

HRGIG 7

Breaking the silos

The seventh annual HR GIG conference by StreetHR took place just over the summer. It brought together HR and C-suite professionals to discuss the theme 'Breaking the Silos' from different perspectives. Distinguished speakers from various disciplines came together to share their thoughts and experiences on silos in the workplace. These included how we can mitigate the development of silos, and what to do when lack of communication affects productivity and morale and the often-ignored effects of silos on mental health of the employees and leaders.

The subject was tackled through opening keynotes by Joseph Farrugia - Director StreetHR, Yasmin De Giorgio - CEO Shireburn Software - and Martin Hignett - Managing Director Trelleborg. These were followed by a panel discussion moderated by Marisa Xuereb - President of The Malta Chamber - with the participation of Christina Galea - CEO Costa Coffee Malta, Stephania Dimech Sant - CEO Richmond Foundation, Joshua Zammit - Consultant Novargo Ltd - and Jaques Barnard - Business Development Manager Cleverbit Software. The message of breaking down silos was driven home through an interactive activity by Outdoor Living Malta followed, by networking with live music by Wayne's World. Silos hurt our company but there is a lot that HR and C-suite professionals can do to rise above them.

Breaking the Silos

Why silos? Joseph Farrugia explained that silos have become a much greater concern for the working world recently, partially due to the ongoing shift in work patterns and partially as a holdover from previous years. He presented a range of different silos from departmental type of silos (vertical) to hierarchical (horizontal) coupled with case studies and data representing the effect of silos amongst different levels of management. Employees around the world have been through a lot, and while some of them have entirely gone remote or switched to hybrid working, the problem of silos not only persisted but at times became exasperated.

Silos left unchecked can leave organisations stuck where they are, battling themselves instead of moving forward and progressing into greater productivity. Eliminating those silos that keep communication at a standstill will eventually lead to shared values, vision, and a direction that the entire company can support.

However, determining when, and how bad, those silos are is a different matter. It is unfortunate that some companies just cannot tell when there are silos, or how to deal with them once they see the evidence otherwise. However, research shows us that in companies where silos are more pronounced teams lack harmony and productivity.

Communication and Silos

A fundamental part of breaking down silos is creating good communication.

Yasmin de Giorgio explained that the importance of good communication is common knowledge, but the practice of good communication is far less common. Her theory is that humans have two modes: one is isolation, and the other is open engagement, and that silos occur when there is isolation within the organisation. This is a state which is not easy to counter, and communication is a skill that takes time to perfect. She highlighted that “we need to be mentally active, rather than passive, and we need to be aware of what we’re doing to confront the facts that rise from that awareness.”

Martin Hignett, a 32-year-veteran of Trelleborg, agreed with Yasmin and had this to add: it’s easy to have good communication at the beginning, but as the company gets larger and larger, you need to implement better communication strategies to prevent the company vision getting lost or distorted along the way with growth.

Culture and Silos

However, it’s not all communication woes.

Joshua Zammit discussed that silos can arise through the company’s own culture. One of these factors is the differences between countries, which bigger organisations must contend with. Country cultural differences can heavily influence the company culture on a larger scale, which means that the way we approach company culture must be flexible, and so does communication.

Christina Galea had a similar understanding. In her own words, she says, “in my view, the greatest strength for a successful business is entirely about interpersonal skills. Ultimately, success is going to come from your relationships with your team, business partners, shareholders, landlords, suppliers, and so on. For me, I approach all these relationships with four values: empathy, respect, trust, and loyalty.” Those four values arise through the established culture - which also includes asking difficult questions and having the courage to act upon difficult facts.

Mental Health and Silos

Stefania Dimech Sant pointed out another facet that could lead to silos - the mental health and well-being of employees both at management level and below. CEOs and section leaders are the role models for the rest of the department, and their mood and behaviour can very much influence the way a company performs. The vulnerabilities inherent in both roles shouldn't be hidden but spoken of.

As she points out, "silos affect mental health: they create mistrust, fear, a sense of unhealthy competition and lack of security, and that is where pressure builds up and people start to feel stressed." To that end, the organisation must support the mental well-being of employees no matter at what level they are.

Christina adds, "one of the positive things that came out of COVID was a huge understanding of addressing individual challenges collectively, which also allows for a removal of blame culture, and can really help the overall culture of a company."

People want to be happy and to belong in their workplace. To do that, messages need to be communicated effectively. Companies which respect their employees perform better.

Technology and Silos

If not used correctly, technology that was intended to aid communication can create silos, according to Jaques Barnard. His take was that "we research and try to find solutions to manage different departments, and we buy those solutions and implement them, but not one solution gives you everything you need - and therefore you create silos because not all departments will have access to the same data."

The first technology related step to combatting silos is therefore to connect all those systems and share the data among our employees as openly as possible. That will allow us to use the rest of the technology to our advantage rather than to a detriment.

Using data to our advantage helps us make decisions that can be bolstered by facts, and which in turn create easier conversations, and further remove silos.

Conclusion

As Joshua points out, there can never be too much communication. “To overcome issues, we need to be respectful, clear, and communicate to an audience that understands the way we are speaking.”

Silos are a real challenge that most of us face at some point. They are an inevitable side effect of lacking communication, toxic work cultures, poor mental health, and misuse of technology. However, those same elements are key to breaking the silos: building healthy work cultures, being mindful of mental health and exploring the opportunities which technology offers and above all, open and respectful communication.

Fundamental, however, is the role of strategic HR and the level of collaboration between HR professionals, CEOs, and decision makers in working together not only to mitigate the effects of silos on organisations but also to take their business to next levels of performance as a result of their actions.

The next edition of **NRGIG 8** is taking place on
1st September 2023.
For bookings please [click here](#).