

HR director of the year Winner

Fiona Evans, HR director, Zoological Society of London



Transforming an HR department in just two years is no mean feat by anyone’s standards. Overhauling the HR function of an organisation whose history spans right back to 1826 is an even more incredible achievement.

But this is exactly what Evans has done for the 1,000 employees and 400 volunteers working in the UK and overseas as part of Zoological Society of London (ZSL)’s conservation activities, including its two UK zoos. A less determined or less expert HR leader might have balked at the challenge presenting itself when Evans arrived in 2014. HR was very much the poor relation at the organisation and limited to reactive, operational activities.

Evans saw the opportunity to make HR much more strategic and contribute much more strongly to the organisation’s critical overriding purpose. Activity has included a new reward and recognition scheme, a doubled training budget, and much greater and more targeted focus on diversity.

Which is not to say the basics have been neglected; nailing administrative activities, such as gaining up to date staff lists, has also been key. The praise of those voting for Evans to win HRD of the Year certainly reflected this: “Great to see someone sorting the basics out and gaining credibility with the line and not just jump straight in with the latest HR theory – easily the best way to move HR forward,” was one such comment.

The volume and detail of appreciative plaudits from ZSL employees is also inspiring. “She was like a breath of fresh air for the Society and has spent the last few years investing in the training and development of the zoo’s employees, creating forums for staff to be heard and engaging with all she comes into contact with,” reports a Whipsnade worker,

adding: “She has been a force for change in the Society and leads by example with all.”

“Fiona has completely turned around the HR department from one that was unhelpful and distant to an engaged, empathetic and competent team,” reports another employee. “She is honest, fair and trustworthy, and I have had personal experience of her fantastic ability to mediate and resolve difficult situations with a firm fairness.”

Similar admiration comes from the senior team at ZSL. “Fiona has reinvigorated the rapidly growing HR department, and has given particular attention to the staff employed overseas in physically and mentally demanding roles that are of critical importance to the survival of many extremely rare species,” comments one trustee. Meanwhile zoological director David Field states simply but powerfully that: “From the personal to the

professional – Fiona provides the answers and support.”

Evans – who has previously held roles including director of HR and marketing at City & Islington College, HR and communications director at Adepta, and director of HR and governance at Asthma UK – is also highly thought of far beyond her organisation; always a telling sign. “I worked with Fiona early in my HR career and her enthusiasm and professionalism were inspirational – as my manager she supported and encouraged me to continue with an HR career,” comments one fellow HR director. “The impact she has had in her current role is testament to her approach and the way she takes people with her.”

Evans has certainly taken us with her. And we have no doubt she’ll continue to do so in the years to come.

Shortlisted

Shakil Butt, former HROD director, Islamic Relief Worldwide

Janet King, director of HR and corporate services, Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust

Kathryn Pritchard, group chief people officer, Odeon Cinemas Group

Pauline Prow, chief people officer, Monarch

Lisa Robbins, director of partner resources, Starbucks UK

Ollie Roberts, vice president, people integration, AB InBev

Melvin Rogers, director of HR, Sytner

Mark Simmons, HR and QHSE director, XPO Logistics

Vicky Williams, people director, Lawn Tennis Association