

The design agency leader who became CEO of the Year

Described as responsive and strategic with the ability to spark enthusiasm in others, after less than two years as a CEO, she was given an award for her leadership. Meet **Pernilla Dahlman**, Screen Interaction's "conductor of innovation" who loves networks, communications, prototyping and digital business development.

By **Lena Lidberg**

LIGHT AND SPACE – BUT STILL A BIG CITY PULSE. Screen Interaction's premises on the 29th floor of Victoria Tower in Stockholm's Kista district offer a magnificent view.

"Down on the street it can sometimes be cloudy while it's sunny up here," says CEO Pernilla Dahlman.

The T-shaped glass building was designed by Wingårdh architects for Scandic Hotels. At 120 metres it is northern Europe's highest hotel, neighbouring the E4 motorway, the railway and the Kista trade fair venue.

The tenants in this internationally renowned skyscraper include a number of companies. The creatively designed tower suits a design and innovation agency like Screen Interaction. On this particular Thursday about 20 employees are present, working to find tomorrow's solutions to everything from energy savings and mobile security systems to user-friendly online services.

The firm's customers are found in both the public and private sectors: from the Swedish Social Insurance Agency and the Swedish Public Employment Service to Ericsson, the Länsförsäkringar group of insurance companies, Swedish TV4 and Assa Abloy.

During the two years that Pernilla Dahlman has led the company, its growth and amount of business have rapidly reached new heights. Screen Interaction's sales revenue has increased from SEK 19m to SEK 70m (EUR 2m to EUR 7.5m).

Among the employees, the proportion of women has increased from 12 to 37 percent and the number of nationalities from 10 to 18. Both customer and employee satisfaction have increased and staff turnover has fallen.

The successes have also had external ripples. When the

Swedish leadership website Motivation.se announced its awards in November for 2015's most outstanding business leaders, Pernilla Dahlman was selected as CEO of the Year in the small company category.

Earlier that same year she was also one of five finalists in the Swedish telecom industry's annual Telekomgalan award for Woman Role Model of the Year.

One of the juries singled out her ability to create an innovation culture and a "we" feeling, and described her leadership as "passionate and responsive". The other jury called her "strategic and analytical, with a great ability to spark enthusiasm in others".

How would you describe your leadership, Pernilla Dahlman?

"I have a strong sense of empathy and believe it's important to be a clear communicator. A leader must be able to single out the goals and overall picture without getting bogged down in the details. Previously I've worked as a project manager and in project organisations. This has made me think in terms of networks, become skilled at dealing with change, and be able to get results quickly. In many ways, a company is like a symphony orchestra where the CEO functions as the conductor. You have to be a visionary but also have good listening skills, be able to mediate and be able to create a sense of security and respect for each other within the group."

What have you done to create an innovation culture?

"I spent my first year being very present at the office in order to get to know the company and the employees. Security and



Photo: Alexander Koste

Pernilla Dahlman

trust are the whole foundation so people can dare to contribute and innovate. The next step was to shape the organisation – to recruit managers and workers, to drive the ‘orchestra’ forward and to start playing the same music. When we recruit we focus on people, not on job roles. We look at their values, personality, ambition and empathy. When you have the right team players, the job roles work out later. The third stage, which I’m in now, is to look outwards more. This involves spending a lot of time building relationships and visiting customers. After winning the CEO of the Year award, I’ve also received many requests to speak in various contexts, which is really fun. It also gives new angles of approach and new contacts.”

What characterises a good innovation climate?

“What you do has to have a higher meaning, one that everyone within the organisation can support. At Screen Interaction our mission is to reach out to many people and to make people’s daily lives easier with the digital solutions we create. Another important aspect is the ‘we’ feeling: instead of closed hierarchies you need open relationship networks in which your staff, customers, suppliers and other business partners are all included and all contribute. For example, here we say ‘relationship manager’ rather than ‘sales rep’. The leadership must be non-controlling – if employees are to have a chance to develop they must be allowed to fail and to learn from that. In a design-driven business it’s about getting everyone to listen, to understand and to generate ideas, and then to prototype and to experiment. Sometimes you also need games and lab work as practice for when you go ‘live’. All innovation work starts with transparency – whereby everyone shares their knowledge and

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experience. If a customer grows and becomes successful, my network also benefits. What’s good for you is good for me and vice versa.”

Who are you as an individual?

“I spent my first years in Huddinge south of Stockholm. When I was in second grade we moved to [the Stockholm district of] Bromma. I’m the oldest of three siblings; my brothers are four and ten years younger. We come from an entrepreneurial family, whose business interests have included being real estate agents. That made me interested in buildings and building management. My father comes from a farming family in Axvall outside [the western Swedish city of] Skara, and my paternal grandmother is one of my role models. Many of my characteristics are like hers: down to earth, stable, caring, farsighted, used to solving the problems that turn up.... I have an enquiring mind and was good at school. As a teenager I dreamed of becoming a journalist but I specialised in economics in secondary school and then studied international economics at Uppsala University. I also have secondary-school graduation-level credits in science and languages. I’ve also spent a term in France studying French.”

“The need for digital transformation is huge and there is an almost unlimited amount of work for all those concerned.”

How did you get into the world of design?

“After my studies I was a trainee at IBM in sales plus other fields. I stayed with the company and worked with project management and change management, which I then continued with at the management consultancy Askus. My next job was with Sandvik, where I stayed for about six years. Most of that time I was based in Sandviken but I also spent two years in Germany. It was during my time with Sandvik that I realised that fundamentally I have an aesthetic disposition and that I’m passionate about learning processes, people and communication. After having my two children I wanted to make a change to my professional life.

One day I saw an ad from SVID, which I then didn’t know much about. It was a contract job for Design Open, which was a competition for students in 2009 to 2011 about business development with the aid of design. I got the job – but it required a lot of courage as a new mother of two to leave a permanent job with Sandvik.... But my decision was absolutely right. I got to work with what I had missed, and it was at SVID that I became a design convert and got to know the whole industry.”

What was your first impression of the design industry?

“As someone who came from outside, I felt that the industry needed to become more outgoing and better at packaging its offerings in terms of value. After my time at SVID I therefore founded a limited company and began helping design agencies with marketing and pricing. One thing led to another and at the end of 2011 I was hired as marketing director at Transformator Design. I worked there for almost three years before becoming CEO of Screen Interaction.”

How would you describe the industry’s development in recent years?

“What is good is that more and more Swedish companies and organisations are starting to realise the value of design as a process. The digitalisation and development of social media has meant that customers’ influence is now greater than ever. As a result, products and services must be developed in close collaboration with the customers. The players who are leading the charge when it comes to working in a customer- and design-driven way are not companies but rather the public-sector authorities. The Social Insurance Agency has come the furthest but there are also other examples: the Swedish Companies Registration Office, the Swedish Tax Agency, the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth.... Here at Screen

Interaction we’ve recently signed a framework agreement with the Public Employment Service, which is terrific. We’re really looking forward to being able to work with design processes in the important issues they are dealing with.”

What industry challenges do you see ahead?

“The need for digital transformation is huge and there is an almost unlimited amount of work for all those concerned. At the same time, an industry shift is occurring whereby design agencies, brand and communications consultants, product development companies and the giant consultancies are operating in the digital arena. One critical challenge for everyone, both agencies and customers, is to attract the skill that’s needed. The need is far greater than the supply. For the agencies I think the challenge can sometimes be to adequately serve their customers. Someone who can support the customer through the entire process – from strategy and concept to product development and management – becomes valuable. It is a plus to be a partner in organisational development and change management simultaneously. The value for the customer lies in manifesting the change, which requires many different skills.”

What are the internal challenges in a fast-growing company like Screen Interaction?

“We’re deliberately striving for a broad base of backgrounds and nationalities, which are good for the innovation climate. But to create a ‘we’ feeling, we must put a little extra emphasis on building a sense of fellowship, for example by trips and by meeting after work. We’ve always worked with global customers and global recruitment, which means we’re staying in regular touch with the Swedish Migration Agency. We’re trying to tackle the lack of housing in Stockholm by buying flats that we can sublet to our employees. Right now we have three or four such flats. We’re also trying to be flexible about the forms of employment and the ability to combine work and family life. If an employee wants to play in another orchestra one day, we will try to arrange that.”

You’ve recently also opened an office in Dubai – why is that?

“It’s a result of our employee-driven way of working. We discuss which customers we want to work with and which problems we want to solve. In this case there were two employees who saw opportunities for us in Dubai, and this led to the current situation where we have about a dozen employees working there. We’re also starting to get local customers and we hope to be able to influence the market with our values and our openness.”

During the interview Pernilla Dahlman often uses small sketches to clarify her thoughts. A pen and A3 paper have become two of her most faithful pieces of equipment at meetings so she can, in her words, “visualise and get a holistic picture.” Beside her is one of her favourite cups in Gefle Porslin’s clas-

sic flow blue Vinranka Grape Leaf pattern. She is also interested in that kind of design and says with a smile that her company's range of coffee mugs has changed since she became CEO. The standard white mugs have been gradually replaced by more colourful, individual alternatives.

What do you do to lead yourself?

"About once a quarter I make an overall plan for how I will allocate my time. Then I take about half a day every other week when I withdraw to work with things like presentations. At a company like ours there are always many ideas being tossed around. So it's important to capture them, validate them, and see how they can be taken further. When there is a high level of activity at work, I have a greater need to reflect and focus inward. Then I try to do things by myself: read, write, listen to music.... I usually get the best ideas when I'm doing something monotonous, such as running or sorting out stuff."

What is your driving force as a CEO?

"This is my first CEO job and I feel no prestige in being a CEO. However, I became a project manager early on and I have always been driven by leading, organising and seeing employees and customers grow – it creates so much joy! Allowing employees to take responsibility for finding solutions means that the result is not always what I had thought – it's often actually far better.... Our business plan is based on us being the drivers of change, and therefore both my colleagues and I need to learn to live with exactly that. I also have a dream of leading a happy company, one that people come to, belong to, thrive, and therefore deliver terrific things. When there is a humanist leadership it is also possible to achieve great successes and free up a lot of energy in each employee."

What are your best leadership tips?

"One of the biggest responsibilities for a leader is to know who they are themselves and to understand their own strengths and weaknesses. Discover your passion and philosophy – they will help you understand where you are suited to be a leader. You must also be able to work with your obstacles and not be afraid of asking for help. Another piece of advice is to acquire a broad knowledge base – it helps you to make better decisions. Cultivate interests outside your professional life."

What will you be doing in five years?

"I'll still be here at Screen Interaction. I am loyal and take a long-term approach. We've just started an exciting sustainability journey, where we will link arms with the goals that the UN has set for sustainable development. We will link the company's vision to measurable goals for everything from finances to equality issues. We will also use various forms of data to trace what effect our services have. I hope and believe that this can become trendsetting for other companies as well." ■

Facts

Pernilla Dahlman



Photo: Alexander Koste

Name: Pernilla Dahlman

Age: 45

Profession: CEO of the design and innovation agency Screen Interaction since March 2014. The company was founded in 2008 by four young interaction designers: Reza Assareh, David Furendal, Petter Olofsson and Martin Kurtsson.

Family: Two daughters, ages 8 and 10. Partner and a bonus child.

Living: About to leave her flat in Bromma for a large turn-of-the-century house in Spånga Solhem.

Leisure activities: Likes to discover new interests: dancing, diving, mountain biking... Trains karate with her children twice a week. Likes to run, pick berries and mushrooms, make juice and grow potatoes. Enjoys visiting the greenhouse at Stockholm's Bergius Botanical Garden.

The jury's comment on its choice of Pernilla Dahlman as CEO of the Year:

"This year's award winner in the small company category has in a very short period of time and with a passionate and responsive leadership succeeded in increasing the company's revenue by an impressive 92 percent. With strategic work for a clear innovation culture and a 'we' feeling, the award winner has brought the company employees to new heights by giving them the freedom to dare to try, fail and learn from their mistakes.

In an age when diversity and heterogeneous workplaces are becoming more and more important, the CEO has taken the lead and become a model for others by hiring people of many different nationalities and a good balance of men and women. The winner has a modern approach to sustainability and weaves it into the company's basic values instead of segregating it in the form of separate activities."

The competition is organised by Motivation.se.