

MANAGING CULTURE IN TIMES OF GROWTH

BY **Filipa Larangeira** Head of People & Culture at Uniplaces

Uniplaces was started in 2011 by three former international students who met whilst studying at university. Their idea was to help other students going abroad to find trusted accommodation, avoiding the issues they faced themselves. This was how Ben Grech (UK), Miguel Amaro (Portugal) and Mariano Kostelec (Argentina) created Uniplaces, at age 23.

The company grew and went through three investments. The latest one, in October 2015, was of 22M Euros (Series A) – this was an important milestone in the company's history.

But big investments also mean setting the bar higher and scaling the teams to cope with new targets, and between September 2014 and March 2016, Uniplaces went from 40 to 140 employees.

Company culture and DNA

When I joined Uniplaces in October 2015, business strategy had been completely redefined. Critical organisational adjustment needed to be assessed. From a people management point of view, recruitment and company culture became clear strategic focuses whilst growing at the speed of light.

Company culture is a set of common traits that unite a group, standards that inspire their individual behaviours, towards each other and customers as well. .

As startups grow so fast, it's normal for culture to change or mutate quite often, some of which happens organically and some based on actual conscious decisions. It's just like a human being going through childhood, adolescence and adulthood. As the business grows and its challenges evolve, you have to keep upgrading the pillars that support that culture.



PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:
 Marketing team meeting
 Think tanks at the office
 Inside sales team members
 Lower ground floor



"At Uniplaces, this sensitive but critical process of aligning the company culture with the business goals is mostly done through a soft skills and performance-based recruitment process"



Overall, after joining, it was crucial for me to understand what I call the "company's DNA", the startup's blueprint, created by the input of employees, leaders and the founders' vision. A company's DNA simultaneously results from and impacts recruitment, engagement and the company's performance. From a people management perspective, it is important to make sure people don't feel betrayed by the new culture developing whilst growing fast, always keeping in mind the uniqueness of the company and its original culture.

Holacracy and horizontal leadership

At Uniplaces, this sensitive but critical process of aligning the company culture with the business goals is mostly done through a soft skills and performance-based recruitment process, and by keeping a close and open communication at all levels of the organisation. In that sense, we became almost obsessed about the company's structure and core values that shape our evolution.

Although we don't like labels as they tend to be too limitative, there are a few modern jargons that could describe the way we manage our culture, employees and recruitment processes. We rely on values close to a holacracy model and a flat, decentralized internal network (similar to the "starfish model"), by which everyone is responsible for keeping themselves and everyone else on track, and where upper management leads by example



and not by coercion. This means that anyone can do anything, because knowledge and power are distributed and spread throughout the company.

This considerable degree of autonomy and empowerment enables every employee to unlock their full potential and explore new fields that go beyond their normal job scopes. Furthermore, this type of structure allows us to be highly flexible and to evolve according to our business needs.

A recent example is the Uniplaces Trainees Academy program that is being developed by a group of people from different teams (including BizOps, Sales and HR) with the project owner being somebody outside of the HR team.

Holacracy has been quite a trendy topic within the HR industry in the last few years probably because of this new generation of employees – Millennials or Generation Y – who are pushing for a change of former business management paradigms, mostly directive and pyramidal. Millennials challenge deeply established models and their motivations are mostly connected to purpose and how they can directly contribute to business. This is what we've been experiencing at Uniplaces and we channel it as a source of inspiration to design and implement groundbreaking organisational solutions.

The importance of recruitment

A fast growing startup is not only looking for talented people, but also for proactive, highly adaptable people who can fit such an holacratic culture. They need to be self-motivated and always looking for the bright side of life. In a company like Uniplaces, challenges can arise from the fact that, for example, our employees are quite young, which is crucial to understand our target audience: students.

A lot of Uniplacers are in their early to mid-twenties, and in their first jobs. They don't always realise how open and rich the company culture is because they do not have anything to compare it with.

That's why our main concern is to reach a fine balance between experienced and junior people that can bring us a rich and diverse assortment of perspectives.

Furthermore, there are also other relevant aspects to address when recruiting from such different cultural backgrounds - we can find people from 19 nationalities working together - and gender parity. In a multinational product-driven company where women represent 60% of our users and having customers spread all over the globe, diversity is key for our business' success.

That's the reason why our recruitment processes are collective and the decision to hire relies on the agreement between a group of people that are usually around five from different teams/ backgrounds.



"To support a holacratic, diverse and open communication culture, we also constantly encourage work-life balance as we fully know that fast growing startups demand a lot of efforts and energy from all employees"



PHOTOS CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Uniplaces founders working in the middle of the open space
Net detail on the upper ground floor
New office opening party in March 2016

What creates a stimulating company culture

To support this holacratic, diverse and open communication culture, we also constantly encourage work-life balance as we fully know that fast growing startups demand a lot of effort and energy from all employees.

We have office perks and company events that are designed to boost the general mood such as an in-house gym with regular sports classes, weekly massages, table tennis tournaments, Speakers Series (sessions where we have inspiring guests telling our employees about their inspiring business experiences), the Company Retreat once a year (an off-site weekend with all employees), free health check-ups, pizza lunches and quarterly surprise events.

I believe that these cultural foundations explain our low turnover rates and the incredible working environment that is perceivable to everyone that visits our office.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Filipa Larangeira has a Master in Law and in Business Management. She is VP of People at Uniplaces, the 3rd tech startup she has worked for (previously Head of HR at Miniclip and Vision-box). She has a passion for tech, fast-paced and multicultural environments as they allow her to create unique, rich and tailored made people management solutions. Filipa's main focuses are culture, talent and organisational development as key pillars of any company

