

WORLD TOURISM FORUM LUCERNE 2019

Human Capital in an Age of Disruption: Talent, Innovation & Diversity

There are many routes to taking a brave decision, Musimbi Kanyoro of the Global Fund for Women told us, but sometimes you just have to say, 'let's do it'. It was a message that will have resonated with many who attended the latest World Tourism Forum Lucerne. An event that was born out of an bold ambition to bridge the silos between academia, industry and the public sector, this May again played host to range of people who've acted on their passion and decided to make a change in our industry. From Jean-Claude Biver from LVMH, to Egypt's Tourism Minister Rania Al Mashat to Isabel Wijssen from Bye Bye Plastic Bags to Brett Tollman from The Travel Corporation, we heard the stories of people who combine strategy and passion with non-negotiable commitment to deliver.

'Human capital in the age of disruption' was this year's theme and 550 CEOs, Ministers, Investors and Next Generation Leaders from 80 countries looked at the human experience of working in our sector through several fascinating prisms.

First, came the strong message that what potential employees want from tourism is changing. Yes they are motivated by earning good money, but they increasingly care about how that money is made. Karolin Frankenberger of the University of St Gallen address the Forum on the Thursday outlining how increased social and environmental responsibility should not just impact a company's actions, but should fundamentally change how it operates. Advocating a shift from linear business models to circular ones where companies give back as much as they take, Karolin argued that this can fundamentally impact on consumer perception and interaction with a brand.

The second element of human capital was diversity. Much of the Friday schedule was built around understanding how this has become a central aspiration in the global workplace. During the 'diversity masterclass' one contributor in the audience made a point that cut through – diversity is one of the primary reasons that people travel. They want to see cultures, people and places that are different to their own. If an industry wants to cater for that desire, it in turn must represent the world. Aradhana Khowala chaired the main diversity panel at the Forum and argued that diversity of thought is for her the true definition of diversity. And if we take that to be true, then diversity of gender, sexuality, disability and social background is necessary to deliver it.

There was also a palpable sense of urgency on this issue. Diversity is shifting from an aspiration to a firm commitment and we felt that throughout the Forum. Brett Heising of brettapproved.com argued forcefully and persuasively for the need for companies and conferences to diversify further in order to have better conversations about diversity. And how, in the case of disability, there is money to be made by creating tourism products that do more to cater for diverse consumers. Disabled people and those they travel with are worth billions of dollars in business each year he told us, and yet most operators don't advertise the support they offer for those with disabilities.

A third and particularly challenging strand of our thinking around human capital came from Reto Wittwer, the Chairman of the World Travel Forum Lucerne. He observed that to many people now the idea of 'service' and of 'serving others' is unattractive. Of course, those words and phrases are, in the English language at least, only a small step away from 'servitude', something from which younger people recoil (and plenty of older people too!).

Reto highlighted both a strength of tourism and a weakness. He eloquently highlighted how we 'serve' people all the time in our lives – helping a stranger up some steps was the example he gave – and it's hugely rewarding to do so. He argued service within tourism is no different – helping a stranger to have the best holiday or break - can be something that gives to us as well as to them. Everyone in the Forum knew what he meant – but the challenge is sell that experience of service to prospective employees who may not see it that way. A redefinition and repositioning of 'service' felt like a powerful idea.

It's an idea which plays into one of the great strengths of the WTFL Forum which is its unrelenting focus on talent. With the best people none of our aspirations can be realised. Kate Walsh from Cornell University reflected on the importance of both academia and industry ensuring what's being taught and the employment that's being offered are in synch. The WTFL Start-Up Innovation Camp was the perfect example of how our industry can identify, respect and support new ideas and the finest talent.

One example of how talent can shape our industry and our world came in an inspiring talk from Isabel Wijssen from Bye Bye Plastic Bags. Her campaign strongly demonstrates that on issues of sustainability and environmental responsibility, there is no need to wait for state level regulation to drive change. It is also the perfect case study of how a great idea combined with expert strategy can tap into a global desire to do more to protect our natural world.

There was a change to the Thursday programme to create some space to discuss the attacks in Sri Lanka. Many at the Forum understand first-hand the horror of a terror attack and the impact it can have on local tourism industries. One of our hosts, Kenyan broadcaster Caroline Mutoko spoke with fortitude about how Kenya has evolved its responses to attacks having experienced several. She spoke about the need for returning the visitor experience to normal as soon as possible, to ensuring that the stories of those helping to do that are told through the local media as well as the stories of those still choosing to visit. They will not succeed was her message.

One final thought on human capital in the age of disruption. The disruption in our world and in our industry is now a constant and our ability to innovate must be too. To do that we must adapt our thinking but we must also adapt how we work. Listen to the discussions at this year's Forum and you'll have heard how expectations of the work place are changing rapidly especially because of the next generation. We heard how flexible working, rapid response innovation, multi-faceted responsibilities within one role, diverse colleagues and holistic corporate goals are not seen as added extras but rather as non-negotiables.

Two challenges also emerged through our discussions in Lucerne. The first is how tourism makes itself part of the climate change solution not the climate change problem. For all the hugely important work around plastic and local environmental responsibility, our industry is heavily reliant on flying. Important work is already being done around this, but the centrality of the issue for tourism is hard to overstate and tough and important decisions await.

The second challenge is around how tourism tells its story. Traditionally, that narrative has rested on seeing the wonders of the world, on rest and recuperation and on having a great time. It was evident at this Forum that there is a desire to tell a more profound story of tourism's positive contribution to our world and there remains work to do on this.

The Forum's strength is our industry's strength – a diversity of expertise, disciplines, countries and cultures. It once again showed the possibilities of when we come together to create something together for our industry and our world.