer clearance was due to start the next day. He explained some of the challenges around this and the steps they take to ensure that they continue to meet their clients expectations, despite the draw on resources. He told me that a number of 'non distribution centre partners' were being trained that day as 'helping hands', where partners are trained in roles in addition to their own, to help out during busy periods. One of those being trained that day was the corporate finance director. The distribution staff themselves are flexible and multi skilled, enabling the resource to be agile when they are 'up against it', and so that partners can move around within the team so that a job does not become mundane.

After coffee, networking, and introductions between those on each table, the day started with a presentation by Terry himself, focusing on the challenges of supply chain management as an employee owned business, the benefits (partners going over and above what might be expected of them, holding other partners to account, the team pulling together to help with resilience during hard times), and the challenges of competing against other retailers, ensuring clients were not disappointed, and upholding the principles of the Partnership within an ever changing environment. John Lewis still do more business via than their stores than online, just! The online environment, itself, relatively young in the long history of John Lewis, is constantly changing; requirement for next day delivery, spikes in demand such as Black Friday, the Christmas and summer clearance sales. The company needs to ensure that they keep up to date with new demands, whilst maintaining their core values of customer service.

Terry also covered some of the additional benefits that John Lewis have introduced for its partners, including a language school for those whose first language isn't English (which helps with efficiency and accuracy), training pods, an internal academy, a three month induction/probation period to ensure that a new partner understands their role as an employee owner, and is suitable to be a partner in the business.

What was obvious from the presentation, and from the contribution from one of the distribution team managers, was just how much they cared. They cared about the company's reputation and history, they cared about the business, they cared about their fellow partners, they cared how decisions would affect the Partnership, the clients, and the partners themselves. This was followed by an enthusiastic Q&A session. I'll end this section with one line which stuck with me

"We only have a differential if we are on our game all the time, every day, every hour, every partner"

This was followed by an interesting presentation on the voice of the employee owner; how John Lewis get feedback from their 80,000+ partners, the various channels, including Partner Voice, where ideas are collected by a representative of a department or shift, the Network Council, where members are voted by the Partners, and the John Lewis Council. There is also an internal magazine including a letters page; any letter submitted must be replied to within 21 days, an intranet, and internal messaging system, regular 'holding to account' sessions, and leadership Q&A sessions, an annual census, quarterly planned, and ad hoc surveys to gather information, and to measure performance, with feedback on progress 'you said, we did...'.

The biggest take away from this session was that communication is a challenge in all environments, Why, within an EOA company, its important not only to ask for ideas, and actively engage with partners to craft solutions, but also to listen and hear what is being said, whether it's a theme or one lone voice with an excellent idea.

Over a delicious lunch (supplied by Waitrose) there were some animated discussions/networking. Topics of conversation ranging from Trustee appointment, responsibilities, maintaining company ethos in a growing/new workforce, celebrating and promoting Employee ownership, the role and responsibilities of the Employee Owner, and employee engagement (it seems that lots of companies eat lots of cake!)

After lunch there was an EOA update, and the things the EOA have been working on. We had a discussion inter table about how we were planning to celebrate EO day (which ranged from all in/way out company events, to lethargy, ie nothing (I hope we shamed this company into doing something!!). The annual EOA conference is open for booking, entry for the awards closes 24th July, and there was a contribution from last years EO company of the year, and what winning the award had meant to them.

We finished the meeting with a breakout session – how we use employee ownership internally & externally. Delegates split into two groups; the External group covered topics such as marketing, security for clients & customers, charitable & social responsibility. The internal group covered the roles & responsibilities of being a partner, as well as the benefits. Understanding that being an Employee owner isn't for everyone (John Lewis estimated that they had a 70-75% success rate). How being an EOA company changed the need for sharing information and knowledge, and ensuring that the heritage, principles and ethos of the company is maintained by telling stories and having experienced representation in each team, as well as welcoming new ideas.

That was the end of an informative and enjoyable meeting. Those who wanted to were offered a tour of the distribution centre to bring to life some of the processes, challenges and solutions, and to see some of the steps taken to enhance partner happiness and wellbeing that have been adopted. It was great to see the pride that the partners took in showing us what they did, and in seeing a calm, and very clean distribution centre working. This was totally fascinating – who knew what happened when you selected a few things for your shopping basket and hit submit!

As others have said before, these sessions are an opportunity to discuss with other employee owners the benefits and challenges of being an employee owner, to share ideas and hear how other companies have solved problems, all in a friendly, open and welcoming environment.