

JOIN THE CLUB

Leesexemplaar

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JOIN THE CLUB

Shaping an impact culture

PELCKMANS

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PREFACE

When we teamed up as writers, our goal was to share how SD Worx grew from a local Belgian payroll specialist into a leading European digital HR provider. It's a journey many organisations may recognise: growing from a local company expanding into new regions to becoming a multinational. By telling the SD Worx story, we hope to offer practical guidance to founders, CEOs, managers, HR leaders, and anyone navigating organisational evolution and development.

The path has been anything but linear. It has been a challenging climb for the company, for our teams, and for us personally. We want to openly share the highs and lows, the successes, the mistakes, and the choices we would make differently today. We approached this book not as academic researchers but as pragmatic business leaders who want to make things tangible and immediately useful. Rapid growth forced us to reorganise, recruit, retrain, coach, and communicate in new ways. Ultimately, it required a new culture to sustain our success.

That is how our impact culture emerged, centred around 'critical friend' feedback to ensure everyone is engaged and aligned. We listen, share perspectives, challenge each other, and value the input of our colleagues, customers, and you, our readers.

Transformation is never a one-off exercise. It is continuous. That is why this book is titled *Join the Club* – a club of people who embrace growth and try to become 1% better every day.

We hope our experience will offer you something useful. Though we are co-authors, this story is built on the contributions, feedback, and dedication of all SD Worx colleagues: those who are here today, those who shaped the last 80 years, and those who will write the next chapters. We learn from each other daily, and we believe we can learn even more when we share feedback openly.

In this book, we share ideas on how to build an impact culture, how to take action yourself and make other people *join the club*. We all have our moments of standstill – because of life circumstances, or because we chose to first slow down in order to speed up. As such, we hope this book can create a moment of reflection for you.

We hesitated a long time whether we should write this book, because we keep learning and understanding every day and because it's tough to finish a book with a never-ending subject. The working title – *Work in Progress* – reflected this ongoing change. Ultimately, we decided to write and publish because people are asking us to share our story and our experience and we hope it can help you.

This book is dynamic, combining both old and new ideas – sometimes even past concepts can feel fresh again after some years. Although many topics discussed here have been explored before, they remain valuable and worth revisiting. We do not aim to enforce a one-size-fits-all approach, as every situation is different. At SD Worx, we are always evolving, and we firmly believe that everyone must keep on learning, moving forward, and asking questions. We invite you to use this book as an opportunity for thoughtful reflection.

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This book is also an open call: foster people who want to create a culture of impact, belonging and critical thinking, where people feel at home, challenge each other and grow together. We want to show that not everything has to be perfect to move forward; what really matters is that we dare to try things instead of sticking to theory.

For that reason, this is more than a management book. It is the beginning of a community that supports your growth in an ever faster changing world. We encourage you to share how you tackle the challenges of scaling organisations and how culture takes shape in your own workplace. To Join the club, simply use the QR code and join our community.

Bruce Fechey-Lippens & Kobe Verdonck
Spring 2026



INTRODUCTION: BUILDING OUR DREAM

By *Kobe Verdonck*

Let me start at the beginning of our journey and how I became involved with SD Worx. In 2018, after more than two decades in leadership roles with leading HR providers, SD Worx first crossed my path. At that time I was the CEO of Raet, the leading Dutch HR and payroll provider, and we were engaged in a competitive sales process of the company. SD Worx was one of the serious contenders. Their ambition to become Belgium's market leader, combined with a clear appetite for growth beyond their home market, immediately caught my attention. Eventually, another competitor, Visma, acquired Raet, while SD Worx was still assessing the opportunity.

Shortly thereafter, I reached out to the Chairman of SD Worx, Filip Dierckx, to ask what had held them back and to suggest how they could strengthen their approach going forward. The essence of my feedback was simple: during the sales process I had encountered great people at SD Worx, but also too many opinions and a lack of alignment. Without a clear vision of where the company wanted to go, teams struggled to move forward decisively – even though SD Worx was performing strongly in its domestic Belgian market.

A few weeks later, after having successfully sold Raet, the Board of SD Worx asked me how I would envision the future of SD Worx. My answer was straightforward: you have a unique opportunity to **build a truly European HR solution provider and you should lead the consolidation**

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of the European market. The next question was if I wanted to take the CEO job at SD Worx. I said yes, but only if we aimed to elevate this national champion to the European stage. To do so, SD Worx had to become a full HR solutions provider managing multiple HR processes for all types of organisations.

When I eventually joined as CEO in 2019, that marked the start of a remarkable journey, personally and professionally. A journey with highs, lows, difficult choices, and moments of doubt, but always with the commitment to improve by 1% every single day. So if you're interested to learn more: *Join the Club!*

A new beginning

Right from the start at SD Worx I felt an undercurrent in the organisation I could not yet name. The company had a +70 year legacy, a strong reputation in Belgium, and almost four thousand dedicated colleagues across a handful of European markets. Yet something was missing. We were a successful enterprise, but not a *strategically anchored* one.

Too many organisations confuse longevity with identity. At SD Worx, we had history and camaraderie in abundance, but we were still in the process of shaping a shared mission. I sensed both an opportunity and a responsibility: to help define who we truly were, and who we aspired to become.

The power and the burden of making choices

Strategy is, in the end, the discipline of choice. Management theorists have long argued that focus is the ultimate differentiator: it separates companies that drift from those that lead. If you try to be everything, you become nothing.

In those early days, we needed to define the strategic identity that would guide SD Worx forward. Would we be an innovation-driven company, constantly reinventing ourselves like iconic tech firms? Would we compete on cost, pushing efficiency beyond our current limits? Or would we centre our entire future on the needs and realities of our customers?

As we studied our history, the answer revealed itself. SD Worx had always drawn its strength from customer centricity, from proximity, trust, and deep understanding. We didn't need to invent a new identity; we needed to rediscover the one embedded in our DNA. Reaffirming customer centricity gave us clarity. It grounded us and provided a clear compass. The SD Worx purpose we reignited was clear and it was directed straight at our customers: *We spark success at the heart of your business so you and your employees can thrive.*

A European dream takes shape

That compass immediately expanded our horizon. If we were serious about customer centricity, we needed to follow our customers wherever they operated. One in five European companies now conducts business beyond its national borders. Serving them meaningfully required us to grow beyond our current capability and become meaningful for all types of organisations across Europe.

As we studied Europe's HR and payroll landscape, a striking gap became clear: while the continent has many strong national champions, it has very few truly European ones – providers operating across borders with consistency, depth, and cultural understanding. We preferred to be the best in Europe instead of trying to be global without any substance.

We felt both the audacity and the necessity of the task: Europe needed a homegrown leader who understood its complexity: its languages, its regulation, its cultural nuance. SD Worx had both the ambition and the credibility to take on that role. Our dream of becoming a panEuropean leader was born from this realisation. Today, that dream is more relevant than ever. With this book, we want to inspire other European companies to embrace the same aspiration – to believe that Europe can produce its own champions, built on its own strengths, for its own future.

Europe's geopolitical awakening

Since the moment that dream was formed, the world around us has shifted dramatically. Geopolitical tensions, war on the continent, energy crises, fragile supply chains, and growing technological dependence have exposed an uncomfortable truth: Europe cannot rely indefinitely on others – other regions, other political systems, other corporate ecosystems – to develop the critical capabilities on which its prosperity depends.

The lesson is as simple as it is urgent: **Europe needs more European champions**. Champions born from European realities, shaped by European laws and values, and prepared to navigate the continent's inherent complexity rather than oversimplify it. We need companies that treat Europe's multifaceted landscape not as a barrier to scale, but as a blueprint for resilience. Firms that are capable of serving Europe *because* they were forged within it.

The recent political climate has made this painfully clear. In a world marked by polarisation and economic nationalism, dependence becomes vulnerability. Europe will thrive only if it strengthens its own backbone – its own technology, its own infrastructure, its own ecosystem of panEuropean leaders.

Our story, in this regard, aims to be more than a corporate journey. It is a call to action. A reminder that Europe's next generation of champions will not be *handed* to us; they will be built by those who dare to believe in them, so *Join the Club!*

The values to achieve our ambition

A clear purpose is essential, but it is only *part* of the equation. We also needed to define the internal and external compass that guides our actions; the values by which we operate. Every decision and initiative should bring us closer to our purpose, but the *way* we pursue that purpose must consistently reflect our core values. These values are not slogans or aspirations – they are lived every day and form the foundation of our culture.

Just as a purpose is not something you rewrite each year, your values should remain constant. They represent what you believe in, how you behave, and what you expect from everyone in the organisation. Purpose gives direction; values ensure we stay true to who we are while moving toward it.

For SD Worx these values are:

- Dear customer: we always put the customer first;
- Commitment drives us forward: we take ownership, keep promises and are driven by results;
- The road is open: innovation and change are part of our DNA;
- We believe in each other: we trust and support each other and collaborate without borders;
- One for all. All for one: we celebrate diversity, share our talents, and work as one team no matter where we are located.

Each organisation needs to define its own set of values. The most important thing is that core values are not just a tagline on a wall, but that they

are lived every day, by everybody in your organisation, and are closely monitored. You can deliver the best results in the world, but if you don't live up to the values, your place is not at SD Worx.

The logic of sustainable growth

While having ambition, a strong sense of purpose, and clear values were beneficial, we also required a targeted growth strategy centred around customer intimacy. This meant understanding deeply the realities faced by European employers and creating solutions tailored to meet their needs.

SD Worx's sustainable growth strategy ensures our company expands, our financial performance improves, our employees seize opportunities, but above all we equip our customers so that they can become better employers. We aimed for a combination of organic growth and growth through acquisitions. But even with the right strategic ambition, we faced a deeper truth: although strategy is essential to unlock the resources needed to put our plans into action, **strategy alone isn't sufficient**.

SD Worx had always been profitable and able to fund its own growth so far, but this would not be sufficient for the level of expansion we aimed for. Wanting to move forward independently, we realised we needed to increase our resources and manage spending more efficiently. From the outset, we prioritised our core focus, discontinuing activities that did not align with it.

This renewed focus rapidly sharpened our execution, strengthened profitability and cash flow, and created the foundation for delivering our European strategy. Employee engagement rose quickly, and customer feedback was overwhelmingly positive, even though, at that stage, we lacked consistent metrics to measure customer satisfaction across markets. So it felt like we were off for a sunny growth ride, but then...

A roadblock that could have stopped everything

Our first true stress test emerged with the onset of COVID19. It was a period filled with uncertainty and fear, yet the team showed remarkable resolve. They stood strong, ensuring we could continue supporting our customers through an unprecedented crisis. Despite the turmoil, we kept growing. We continued acquiring companies, and in 2021 we even completed our largest acquisition to date: Aditro in the Nordics, a historic milestone for SD Worx.

Many people told us we were doing an excellent job and encouraged us to keep going. And while we could have been satisfied with our achievements, I felt already during the pandemic that something fundamental was missing. Almost every key decision still landed on my desk. We were scaling rapidly, but we lacked the essential glue that binds a growing organisation together: a shared culture.

At first, I underestimated the influence of our Belgian roots, deeply anchored in hard work, but also characterised by a preference for harmony, an aversion to conflict, a fear of failure, and a hesitancy to take ownership. These traits, admirable in some contexts, unintentionally fostered a 'stand-still culture', where decisions were routinely escalated upward, ultimately landing with the CEO.

As a consequence, integrating newly acquired companies became increasingly challenging. It became harder to keep everyone aligned and to maintain a smooth, efficient decision making process. Obstacles continued to emerge, further progress in financial results became tougher, engagement stagnated, and our momentum slowed as our focus diminished.

I began to see that part of our challenge was not capability, but mindset. We were still, in many ways, thinking small, thinking locally, thinking

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incrementally, thinking within the boundaries of what felt safe and familiar. But our ambition was anything but small. We were not setting out to climb a hill in the Flemish Ardennes. We wanted to climb **Mont Blanc**; to achieve something big, demanding, inspiring, and unmistakably European in its scale.

And to climb Mont Blanc, you do not wait for perfect weather or a perfectly marked trail. You develop the spirit that allows you to tackle the ascent from the more structured, better supported North Face if you can, or from the more alpine and unpredictable South Face if you must. You prepare yourself to face obstacles not as impossibilities, but as part of the journey. You accept that the climb will be rocky, unpredictable, and exhausting at times, but also worth every step.

In that moment, I confronted a truth that I had intellectually understood, but had not yet fully internalised: **no strategy, however brilliant, survives contact with reality unless the people believe in it, feel part of it, and are equipped to deliver it**. This was the leadership lesson I had missed.

If we had kept working as we were doing, our long-term growth goals would have been at risk. We realised that we lacked an explicit SD Worx culture – one that is impactful, easily understood by customers and employees, and able to support our growth in a trustworthy environment. If we wanted to achieve our ambition, we needed to shift gears.

It was during this period that I met Bruce Fechey-Lippens. At the time, he was building *huapii*, a promising HR startup for skills management. Our conversations quickly gravitated toward culture: how to build it, how to grow teams around it, and how to help organisations adapt to constant change. It became clear that we shared a strong passion for people and transformation. Soon, I realised that Bruce could help SD Worx address

what we were missing: a unifying, enterprise-wide **impact culture**. The real question became how to bring him on board. In the end, we did what we had become exceptionally good at; we acquired huapii. As part of that integration, Bruce agreed to take on the role of CHRO for the SD Worx Group. His mandate extended far beyond safeguarding our mission, values, and strategy. I asked him specifically to embed an impact-driven culture and to make it the *glue* of our organisation, binding our people, teams, and decisions together as we continued to grow.

This is where our real journey began. Not the journey of European expansion, but the journey of becoming a company capable of sustaining it. Because in the end, great strategies may chart the path, but **people and culture determine whether you reach the summit** and continue to reach summits.

And that realisation – painful, necessary, and ultimately transformative – is where our climb begins.

SIX INGREDIENTS TO BUILD AN IMPACT CULTURE

By *Bruce Fecheyr-Lippens*

My journey at SD Worx was not part of a master plan. It unfolded through a series of conversations – first with Kobe, then with other SD Worx employees – where I felt a genuine connection and a shared desire to build something meaningful. When SD Worx acquired huapii, Kobe surprised me when he asked me to take on the role of CHRO. I admit, I felt a mix of excitement and uncertainty at the same time. At home, our family was growing – our daughter was seven, and our twins, born seven weeks early, were just six months old.

The timing was far from perfect, and I wondered whether I was ready for such a responsibility. The opportunity felt right and I felt a real ‘click’ with Kobe. My optimistic voice convinced me, and I was drawn into the challenge. But I asked Kobe if I could start after the summer, so that I could first spend some quality time at home with my family. He respected that and so our journey started.

My career started out at McKinsey, a place where feedback is as natural as breathing. For nearly a decade, I was surrounded by brilliant minds, high expectations, and a culture that pushed me to grow – sometimes faster than I thought possible. I had the opportunity to work as a consultant in tens of organisations in different continents, countries and from different sizes and industries. I was lucky to observe those many different organisational