

When Ralf met Dani ... Flexibility is the word!

"Ralf Adam is part of our Business Travel Advantage team in Amsterdam. Having come from an in-house mobility role, Ralf understands what it's like to be both providing and receiving mobility support! Outside of the office, Ralf likes to "turn up the heat"he is very particular about how his firewood is chopped and stored throughout the Winter months. He also enjoys running, golfing and skiing."



Hi Dani, thanks so much for taking the time to speak to us today. Can you tell us a little about yourself and what your priorities have been for the last two years?

Well, I am very lucky to have been with Unilever for nearly 21 years. I am part of the People Experience team covering Latin America although over the last couple of years that role evolved to include leading on a Posted Worker Directive implementation project for our Global Business Travel population! The Pandemic meant changes in many peoples' roles and with so many employees out of the office, my duties changed, almost overnight. It didn't make sense for me to continue with the role I previously worked on, so we took the opportunity to review our vendor activity and I took on the PMO role for the PWD implementation project. It was a new area for me to develop my skills and knowledge in, and to meet new colleagues within Unilever and at Deloitte. I have really enjoyed being part of the team, I learnt a lot and I had fun! Particularly at this time when there are real changes in the way that we, as an organisation, operate.

In this second interview, we've moved literally halfway across the world to bring a perspective from Brazil. After a varied career with Unilever, **Dani Silva** is now part of the People Experience team covering Latin America. She gave us her insight into how mobility, and people movement in general, has become more considered at Unilever and how a people-centric organisation is putting their people at the heart of the future of work debate.



A portfolio career often applies to people who move role, but you have managed to do that within one organisation! Can you tell us a little about how you came to your current role?

I'll try to condense 20 years into a couple of sentences! My background was originally in our international business, and I developed a particular expertise in our procurement department, working on our supply chain. This was a great role as I focussed on innovative, new products. So, for example, if a new ice cream was being brought to market, I was embedded in the team supporting the development and stabilisation of the supply chain right up to product launch.

As with many things in life, huge changes are often a time of positive change. When I came back from maternity leave, connections I had made in the company offered me the chance to change role and join the People Experience part of the business. I was invited to join a new team supporting all aspects of the way Unilever people work. My PWD implementation project role was very different and challenging but one where I was able to use my knowledge of Unilever – the way we operate and my project management skills. As I said, it really was a fantastic experience

The pandemic brought a lot of challenges to us all. Can you tell us what the biggest professional challenge that came from the pandemic and aftermath was for you and for your role in Unilever?

When you ask about professional challenges and the pandemic, what jumps to mind is "people", that is the heart of the issue. It's about the personal element, the way we work. My team's full focus is on the people experience and particularly on the way our approach to work has to adapt. What hybrid working means for Unilever and how we best deliver that for our people.

At a basic level, we need to ensure that our people (from different departments, and different offices) can still connect effectively together. Our offices and the way we use them are a key component for that. We want and need people to enjoy coming into the office and collaborating. This should be the start of everything we do. We have to help build this connectivity.

Like lots of global organisations, the way we work in this region has changed dramatically. We were used to lots of travel and we had a very large office base. Now, we see that the demand has changed. Our people are not returning to the office as much as we thought they would, and we are certainly not seeing the same level of travel. We have proven that they are alternative ways to connect. For some people this is about work balance, for others is about sustainability but the result is that we need to use our offices differently. We have a different office format now and it's very well structured to help people connect virtually. This was a huge project for us. It's working. People are starting to return to the office – not to the level we expected but they are coming back.

So what does the business travel culture look like at the moment?

When travel began to open up, those who had to travel did, but levels are much lower than we are used to seeing. Part of our investment in our offices was to improve our IT connectivity offering so that people can now connect more easily. We're not expecting levels to return to pre-pandemic levels soon. We think that people are being much more deliberate and thoughtful about the things that they will – and won't – travel for.

In terms of our business processes, there have been some changes, like my PWD workstream. Despite the drop in travel volumes, we are very committed to ensuring that Unilever and its employees are compliant, so we have built a process that in very simple terms that feeds travel booking data into Deloitte's PWD engine to assess the requirements and produce notifications for the employees who need them. It's been a complicated project, not least because we changed travel provider mid project! But what is great is that after such a huge period of uncertainty with travel bans and ever-changing travel restrictions, our processes are working well for those who need to travel and that despite some real challenges with the PWD project we are now back on track to go live in the next few months.

So we are interested in your advice to mobility professionals, trying to address the current environment?

Flexibility is the word. This has to underpin everything you offer. We can no longer think in terms of just one way to do things. The approach must be employee led. Each employee has their own priorities and their own ways of working. As employers, the challenge to us is to let employees manage their own work life approach – much better than setting rigid rules.

Even with a great employer like Unilever, we've seen churn in our market and our talent team are always very busy. Creating a culture with flexibility built in is a critical component of our talent agenda. We're in an environment where we need a diverse employee base to compete and flexibility has to be there to help us attract and retain the right people.

Get in touch

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