

Workplace 360

An Interview with Laura A. O'Brien,
Global Director-Human Resources and Workplace Strategy, CBRE

EDITORS' NOTE Laura O'Brien also has responsibility for Global Facilities, including CBRE's Workplace Strategy initiative. Prior to this, she was Senior Vice President-Global Facilities and Special Projects. O'Brien is a member of the Americas Operating Management Board and the Global Operating Committee and she is also an officer of the CBRE Foundation. Prior to her role in Shared Services, O'Brien had a full career as a sales professional at CBRE, earning the title of Senior Vice President. She was a



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member of the Client Development team for Global Corporate Services. Prior to that role, she was an Account Manager for 10 years for CBRE clients with large U.S. and global real estate portfolios. Before joining CBRE in 1991, O'Brien co-owned and managed a diversified, real estate company for 12 years, specializing in commercial brokerage services, property management, appraisal, construction management, and development services. She began her career in agency leasing and project management, transitioning into tenant representation and finally into corporate services when she joined CBRE.

COMPANY BRIEF CBRE Group, Inc. serves real estate owners, investors, and occupiers through more than 300 offices (excluding affiliates) worldwide. Headquartered in Los Angeles with approximately 34,000 employees (excluding affiliates), CBRE (www.cbre.com) offers strategic advice and execution for property sales and leasing; corporate services; property, facilities, and project management; mortgage banking; appraisal and valuation; development services; investment management; and research and consulting.

What is the focus of your role at CBRE?

Essentially, I oversee our worldwide HR operations for our 34,000 employees around the globe. It's a full service operation that involves recruiting and staffing, employee relations, training, learning and development, diversity, payroll, and compensation and benefits. There is a huge amount of work just to "keep the lights on" and there is tremendous activity around job one, which is talent acquisition and development, because we are a people business and it is our people who deliver the services we provide to our clients.

In addition, I lead our corporate real estate function, a role that requires our facilities team to

partner with our own real estate experts in delivering real estate services to our company. Today the CRE function is all about providing a productive and effective workplace for our people and our clients. So putting those two together into one global role makes sense.

How critical is it to make sure that despite your size and scale, the CBRE culture remains consistent?

In essence, we are two cultures: the culture of CBRE's overall enterprise is absolutely clear to those living inside this company; and we also

respect our local cultures, whether it's a local culture in a small submarket in the U.S. or in Christchurch or London. Local cultures are important – they're integrated but not lost within the greater enterprise, and we need to respect and support both.

When I was a broker, I had a global practice that taught me to realize the U.S. isn't always the center of the universe, nor was I. I needed to team with my colleagues around the globe. When I think of my current role, I'm even more cognizant of how important it is to keep the focus on "team."

What expertise does one need to be a successful broker today?

The role of a broker is twofold: the ability to command and marshal a myriad of services for the client in search of the right solution for whatever issue presents itself – in some ways, that could be considered a generalist skill, but it's about leadership. The other important role is specialization, and many of our finest professionals have deep subject matter expertise which they have built over time. Combining those abilities is key to delivering excellent service for our clients.

How critical is a diverse workforce to CBRE's success? Are there opportunities at senior levels for women?

The focus and investment in our diverse workforce hopefully shines through me in my position as a global leader at CBRE.

It's critical that our organization not just honor and respect our diverse workforce in all ways, but also promote and support them.

For example, we are currently developing a scalable and sustainable mentoring program where we can pair leaders with mentees and protégés from around the globe – we want to formalize our informal process and make it part of our fabric.

Recently, the CREW Network awarded us with their Circle of Excellence Award. We invest in

research with CREW because women are important leaders in commercial real estate – women bring talent and perspective to this industry.

With all of the technology available today, how critical is it that employees remain focused on human contact?

Relationships will always be the most critical, but we also embrace technology, which leads to our Workplace 360 strategy. Through this initiative, we're examining how we work at CBRE from all 360 degrees – work environment, supporting technology, branding, personal productivity, the way we use our space, sustainability, mobility, flexibility, and more.

We need to give the next "workforce" generation a reason to come to the office to be part of the collaborative nature of our workplace. Workplace 360 is aimed at providing those benefits – an office that reflects the way they work, improves the personal technology that we're providing them, and offers the little things: being able to find people more easily in the office space; peace and quiet; the ability to make a first-class presentation; and to be a positive reinforcement that all of us are working for the industry leader in workplace strategy.

Are there metrics in place to monitor the engagement of the workforce?

We did a broad-based employee engagement survey in North America that we plan to repeat in 2013, which showed an extremely high level of employee engagement with our company.

It was a satisfying statement of the connection we have with our employees. Our workplace strategy is aimed at continuing to provide that glue whether it is the workplace in the office or at home, or at a client site.

Recently, I attended a Build Day in Dallas, where over 100 CBRE employees from our offices and account teams volunteered for community service as part of our CBRE Cares Shelter Program – our national program where more than 70 CBRE offices participated this year in providing hands-on service to rebuild homes and community centers around the U.S. Many more CBRE-sponsored community service projects occurred around the globe as a result of our CBRE Cares mission.

How critical is it to have CEO engagement with your department?

By giving HR a seat at that table, CBRE senior leadership is underscoring the fact that people leadership matters and that diversity makes a difference. HR can be a vehicle to accomplish both in support of our business goals and objectives. It's about people first. ●