

employer branding

## case study: employer branding at microsoft.

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Founded in 1975, Microsoft is a veteran in the fast-moving world of technology, facing fierce competition for talent from not only the likes of Apple, Google and Facebook, but also a myriad of nimble start-ups and challenger businesses. Yet Microsoft is a business that's constantly reinventing itself, enabling it to stay fresh and relevant in an industry that in the words of its CEO, Satya Nadella, "doesn't respect tradition – it only respects innovation." According to Chuck Edward, Head of Global Talent Acquisition, "Microsoft's continuing appeal to people who want to shape the future stems from our ability to combine the buzz of a start-up with opportunities to bring ideas and innovations onto the global stage." And it's certainly a winning formula – Microsoft is the company for which both US and global participants in the Randstad Award Survey would most like to work. Yet as Mr Edward says, "there's no let-up in a highly competitive technology labor market. We have to bring our 'A' game every day." So how does Microsoft stay on top?

Early on, Bill Gates saw an opportunity to make Microsoft the main gateway to the worldwide web. His vision was followed up with swift and decisive execution as the company sought to take the initiative and prevent competitors from moving in ahead. It's this vision, tenacity and, ultimately, the ability to organize and execute that has enabled Microsoft to thrive and survive long after most of its original peers have fallen by the wayside.

Now Microsoft is taking another big leap as it seeks to empower people to be more productive in what Satya Nadella, who took over as CEO in 2014, describes as a "mobile-first and cloud-first world".

"In a market that never stands still, we want people who embrace growth, people who are eager to learn rather than thinking they know it all," says Chuck Edward. He believes that the move to a cloud-first world is changing the relationship with customers and making the need for people who are both curious and able to think on their feet even more pressing. "Before customers would buy an application or piece of software, and then the engagement fell off. But cloud systems create ongoing engagement, marked by the continual need for feedback, update and renewal," says Mr Edward. "It's no longer about long development cycles and big product launches. We need people who can keep listening, analyzing and responding all the time. These fast-paced demands have created a renewed vibrancy in how we work. People have to keep thinking and be more open to making mistakes as they present great opportunities to learn."

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### challenging the challengers

This vibe of a challenger is something Mr Edward is very keen to promote. "We want people to know that we're changing, and that we're still curious," he says. While he recognizes the appeal of a start-up, he believes that Microsoft has more to offer. "People want the impact and relevance that comes from being in something new, being at the cutting edge. They often think that in comparison to a start-up, a corporation like ours is going to be slow and bureaucratic. But we've been able to create a similarly innovative and fast-moving environment by encouraging people to come together in small, nimble work groups that have the energy and interaction of a

start-up,” he says. “And the big advantage of our business over a start-up is that we can launch innovations in a global market, at massive scale, which allows innovators to make a real and immediate impact. There is also the point that if you work for a small organization and want a change you have to switch employers, but here you can go to another team. Our people like the fact that we have a wealth of knowledge and experience that young people coming into the industry can learn from, not just from a technical perspective, but how to commercialize ideas and innovations.”

So how does Microsoft create that challenger vibe and cut through all the red tape that can oftentimes slow down innovation and decision making in large corporations? It’s in part how the business is structured. “We prefer a flat organization as that keeps us close to the marketplace and enhances our listening systems,” says Mr Edward. He believes that the real key is culture. “We’re determined to create an environment that encourages people to be curious, to take risks, to talk openly about what might have gone wrong as that creates the insight that’s going to help us get it right in the long run,” he says.

### workshop of ideas

This ambition to push boundaries is bolstered by opportunities to come together in ad hoc teams to develop experimental projects. Examples include the Microsoft Garage initiative, which aims to ‘find the next thing you can’t live without’. This problem-solving drive stretches to social responsibility and charitable initiatives through to collaborative hackathons that promote the spirit of innovation, tools now being made available to colleges and community groups. “We see these initiatives as more than just corporate social responsibility. They help to keep people engaged and motivated. They also encourage greater collaboration and the development of lasting relationships and partnerships around our worldwide group,” says Mr Edward.

### local and global

As an industry, technology tends to operate in clusters and has given renewed impetus to the campus model. How much does Mr Edward feel that the location and physical environment of Microsoft’s headquarters in Redmond, Washington, contribute to its commercial success and appeal to talent?

“We’ve been able to create an ecosystem of technology and innovation here in Redmond. The town has become a magnet for talent, drawing people from around the world. A lot of smaller technology businesses have also set up here. In a marketplace in which partnerships are more important than ever and in which we need to buy and borrow as well as build talent, this local ecosystem and the concentration of talent and expertise that comes with it is very valuable to us. However, that can cut both ways as people move quite a lot within this industry,” he says. The Microsoft campus in Redmond is only part of a hugely diverse global business. “I spend as much time interacting with my colleagues in Asia, Africa, Europe and Australia as people here in Redmond and I think that international reach and exchange of ideas gives us the best of both worlds, local and global,” Mr Edward says.

### clean sweep

Whatever Microsoft is doing to attract talent, it works. Microsoft is not only the company for which people around the world most want to work according to the 2015 Randstad Award Survey, it is also rated number one across all individual categories from salary and benefits to training, job content and career progression, through to work-life balance and pleasant working atmosphere. Mr Edward shares this enthusiasm. “After 12 years with Microsoft, I still get a buzz from coming into work. Working with smart, passionate and motivated people is really enjoyable, it inspires me to keep learning, to always want to do better,” he says.

What can other mature businesses learn from Microsoft in terms of developing an enduring appeal to talent when newcomers to the industry are snapping at their heels? Microsoft recognizes that it has to be fast as well as big to survive and thrive. In turn, talented developers and innovators don’t want to be cogs in the machine. The secret of Microsoft’s success is a culture that embraces transformation as an opportunity for each new generation to prove itself the equal of the pioneers who have gone before. Employees know that they will have the chance to work on more new projects and try more new things than at other comparable companies, large or small, new or

established. They know that they have leadership who is prepared to challenge expectations and strike out in new directions. This hunger for the new keeps Microsoft fresh, employees motivated and talent wanting to join.

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