



Unilever

## Case Study: Unilever 'Hot Chilli'

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## Unilever 'Hot Chilli':

How Unilever uses young IT coaches to help senior Executives understand the value and use of the latest technologies

This is the eighth in a series of case studies produced for partners in the Digital Generation Initiative, an innovation programme by [Career Innovation](#).



## Unilever 'Hot Chilli': How Unilever uses young IT coaches to help senior Executives understand the value and use of the latest technologies

### background and rationale

Unilever is one of the world's leading FMCG suppliers with around 174,000 employees in more than 100 countries. Its brands include Knorr, Hellmanns, Bertolli, Dove, Sunsilk, Cif and Marmite.

With such a global spread Unilever clearly recognises the importance of worldwide communications and collaboration. It has developed a New Ways of Working vision to get more value out of IT within the company. A part of this, The Hot Chilli Programme focuses on helping senior Executives understand and embrace IT. Chris Winn, Programme Manager, explains: 'It's vital that senior Executives understand the opportunities for applying technology, especially among those working in global and regional teams.'



The rationale behind Hot Chilli is that many senior Executives 'miss out on IT' - they don't have the time to embrace the potential benefits and they tend to rely on their support teams to do this. However, these teams might not necessarily identify the possibilities for the Executive and the broader business. Also, by involving the senior levels of management they become role models and ambassadors for new ways of working.

The key feature of Hot Chilli is that it uses junior IT managers to coach the senior Executives. This gives upcoming IT talent the opportunity to get involved in a major project, and creates closer links between IT and other business functions.

Hot Chilli therefore aims to benefit the business by increasing communication and collaboration, particularly through virtual working and reduced travel; this in turn saves the cost and time of travelling and improves the life balance of employees. It also aims to increase understanding of how technology is being used by other companies and consumers so that the business can respond to these changing behaviours.

### building the programme the people

Helen Toogood, VP New Ways of Working, developed the Hot Chilli concept more than two years ago when she saw the need to get Unilever's senior Executives - around 100 people - more involved in IT.

The Hot Chilli name came about following a brainstorm with some of the digital generation graduates. It represents hot, new ideas and people's caution about being 'burned' by something they may not fully understand. Hot Chilli helps them grasp the concept without getting burned.

Toogood did not announce the programme but began by recruiting the Executives and coaches. The approach was low key, making best use of personal contacts to engage individual Executives and gauge their levels of interest.

The Hot Chilli coaches are business focused IT Managers who have a passion and enthusiasm for technology. They are volunteers and the time commitment varies - but on average is around half a day per month from each coach. An important part in getting the programme off the ground was getting their line manager's support.

Individual IT coaches were gradually linked up with an Executive and they began working together. Later, as Hot Chilli developed, Toogood found that Executives often volunteered themselves.





## support materials

A first step is for coaches to attend an induction to understand the objectives of the Hot Chilli Programme. They learn both about the technologies available and develop the associated non-technical skills they need, for example, to help them build relationships with senior managers.

Conversations were held with the Executives to find out what they wanted to learn about. This led to the development of a set of briefing modules and more are planned. Current modules are:

- Virtual Team Working
- Web 2.0
- Unilever Virtual World
- E-mail management
- Unlocking the value of portals

Coaches have found that Executives are particularly interested in learning more about improved collaboration and communication within Global Teams. This reflects Unilever's changing Organisational Model which has created far more truly Global Teams. This is a need in every part of the world.

All the materials developed to support the programme are stored on the Unilever intranet. The modules, training packages, case studies, records of web conferences, and other information sources, are available to both the coaches and the Executives. This further encourages the Executives to use the technology.

The coaches also have fortnightly web conferences to review progress, plan future topics and share ideas and experiences.

## coaching sessions

A coaching session usually lasts about one hour. The first one is a diagnostic session to identify personal needs and establish a plan for future sessions. Thereafter, a typical coaching session starts to build awareness, for example, of the benefits of a particular technology. There is then a 'hands on' session to

get the Executive to experience the technology and see how it has been successfully used in Unilever and externally.

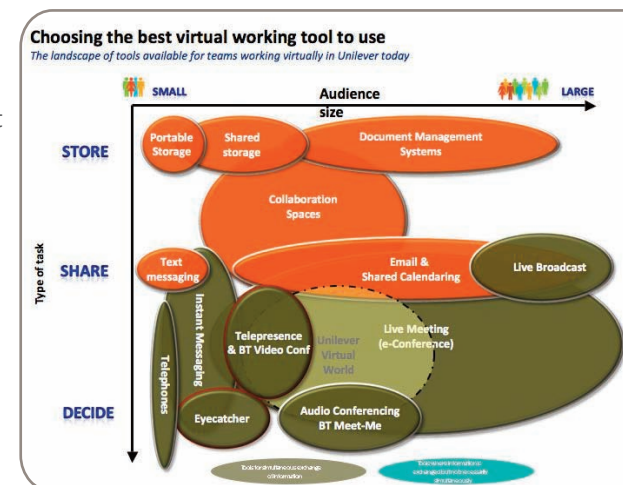
This is likely to be followed by a discussion on how the coach can help the Executive and his/her team use this more effectively. Most of the Executives in the programme work closely with PA's and coaches are encouraged to involve them in the programme too.

Coaches build a one to one relationship with the Executives and coaching sessions are tailored to their personal needs and interests rather than following a set syllabus. This trusted relationship between coach and Executive is one of the most important aspects of the programme. Although coaches feed back needs and requirements to the central team, much of the content of the sessions remains confidential between the Executive and the coach.

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Whilst most of the coaching sessions are face to face, others take advantage of the technology itself, in the form of virtual meetings. In some cases the coaches have never met their Executive face to face; one member of the team in Australia is coaching an Executive in London, and another coach in London is linked to an Executive in Singapore.

As the programme extends throughout Asia/Africa, Middle East and Turkey (AMET) countries there will be even more virtual coaching as the people there are physically more dispersed and work across different time zones.





## progress report

There are now more than 40 coaches enrolled in Europe and 20 in the US, Canada and Latin America. A pilot has just been completed in Asia/AMET (Singapore) and is soon to roll out further in that region. So far just over half of the senior Executives have been engaged in the programme.

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Chris Winn adds: "Hot Chilli has entered the language with some Executives now asking if they are to have a Hot Chilli coach. One of our senior executives is also known to say, 'Here's a Hot Chilli Moment' when he is about to try something new in a web conference and isn't quite sure what might happen. That gets everyone's attention!"

## virtual working

There has been a big increase in virtual team working. Since the installation of Telepresence high quality video conferencing equipment, Hot Chilli coaches have helped raise awareness of this and other collaboration technologies, including web conferencing. Coaches often work with Executives and their teams to help them make effective use of web conferencing, especially the interactive elements such as voting, polling, and whiteboarding. Many global leadership team meetings are now held virtually. Indeed, a small e-events team has been set up to meet the growing demand for on-line conferencing, which can be for as many as 1,000 people.

A major event took place in 2008 when the Deputy Chief Financial Officer (an original champion of the Hot Chilli Programme) decided to

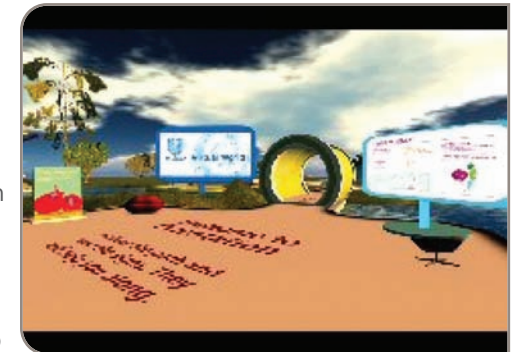
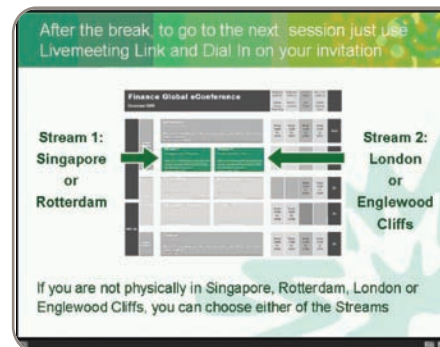
hold the annual Finance conference virtually. Until then it had been held in a hotel and involved huge amounts of travelling. The event planning was complex and needed to span global time zones but it paid off. Over €120,000 in travel costs was saved - in addition to the benefits to participants in not having to travel. The interactive elements of web conferencing enabled participants to input their views to the decision-making process.

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## understanding the marketplace

The Hot Chilli programme also raises Executives' awareness of how technology has and will continue to change the behaviours of society. This includes an appreciation of how social networking and 3D gaming, such as virtual shopping malls, are changing how consumers learn about, acquire and share their experiences about different products.

To address this, some time was spent in 2008 briefing Hot Chilli coaches on the possibilities of virtual worlds so that they could share this knowledge with their Executives. Materials have been developed with Marketing to provide an in-depth understanding of these emerging trends. Now coaches and their Executives are able to 'tour' Second Life and view Unilever's private presence including the internal induction areas as well as the spa, hair salon and catwalk which support the DOVE brand and the Hair Category teams. Understanding the opportunities that these technologies offer is likely to become an even bigger part of Hot Chilli.





## benefits

### for the business

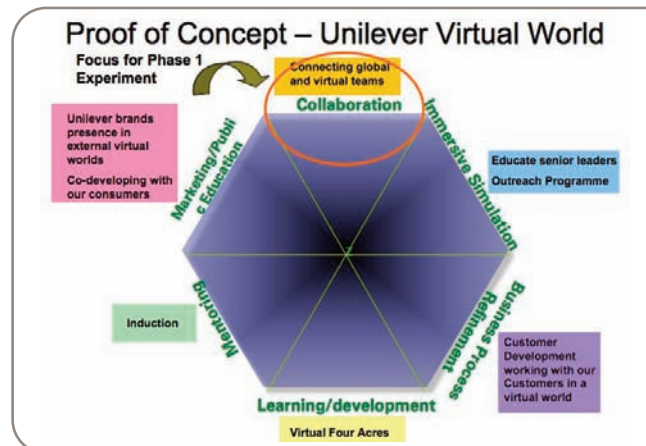
One of the key aims was to increase worldwide collaboration and reduce the amount of unnecessary travel. This has clearly been achieved, as Toogood explains: "The biggest impact for me is the reduction in wasted time and fatigue from travel, by using the tools effectively and working sympathetically with

You brainstorm, you sort the possibilities, you rank the possibilities, you vote on the priorities - you jointly commit to the actions and you go away and work on them. All within an hour!

Time Zones. It also forces the decision making process to be much shorter. You brainstorm, you sort the possibilities, you rank the possibilities, you vote on the priorities, you jointly commit to the actions and you go away and work on them. All within an hour!"

Toogood points out that whilst these benefits cannot be attributed solely to the Hot Chilli Programme, engaging senior Executives to help change behaviour can and does trickle down the organisation.

As the coaches are volunteers and are making use of existing technology the programme has needed relatively small financial investment. Unlike many IT projects, no ROI business case was required. Even so, the IT team is currently collating figures to assess what types of technology are being used most and what savings and benefits these are bringing to the business.



### for the people

Toogood has been seeking informal feedback from the Executives on how the programme is going. She is pleased with the results: "We are finding that the Executives now feel more confident in their use of technology. Some of them say their 'street cred' has gone up and they like that." In fairness she adds that the programme's success is to some extent inevitable as it concentrates on those Executives who are interested and want it to work.

Executives gain exposure to enthusiastic managers with a passion for IT - in a non-threatening, trusted environment. This has improved the perception of IT and given it a 'human face' for the Executives. The Coaches benefit too as they gain exposure to senior management and experience the bigger business picture. Some Line Managers are now nominating their people to become Hot Chilli coaches as part of their personal development.

## key learnings and challenges

### managing expectations

During the last two years the Hot Chilli team has successfully dealt with a number of issues and challenges. One challenge is managing expectations. When Executives are made aware of possibilities 'ahead of the curve' their expectations might be unrealistic. That is why traditionally IT has tried to keep new, untested elements away from senior people. Hot Chilli coaches are trained to deal with this. They learn to explain why things can and can't happen. For example, they might need to explain that in some areas network capability can be a limiting factor.

Another issue has been some questioning of why senior Executives are getting so much help when it is the less senior people who use the technology on a day to day basis. This is addressed by explaining that Hot Chilli is a top down process to get senior Executives to be role models and ambassadors. Plus there is lots more "Self Help" IT support for the rest of the business.

From the start the approach has been to work with those Executives who are committed and interested. Inevitably a few Executives have chosen not to join the programme but Toogood takes a pragmatic approach to this, ensuring that other members of the Executive's team are aware of new technologies.

## encouraging the coaches

Time has been spent addressing the hopes and fears of newly recruited coaches. Interestingly these tend to be the same wherever they are based. They worry that they will become a personal helpdesk, or will not be able to answer all the questions. Toogood responds: "It's actually a good thing if the coach can't answer all the Executive's questions straight away - that builds the relationship of trust and not feeling inferior. Of course, the coach does need to find out the answer so we encourage them to link up with all the Business Partners who work with their Executives - IT, HR, Communications - and work with them." Coaches are also encouraged to use materials from other sources, such as the New Ways of Working education team.

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Sometimes coaches can get downhearted if there is difficulty getting time in the Executive's diary or if their session is cancelled. They have learned to understand that appointments might get changed at the last minute.

Celebration of success is important too. In Europe two face to face events are held each year to brief coaches on the latest developments and to say a big thank you to them. Toogood further acknowledges the coaches' efforts to their line managers and this is to become a more formal part of their PDPs. The Hot Chilli team is currently working on how to organise briefings sessions in other regions and how to give coaches who are geographically very dispersed the support they need.

## what next?

Looking ahead Toogood identifies some significant activities:

- Complete rollout in Americas region.
- Plan the major rollout in Asia/AMET, taking account of regional/local needs.
- Address the big question of how to make Hot Chilli available to the lower executive levels without a huge central cost.
- Continue to develop modules and other briefing materials to keep pace with both expressed requirements and general trends and developments.

Toogood adds: "The Hot Chilli concept does not need to be contained to just IT. The concept is about - If you Understand and you Connect with an area - then you will thrive. It could be used for all areas of a business who don't understand another part - and therefore don't connect. IT



is the obvious one because it is moving so quickly - and it does require behaviour changes to take advantages of the new tools. I would like to see the concept growing in other organisations - Schools/Education/Government being immediate thoughts!! If senior Executives in these areas had IT demystified for them - we could all get much more value out of IT."



## conclusion

The Hot Chilli Programme has made significant progress in helping senior Executives understand and use the latest technologies with real benefits seen in reduced travel and an increase in virtual working.

Neil Cameron, Unilever CIO, sums it up:

“What we have is reverse mentoring. In the past we have had people who have years of experience on their side to show young people how to work in an

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organisation. The Hot Chilli Programme is about taking young people who've got experience from the outside bringing it in and helping people to adopt it for value to us. So it is a very interesting model and it is working. I think it was innovative when it started; I think it is still innovative now. It certainly works for us.”



## sources

Chris Winn, Hot Chilli Programme Manager

Helen Toogood, VP New Ways of Working

Neil Cameron, Unilever CIO

## acknowledgements

This case study was researched and written by Allison Hill. We would like to thank all those who contributed to the research by taking part in interviews, innovation events or informal exchange of ideas.

## about the Career Innovation Group

The Ci Group is an alliance of global companies using research as the basis for joint projects in the area of human capital. Based on eight years of research and innovation events, their goal is to help create the 'inspiring companies' of the future, through a focus on people and strategies for change.

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