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Interview

Francisco Belil

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“We have to be capable of investing talent in our business projects”

Francisco Belil, CEO of Siemens in Spain

Innovative approaches to managing talent and the ability to take on risks in difficult times are two key factors identified by Francisco Belil, CEO of Siemens in Spain, for successfully tackling such important challenges as improving productivity and developing talent in Spanish companies.

What is the role currently played by innovation?

Innovation is synonymous with success and growth. At companies such as Siemens it is something that is just part of our DNA. Siemens was born out of innovation and we have been innovating for 162 years, investing around EUR 3,900 million in innovation, research and development every year. This gives us an average of 23 patents a day.

In general terms, we should not see innovation as something limited to the field of technology. I think that innovation should also be present in administration and especially in relation to talent. Innovating talent is something that Siemens does both here in Spain and abroad. We have long-term contracts with many research centres and universities with which we carry out innovation projects across the five continents.

Are companies suffering from a shortage of talent?

I think that there is a lot of talent in all companies but the key is discovering it, knowing where to find it. When we say that “companies are short of talent” perhaps we mean that for certain job descriptions there is a shortage of people who can add value. It is very important for companies to know where talent needs to be assigned, how to find it, how to develop it and, very importantly, how to invest talent in a business project.

In macroeconomic terms, throughout the world there are countries who know how to develop and invest talent, while others have difficulties in this area. For example, India is developing a lot of home-grown talent and is also capable of exporting it. If we look at large institutions that everybody would agree have a lot of talent, such as NASA, we see that a third of the scientists are from India.

So there is definitely talent around. What we all need to do is develop new ways of harnessing and developing it in the right way and investing it in a business project.



How do you identify and retain talent in complex situations like the present one?

Albert Einstein said that "what is rarer, more difficult and more delicate a matter than possessing talent is recognising talented people and committing them to something". In order to achieve this it is important to excite people, for the company to convey enthusiasm and for professionals to be excited by a certain project. It is vital that we enjoy what we do in order to perform satisfactorily. This is as valid in the business world as it is in the world of sports where players who enjoy what they do usually perform better.

It is also important to make the best of individual differences. Each one of us has our own unique characteristics and can contribute a great deal. It is about finding who fits in where so that each person is happy and develops the innate abilities that they may have.

It is always essential to practice what you preach. Any person who is responsible for another must lead by example because this is the easiest way for people to learn, what impacts people the most and what people really perceive. The same is true of families; the example set by parents is worth more than a thousand words and has a greater influence than a thousand images. In Spain we should learn how to take a few more risks and take on various risks. Many companies are afraid of faltering or failing and this stops talent being developed. If a player is afraid of attempting a difficult move because they are scared of failing, if they are too scared to try an overhead kick when they are well placed to take a shot on goal... they will never try and they will never succeed. When children learn to ride a bike they fall off many times. If we are not capable of making mistakes, picking ourselves up and learning, then we will not advance. As a country we need to be capable of taking risks and should look towards countries where this culture is firmly entrenched, such as the US.

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How do we innovate in relation to managing talent?

There are certain recognised techniques in this field, although it must be said that they have not been developed much in recent decades. There are initiatives such as talent banks, round tables, 360 degree analysis... which are well known tools that, although useful, are not enough in my opinion. We need to innovate in the area of managing talent but, unfortunately, Spain does not really excel in innovation. We are improving in management, especially in certain sectors but, generally speaking, we are not exactly one of the most innovative countries in the world.

We are aware that there is a need for action and improvement, which is why we have created a working group with a total of twelve companies to innovate in this important area. We are expecting great success in the future to help us fill the void we have in Spain and to innovate in an area that is vital for the future.

How would you assess the situation of companies in regard to managing talent?

A constructive criticism is that we often try to predict the future by driving while looking through the rear view mirror... which we know does not work and does not get us very far. There are surveys that show that in Spain only 20% of companies are satisfied with how they are able to discover, attract and retain talent. This leads to a series of large-scale disadvantages that affect us as a country: we have a productivity problem which does not just relate to technology but also to talent and HR training.

Statistics are an example. As chairman of the German Chamber of Commerce I have observed that absenteeism rates are far higher in Spain than in Germany and are above the European average. We are also granting early retirement, at great cost, to very valuable people with considerable experience and are sometimes unable to pass down the knowledge of this generation. We do things like forcing quotas in the name of certain groups, instead of giving priority to talent, drive and people's commitment to a project. We need more creative attitudes, especially from people, since at the end of the day we make up the company: companies are what they are and get where they are thanks to the people committed to them and who work there. Therefore we are going to work on this area: we should never see people as just another resource to be manipulated or optimised. It is important to give people the importance that they deserve in a company.

How do you maintain the enthusiasm and commitment of collaborators, especially in difficult times?

It is not easy. The most important thing is to treat people like people, to be open, lead by example and recognise that it is both good and necessary to break the mould. We have to create a better future and we have to do it using the talent of the people that surround us. Every person in every organisation has something to contribute and we have to give each person the chance to add their value. We must make the team aware of the importance of experimentation, of seeing things from a different angle: encourage them to ask "why can we not do this another way?". Even if something appears to work well we still have to ask ourselves if there is another way of doing it.

It is also important for our collaborators to take part in what could be seen as their professional development, that we involve them in their career plan. This used to be done in managers' offices, where decisions were made in relation to how we were going to promote certain people. It is important to involve people, have them participate in their development, as they will be the most affected by it.

In these difficult times communication is more important than ever and we must be capable of speaking openly and honestly and of giving feedback. To this end there are a series of very well known mechanisms. At Siemens we hold high-level meetings where we give the teams the opportunity to express themselves openly, taking what they say very seriously, knowing how to listen, analysing what each person wants to express and trying to change things and enrich decisions with different viewpoints. There are many tools which should be applied better and more than ever in difficult times.

When looking for talent what is it that you most value in a professional?

It is very important for a professional to be fast. In the twenty-first century speed is often the difference between success and failure. They must also get things done and be capable of making things happen: they must be capable of scoring goals. It is not enough to pass the ball around in midfield, you have to know how to put it in the back of the net. On the other hand it is more important than ever to work as a team, be part of a team and contribute. As individuals we are not complete, we lack certain facets... but as a team we can be complete if each person helps the other and provides them with what they are lacking.

It is also important for people to be open and communicate well, just as it is important for teams to have people who think differently. In this regard we can gain a lot from minorities with different experiences, other ethnicities, other cultures, other realities like the lives of disabled people, who have had to make a significant effort to overcome their limits.

A highly valued professional is one who is not scared of being wrong and is able to make a mistake and keep going. Those who have creative leadership skills and, something vital: that they are people. I would rather surround myself with people than professionals. If somebody is a person we can teach them certain technical skills. If they are not, it will be pretty difficult to get anywhere.

In the words of Linus Pauling, a very well known Nobel Prize winner for chemistry, "the best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas". So we encourage our professionals to contribute many ideas as we will undoubtedly be able to use some of them, because one thing is for sure, the only people who do not make mistakes are those who do nothing or who never contribute any ideas.

You have a long career as manager behind you. What keeps you going?

Lots of things. What motivates me the most is commitment. People of my generation who have the good fortune to be working have been "spoiled" by fate. Life has given us many good things so I would like to try and give back some of what this society has given me. And that is an important commitment. Also, I am a father and I would like to leave a better world for my children than the one I received from my parents and grandparents, a better world than the one I discovered, as I believe that each one of us in society can make a difference. If we do not believe that then everything else is worthless. If we do not believe that each one of us, in our areas of influence, can change things, then we should just "pack up and leave". But I am utterly convinced that all of us can make a difference and improve.

In Spain we need a cultural leap forward in this regard. When companies hire people they should prioritise values. Up until now selection processes focused on looking for technical abilities but we should select people based on their values and then look at their abilities and not vice-versa. We need brave people who are not afraid to ask "why not?", who are not afraid to try new things, who are not satisfied with second place, who want to be number one... People in second and third place are destined to eat the dust of those in front of them. I like to be out in front and for my company to be out in front.

So... do we have the courage?

Without a doubt. We should be courageous, lose our fear. We should be aware that we will fail sometimes, but most of the time we will be able to achieve our goals, especially if we have the desire and the willpower. Our society is full of examples of people who acted courageously and made a difference. Someone who I greatly admire is Gema Hassen Bey... As a young girl she suffered the misfortune of being in a car accident and after a tremendous recovery effort she ended up in a wheel chair. In these circumstances many people would

have thrown in the towel and would not have had the courage to do anything. She showed us that willpower and the desire to do things do not stop just because you are in a wheel chair. She always says, "if I move, the world moves with me". She is always thinking "how she is going to achieve it". This desire to do things and to contribute is what makes a difference.

Ortega (Spanish philosopher) is one of our clearest thinkers and whatsmore he knew how to express this very clearly. He said that "you can only advance if you look far ahead". We will only advance if we look forward and think big. We need more thinkers like Ortega and, moreover, more people who are capable of applying these maxims to their daily lives.

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