

Leadership

A High Rise

Leadership Interview
with
Christine Baldwin

By
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Amrop

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Leadership interview with Christine Baldwin

Christine Baldwin is the newly-appointed UK director of Infinitus, the property investment arm of the Lee Kum Kee Health Products Group (LKK HPG). LKK HPG is a division of the 132-year-old Chinese food conglomerate that found fame in inventing the now globally consumed Oyster sauce.



In her current role Christine is responsible for a number of properties in the UK, chief among them being the iconic 20 Fenchurch Street, or the 'Walkie Talkie'.

Christine has worked for over twenty years in Real Estate. Before joining Infinitus she held positions with a range of businesses including REIT Landsec, private equity investors (JER Partners, MGPA) and in the operator/developer field for McArthurGlen Group.

Prior to stepping into the world of property investment, Christine worked for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and for a variety of performing arts companies.

Christine is a Surveyor (MRICS) and holds a Bachelor's Degree in English Literature from Queen's University, Belfast.

The world has been forever changed by COVID-19, and the commercial real estate sector is facing an unprecedented threat. The pandemic has forced us all to work in new ways, throwing into question the true value of a 5-day office-based working week.

In this interview we speak to Christine Baldwin, recently appointed UK director for Infinitus and manager for the iconic Walkie Talkie building in the City of London, home to 5,500 occupants and some of the world's largest insurance companies.

Christine shares with us her view on the changing landscape of real estate, and how her leadership journey to date has shaped her core leadership values.

This interview was originally recorded as an episode of the Amrop Coffee First podcast — a series of thought provoking conversations with leaders.

Key Messages

1

Demonstrate the behaviours you wish to see in others

As a leader, the most important action you can take is to model the behaviours you wish to see in others. Being authentic with, and trusting in your team is a key to success.

2

A new philosophy

In joining Infinitus Christine has begun practicing a new leadership philosophy, the Autopilot Leadership Model (ALM). The ALM is a blend of Eastern and Western leadership values, focussed on establishing a self sustaining, happy team.

3

A “happiness index”

Christine started a new role in an exceptionally challenging environment. Creating bonds, and trust, with a new team has been a hugely rewarding challenge. Utilising daily zoom calls, and rating their happiness daily has enabled the team to stay human, and connected.

4

Remaining human

Whilst navigating the transition to home working it was key to Christine that she encourage her team to be frank with the challenges, and to remain human by acknowledging the logistical, operational and mental drawbacks encountered through the pandemic. Creating a spirit of openness enabled her team to communicate the tools and support needed to succeed.



Key Messages

5

The road back to the office

Managing a return to work for 5,500 tenants has been no slight task. Through regular communication with clients, consideration of the “new” commute, as well as government-mandated safety guidelines Christine has created a safe working environment ready for all clients seeking a move back into the office.

6

The new office

Our behaviours and approach to office-based work will have fundamentally changed through the pandemic. Christine believes the desire to work together collaboratively in an office will never diminish. However, we will be more open to completing individual work at home, creating a more enriched personal life as a result.

7

Communication is key

Communicating your own message and listening hold equal merit and are valuable tools in leadership. These are skills developed with time, and differ with each individual you are communicating with. Communication is key for anybody that wants to work efficiently, and effectively in life.

8

Looking back, and forward

To those in the early stages of their career: worry less and do not miss the opportunity to put your ideas forward. Looking onward, Christine is focussed on driving the Infinitus UK assets, and hopes to instil strong leadership values that set up a self-sufficient team.



A High Rise

Full Leadership interview with Christine Baldwin

What does leadership mean to you?

To me, leadership means a number of things. I've spent a lifetime observing leaders to identify the people I would like to be like. I try to always continue learning, and living the leadership values that I find important.

The simplest, and to me the most important rule, is to live the behaviours you would like to see in others. As a leader our actions are closely scrutinised.

Another key principle is always trying to be the calmest, most rational person in the room. I once observed a very humble admission from a senior individual where they admitted to their team that in losing their temper they had let the entire team down. Whilst it can be tempting to use your position to exert power and influence, being unshakable in demonstrating the values you want to see in others is key. It is important to be seen as someone acting on the level, stick to what you know to be the absolute right and moral thing to do. Remaining calm and rational is another brilliant basic in leadership you can't deviate from.

Leadership also means being truly able to trust, and to let other people do their own job. Through my career I have seen so much disruption and lack of effectiveness caused by micromanagement and a lack of trust generally. That being said we should remember that trust is a two-way street. Being authentic, rather than just doing an imitation of "correct" leadership behaviours and misrepresenting yourself will engender trust, creating teams that work well towards achieving the same goals.



Trust is a two-way street.

Authenticity engenders trust, creating teams that work well towards achieving the same goals.

The Autopilot leadership model: a blend of Eastern wisdom and Western management.



You most recently joined Infnitus. The group is well known for having purchased the “Walkie Talkie”, or 20 Fenchurch Street, in the City of London. Can you talk to us about your role, and the building you are now managing?

Yes, the Walkie Talkie is one of the few towers in the City and at almost 700,000 sq. ft it is quite the gorilla of a building. Based in the insurance district it is iconic in design and is home to some of the biggest insurance companies in the world, and has a very distinct flavour and character.

One of the things that attracted me to the role was the opportunity to work with such a special building. There aren't many comparable properties in London so you don't get many chances to work with a building that has such a special status. I have always loved it, I like the fact that the design is different and I like its location. Despite a long career in real estate I had never worked in the City of London before so I was very excited about that.

Being a part of the property investment division I am very much working with the property, thinking about its long term value both for the building and the occupiers.

From a personal perspective I was really excited to work with a Hong Kong/Chinese company as I had never worked with a company from that culture before. Culturally there is an energy, and a will to do things, the level of ingenuity really attracted me.

Sitting behind the LKK HPG business is a very strong core of leadership values. Sammy Lee, the gentleman that runs the division, has a very unique view on leadership doesn't he?

He does indeed, he gives himself the job title of CIO “Chief Invisible Officer”. Sammy has been a pioneer of a philosophy of leadership: The *Autopilot Leadership Model* (ALM). His philosophy is a fascinating blend of Eastern and Western ideas on how you become not just a leader that people love, but a leader that is almost invisible because you have put in place the people, systems, processes, and philosophies that allow you to disappear into the background whilst your team manages themselves.

He has written books about his philosophy and is very interested in investing in the happiness of the workplace and of the world generally. These values speak to so many of the things that I think are important about leadership, and as a philosophy seems to be a long way ahead of its peers.

Given these philosophies, how did your interview experience with Sammy differ from those you have had in the past?

It was quite extraordinary, Sammy was surprisingly the most relaxed and happiest CEO, or should I say “CIO”, I’ve ever encountered. We met after my appointment to the role, which is another great example where the business demonstrated the ALM— my direct boss was absolutely entrusted to recruit who he needs to for the business.

In previous interviews the focus may have been on competencies or experience, but with Sammy we spoke in depth about who I am and how I behave. My thoughts on different philosophies and how they relate to LKK.

The interviews were an exercise in trust. Behind the meetings were an assumption that I’ve been doing what I do for a while and I know the nuts and bolts of it. Sammy was looking to establish whether I can be trusted to look after LKK’s biggest “baby” in the UK, doing so with colleagues in the same philosophical vein in which they’re currently operating.

The topic of trust is a perfect opportunity to discuss COVID. You had been in the role for 4 weeks before the UK went into lockdown. How did you manage a new team, with overseas leadership, during an emerging pandemic?

I have never started a job in those circumstances before and imagine very few people have. I joined Infinitus at the end of February and spent 4 weeks in the office before going into lockdown. Luckily, the Chinese headquarters gave some background on how to best set up and manage working from home. Given their previous experiences with SARS and MERS the lockdown in Hong Kong happened very quickly, and very strictly. There was an acceptance and anticipation of how the pandemic would be controlled, so the team were

very supportive in ensuring that I had all the help I needed for myself and my broader team, e.g. asking if we needed facemasks, and providing guidance on what precautions we wanted to take.

As for managing the UK assets, the Walkie Talkie comes with three main occupier categories that required a different management approach; corporate offices, the SkyGarden, and hospitality. Ironically, the pandemic has been a prime opportunity to get to know all the clients and their needs.

One by one through March the major corporate occupiers began experimenting with remote working before operating almost exclusively from home.





The SkyGarden and its restaurant operators posed a separate challenge. As an iconic tourist attraction, 3 storeys high on the 35th floor, the site is lift-access only. The chief concern was keeping our employees, restaurant operators and of course visitors safe, so we kept in mind that if there was any danger we could close down the building, quickly and efficiently, whilst continuing to keep it clean. Initially we kept the site open in line with government guidance and with approval from the City of London Corporation, which is our governing authority, but with the developing pandemic and with dwindling reservations the restaurant operators closed sequentially and we made the call to close the site. Whilst the guidance on keeping open seemed to fall between the cracks in government advice, it became clear that due to the lift-only access we could no longer operate it in a way that was safe enough. The closure received full support from the City of London Corporation, which is normally focussed on keeping us open.

For the benefit of all our clients we have kept the main office building running as we felt it was important for all these different firms to be able to access essential documents and servers needed to support their business. Through the lockdown we have gone from a peak of 5,500 people in the offices per day, to 35-50.

So you've clearly navigated some huge challenges and received great overseas support. As for your team that you are working closely with, how have you built bonds and trust whilst working remotely?

My joining the business came with dramatic changes that were somewhat a blessing in disguise. We were forced to get to know each other very quickly, and have had some good bonding experiences.

In circumstances where we have anxieties and are concerned with doing the right thing we all become much more human. It is very easy to go through the ordinary work day without getting back to your basic humanity, and talking about the things that worry us and that we truly care about.

With the lockdown we adopted online technologies and began speaking daily via Zoom.

In the early days our calls focused on a mixture of how we were all doing, business and establishing what we need in order to carry on doing this.

It was immediately clear we are all pretty technologically proficient, but that we also needed to figure out the practicalities of home working — do people have an appropriate working space? How will their home and family lives impact their working day? Is anybody in a vulnerable group that won't even be able to do their own shopping?

There was a lot of being very frank about our challenges in order to solve basic issues i.e. getting office chairs to those sitting on deck chairs, getting double screens to finance people etc,



ultimately making sure that the team could work comfortably at home in a way that would be as beneficial for their health as possible. The last thing we wanted was people coming back after a frightening experience, where they didn't even have the basics. We might be technologically set up to work from home but we are still people, we still need to sit and stand and do all those things in a healthy way.

We got to know one another very quickly over those Zoom calls, we shared feelings and followed a company tradition of a "happiness index" where everybody indicated on their fingers how happy they were from 1-10.

We had some days where we all pretty much felt 4/10 rather than 8/10, so we talked through what we can do to push the numbers up a bit, or accepted that on some days it just wasn't possible for people to feel comfortable or happy and that we might just have to work through another day and see if time improved things.

When you look back, do you think working from home will have been a catalyst for much better bonding?

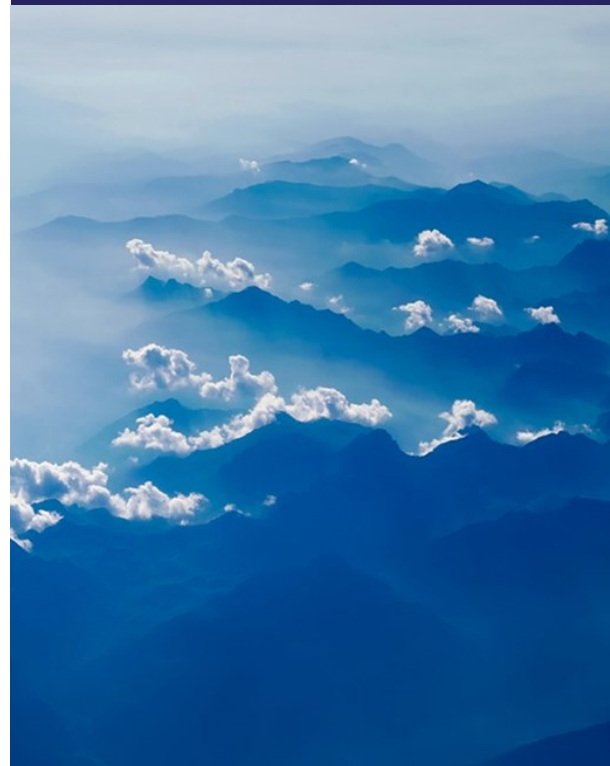
It has, I would compare working from home to being in a reverse escape room in that we're all working together to find a way back to the office safely for both a building and personal perspective.


The experience has been tremendously bonding, and the strange thing is although we haven't all been in the same place we have worked hardest on collaboration, and problem solving — the things we do that knit us together. For the worst possible reason it has been a very positive experience.

Getting back to work is something we're all dealing with, you are looking at this on such a large scale for the building you are responsible for. What challenges does returning to work bring, and how have you addressed them?

From the building perspective the key objective is to make it as safe as possible by communicating to our occupiers the behaviours and guidelines we must collaborate on to be successful.

Remain human.
Be frank with the
challenges and
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We can't wait to see people again, and have them populate the building and the area. These great buildings and streets aren't anything with the people missing.

With the best will in the world, returning 5,500 people to work across 35 storeys, whilst keeping 2 meters apart is just not possible with normal behaviours. Using the government guidelines we are recreating ways of accessing the building, and getting occupiers in the lift and to their floor safely, so as not to disturb their working day.

It has helped us to think about the whole journey. When people arrive they may be getting off public transport, possibly for the first time in a long time so they might have a lot of anxiety around having travelled in the first place. We want to ensure that we have a new system that is completely clear upon arrival so clients are absolutely aware of the changes as the difficulty comes where people are flustered and don't understand the changes.

We have invested a significant portion of time in communicating the reoccupation plan to customers. We have suggested staggered arrival times, building up to bigger occupancy numbers over time, and have emphasised the need to continue washing our hands, keeping a safe distance and encouraging the use of masks. We are ready for our clients to return, very few have yet but I would anticipate it will remain quiet until the government announces it is safe to return to work. We can't wait to see people again, and have them populate the building and the area. These great buildings and streets aren't anything with the people missing, so it will be great to see them back.

Do you believe that our behaviours, and use of commercial office space will have fundamentally changed as a result of the pandemic?

It will be astonishing if our behaviours haven't changed. We have seen such fundamental shifts in how we do business, through necessity we went through the biggest WFH experience that you can possibly imagine. For a lot of different areas of work it has run brilliantly, there is no need to run a building for people to work on their personal workload. What I imagine will happen is that people will start to use their offices differently.

They will use the space for collaboration, for mentoring and training as these are the pieces that are worryingly missing through the whole lockdown period. If you have young people in your office that needed bringing on and guidance, they're not getting any of that experience at the moment and quite often are sitting at home alone when they should be out building their networks and doing all those things that are fundamental to getting your career off the ground. There are a lot of pieces that are essential to be done with other people, and there are clear chunks now that you can do from home.

It has also been a trust experiment, prior to this we knew that the technology could work, but there was a general lack of trust from leaders that businesses could continue to run as effectively from home as in the office. In our current situation it hasn't been possible to worry about that, you've just had to get on and trust your team. Granted, for some companies it may have been a terrible experience and they have discovered that they couldn't trust their team but I've got great faith in human nature and I believe that the majority are going to come away from this satisfied with an amazing, positive result.

The need and desire to work together will never stop, what we do in our commercial office spaces will become much more focussed, and will be seen as a pivotal part of the business that needs to happen really efficiently. Some things will stay the same, the importance of being co-located with similar businesses is going to come back as people will be hungry to be out doing business together.

The desire to attract and retain talent, and to nurture and develop people's careers is only possible through having people work alongside you. All that creativity and collaboration has to happen together, whilst a lot of other pieces can be done from home, which may for all of us create a much more enriched family and private life as a result.

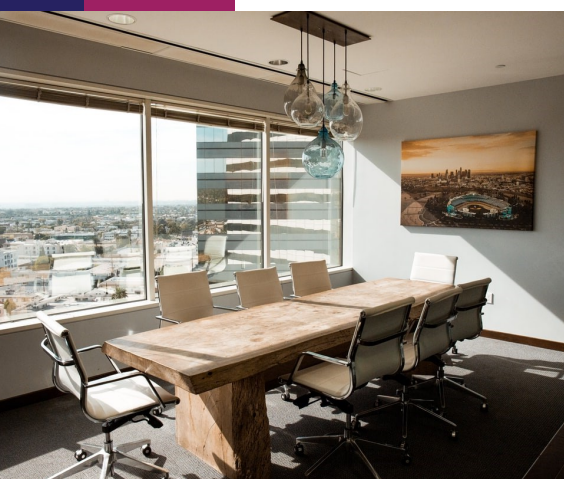
Taking your entire career history into perspective, communication is clearly a core leadership value to you. How do you view communication?

It is absolutely key, and is easily misunderstood. Having lived through the email revolution face to face communication is the most important of all. I value listening very highly, as much so as communicating my message. Listening actively is something I've learnt to do more as I've gotten older, as well as reflecting on people's styles of communicating. You listen and communicate differently for different people, so it has to be a constant study for anybody that wants to work efficiently, and effectively in life.

You also value listening very highly – what have you learnt about listening that we could learn?

I'm really keen on listening very actively, looking at and watching the person that you're listening to by observing body language, and picking out what is not said are critical and key things.

I have learnt a lot from my daughter who has a hearing impairment and learning disorder. She doesn't hear a lot of what people say, and is very good at covering for it. When I listen to what she is saying a lot of the time I am trying to check if she has actually heard what she thinks she has heard. We also sign, which is a combination of quite exact movements and gesturing to use your body and voice to be impactful.



The need and desire to work together will never stop. In our commercial office spaces we will become much more focussed to the creative, collaborative elements of our roles.



So what is the optimal communication method for you?

If I really want to talk to somebody I will take them for a walk in the park, or go for a drive with them. It is about giving an opportunity to open up without them feeling as though it is an interrogation, taking away the ordinary situation to let them concentrate on saying what they need to say.

When you look back at your career and think about the journey you've been on and the learnings that you've had, what advice would you give your younger self if you had the benefit of your experience today?

I would say, don't worry. When I was younger I would be hesitant about putting forward an idea in case it was too obvious, or had been tried before. I didn't consider the fact that perhaps I was the only one having that particular good idea, and that maybe it wouldn't hurt to just throw it into the ring. So I would say, don't miss that opportunity to put your idea forward.

And when you look forward, what would success mean to you in the next 10 years?

Success would be to carrying on learning about this brilliant new company I'm working with and the culture that it springs from.

Continuing to work with, and grow the team that I have here to make this asset, and others we may take into management, to be the best assets that they can possibly be, with the happiest and the most satisfied customers.

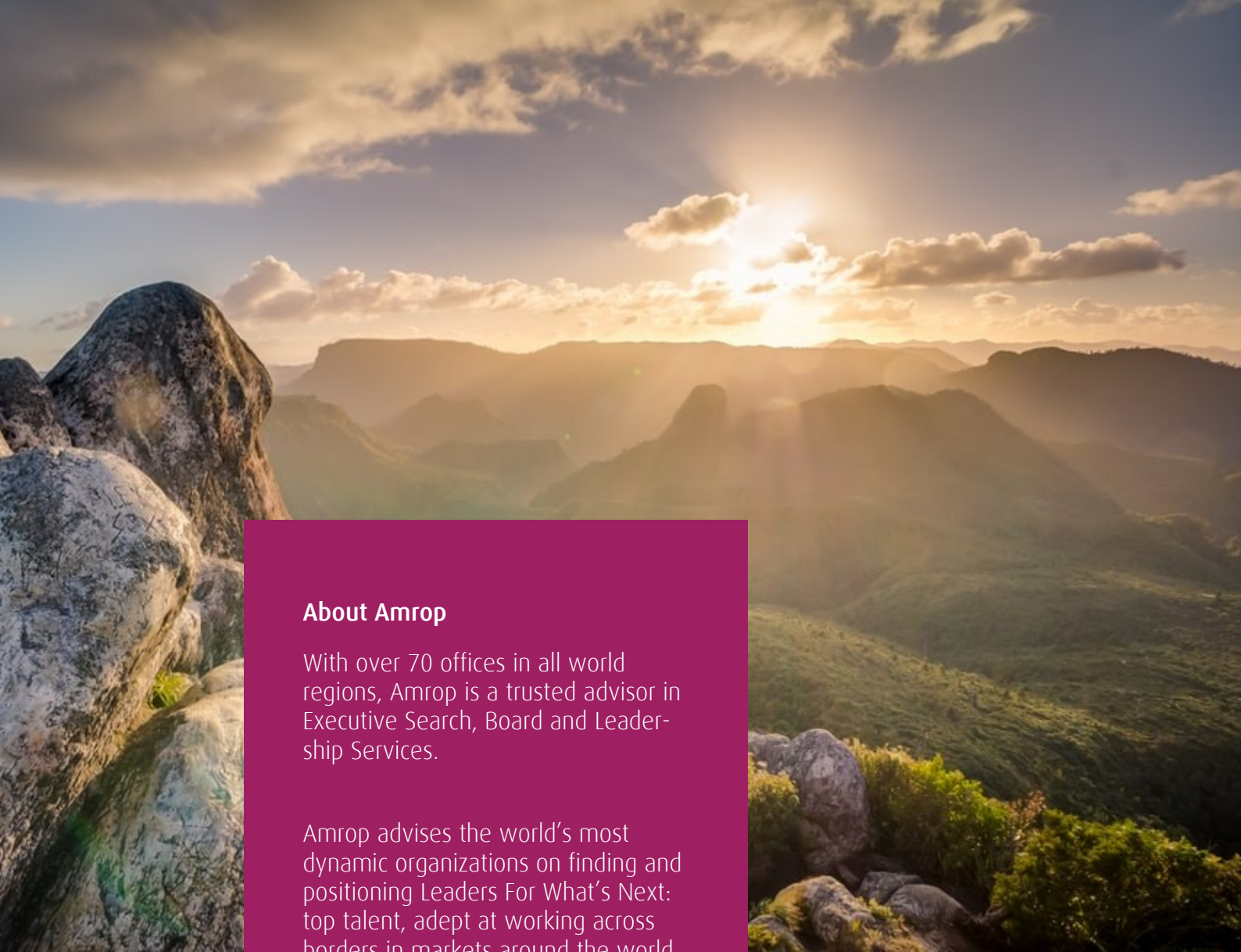
Those things underpin the financial success of the company, but for me personally, developing the team to a point where I can walk away very easily and become as invisible as Sammy Lee, that is absolutely my aim for my role here.

And to finish, what would you say to a younger version of yourself who is about to enter real estate?

I really would encourage anybody entering the sector to try to find out as much as possible. The sector covers a really broad range of roles, from any of the technical roles, investment roles, through to the up and coming concierge and experience roles.

There are lots of exciting things to do in real estate and I would encourage individuals to give it a try, and find out what we are about as we need lots of enthusiastic young women of all shapes and sizes in the real estate profession.





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