

First-hand...

“Today, flexibility and professional development are non-negotiable and represent challenges that we are going to overcome at Aqualia”

Carmen Rodríguez heads People and Culture department at Aqualia, a company that employs more than 10,000 professionals and operates in 18 countries worldwide. In a post-coronavirus context in which we face major social changes, people management is one of the main corporate challenges.

Today employees expect the companies they work for to play a social role as promoters or prescribers of the values of 21st century society: equality, diversity, inclusion, human rights, mental health, well-being and a long list of other values. These expectations involve going beyond the limits of what is strictly considered occupational and demonstrates the need for companies to play an active and committed role in the face of social problems.

Following the pandemic, what issues has the People and Culture Department focussed on over the past year?

This past year has been difficult. The end of the pandemic, which was terrible, and the invasion of Ukraine, which has brought war

to Europe, have seen a change in mentality. People have reprioritised many aspects of their lives and at the department, we have witnessed this change, which also affects corporate culture in general. New ways of working, greater flexibility and less uncertainty as regards professional development are all in demand. As a company, we are responsible for adapting to this change.

Another cultural change is the modification introduced by the transformation towards sustainability that Aqualia is immersed in and we collaborate with the Communication and Corporate Sustainability department to relay this. Of course, a priority area that we have focussed on is maintaining the physical and emotional well-being of our people, as well as their safety when it comes to performing their duties.

At the same time, we have experienced significant international growth and we have had to support the expansion of our corporate culture, which is not only structured around implementing our way of conducting ourselves and doing things wherever we go, but also

around implementing the best that each place in which we operate has to offer. To this end, we have focussed on digitalisation, a major ally that makes us more agile when it comes to continuing to grow and include all regions.

Which are the main challenges that your department has faced in including the different cultures in Aqualia's culture?

Internationalisation poses particular challenges in each region. In the case of Colombia, we have imparted several training sessions to adapt the knowledge of our people there to the way we operate at Aqualia. We have made significant efforts in relation to safety, prioritising compliance with our standards. We are doing a really good job. There is great enthusiasm on both sides to make the projects work and we are seeing how quickly our Occupational Risk Prevention protocols are being rolled out. We have also gradually transferred awareness raising actions in the fields of diversity and equality.

In MENA we have adapted without compromising on our essence or on our values. I'm proud to see how we

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are introducing women into the job market in Oman. Our latest addition has been Georgia, where 3,000 people have joined our team. There, the biggest challenges we face are the digitalisation of processes and the implementation of our corporate culture.

Which projects in your department have generated the most positive impact? What were the main milestones in 2022?

We make significant efforts to enrich the culture in terms of diversity and equality. We have been implementing good practices for years now and, undoubtedly, this is a factor that is totally representative of Aqualia. In 2022, the mentoring initiative is worth particular mention, helping us make women more visible at the company. Our aim is to create spaces and opportunities in our work environment, which on account of a variety of circumstances has a higher male presence, for more women to reach decision-making positions.

Another aspect that has a major contribution to make is the creation of the Diversity Committee. Our aim is to analyse where Aqualia is at and implement initiatives to raise awareness about this issue. One turning point was the signing of an agreement with the LGTBI association and seeing the response of many people when we changed the corporate signature to commemorate LGBT Pride Day. We are committed to ensuring that Aqualia is a safe environment for everybody, regardless of their

sexual orientation; however, when it comes to diversity, we refer to it in the broadest sense of the term. We need to be more ambitious when it comes to recruiting people with different abilities, and this is something that we are firmly committed to working on.

The biggest challenge we face is continuing to move towards making the company an environment where professionals want to stay and develop their careers and where we can attract talent

Finally, I would highlight the Employee Aid Programme (PAE), our psychological care service, which emphasises the importance we attach to our people's mental health. This service operates, to a large extent, thanks to the support offered by the Communication department. Working in

coordination is critical to ensure the entire workforce can find information about these actions. If they are unaware of them, it would be as if they did not exist.

What does Aqualia need to work on to have a workforce that is prepared for the future?

The biggest challenge we face is continuing to move towards making the company an environment where professionals want to stay and develop their careers and where we can attract talent. Our main challenge is being able to understand the weight of this cultural change correctly, so that we continue to be perceived as a company that cares for its people. This implies managing flexibility, looking at how we can provide teleworking options, one of the issues that many of our employees are pursuing. We want to manage these expectations correctly while, at the same time, aligning them with Aqualia's business context.

Furthermore, all professionals need to have long-term job expectations, to know that we are committed to their talent, that we want them here, and this involves designing training plans and career plans. I believe that, at this time of growth, we must also commit to the growth of our people at the company.