The Amrop Digital Interviews:
Mikael Norr, Sweden

Mikael Norr is the Managing Partner at Amrop's Stockholm office and a member of Amrop's Global Digital Practice.
We spoke to him about leadership in the tech sector.

Q: Mikael, you've been with Amrop for 14 years. Can you talk a little about your professional experience prior to joining the firm and how it's helped you shape your career within the company?

A: Looking at my experience prior to coming on board with Amrop, one of the most valuable things is probably that I come from an HR background and that I also had line management roles. I believe that this gives me a bit of a broader view on how companies – our clients actually work with recruitment and development of people. As consultants we always tend to think that what we do is the most important thing on our clients' agenda, but, having worked at a large company with an HR department, I'm aware that they might have other things on their mind too! I sometimes say to my colleagues: if they don't immediately answer your emails, there might be a "fire" happening somewhere else!

Another thing I had been doing before joining Amrop was investing in some small start-ups and was on the board of directors for some of them, as well as I did some M&A with them. I find this experience valuable for our line of work at Amrop too. Having worked with hyper-growth companies, it's easier to work with digital scale-ups now than if I would have been if I had spent my professional life in a corporate environment.

Your focus at Amrop is now the digital and technology sectors. Can you tell me a bit about the types of clients you've been working with before and ones you're working with now? What's your experience working with the companies in the tech sector?

I started off working with clients in telecommunications, but over the last couple of years my only focus is, indeed, tech companies. My experience prior to working at Amrop has again come in handy – I've been working with smaller companies, so at Amrop I've been able to transition smoothly from telecom and IT giants like Ericsson or IBM to what could be called the "future companies". When I started this transition seven years ago, my largest client was the telecommunications operator Telia, which was stable, but now growing; now my portfolio is much more diverse – and it's a lot more fun for me to work with these rapidly growing companies.

The things which I've done which have helped me advance quite a bit are: I started working with a VC fund. I knew the Managing Partner of the fund before they even launched their project, and we discussed their business opportunities. Now they use us for assessment of the founding teams of the companies they are thinking about investing in. Basically, I help them understand what type of team they are going to get if they invest in the particular company. We have assessed about 25 of their companies so far,

and it is maybe not the largest source of income for Amrop but working with them gives me excellent insights in the world of digital start-ups. Not only does it keep me well informed, but it clearly gets larger potential clients interested in our business – it's simply a lot more interesting for them to hear about the likes of Spotify than our larger, more stable corporate clients.

You mentioned that there were two things you did, which helped you advance in the tech sector – working with the tech start-up fund was one; what's the second one?

Thanks to my involvement in early-stage tech companies I have got exposure to many different kinds of owners. Another type of active owner is the different tech funds. When getting to understand them it is very beneficial for both parties to discuss everything from Board composition to Leadership and CEO qualities. This has also helped me to get a good understanding of how the investor community thinks and acts.

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What, in your view, are the qualities which are essential for leadership positions in the digital sector?

One thing is the generic leadership qualities, which, in my view, don't differ so much across sectors – if you're successful outside of the digital sector, you can be successful in the digital sector too. But, I believe, it is important that one has an understanding of the modern way of working. Everyone is now talking about agility, but if I have to translate what it means in terms of general leadership qualities – one must have the attitude of "test-fail-test again", learn from mistakes and be very dynamic in one's line of work.

The normal "before" way of working was that you had large projects going on, as in, there's a big thing you want to do, then you work on that for several years and then you launch it. Now, if you're developing a product in the technology sector, you have to work much faster, and take into account all the changes that are happening around you. So that's my view on generic qualities, but then in the technology sector there's also functional product knowledge.

If you take, for instance, an e-commerce company, you can see that they're built on different digital products, such as the check-out, the payment, the shipment... In the digital sector the product has crucial importance, so as a leader you must have some understanding of how it works and how it all fits together. In other sectors you can be a more generic leader, but in a digital company you need to understand how you develop products. You need to know how a technical product road map is developed and how that is linked to driving and converting traffic, customer experience, on the one hand and the core engineering and architecture on the other.

Can that be learned at an organization or do the tech leaders always need to have previous experience in the sector?

It depends on exactly what type of company you're joining, but there should be some understanding of the digital product. You can learn that, of course, but you need to have a keen interest and understanding of both the inside-out and outside-in perspective – the customer experience of the product and the engineering challenges. If you don't have any previous experience in the digital sector, it's a huge learning curve, but, otherwise, as long as you believe in a more agile way of running an organization and have a more modern way of thinking about how to lead people, I think it's possible.

What is your process of assessing whether a candidate is a good fit for a leadership position in a digital company?

It is a broad question… but as an example: most digital companies attract their customers online, so I need to get the candidate to explain how they would drive traffic to their site and how they develop the customers once they're already using the product or service. Essentially, I want to hear them explain from A to Z how the company should operate. They must also have a keen interest in the customer experience and how the customers view the company – a more outside-in than inside-out perspective, and also an understanding on how the full supply chain works in a digital company.

You are a member of and were previously leading the Amrop Global Digital Practice Team which brings together specialists from Amrop's offices around the globe with deep technology and digital knowledge and sector experience. Can you tell me what the main benefits are of being part of the Global Digital Practice?

An obvious benefit is, of course, that the existence of the Global Digital Practice allows us to work on cross-border business opportunities, especially when we're doing projects with large companies. We recently did a project with Google, where we had seven members of the Digital Practice collaborating from different countries. It's great that we can show multinational companies that we have the right type of experts in the Practice from different countries, who know their country and its digital space. When I was leading the Digital Practice, we started the sub-sector specialization, which was, of course, always out there. However, by grouping professionals around these sub-sectors, such as Cybersecurity, Telecom, Fintech, Media & Entertainment and so on, we can clearly show our clients the type of expertise and deep knowledge that each of the members has. Of course, we also help one another out a lot, and we have bi-weekly meetings, where we discuss various opportunities, and it works great.

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