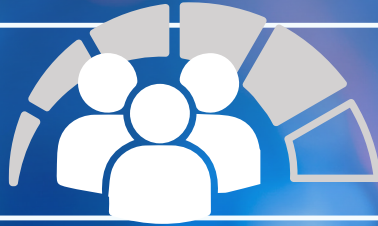




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PEOPLE AND PERFORMANCE SERIES

# ENGINEERING A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Spirax Group specialises in thermal energy management and fluid technology, providing solutions to help customers improve the efficiency, safety and sustainability of their industrial processes. Group HR Director **Jim Devine** sits down with Criticaleye's Senior Editor, **Bridgette Hall**, to talk about how the performance of the business is what propels HR





Founded initially as Sanders, Rehders & Co back in 1888, the company now known as Spirax Group began by importing thermostatic steam traps to revolutionise industrial energy use. Fast forward to today and the company has an international presence, boasting an expansive portfolio of solutions that cater to industries as diverse as pharmaceuticals, food and beverage and oil and gas. Headquartered in the UK, it operates in 66 countries, with a network of 37 manufacturing sites and over 10,000 employees.

In 2023, the FTSE 100 company reported over £1.6 billion of revenue. Key divisions such as steam specialities, electric thermal solutions and fluid technology solutions continue to drive growth by addressing critical industry challenges, from decarbonisation to energy efficiency.

**Jim Devine** has been the Group Human Resources Director at Spirax Group since 2016. Prior to this role, he served as Group HR Director at Chemring Group and held senior HR positions at Centrica, British Gas and Ford Motor Company. Throughout his career, **Jim** has focused on transforming HR functions and promoting employee engagement as a key enabler of corporate strategy. In this interview, he tells Criticaleye about the expanding role of the CPO, how sharing is integral to his success as a leader, and what mindsets and attitudes will shape future leadership.

**BH: As Group HR Director at Spirax, what are your primary responsibilities? How would you differentiate between the 'day-to-day' and the more strategic aspects of your role?**

**JD:** There's no such thing as a subject that's either strategic or tactical—one

*“There's no such thing as a subject that's either strategic or tactical—one is not more important than the other. They're all equally important at the right time”*

is not more important than the other. They're all equally important at the right time. I don't know a magic answer as to the balance, but some day-to-day things are of massive strategic importance because the weak link in strategy is when it's not implemented.

I work in a Plc and the Board agenda is definitely bigger than it was. You've got that Board audience. You've also got your functional leadership audience, which everyone in HR thinks is what you spend all your time doing when the reality is you spend about 15 percent of your time on it. Thirdly, you're a high-end HR business partner to your exec committee and your boss. And those are the three dimensions of the job for me. You know, those subjects are neither tactical nor strategic. And if you work closely with the CEO, they flip from the micro to the macro in consecutive sentences. You just need to recognise that.

**BH: How do you measure HR's impact on business performance and which metrics do you prioritise?**

**JD:** Ultimately, the only metrics that matter are the key ones for the business. If the HR metrics are good, but the company's not doing well, it doesn't matter. We haven't made a commitment to shareholders that attrition is [reduced]. That's a pointless conversation. There are only business metrics. Ultimately, you've got to have the right level of responsibility for your stakeholders. It is broader than the share price, of course. As a bigger Plc, responsible capitalism is one of the biggest shifts I've seen in the last five years. However, the first thing is that you have the same business metrics as everyone else in the organisation.

**BH: How has the role of the Chief People Officer changed over the past decade?**

**JD:** The Plc Board agenda on people is much more holistic and deeper – unsurprisingly – than it used to be. Now, it's linked to responsible capitalism and sustainability. And then, within that, people and culture, and asking ourselves: 'Are we operating responsibly for a company like this?' For example, that flows through to how we treat people or approach pay raises globally.

There are four Board Committees at Spirax—three of which are people-focused. The Remuneration and Nomination committees are standard, but we also have a 'Colleague Engagement Committee' with a nominated Non-executive Director chairing it who has open focus groups >



with a member of my team at least once a month. So, I think [the role of the CPO] has shifted and the people in the organisation are more prominent, for all sorts of reasons, giving HR a platform should it choose to take it.

**BH: How has your leadership style evolved over your career? How have you adapted to get the best out of your team?**

**JD:** Earlier in my career, I thought that if I knew more and that I could work harder than everyone else, I could do more. And if there's a point in your career where you transition out of being an individual contributor, where you can't do that anymore.

I had to get my head around the fact that I was accountable for things I couldn't control. You need to make

peace with that; otherwise, you'll blow up. So, if you accept that, then you think about, well, how do you mitigate that? And the only way you mitigate that is by the people you will attract. The best people only follow better people. If they don't think they're going to learn from me, or I'm going to share stuff, or I genuinely want them to get on, then that's going to be a constraint on who I can attract to work for me. So, that's something I'm more aware of.

Finally, permitting yourself to ... some white space. And the things that come from that. It's easier said than done, but sometimes that white space, and what comes of it, and those incidental conversations that can go from social to business to otherwise, are where some big jumps can be made.

**BH: What advice would you offer someone stepping into their first Group HR role, especially in a global organisation like Spirax?**

**JD:** In a Plc, it's rare to be exposed to the machinery of the Board before getting the job. With my direct reports, I try to expose them to that, to demystify it... If you're working for someone who's an enterprise leader, whether it be in private equity or a Plc, a lot more of their job is externally facing than anyone internally realises.

This may sound glib, but actually just understanding the heartbeat of the business you're in, through the people that run the divisions and what's worrying them, is vital. And then, thinking about what's bothering your direct boss and looking at it from their perspective. It's important to be cognisant of things like that. ■

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Criticleye supports aspiring and current CPOs to accelerate their development as CPOs and become broader enterprise leaders in the C-suite.



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