

With All Justice

Europeans advising Europeans.

| Part 20: Elise Bulger, Account Manager at Pleon London. |

Von Gerhard Elfers

Pleon is a new European consultancy. And one with a most unusual vision – for its goal is to use the intelligence peculiar to various countries and regions to create a shared network economy. During the next few months, we will be following the progress of this unique mission with reports and essays on a Europe that is growing together because it belongs together. Itself a newcomer on the PR scene, Pleon has gone out of its way to hire high-potential recruits, one of whom is erstwhile legal caseworker Elise Bulger.

The weather seems unable to make up its mind. The sky over London is overcast, while at 11°C it is unseasonably warm. Elise Bulger is talking about football. “Wayne Rooney is very much an exception,” she says. “Being able to play like that at such a young age! And his goals against Middlesbrough on Saturday – fantastic! He’s a genius – except that he plays for the wrong team,” she adds, with a despairing shrug of her shoulders. For Elise Bulger, the “wrong” team basically means any team that is not Liverpool FC. They are the good guys to her, and she manages never to miss any of their London matches.

Dropping onto the worn brown leather sofa in Cafe Nero, conveniently situated just round the corner from Pleon’s London branch, Elise Bulger orders an “Americano” – not a trendy Latte Macchiato, but classic filter coffee. And black please, with no sugar – or anything else, for that matter.

Whether she is donning a Liverpool FC scarf and jersey on the terraces or hurrying off to a client clad in a smart suit and with a briefcase in hand, playing for the right team is very important to Elise Bulger. That Pleon was the right team for her was clear from the start. “I knew the moment I walked through the door for the interview that this was the job for me,” she says, placing her mobile phone on the table in front of her. “What impressed me most was surviving not just one, but four interviews!” After being quizzed by the HR manager, she had had to get past her immediate superior too. “Best of all, though, was the round-table discussion with my future colleagues,” she says. “Getting to know each other like that gave them a chance to decide whether I would fit in the team and me a chance to get an impression of my future work mates.” Only then did she get to meet the Managing Director.

For four months now, Elise Bulger has been part of the team of 33 at Pleon London, where she is responsible for three clients and Senior Account Manager for the largest of these, COLT Telecom. It is a move she certainly does not regret. “Here at Pleon you have plenty of scope for personal development and a chance to get a taste of other fields too. I’ve never worked anywhere where there’s such a strong sense that the sky’s the limit,” she says.

Not that the 32-year-old consultant lacks experience. After leaving

Elise Bulger, Senior Account Manager at Pleon London.



school, she joined the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) in Bournemouth as a trainee caseworker. Her parents, both of whom are Liverpudlians, had moved to the town on the south coast after her father was offered a job in the judicial administration there.

That her father worked for the law courts impressed his young daughter no end. “My childhood dream was to become a public prosecutor so that I could put all the bad boys behind bars,” she laughs. At the age of 17, however, she really did follow in her father’s footsteps and became a trainee caseworker whose job it was to help public prosecutors plough through files, prepare cases and liaise with witnesses.

Bournemouth soon began to seem too small and provincial, however, so when a vacancy came up at the CPS in London, Elise Bulger did not hesitate for one second. “My parents still don’t understand how I can live in a big city like this,” she says. “But I love London. I love the hustle and bustle and find the vitality of the place fascinating!” Having lived there for 12 years, she must know what she is talking about.

On her first day on the job, her colleague called in sick with the result that Elise had to jump in at the deep end. The case in question was a high-profile IRA trial. “It was certainly pretty frightening,” she recalls. “These people had planned to set off bombs in London and suddenly I had to deal with senior operatives from MI5 and MI6, had to sign the Official Secrets Act, learn secret codes, listen to testimony and evaluate reports on undercover operations.” This first case was followed by others like it so that before long, kidnappings, racial hatred and sensational murder trials had become her daily bread.

From terrorist trials to media strategy.

And how did she make the leap from caseworker to PR consultant? Elise explains how she felt buried alive in the dark and musty corridors of the Old Bailey and indeed, anyone who meets her can sense immediately why that would be. The enthusiasm and dynamism that drive her are apparent even while enjoying a pleasant chat over coffee. “The civil service mentality soon began to get on my nerves,” she admits, sweeping a strand of blond hair out of her eyes.

Her open and personable nature was not of much use to her in the civil service. Besides, she already had different ambitions and the switch to PR seemed only natural, given that she was already an old hand at handling the press. Even while still a caseworker, she had had to organize countless press conferences and had eventually become a CPS press spokeswoman. Yet she still wanted to get away. Her first break came when a colleague found her a job at an advertising agency in upmarket Knightsbridge. This was where she got to know the ropes, having been assigned various accounts, including the agency’s own PR work.

And has she ever regretted abandoning her civil service career? She checks her mobile for new messages before replying with a categorical “No, not once. Besides, I’m not the kind of person to regret things. You make a decision and live with it. It’s as simple as that.” After working for two other agencies, at which she handled such big name accounts as Heineken and Microsoft, she joined Pleon last October and knew instantly that she had finally arrived. “It may sound like a cliché, but this is the best job I ever had and the team is just great,” she says. “We all think along the same lines and are tremendously loyal to each other.”

We have returned to the office and are standing in a large room with yellow walls strewn with beautifully framed newspaper cuttings. The desks are arranged in groups of four, separated by waist-high partitions. This is deliberate. Here, managing director and trainee sit cheek by jowl and not even senior managers set themselves apart. The idea is to facilitate communication and help foster a team spirit. Meetings are held in a small room with comfortable

A great team and great clients.

leather couches. “That’s our ‘comfy’ room,” says Elise with a grin, adding that “it’s also where all the best ideas come from.” The atmosphere is one of casual intimacy. Elise’s own desk is very neat and tidy, which seems slightly at odds with her personality.

The telephone rings – a journalist wanting to know about an event coming up in Munich. “We’re handling a pan-European product launch for one of my clients,” Elise whispers, cupping her hand over the phone, “and the whole thing has to be ready in two weeks time.” . Obviously her work is a very personal matter. Because what motivates her most of all, besides the great working atmosphere, is having a good working relationship with clients. Elise then tells me about the Indian software company that donated a large sum of money for victims of the Indian Ocean tsunami disaster. “The Chairman of the Board of Directors takes a salary of just 50,000 dollars,” she says, “the point being to show his workers that there’s more to the job than just earning money.” Her eyes light up. “That’s a real inspiration and working for clients like that is fun.”

Elise Bulger epitomizes a new and successful generation of women now working in the PR business. Able to draw on her experience of other fields, she knows there is more to life than just meetings and marketing, presentations and portfolios. She is sometimes bothered by “this assumption that women in PR are all blond and do nothing but organize parties and drink champagne.” She knows there is more to it than that. For example, that to be successful in PR these days, it is vital to have the courage of one’s convictions. Her personal philosophy is to encourage clients to do the right thing, to remove their blinkers and to think about the larger picture. “What counts these days is not so much how our clients want to see themselves, but rather what their own customers want and how our clients can help them get it.”

*Typically British,
typically European.*

Just last week, she was in Seattle, attending an international strategic planning session for one of her key accounts. The programme included intensive discussions with colleagues from both Germany and the USA, some of whom she was meeting face to face for the first time. “My colleague in America assumed I must be much older because of my British accent,” laughs Elise. “In fact, we’re both about the same age and had a really great time together.”

But it is not just the personal contacts that facilitate her work. Close contacts with colleagues abroad tell her a lot about them and about herself too. Working in a European agency has helped sharpen her awareness of her own British identity. “It’s true: I go to the pub on Fridays and I love football and you can’t get much more British than that!” she laughs. “It may take us less than three hours to hop over to the Continent, but the cultural differences are still huge and these soon surface the moment we start planning a campaign. I’ve had to learn to ask myself ‘How will this go down in France?’ or ‘Do events in Germany have to be handled differently?’ or ‘What do product tests in Holland involve?’”

The weather here in London has finally made up its mind and taken a turn for the worse. Night is falling and it is drizzling softly as we step out onto Old Marylebone Road and walk past a Lebanese café, the Spartan brick facades of St. Mark’s Marylebone and the exquisitely Victorian Hyde Park Mansions. We chat about the importance of keeping abreast of current affairs. “We all know how fast things are changing – and not just in business, but in society generally,” she says. “I accepted a job at Brodeur and one week later found myself working for Pleon!” And her clients are changing just as fast. “You certainly have to be quick off the mark and able to gear up, if necessary – not just so you can keep up, but so you can help your clients handle these changes as well.”

Rapid change.

She pauses for a moment and glances thoughtfully at a boutique before

blurting out a rather curious confession: “My friends criticise me no end for this,” she says, “but the fact is I’ve never once voted in an election.” Yet she is obviously not lacking in convictions. “No, I’m not. Which is why I can’t bring myself to vote for the lesser of two evils. It’s just not my style,” she smiles.

Elise Bulger is Senior Account Manager at Pleon London.

Gerhard Elfers is a freelance journalist and lives in London (*Gerhardelfers@gmx.de*).

Translation: *Bronwen Saunders*

Further information:

www.pleon.com