

How to recruit and retain top talents is a crucial factor in today’s business environment. *African Business* asked the Leaders Panel at the GCC West Africa Talent Series to share their thoughts on the subject.

# Roundtable: How can companies attract, manage and retain top talent?

In economies that are increasingly skills-based, recruiting, nurturing and retaining talent are increasingly critical to an organisation’s success. As a follow-up to our Employer of Choice annual ranking (see *African Business* issue 452) our publisher chaired the Leaders’ Panel at the Global Career Company West Africa Talent Agenda Series that took place in Lagos in May. It provided an interesting discussion and many insights. We present excerpts below.

**Moderator:** *At the World Economic Forum earlier this year, the prime minister of Canada said, “The pace of change has never been this fast, yet it will never be this slow again.” Which basically means that businesses are changing, the world is changing very fast and we need to adapt to it. And that’s going to impact all our businesses,*

**Opposite:** The panel line up, accompanied by Omar Ben Yedder, Group Publisher, IC Publications (far left), Oscar Onyema, CEO of the Nigerian Stock Exchange (3rd from left), and Rupert Adcock, managing director of Global Careers Company (far right).

*wherever we are. The media and communication space is changing my business and I know it is disrupting many areas, from finance to technology.*

*In this year’s Employer of Choice Survey, the key drivers that people were looking for was training and talent development. But something that’s very important in Africa compared to the rest of the world is making an impact. Another key driver is trust in senior leadership, which means that candidates want a leader that they can believe in, that they are happy to follow and who will also be a fair and accountable.*

*Oscar Onyema in his keynote address said something interesting, stating that “talent, today, is as important as the income statement” for those investing in institutions. So, numbers matter but ultimately talent matters just as much.*

*I want to understand how you are all managing*

Talent, today, is as important as the income statement.

Oscar Onyema, CEO, Nigerian Stock Exchange



## The panel



AMY JADESIMI

Managing director, LADOL

A medical doctor by training, Amy has overseen rapid growth at LADOL, an oil and gas fabrication and multi-logistics service based in Nigeria. She was on the 2015 advisory board for the UN Development Programme’s Africa Human Development Report and joined LADOL after working at Goldman Sachs and Brait Private Equity in London.



AUSTIN OKERE

Founder, Computer Warehouse Group

Austin is the founder and entrepreneur-in-residence at the Ausso Leadership Academy. Computer Warehouse Group, which he founded in 1992, has been recognised as a Global Growth Company by the World Economic Forum and is the largest security listed in the Technology Sector of the Nigerian Stock Exchange.



KAMAR BAKRIN

Operating partner, Helios Investment Partners

Kamar heads Helios’s Lagos office. Before this, he was a director at the corporate office of the Honeywell Group, a Nigerian conglomerate, where he was responsible for the natural resources and power infrastructure businesses. He previously founded and run Vios Principals, a principal investment and advisory firm.



WELELA DAWIT

Chief financial officer, GE Power Services – Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), GE West Africa

Welea joined GE in 2005. In her current role, which she started in March 2015, she leads a regional team of finance professionals within GE’s Power Services businesses in sub-Saharan Africa and across all business in Western Africa.



talent, your roles as leaders in different institutions to grow these businesses. I'll start with you, Amy. How have you managed to grow your company into what it is today and how have you managed to compete with the multinationals out there, who are generally better known and more attractive to the top talent in Africa?

**Amy:** The most important thing is people. And LADOL is where it is today, 100% because of its people, because of the teamwork. We talk about this being the fourth industrial revolution, but just to illustrate how important people are, I think this could maybe be the fifth and not the fourth, and I'll tell you why. There's a school of thought that says, "The fourth industrial revolution actually happened in the West, in the US or the UK primarily, some parts of Western Europe, around the mid-twentieth century, around the 1940s, 1950s, with the invention of the washing machine." With the invention of the washing machine and other household tools, women didn't have to stay at home; women could go out to work. And you went from a situation where the vast majority of women were employed in menial jobs as housekeepers, to where they could actually join the workforce. And that dramatically increased the productivity in America and drove a lot of the prosperity that you see in the West now.

In Nigeria, we are very much like America before the invention of the washing machine. We're not taking advantage of all of our talent. We're not taking advantage of women. We have issues with diversity in a lot of companies and even in multinationals. You find that when they employ Nigerians, they don't give them opportunities. So, when we started LADOL, we knew from the kick-off that we needed to have the very best people. The very best people sometimes don't know they're the very best; they're hard to find; it's difficult to attract them to Nigeria. So, we did everything we could to plan ahead and we went to extraordinary lengths to find the right people wherever we could.

In terms of Nigerian talent, a lot of the things we do at LADOL had never been done in Nigeria before. So, again, right from the very beginning, we hired the smartest, brightest people we could. Sometimes they didn't have any experience in the areas that we are working in. I myself have had different careers [Amy had trained as a medical doctor and started her career in investment banking], so I know that doesn't matter, if you have someone who's really smart, and who's dedicated to your business, then they will succeed.

And then finally, in terms of really mobilising and energising that talent, we were always very clear about the vision and the mission that we were trying to achieve. I think having a team that's focused on realising some-



“When we started LADOL, we knew from the kick-off that we needed to have the very best people.

thing, where the rest of the world doesn't believe that what you are doing is possible, and the main reason they don't think it's possible is because you're Nigerian, which is ridiculous even now when you say that out loud. But there are a lot of people who still believe that. So, having a team that can see beyond the perceptions that the rest of the world had about us and could believe in what we were doing, even though it was really hard, and we didn't have the resources to do it, was instrumental to our success.

And for looking at this as a countrywide issue, we see all the time now, divisions between parts of the country, divisions between men and women, divisions between tribes, is crazy. Think about that story about the washing machine, mobilising 50% of the people in the country, which was just mobilising the women in the West, but mobilising the whole of our country and looking at how all of those talented people, all over the country, can be energised and can be motivated to follow a career path in any of your companies, is super important.

The cost to the company of doing this initially is high and that also has to be recognised and that's why I said we made a conscious effort, because it's expensive to train people, it's expensive to recruit people and conduct the background checks; to find out what grade someone got in high school and what grades they got in university. So, you have to have a strong commitment to do it, but I would definitely credit our success at LADOL to the fact that we've made that effort and that we continue to put so much emphasis on the quality of the people we hire.

*And in terms of the culture that you are selling to prospective employees, again, in terms of the culture and the skill sets that you are looking for, how do you attract those employees? Did you say, "We can prove these guys wrong. We can actually build a world-class business that can compete with anyone out there and that can offer the services that they have in Singapore, Rotterdam,*



*wherever it may be"? And what were the skill sets you were looking for?*

**Amy:** Well, I would say the most important thing is transparency and then second to transparency is consistency and discipline. So, in other words, we told people exactly what we were about: "This is what we're building, it's going to be hard, it's going to take a long time. I'm going to need you to work really hard and be excellent in whatever area you need to work in and that's going to vary day to day." We were very transparent about that.

Then at every stage of the company, we put in as many policies and procedures as we could, so that we could have that consistency and discipline. You want people to know what they're in for. For some people, especially as you become more successful, this actually becomes more of an issue because people will want to join you for the wrong reasons, even though you are very transparent about who you are and how you operate – we're not an oil and gas company, so don't come and work for LADOL if you want to be in a fancy oil and gas company, that isn't who we are.

So, we're very transparent, but then when people join, if they join for the wrong reasons, the policies and procedures that we put in place, which are very strict, very rapidly make it apparent that it's only if you have this particular type of teamwork-driven personality that's focused on achieving the same mission as everyone else in the team, it's only then that you'll be able to succeed in the company. It's important to have heads of department as you grow, as it's the heads of department that carry through those philosophies.

*It's interesting that you mentioned diversity and you said that even in certain multinationals in Africa, they may not be as meritocratic as they should be. I'd like to go to you Welela. I've been following GE for about 10 years and possibly more closely when you opened your Africa*

*HQs in Nairobi. You've got Jay Ireland, an American, who heads GE Africa, but everyone else within the new management team of the various divisions, be it health-care, be it transport, be it power, is African. So, it seems to have been a conscious decision to put Africans in charge of those operations across Africa.*

**Welela:** Jay, our CEO for GE Africa was incredibly intentional about making sure that we have local talent, not only leading the businesses but also leading functions within GE. One of the benefits of working for such a big multinational, such as GE, with 300,000 employees, is that we have a deep talent pool to recruit from. So, there was an incredible effort around recruiting diaspora that were already within the GE system but just happened to be working in Europe, in the US, in other parts of the globe and then bringing them back home to the region.

There were certain areas where we didn't have the skill sets and the capacity internally within the company, and we went out and searched externally. In some cases, we did bring in GE DNA – expats to come in and do internal assignments for two or three years. Or they went out and hired someone who would eventually become a successor for them and put them on a very deliberate successor and training plan in order to eventually localise that executive or senior executive role.

It's that, coupled with being able to partner with external talent executive search services to help us understand who was out there, because up until 2011, GE was present in the region, but we were shy. We had one foot in and we were very focused in the oil and gas sector but not really anywhere else. And so, we needed to leverage, target recruitment services, external head hunters to be able to help educate us on the market, on how to be able to recruit talent, how to attract talent, what was the value proposition that was going to be needed in order to be able to attract and retain talent. And then of course, putting it on very incremental development programmes.

Oscar mentioned something around having exchange programmes. We did that with some of our leaders, whom we brought in externally. To help them to really understand GE culture, we would send them to the US. We would send them to Europe. We would send them to very established GE environments, to make sure that they are known.

So, when they come back into the region in those leadership roles, they are empowered, and they have capacity and there's trust between them and GE outside the region. It was seen as a combination of those efforts. But it was something that Jay was absolutely intentional about. And it only gives us that much more credibility, when it comes to interacting with our customers and so forth.

Above: Amy Jadesimi (left) looks on as Austin Okere (right) speaks. Opposite: Delegates listen to the Leaders Panel at the West African Talent Agenda Series.



Oscar mentioned that the tenure in a company is generally less than five years today. But I think the GE story's a little bit different. Maybe it's because you guys have got an engineering mindset where things are long-term, while many businesses may have a shorter-term mindset.

You have launched GE Garages in Lagos and elsewhere around the world. What are the Garages for ultimately? Is it about identifying talent and then recruiting them and training them to become future leaders? Or is more about identifying disruptions and disruptive technologies that GE can take over and adapt to the new digital age?

**Welela:** It's a combination of the two. GE Garages is essentially a hub that's dedicated towards advanced manufacturing, innovation, and so forth. So, we have a permanent installation of it here in Nigeria, co-located in our offices here in Lagos. It was originally started in 2012 as a means of inspiring innovation, ingenuity and manufacturing in America. But obviously we saw a need for it here, when it came to developing SMEs and developing entrepreneurial skills, as well as providing access to technology, such as 3D printers, laser cutting, things of that nature.

We advocated and got a temporary pilot programme, located here in Lagos for six weeks. And then the programme itself was incredibly successful. We partnered with the Lagos State on it. And because of the success of that programme, we were able to get it permanently installed. And this programme, it's not for GE talent only but it's actually for young, local entrepreneurs to be able to apply and participate. It is essentially a four-week programme or a one-week programme, industry specific, where they essentially go through a programme of having access to all the technology and the tools, mentoring – they're taught courses around marketing, customer acquisition, finance, sales, things of that nature.

Essentially, they are taught to put together a business plan for themselves. And they use the technology in order to be able to come up with prototypes. We've been able to put over 200 young entrepreneurs through the programme. We've been able to create 60 plus practical business models through it. A number of these prototypes and projects that these young entrepreneurs have worked on have won awards and been recognised.

And for us it's a couple of things. We benefit from being able to identify young talent, so that we can bring them on board if we see fit. But it's also about promoting skills development and entrepreneurship here. We're providing them the very practical things that are not taught. These are skills that are not easily accessible, especially in a programmable approach, the way that we've done it.

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If there's just the slightest question mark around the person's integrity, then it's a no-no.

It becomes a very powerful tool. You can eventually use this to build up more of the skills of SMEs that we engage with as we go through our localisation efforts, because one of the challenges that we struggle with doing more in terms of localisation [and backward integration].

Again, it gives us access to young talent and we can benefit from the ideas that are generated through what we've done. But for the most part, it's more about creating a culture of developing SMEs and entrepreneurship.

Do people generally have long tenures at GE? Is there less turnover than in other companies?

**Welela:** The thing about GE is that we like to grab them when they're young. I was an intern when I was in university. GE is the only place I've ever known. I've been with the company 13 years. My story is very typical in the US, in Europe. I entered through leadership programmes; I entered through the financial management programme. I accelerated my career significantly through these programmes. My story is pretty typical in that market.

We've been on the continent for over 100 years, but we've scaled up significantly over the last eight to 10 years. The average tenure for an employee today in this part of the world is about four to five years. But what we see is that typically in GE, once people stay after seven years, they basically spend their careers with us.

In terms of the HR strategy thinking, how aligned is it to the senior management, CEO strategy thinking? You are saying there are a lot of opportunities to change jobs, or to change the visions, or to change paths. So, there seems to be some kind of alignment to management culture.

**Welela:** There is, absolutely. It starts at the very beginning of the year. We have this thing called a Blueprint, which is essentially our priorities for the year and it's our strategic priorities and it also includes our organisational priorities. And if you look at any GE office – forgive me because I've only been in GE, but I imagine this is the same as other multinationals – next to the CEO's office, it's always the HR leader's office and then the CFO's office. It's always that way. Next to the CEO, it's always the HR leader and then the CFO.

So, Kamar, you've worked for a number of companies – Honeywell, Boston Consulting Group, Colgate – today, you're at Helios. In private equity you're looking at investing in a company, transforming it and then exiting from your investment. But to transform a company you need strong management and to grow the company you need to be sure that talent pool is present. So, how important is the HR aspect or the whole human capacity



aspect when you're making those decisions [in terms of companies to invest in]? Especially as your investments are very diverse and therefore will require very specific skillsets as the companies grow?

**Kamar:** Helios itself has between 40 and 50 people across our offices. Yet we manage businesses with maybe 5,000 people. So, clearly, we're not the ones doing the work – obviously we don't run businesses, we invest in businesses and let them run. And clearly, the only way we make money for our investors and ultimately, for the members of the firm, is by significantly increasing the value of the businesses that we invest in.

The single most important thing, after those initial reflexions – whether it is a business that makes sense, an industry that makes sense, and so on – is the people. That takes up by far the bulk of the time of someone like myself, as a partner in a portfolio operations team, where all I am focused on is value creation.

You do not show up at the investment committee (IC) you work with without a very clear plan. And that includes an evaluation of the team that is actually going

Kamar Bakrin of Helios underscored the importance for investors of seeing that a company has the right team.

to create this value. So, after you've done all your nice projections and your five-year plans and your return scenarios, the next obvious question is about the people who are going to do the work. Until you do a very thorough evaluation of each critical member of the leadership team and very clearly state these are people that we think we can back, or show a very clear plan of how we are going to build on the team, it won't pass IC.

And you need to align the incentives of the team, the leadership team in question, to ensure that they actually deliver on those things. You do not show up at an IC without a management incentive plan. We won't execute an investment unless we have figured all this stuff out. A key part is the 100-day plan, which we do before we get an approval for any investment. It also includes the people components and how you're going to plug any gaps in the management team.

In terms of the leadership, there are four things that we tend to look for as we recruit leaders, especially for the role of CEO. One is that they have a very clear understanding of how value is created in the business. The second thing that I'm looking for is experience in actually creating value. And again, because this is Africa, and we're investing sometimes in fairly new industries, where there are no existing businesses, we tend to look for people with experience in similar industries. We recently did an investment in the solar distributed solar business. There aren't many former solar CEOs in Africa, so you tend to then to look for analogous people who are based in analogous industries and have been successful in them. You look for someone who's done stuff in distributed asset businesses.

Another thing we're looking for is a factor that I call resilience. This is a challenging business environment, so you don't want someone who will cut and run at the first challenge that they meet. You want that ability to bounce back, that ability to find solutions.

And then the last one, of course, which is absolutely non-negotiable, is integrity. For us, integrity is such a big thing, that you can have all these other things, but if there's just the slightest question mark around the person's integrity, then it's a no-no. It's why we put these things in place, because we know that if we have this type of person, your work is actually done for the most part. Everything else – processes, systems – once you get the people part right, you're really coasting for the most part. That is the secret that you don't let up on.

You are an African company and most of the companies that you invest in are homegrown African companies that have been built and developed by African teams. Do you



*think it's easier to attract top talent than it would have been 10 or 15 years ago?*

**Kamar:** In some ways, yes, it is easier because there's this crop of truly global young African talent that has emerged, whether trained abroad or from some pretty decent institutions within Africa. But the competition for talent has never been as fierce as it is today. When I started work, 30 odd years ago, in Nigeria, if you wanted to work in professional services, you worked in Ernst & Young or Price Waterhouse. In order to work in banking, you went to Citibank. Fast-forward 30 odd years, and there are so many options: McKinsey and Bain are here; you want to do banking, there's Standard Bank and all these large local banks. There are new industries that didn't exist all those years ago, MTN and others also recruiting for top talent. You can't take anybody for granted because they have options; and this is something that needs to be thought about.

*So, Austin, you've built a business that operates across West Africa and ultimately, when we look at your history, we can see that you were ahead of the curve in terms of being in the tech sector, which today is booming and where everyone wants to work. What were the challenges that you faced when you built the business in your particular sector?*

**Austin:** When I was building CWG, it wasn't a plc. It used to be called Computer Warehouse Limited; today it's CWG plc. The skills shortage was the biggest challenge. As has been said, today you have global millennials that are available and they are ready to hit the ground running. It wasn't like that when we started the company in 1992 and we were competing with established companies like IBM and ICL that were hungry for skills as well.

So, it was the biggest challenge and what we did was to start, in a very short period of time, an academy. We called it the CWG Academy. We started the academy because we found that after we had taken the time to effectively train the young people that we got, usually from the youth corps, or youth service, to where we could begin to use them effectively, the bigger deep-pocketed corporates just came and took them.

At one point in time, we were advocating legislation against poaching from smaller Nigerian companies but that wasn't going anywhere. We used to send them training overseas and they come back and then even if you signed a bond, if the guy was really not happy there, the bond meant nothing.

So we decided to actually accelerate this assembly line to develop a ready supply of skills, knowing that we were going to lose skills, and that if we did, then we

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You'd be astonished just how capable and exposed young talent are to digital technology.

could very easily put somebody on the project and not lose the project entirely. And that reduced the attrition tremendously. People knew that immediately you made signs to leave, we quite deliberately relieved you of your critical roles and someone was waiting.

The academy is still ongoing and has become the cornerstone of a lot of the technical skills in Nigeria. We train 50 people in a quarter. The quarterly training is three months. In a year, we train 200 people. We are 625 people, so obviously we don't need all the 200. We take the best 10%; the next 10% goes to our customers; the bottom go to our competitors. But we train for everybody and in a lot of the companies you see here [in Nigeria] in technology, the CEOs are alumni of CWG Academy.

Yesterday one of my former staff, who's now built a very successful business, was at the class in our leadership academy [Ausso Leadership Academy]. And people were asking him how long he worked at CWG and why he left. He worked at CWG for 16 years and I think in 16 years he's paid all his dues. So, he left to go and start his business, very successfully and his answer about why he stayed for 16 years was, he said, personal gravitas. People want to be sure that they're following a leader that is making an impact and therefore, they will also make an impact.

This also came out very clearly in the Employer of Choice report – people follow a leader that builds other leaders, rather than following a leader that is just leading followers. And this is what has been manifest in a lot of the CWG people going on to become leaders themselves in where they have gone to.

*So, Austin, you've set up an academy and a leadership academy. Do you feel that what's coming out of the educational system isn't suited to the realities of the business world?*

**Austin:** I think that there can be some improvement. We have to reimagine the whole education process, especially when a professor stands in front of a class and just keeps talking and reading manuals and so on. It's really not going to work anymore. You have to invent the class and get the class to then think through what they want to do. In our leadership academy, which is based on our CWG Academy, we are looking at creating a whole pool of high-growth entrepreneur businesses to succeed and high-performing intrapreneurs to also succeed.

*So, Kamar and Welela, I wanted to ask you about digital skills with technology transforming the way businesses operate. Is the talent pool there and if not, what are you guys doing about it?*



Welela Dawit cited the benefits of receiving reverse mentoring from young talents in the digital field.

**Kamar:** There's a nascent talent pool. It needs to be developed and it needs to be supported by infrastructure, but we have seen, definitely, that the fundamentals are there. You have smart, ambitious people with a lot of creativity and innovation. The key things they are missing is that exposure, as well as the enabling infrastructure to make things happen. I'm super optimistic about the future but those two things have to happen.

*Welela, I know that GE has adopted the lean startup philosophy to become more agile and embrace technology and change.*

**Welela:** I agree, the skill set is there, it just needs to be nurtured and focused. As a company, we've shifted pretty dramatically to this digital industrial culture and strategy and path and that's essentially combining software with hardware for multiple benefits.

When I look at the Garages, you'd be astonished, actually, just how capable and how exposed young talent are to this. Things like coding, things like robotics, concepts like this where we just need to continue to nurture it and focus it more in an industrial application. I mean I benefit from reverse mentoring from a young talent because I feel very archaic. I know how to use Facebook on my phone or have a tweet but apparently, that's not enough.

But then in myself, as a leader in a digital industrial company, I've had to get myself up a learning curve and you have to be very intentional about this. Just because I'm a finance person I can't not be someone who embraces this digital culture. So, reading books such as *Digital to the Core* has helped me adapt to this.

When I first joined the company, it was all about Six Sigma process, operational excellence, reducing errors. And we evolved slowly to this concept of lean, which is basically figuring out faster and smarter ways to execute. We are now at a point where we are trying to combine the two, because we don't want to lose the operational excellence that we have always been known for but at the same time, you don't want to be burdened by process. So, we leverage digital tools, predicts, digital thread, all these kinds of concepts to bridge the two, in order for us to be lean in how we work but still have operational excellence.

*Thank you. I think you also made a great concluding point in terms of reverse mentoring. I was reading an article about the CEO of Estée Lauder, who is in his late 60s, but they've got a reverse mentoring philosophy in the company. And he's learning amazing things from the young graduates and the recent intakes, especially in this fast-moving world we are living in. ■*

**AFREXIMBANK:**

**PUTTING RECRUITMENT AT THE HEART OF A GROWTH STRATEGY**

The day's discussions at the West African Talent Agenda Series were chaired by Stephen Kauma, the director of human resources at Afreximbank, which this year is celebrating its 25th anniversary.

In five years it has doubled its staff numbers. In line with the bank's African orientation, the majority of its people are Africans, from 27 African countries (and growing). What the bank looks for, says Kauma, is deep knowledge and experience of the African continent's history

With the bank rapidly expanding, since 2014 it has deployed a tailored balanced scorecard approach to its business planning and performance measurement process. This is underpinned by an inhouse tool developed by Kauma, the Employee/Employer Value proposition (E<sup>2</sup>VP) model, which since implementation in 2016 has helped to foster the right people behaviour, creating the Afreximbank culture of innovation, passion for learning, responsiveness and commitment to Africa while supporting African emancipation and empowerment.

For Kauma, there is a clear link between the Bank's success over the years and the manner in which its people are recruited and managed. The tailored scorecard approach to business planning as well as the customised E<sup>2</sup>VP model act as tools that guarantee the bank continues to attract the best staff.