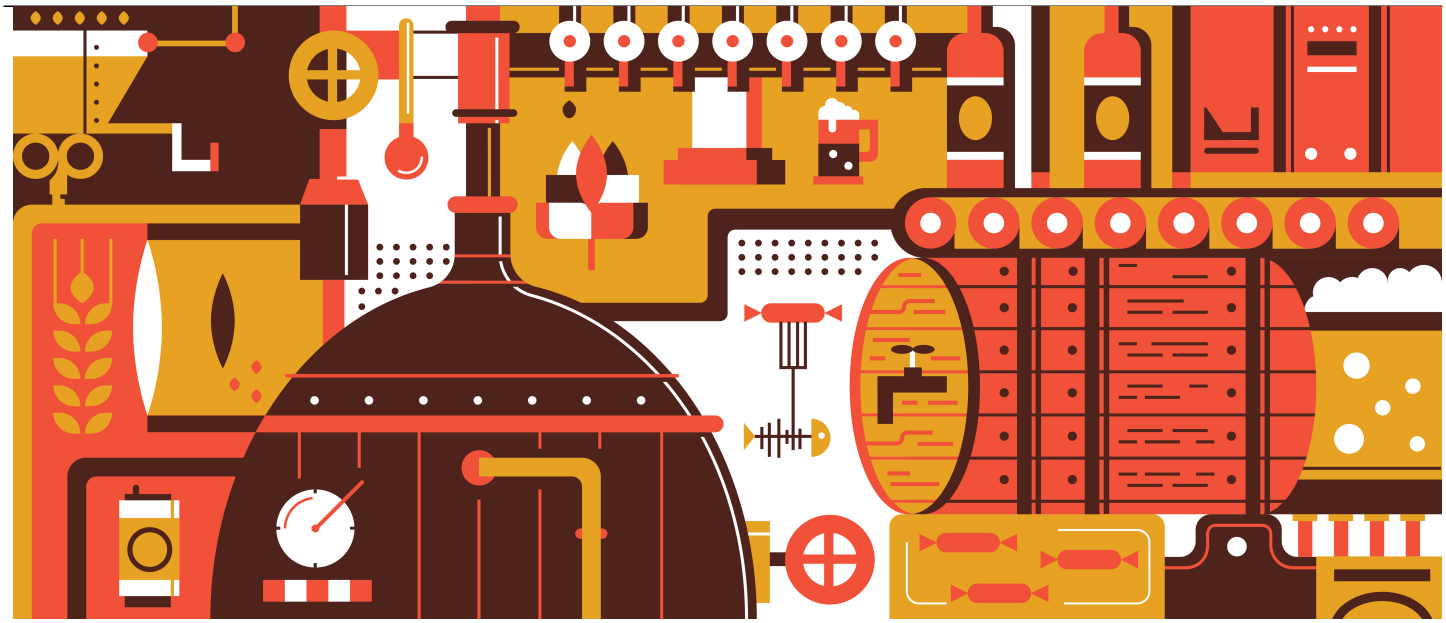


Seed to Sip: An Interview with AB InBev’s CLO John Blood

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Even under normal circumstances, steering the legal reins of a global brewing company is no easy task. However, when you throw a post-pandemic element into the mix, the task can graduate to a herculean endeavor.

John Blood, AB InBev’s chief legal and corporate affairs officer, is staying innovative by building the right environment to meet these new-COVID related challenges and cultivate the next generation of leaders.

John Blood, AB InBev’s Chief Legal and Corporate Affairs Officer

Blood was generous enough to share some of his insights into AB InBev's best practices to spur innovation and create a culture of passionate individuals.

No man is an island

Blood did not hesitate to describe what he thought was the most important element of running a business: the power of human connection. He affirmed: "It's really what business is about. It's about life's great moments and meeting interesting people all over the world."

The artisanal discipline of AB InBev's enterprise is not something that can be done remotely. To craft a great brew requires hands-on attention and care. Only a small portion of AB InBev's global team had the opportunity to work remotely during the pandemic. He shared with us that almost 95 percent of AB InBev's workforce never stopped going to their place of work, whether that's an office, the brewery, the field where hops are grown, or the roads that connect production to the customer. This commitment and perseverance augmented a company culture stitched together by shared passion for the work being done.



Everyone brings a unique problem-solving perspective.
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Many companies' day-to-day changed in the last few years. For some, it's a fully remote experience, and for others, it's a hybrid one. AB InBev now offers an annual 25-day fully remote work option — employees can choose to work from anywhere in the world. As for the day-to-day, AB InBev is back in the office five days a week. "Everyone's in the office. It's just part of our culture, part of who we are," Blood shares.

Digital apprenticeships and mentorship

Part of this decision to reestablish in-person work stems from the desire to develop a certain type of experience that remote work just cannot offer. A Zoom meeting does not capture the subtle dynamics and nuances of a negotiation. It does not offer a meaningful opportunity to hold a post-meeting discussion during which many important personal relationships can be forged.

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"When it's online, you don't get that opportunity for the post-conversation. Everyone moves on to the next thing. You learn so much about the politics of an office or how to navigate conversations just by being in the room," Blood illustrates.

While more experienced professionals, with pre-pandemic tenure, may have cultivated such skills already, the younger generation of professionals who have begun to establish themselves in the remote-work era may not have the same opportunities. Blood is excited about AB InBev's new, agile way of thinking about such issues: communities of practice (CoP).

20th century guilds

Originally developed by cognitive anthropologists Etienne Charles Wenger and Jean Lave, communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to it better as they interact regularly." These CoPs engage in problem solving, development of shared measurement tools, and mapping knowledge and identification of gaps. In essence, it's a way for people to nurture an environment of collective learning.

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> Etienne Charles Wagner and Jean Lave

Blood was excited to talk about AB InBev's adoption of this approach: "It's a way of bringing together colleagues that are working on the same issue or topic across geographies. We have about 12 of these communities of practice that really focus on a challenge in a multidisciplinary way."

After seeing similar questions being raised across AB InBev's sprawling geographies, he seized the opportunity to problem solve in a more connected and efficient way. "Almost all the problems are

multidisciplinary, multi-functional, and require a full view of the business to solve the challenge," Blood explains.

Bottom-up for bottoms-up

While it may sound like a needlessly complex way of describing a "team," a community of practice is different in its purpose and function. A team is created by a manager to solve a particular problem or complete a specific project. A CoP, on the other hand, is informal. It chooses its own leadership, it organizes itself, and it aims to develop its members capabilities through the exchange of knowledge.

Attendance is not necessary, and one of key success measurements is the presence of this organic, bottom-up participation. Sure enough, Blood reported that there are self-organized communities of practice with semi-weekly 150-person meetings. "They're attending on their own. They're carving it out of their own busy schedule to attend, because it's producing results for them," he explained.

Planting seeds for future leadership

According to Blood, one of the most important investments that a company can make is in the next generation of leadership. After a unique experience at ACC's Executive Leadership Institute (ELI), his conviction in this regard grew stronger. While this is a broad, abstract issue, Blood sees a concrete, tangible solution. When asked about what AB InBev is doing to ensure the continued professional development of its teams, he stressed that it's a learning environment that gives people the skills and confidence to persevere.



Proper mentorship will elevate future leaders to the next level of success.

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“I really encourage people to set up an environment where people say, ‘I’d like to expand my horizons, expand my expertise, learn, but not just learn, also apply my full self to it,’” Blood explains.

A welcome contagiousness

For those new to in-house, or thinking about an in-house future, Blood has some advice that he keeps returning to: be passionate about the business. “If you’re an outside lawyer at a firm and you love an industry that you’re working on, dive into that. If you have passion about an industry, talk to people about that industry,” he urges.

A passionate person is a magnetic person — if you have a passion for something, people will love it, people will invite you in, and people will want to help you. At AB InBev, that’s what they call “seed to sip.” By steeping yourself in your passions, you create your own orbit that will attract new relationships and create novel opportunities.

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At AB InBev, Communities of Practice has been key in brewing new passions and opportunities by exposing colleagues to different topics and challenges beyond individual geographical borders and company roles.

While it may have started with mostly in-house lawyers, the program has created shared capabilities for colleagues from other functions such as sales, marketing and sustainability to work together towards topics such as entrepreneurship, Smart Drinking and Road Safety.

According to Blood, Smart Drinking has by far the widest global reach with around 43 countries participating to advance the company’s efforts to reduce the harmful consumption of alcohol. Multiple in-house functions are engaged to provide Smart Drinking resources and evidence-based programs to consumers and communities, leverage the power of marketing to help influence behavior changes and new social norms, promote the adoption of evidence-based public policy regarding alcohol and amplify Smart Drinking messages through digital communications and technology.

Despite these successes, the work is far from done. Blood hopes to identify additional “seeds” of opportunities for internal cross-function capabilities and external consultation opportunities to brew, as he calls it, “the best beer legal firm in the world.”

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