

“Careers Don’t Just Happen”

11/11/2024 Sylvie Nicol is the Management Board member in charge of human resources, infrastructure, and sustainability worldwide at Henkel, a German industry and consumer goods company perhaps best known for its Persil laundry detergent. A native of France now in her third decade with the company, Nicol has come to stand for change and transformation.

“If we want to remain competitive in the future, as a company we need to change continuously — that starts with our organizational culture, but ultimately encompasses each individual,” says Sylvie Nicol, Management Board member responsible for HR at Henkel, a German consumer and industrial goods company. There’s no doubt in this top manager’s mind that personnel matters will play a key role in the company’s transformation. She notes that nobody at Henkel can avoid change. But at the same time, nobody needs to fear it — because far-reaching changes will have positive consequences and make everyone more equipped for the future.

Since transferring to Henkel’s headquarters in the western German city of Düsseldorf in 2013, she has worked in human resources, first in what was the Beauty Care unit. She draws on valuable leadership experience in marketing, brand development, and sales management — an area that tends to be driven by numbers. It stands to reason, then, that she is now also in charge of infrastructure and sustainability.

More than PowerPoint and poster campaigns

In Nicol's very first year on the Management Board in 2019, the company's Leadership Commitments have been introduced to all regions. Before this transformation could extend into all parts of the globe, however, the management team was already intensively working on the cultural transformation. As Nicol recently explained in an interview with the HR journal Personalführung, "You can't achieve that type of transformation with PowerPoint presentations, video messages, or poster campaigns alone." She relies instead on powers of persuasion. "You need genuine exchange in workshops, discussions, and training sessions: in other words, a non-stop focus on communication."

At Henkel, an iconic family business in the consumer goods and adhesives industry, innovative spirits interact with structures and traditions that have developed over decades in both Germany and abroad. And have brought commercial success. In 2026, Henkel will celebrate its 150th anniversary. In 2023, the group posted operational earnings of 2.6 billion euros, somewhat diminished by the sale of its Russian business and plants and the loss of that market. A brief look back: founder and merchant Fritz Henkel began pursuing his passion for chemistry in Aachen, a German city near the border with Belgium. Two years later, in 1878, he began experimenting with detergents in Düsseldorf. Henkel's bleaching soda was the company's first bestseller. It was followed by brands such as Persil (laundry detergent, 1907), Ata (scouring powder, 1920), and Pril (dishwashing liquid, 1951). In addition to its consumer goods sector that includes the Schwarzkopf haircare brand acquired in 1995, the family-owned corporation also runs an industry business with adhesives, sealants, and coatings. These consumer brands, along with Pritt (1969), Pattex (1956), and Ponal (1979, watertight wood glue), enjoy excellent long-standing reputations among target groups ranging from consumers to customers.

In 2023, the company's approximately 48,000 employees from 124 different nations brought in sales of 21.5 billion euros in 79 countries — down from 2022, but up from 2021. Sales have increased overall since 2005, not continuously but with fluctuations due to overarching economic and political developments.

"Not everyone wants to change"

So why, are fundamental changes on the agenda right now? For one thing, there is a need to counter the rising share of cheap products on markets worldwide. Top manager Nicol is aware that cultural changes require time, especially in large organizations. Despite that, change is "unavoidable." In the HR expert's words, "I've been with the company for over 25 years, and like many of my colleagues, I'm seeing the progress." She spends most of her time looking ahead. The company's global initiative ACT, which stands for Accelerate Cultural Transformation, entered its second stage in 2024, with a focus on fostering a culture of feedback. It's not a matter of introducing a new tool but of changing human behavior. "We must acknowledge and respect that not everyone wants to change," she says. In open dialogue and concrete action, however, the teams especially need to establish what they identify with in their work.

Personnel managers draw up efficiency plans that streamline processes while also motivating employees. One example is HarMoney, a project designed to integrate the company's 150 different payroll and time management systems in different parts of the world. "It sounds quite technical — and it is," remarks Nicol. "But we're aiming to streamline and transform how we manage HR globally at Henkel." Launched in the large US market, the project was then extended to other plants and offices. Nicol is convinced that "with each successful rollout, we are moving closer to a more unified and efficient HR ecosystem, fostering collaboration, and ensuring the corporation's readiness for the future."

Own culture, own leadership style

In early 2023, the previously separate Beauty Care and Laundry & Home Care units were consolidated into the Consumer Brands division. "It was quite surprising to see just how different the culture was in the two units despite being together under the Henkel 'roof,'" Nicol recalls. "Distinct cultural identities and leadership styles had developed over many decades." Shared goals and directions were defined over the course of numerous discussions. The resulting synergies led to the elimination of 2,000 positions worldwide. In an interview with the Süddeutsche Zeitung, Henkel's CEO Carsten Knobel announced further worldwide efficiency measures in the areas of purchasing, logistics, and production.

Knobel is the latest non-family member to head the company since 1980 when Konrad Henkel, grandson of the company founder, moved to the Supervisory Board. The consumer and industrial goods company has remained in family hands, however, with around 200 family members holding more than 60 percent of the shares. The remaining shares are traded freely on the market. Fritz Henkel's great-great-granddaughter Dr. Simone Bagel-Trah chairs the Supervisory Board and the Shareholders' Committee. She is actively overseeing the transformation — including the changes in HR management initiated and implemented by Sylvie Nicol.

Eight weeks paid parental leave for everyone

Before Nicol's time, Henkel had already been actively promoting diversity, gender equity, and inclusion. In 2024, the company introduced eight weeks of fully paid parental leave worldwide — regardless of country-specific guidelines. And looking forward, its HR talent cloud platform is expected to match talented employees with new company jobs at a faster pace than before. To do so, AI systems support to find a fit for open positions worldwide.

In search of experts in specialized fields such as digitalization, analytics, supply chain management, and IT, the goal is to identify capable people already at the company and develop their abilities further. As Nicol observes, "This is not just about acquiring new skills but about fundamentally reshaping our approach to talent development." Digital solutions are absolutely essential in such a large and international organization, she adds, and explains that a global job architecture already exists to compare employees' skill sets. "We encourage our workers to keep their skill profiles up to date," she says. "The next step is for each participant to obtain references or feedback on their individual profile,

not only from their manager but also from their peers." The mix of personal initiative and efficiency gains is very important to her. "We offer a platform and the necessary tool support, but each employee must take action for themselves," she says, also speaking from personal experience. "A career is not something that just happens to you."

About Sylvie Nicol: first Paris, then Düsseldorf

Born in Paris in February 1973, Sylvie Nicol earned an MBA from ESCP, a leading international private business school in Paris. She began her career at Henkel in 1996 as a Brand Marketing Manager in the Beauty Care business unit, taking a series of higher positions in the unit until 2017 — including moving to the Düsseldorf headquarters in 2013 as Head of Beauty Care HR and later Head of Beauty Care Retail Europe and Global Sales. In 2018, she was promoted and became responsible for the strategic HR topics. In 2019, she joined the Management Board as the member responsible for HR, infrastructure, and sustainability.

Info

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Path: "Careers Don't Just Happen"/Images/img_1.jpg
Title: Marie-Théres Ebensperger, Executive Assistant; Sylvie Nicol, Henkel board member; Lucas Kohlmann, Global Head of HR Strategy (l-r), 2024, Porsche Consulting GmbH
Subline: "An inclusive management culture starts with me, of course. We hold many meetings in my office," says Sylvie Nicol, shown here with Marie-Théres Ebensperger, Junior Sustainability Manager at Henkel Consumer Brands and Lucas Kohlmann, Global Head of HR Corporate Functions. © Henkel AG & Co. KGaA

Path: “Careers Don’t Just Happen”/Images/img_2.jpg
Title: Sylvie Nicol, Henkel board member, 2024, Porsche Consulting GmbH
Subline: “In Germany there’s a special emphasis on promoting women in management. Coming from France, I had to learn that myself. Prejudices or biases against working mothers are against women in the workforce are hardly an issue there,” said Sylvie Nicol in an interview with the Tagesspiegel. © Henkel AG & Co. KGaA

Path: “Careers Don’t Just Happen”/Images/img_3.jpg
Title: Henkel Team, 2024, Porsche Consulting GmbH
Subline: Henkel has employees from 124 nations at 79 locations worldwide. “Our global ‘One Henkel’ team is the key to our success,” says Sylvie Nicol. © Henkel AG & Co. KGaA

Path: “Careers Don’t Just Happen”/Images/img_4.jpg
Title: Sylvie Nicol, Henkel board member, 2024, Porsche Consulting GmbH
Subline: Sylvie Nicol, Executive Vice President Human Resources, Infrastructure and Sustainability, Henkel AG & Co. KGaA. © Henkel AG & Co. KGaA

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