**Inside Octopus Energy – Episode 1: Culture**

**Interviewers:**

Trudy Lewis and Russell Goldsmith

**Chatting to:**

Greg Jackson – CEO of Octopus Energy and Rebecca Dibb Simkin - Head of Product and Marketing

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**Russell**

Thanks for downloading this first episode in a new podcast series from Octopus Energy where our aim is to give you a real insight into the company's DNA. And that's the way we work the way we think, our values and our people. My name is Russell Goldsmith, and together with my co host, executive coach, Trudy Lewis. We'll be chatting to various members of the Octopus Energy team over the coming series, exploring everything from our products and services to the technology that sits behind them, and the culture that is driving us to deliver cheaper, greener energy. And so what better way to kick things off and help set the scene for the conversation ahead, than speak to the founder and CEO of the company, Greg Jackson. So welcome, Greg. And joining him online is the marketing and product director Rebecca Dibb-Simkin. So welcome both of you.

**Greg**

Hey Russell, hey Trudy and hey Rebecca as well.

**Rebecca**

Hello, hello.

**Russell**

It's a bit weird, actually. How are you currently sitting in your office? A little bit apart? What's going on there at the moment?

**Greg**

Well, we've just opened a new office in Soho. But thanks to COVID it's got room for 250 people, and is occupied by right now the two of us. So we just got around seven and a half thousand square feet to ourselves.

**Rebecca**

We have I mean, look, I think if I can, I could probably, like, appear in the background of Greg.

**Russell**

So I should probably explain for the benefit of those listening to the podcast, rather than and Rebecca's just picked up her laptop. She's currently walking around the office, to where Greg is

**Rebecca**

Hey guys, Greg sitting on the floor. Because that's just how we roll. sorry all that really carefully planned setup, you can cut this bit out if you want

**Russell**

No, because it's great to see the set up and the branding and everything.

**Trudy**

Nice space.

**Greg**No, thank you.

**Rebecca**

Good, isn't it? Right?

**Greg**

Yeah, I think every time, this is our 12th kind of office in our four and a half, five year history, including, you know, the other towns Leicester, Warwick and Brighton. Actually a couple more, we've got Melbourne and Sydney as well. But I think part of the job is to create a space where people want to come to work. And that enables them to be collaborative, but also to be able to focus. And so yeah, big open plan areas, but with lots of breakout space. But I think the other bit that we're kind of really trying to achieve now is we've discovered that lots of people want to come and visit us, and actually creating a great space for the visitors to flow around while people are working. And to see how the company really operates. So deliberately, what we've done is really create space that's good for our people. Inspiring and hopefully motivating, relaxing, but also to welcome. Welcome the world.

**Trudy**

Cool. Well, thanks, Greg, why don't you start by explaining where the idea came from, for this podcast?

**Greg**

You know what, we've been growing rapidly. I guess in four years, since we started trading our revenues over one and a half billion pounds. And you know, our team size is growing from everything. Rebecca, you joined, how long ago?

**Rebecca**

I was employee number 34, three and a half years ago

**Greg**

And we're now you know, there's over one thousand people on our slack system. Now they're not all full time. And they're not all here in the UK. But, you know, we've got well over seven hundred full time equivalent people in our team there. Plus we've got partners, companies who we work with to build our business here and internationally. And really, what we're finding is that as we keep growing, the most important thing about our company is really understanding the mission we're on is not retrofitted to what we want to do is what we exist for. And our culture of everybody understanding and carrying that and spreading, it is so important. And when we were thinking about how we best communicate, if you weren't here on day one? How do we best help you kind of soak yourself into that quickly. And being part of these conversations is going to be where I really hope that people who are joining the company, people who you know, it may be with companies we acquire as we open up in other countries as we drive in other lines of business.

I really hope that this enables people to really get a good sense of where we come from, what really matters to us and how they can really revel in being a part of that and growing it themselves. Now that some people join the team, you know, if you're thinking about joining this company, what better way of getting to understand who we really are. And then I guess finally, we've worked hard to try and create a different kind of organisation. One where you don't hang your personality up alongside your coat when you arrive at the office, but where you can be your real self because that's who we hired, and that's who your teammates and customers want to deal with. And I hope more organisations follow this path when they recruit people, that they really cherish the essence of the person they've hired, and allow them to be in sales and to create and contribute as best they can. So if we can talk about this openly as part of a conversation within the business community, I think that's a contribution we can make to how companies can better serve your employees. And of course, vice versa.

**Russell**

Rebecca, we only spoke for the first time last week, you know a bit about putting this podcast series together. Here we are, literally a week later, you know, on episode one, is that typical of the way you guys work?

**Rebecca**

Well, yes, absolutely. I think if something's important, you make it happen, and you make it happen fast. There's no point waiting around for it, we felt that the organisation has grown rapidly. We can't talk to everyone all the time. We're not in front of everyone all the time. But actually, how can we explain to people how we work and how we do things differently?

**Russell**

Well, okay, well, let's dig a little deeper than into the culture of the business. So, Greg, let's start with you. What does it take to work for Octopus Energy?

**Greg**

First of all, we got a concept. We talked about the dry stone wall. Now, I don't know whether you know about dry stone walls. But a dry stone wall is a kind of way in which people build walls without using cement. So with the walls most of you are familiar with, you have a brick, there's a perfect cuboid. And you cement it onto another perfect cuboid. And they all make a perfect straight wall. And dry stone walls date back millennia. There's still dry stone walls around from Roman times here in the UK. And the way they work is the person building the wall, looks at each stone, natural stone, and identifies how it will best fit with the others. And they start stacking them and there's no cement. That's why it's called dry stone. And instead, it gets a strength from how well the natural shape of those stones fits together. And that strength means as I've just said, like they can last millennia, whereas traditional cemented walls have real problems like watering grass, freezing, cracks, the cement and the walls start to fall apart. The wall is only held together mostly from brick walls that we are familiar with, because of that cement. And that kind of it requires a lot of effort to do that. Now most companies recruit people, we’re all different shapes, then they try and turn them into bricks, they knock the edges off, and they try to make straight lines, because it's easier for them to construct the wall like that, it's harder to do our way which is really getting to know an individual and really getting to know where their strengths will fit against those of others. But if we do that well, instead of chipping off some bits of someone that are incredibly valuable, and then trying to get them to do some stuff, that's just not them. Because you've got to, you've got to fit into the wall, we're able to really try to enable people to contribute what they are naturally best at and then join most. Now, if someone kind of brings those characteristics in and is comfortable with that, then they can enjoy tremendous time here. And if on the other hand, they crave being turned into a cuboid. And some people do, then you know they genuinely are better off, for example, in a more traditional corporate.

**Russell**

So Greg, are you saying then that the kind of people that you're looking for are those that are really looking for a challenge that want to push themselves?

**Greg**

Yeah, it's interesting. I think most companies say that, right? But then what are they pushing themselves to do? You know, I worked in a large corporate matrix organisation. And what I was pushing myself to do was to get someone to do something they didn't want to do. If you spend your entire life pushing water uphill, it's just not enjoyable. And it's also not making the most of the talents of yourself and everyone else. So I think with us, it's interesting, have you ever seen one of those videos on YouTube, of an animal being let out of captivity, so they'll have like a deer or a bear or something that has been catching a cage. And they'll take it off to a field, and they'll open the cage. And it will gently, nervously tend to work its way towards the gate and look around. Nine times out of ten, it will take a couple of steps into the wild, breathe the fresh air, see the horizon and disappear in a distance. And that fills us with joy.

At one time out of ten, by the way, it will see the outside world and it'll go actually, this looks a bit scary. I quite enjoyed being fed three times a day and having a free vet bill and gets back in the cage. And I think an organisation like ours is very much, if you move in from a corporate world, are you considering what you're where you want to work? It's having the freedom and the responsibility that, for example, I've just described there, you have to be able to do a lot for yourself. There aren't loads of support functions here. We've got seven hundred people wherever and we don't have an HR department. Right. And you cannot expect other people to cover your back, you have to take responsibility. But in return, you're able to do so much to keep on, delivering, whether it be outstandingly good customer service, whether it be nurturing and growing a fantastic team, as you work your way through this growing organisation, whether it be having a lot more freedom in how you write code, make software, whatever the kind of space you're in, we don't always deliver this. But the idea, the concept, is you can see the challenge, you want to be successful, no one comes to work to do a bad job. All right, great. Okay. In that case, let's let you do a good job. We hired you, because you're great.

**Trudy**

So Rebecca, you've been here about three years, how is it different working for Octopus in comparison to your previous experience?

**Rebecca**

So previously, I worked at British Gas, which is full of some really great people trying to do some great stuff. And great people getting beaten down by the traditional way of doing things, which is sign off and processes and silos and functions. And I remember when I first joined that business, trying to get something across the line, and I'm in a meeting with some people have been in the business for years, and it was just an absolute ‘computer says no’ face, that won't work, you don't understand, you're new and you're so keen, you won't be that keen for long, and I managed stay keen for about eight years. And then when I was the person in the meeting, when someone new suggested something and I was doing that sucking through teeth thing that I realised it was time to go because I could no longer and I no longer have that joy of work.

And I think when I came to Octopus, they were like, you'll have complete freedom to drive value and grow the business. And that's quite scary first of all, so I remember having a conversation with Greg the first week was even stuff like, well, who's my team going to be because I was this senior person coming into the organisation and wants to know who and what your team will be. And he was like, there are people who will do stuff for you, it's not quite as simple as that, there's a kind of this guy here, he's awesome, he creates stuff and this person builds stuff. And this woman, she writes stuff, and you kind of use them to fulfil your needs. And that was quite difficult to kind of get my head around until I realised it's the kind of organisation where, if you lead people, people will come and people will create great things together. If you don't put them in a particular way, like a writer, and you're a developer, and you encourage them to expand their own horizons. And something else that was a big change for me was as a marketer, how you get work approved, how I get things done, I was used to, you come up with an idea. And then you take it to someone to approve, and they go yes, you can do that. And when you created something, it would go to a lawyer or regulatory person and data protection person and an operations person and a public affairs person and a PR person, all these different people to sign off, we don't have that Octopus that actually, I'm the head of marketing, it's my responsibility to make sure that anything that is going out is correct, is not going to cause any problems.

And actually, I know my trade, I know, when I'm creating something that it's not illegal, or, to reverence, it's going to do the right job. And that creates, it's like complete accountability for your work. It's not just responsibility, it's accountability. And that means that you're thinking, whenever you create anything, you know, you're thinking about all the edge cases, you're thinking about all the things that could go wrong, you think about what if that customer thought that also read it in a particular way? So there's no there's no lazy creation of ideas, you're working really, really hard to make sure that what you put out the door isn't gonna cause you issues later on down the line.

**Russell**

Greg, what about what about yourself in terms of because this isn't the first time that you've led an organisation? So was there anything from your previous businesses that influenced how you wanted Octopus energy to kind of look, feel, run?

**Greg**

Yeah. And I think we had the opportunity, because we had visionary investors to start off on a path that would enable us to kind of set a trajectory that I've always wanted to be on. And there are a couple things. I mean, first of all, the way from what Rebecca was talking about, even from things I've previously led, but I used to work at Procter and Gamble in Marketing. And probably the core skill of a junior marketing person, Procter and Gamble, was getting signatures. And you actually didn't put that much effort into making sure that the creative was brilliant, because you knew it would get butchered during the signature process. Moreover, you wouldn't put that much effort into making sure we're going to be fully compliant, because the compliance team would do that. And fully legal because the legal team would do that. Now, by the end, a dozen people would have done a whole load of work to make a good idea pretty bland and ordinary.

And in the process, it was painful. And by the way, because you always get signatures, you didn’t actually care that much whether the signatures should have gone on the paper, you've gotten them and that was the joy. So when you look at how companies, for example, in sectors like ours, ended up in mis selling scandals. Everything that was signed off, everything they've gone through all those processes, if that what those processes did was once people that got the sign off on something, they allowed it to be scaled without anyone questioning whether it was right.

And I think that what Rebecca talked about there, the total accountability sitting with you actually means you make sure, you absolutely make sure it's right now, of course, if Rebecca wanted to go to the legal team and say, “Hey, we just want to check this.” But, it's on request, as opposed to forced. And that is what causes the accountability. In terms of other stuff I've learned whilst working, it's so difficult for people who've come from high flying backgrounds, to remember, so important for them to be aware, that pretty much everyone's pretty much as smart as they are, right. And if you can make ends meet in the modern world, if you can bring up a family and take out a mortgage and deal with all of the things that make life hard. You can do what most companies want you to do most of the time. And instead of managers sitting over you with a set of KPIs and a checklist, and a prod to make you go faster, and you know, what they should really be doing is freeing you up to deliver the brilliance that's inside you.

**Russell**

Very good. Okay, um, change your subject slightly. Someone's gone through your recruitment process. They've got their job offer. They're all very excited, they're raring to go, they're listening to this podcast. What can they expect on day one?

**Greg**

It's been so long since my day one, Rebecca, go on.

**Rebecca**Oh, it's funny, actually. Because I've had two people join the company. During lockdown, actually, people who were both interviewed during lockdown, which is hard work. And then they served out their notice. And they're joined, including one who moved from another country. And then they're the kind of Octopus people, right? So the people who you know, want, they didn't have a company laptop, you know, but they were kind of rolled with that they had a company, we use Gmail, so they had access to everything. We got them set up on our Slack channel. First, they can talk to everyone. So the first thing we do, we go, here's the marketing group, everybody says hi and shares some banter. And there was immediately some banter. So actually, the first thing you're doing is kind of this is everyone, this is a community, I buddied them up with people immediately. So actually the second person to join, I buddied up with the first person to join two weeks earlier, because he just went through that process. And I was like, What did we say to read that was useful? You know, there's not a kind of set process in my team in particular, it was just kind of bring them in, bring them in immediately and start to talk to people and talk to everyone about you know, how we do things.

**Greg**

Yeah, I think it's interesting. On reflection, listening to Rebecca, one of things about having a very decentralised organisation, with very little in the way process. Yeah, that's the experience, when someone joins Rebecca's team, it's probably quite different when they join a different team. Right? Now all people who run teams will be learning from each other about what works and what doesn't. And finding flavours that work best for their function, their role, their location. But rather than us trying to say, Hey, here's the best practice, which would then immediately constraint that learning. Every time someone joins, it's part of the company learning how to do it better. How cool is that? And I sometimes say, I don't run the show, I just host the party, I create the environment in which people can mingle, and get to know each other and deliver great stuff. But it is everyone's responsibility to make it that. So I guess, and I think that is probably, a lot of companies might say similar things, but we're at the more extreme end of it.

**Trudy**

Have you had any challenges? So individuals coming in new and experiencing perhaps that for the first time? You said earlier, it's not for some people?

**Greg**

Yeah, we've had a very few people who craved structure, you know, and, and actually would look at this and some might think they'd recognise it's powerful, but not for them. And a few might even think this is kind of crazy. And they'd rather go back to a very structured process oriented corporate. And that's totally cool. I think products and services that companies sell, not every product or service is for everyone. And if I say I want you to be yourself here, well, if you turn up here, as the kind of person who really wants to make the most money possible, and will tread on your colleagues to get it, and that believes that the way to get things done is through politics. Well, I hope we won't let you in but if you do join, it won't be a place that you're successful for long.

**Russell**

Rebecca went when we were planning this podcast. So we've had a couple of emails go back and forth. And in one of your emails, you wrote that you're keen to keep your random awesomeness and way of doing things which kind of really stood out for me. So I don't know if this is going to be something that you are able to answer, but it was just an interesting phrase. So just tell me about random awesomeness. What's all that about?

**Rebecca**

I think with random awesomeness, it’s always enabling the most kooky bits of everyone's personality, all those bits. You know, when you sit in a meeting in a corporate and you kind of wonder what people really like outside of work. Sometimes you see that the Christmas party and people drink a bit and you think, Blimey, I didn't know that you did that, or you were like that or something, but it’s about at Octopus, how can you kind of bring that out every day and what people will do, will do at work. So, people coming up with stuff that feels a bit uncomfortable.

I like the fact that the business that Greg founded, and I joined early on, have kind of settled a lot of the culture around, you could be coming into the business and will push it even to what we kind of think is acceptable, and occasionally something will be happening. And me and Greg, will be like, “God that's a bit a bit far out, even for us.” And you know, someone will come up with an idea. And we have to believe that actually, we bring in brilliant people, and they do, random, awesome stuff. And whether that's, you know, a developer, deciding to change something, because they worked very closely with it with an operations person. And, as we had quite recently, someone sent something live in the middle of the day, that was totally brilliant, and totally unexpected. And in a normal organisation, it would never happen at all, but it was much, much better than what would have been before. And it's enabled people to go, I've got a real passion, I think I can make a real difference by changing that thing. And within my remit, and just being able to get on with it.

**Greg**

You know, it's quite funny, isn't it? I mean, loads of companies, people got something they want to do. And they keep bashing their head against the wall is it's like a fly out the window. Yeah. And you should be really honest, it's like, we're either gonna say yes, straightaway, so you don't have that or no, honestly, don't bother, but keep coming up with stuff. Because we might say yes, next time. I was speaking to a big corporate, and then they were kind of trying to be innovative and creative ventures. And then, you know, they have people spend a year going through iteration after iteration of their idea of pitching to the executive, give wise words back, to go in and make a better job and then pitch it again. Now, it's a few things that come from that.

First is, anybody who spent a year pitching something is never gonna admit it didn't work. So they're not going to fail fast, they're going to keep on pretending it's worked, right. And the second thing is, executives are often the worst people to know what's going to work. And we've had a great thing here, right? A guy on Rebecca's team, Max, there was a load of stuff around the office, which we'd been given by other companies, or which had been part of development. And that ordinarily, you'd have thrown away or whatever. And he said, “Look, I put it in a big box and give it away as a prize to customers on Facebook”. And I was like, “We don't do that. We're not a company that does competitions.” And yeah, Max did it anyway. And guess what, it was unbelievably successful. So a couple months later, Max says “Hey you know that competition. I want to do another one.” “This time, I want to give away eight electric vehicles. Eight because we're an octopus, but like a Tesla.” And I was like, “How much is that going to cost?” Anyway, again, it was completely not what I would ever do, but we could afford it, it works out. I think it's 16 pence per customer, and of course, our own business. So I let him do it. And again, it was outrageously successful, to the extent that the CEO of another energy company came up to me when that is genius, right? How does your company develop ideas like that? and I was like, you know,

**Rebecca**

Just to develop them and it lets people come up with stuff.

**Greg**

Exactly, you know, I think here's the thing, they can't replicate this. Yeah, it's so hard for a company to replicate that freedom. So I can tell everyone about it. Right. And it's not competitive practice. Sorry, Rebecca.

**Rebecca**

There is a filter. I mean, we give people some support, so Max did, and we kind of poked the idea around and Greg was like, I'm really not sure. But then we decided in the end to go with it. So it's not free range, it's not total, do whatever you want. It's like, come up with whatever you want. And then we will help you do that. And actually, it's the kind of environment sometimes even if we say no, and then actually, Max and other people feel empowered to go, “I'm really going to champion this one. Because I really think we should.” And it's like, “Okay, well, we listen, and we need to understand that.” This is our culture, and what people will do is developed even beyond what we could have hoped.

And it's a similar thing, actually, we use slack as a communications channel, and we have a comms channel where anyone in the business can put in any suggestion around, whether that's a customer said or done as email, or can we tweak it or just random suggestions, and that channel is monitored by by my team. I look in there and I'm kind of constantly reading that channel to see what suggestions go in. And it means that you'll get some incredibly brilliant ideas from our operations team, we've just spoken to a customer that you'd never would have thought of, and we can action them really quickly. So there might be like, 20 things go in there a day and 15 or so we've had that question before so we can give an answer to and four things are really hard and yes ideal but it's not something that would be really productive, as an organisation and there might be one thing which we literally never thought of was absolutely brilliant and then you down tools and you make it happen. And that absolute ability for anyone in the business to talk to anyone in the business and share those ideas is what enables us to just do things that you never would have expected a business like us to do.

**Russell**

But taking that as an example, so take the competition one, and I get the autonomy and you want responsibility. But mistakes will happen at some point. So what do you guys, as the leaders of the business do, then?

**Greg**

Yeah, loads of companies say, embrace failure, but they don't deliver on it. We really do. And I think the first thing is you’ve got to learn when someone does something wrong. It's very rarely meant to, they probably feel worse about it than we do. So first thing is like, look after that person, put your arm around them. Now, that happens a lot with that person. And we might be having a different conversation. But the point being, we all make mistakes, and we should learn from them. But we should feel supported. Because guess what, the person who made the mistake this time, is one who's least likely to make it next time. Now, the next thing is that we don't brush it under the carpet. Because I think that if people are scared of telling you when they've made a mistake, right, and they don't know that we all make mistakes, then there's a high chance that they will try and cover it up. And I've seen that happen in lots of companies. And the problem is, it's the mistakes you don't know about that cause the biggest damage to a company. So it is literally thanking someone for telling us when something's gone wrong. Blame flows upwards, if we've put someone in a position where the mistake is going to cause a big problem for the company, well, that's my fault, right? So we were talking about that competition thing as an example. If it didn't work, it's a small enough risk, it doesn't matter. If it does work, it can make the company better. But nobody should be exposed to being able to make a mistake that you know, kind of bets on the company or creates massive problems, financially, legally, or in terms of customers. And so, you know, the more senior you get, the more responsibility you have to take for making sure that you're aware of what can go wrong, and guarding against it. And if anything goes wrong, it's your fault. And that's cool. Because ultimately, the blame lands with me.

**Russell**

Was something that's kind of linked to this conversation, but it's just picking up on what you said earlier, Greg, about not having an HR function within the business. So how does that work exactly?

**Greg**

I think, first of all, it’s a bit of a philosophy. By the way, one day, maybe we'll have one, right? The question is, yeah, well, if we've got this far without one, maybe we can go all the way. When I first ran small businesses, you know, you start a business, you've got, you know, one person and 10, then 20, and 30, and 50, and so on. You don't have an HR function, you learn how to do it yourself, you learn how to deal with all of the really important aspects of management. And it's incredibly fulfilling. And I think, you know, I use that one as an example because if you can run a company of 50 people without one which most companies with 50 people don't? Why do you need one when you get to 500 people, because, you know, as a manager in that 50 person company, actually, what you spot when you're going to small companies is very often they're closer to their people, and other people better than a large machine.

So what we don't want to do is create that large machine, what we want to do is scale the magic of smaller companies. And so what it does mean is that we need to teach managers and leaders how to manage and lead, not how to outsource it when it gets hard to someone else. And we also need to talk to our people, because sometimes particularly people who come from other organisations are like, well, where do I go with this problem, you know, I normally take this to HR. And what you have to remember is that HR doesn't work for team members, it works for the company. And so actually, it's just very often and there's no criticism, and there's some amazing HR professionals. But once you have a function, any function in the company, the first thing it does is make sure it has a role. And that that role is really important. And typically that that role keeps getting bigger. So essentially, the idea here is, you know, we try to minimise the number of specialist functions. Because as a manager, you always look at it going like, how did that get so big? So better not to get started on it in the first place.

**Trudy**

So how do you then deal with some specific things? So for example, within HR, there are things like disputes, bereavements, there might be some quite big things that happen for employees. So how does some of those things get handled?

**Greg**

Yes, I think most of the way in which an HR function, take bereavement as an example, you know, they'll be telling the manager how they should help look after that person. Well, hey, why don't we just train our managers to be able to do that themselves? Right. Now, by the way, we may get it wrong sometimes, but so do HR departments. But I believe being a learning organisation where people are taking responsibility and accountability. I hope we get it right most of the time. But no one's got more interest in making it work, then, team leaders, managers, and then if you get into more complex areas, like a dispute or a complaint about a manager or something, ultimately, in a company with an HR function, yeah, those complaints would flow up the tree and my input the CEO, well, hey, they can get to me, right, and then get to any manager in the tree and then go horizontally across the company. And we really encourage those discussions.

So I think we can provide the same outlets, and the same capabilities. But we do so by, instead of shrinking the role of managers, growing it, instead of taking away some of the most important stuff and most rewarding bits about being a business builder, give it to those people. And then finally, there's some technical things, and we have an outsource company that advises us and can help with that, who are truly experts. But I think what's interesting is, if that were an internal function, then it would be continued trying to add value by mere prying into what's going on. Whereas again, I think we talked earlier about legal support being on demand rather than forced. And it's the same with HR support. And that balance of really, making sure it's available. I mean, probably greater expertise than many internal functions have, because externally we've got access to a whole world of expertise. But on demand, I think it's a much more contemporary progressive approach to building a people centred organisation.

**Rebecca**

And again, as a manager, we would want to empower people to have the skills to be able to manage that, to give an example, if someone in my team has had a lot of sickness, and had been off sick, then, first of all, I'd be worried about that person, and see if there is something that we could do to help, if there's a change of working, do they need some time off. But, if I wasn't sure that sometimes, if people are a bit grumpy about work that can visualise it in sickness, so it's like, actually, I kind of felt that someone was grumpy about work rather than sickness, then I should have that conversation with them.

And it shouldn't be, we'll tell you what, I'll wait till they get back to their allocated number of sick days for a year. And then I'll put them through a performance review. Actually pick up the phone and go, “I’m really sorry you're not very well, is there anything I can do to help?” Try and identify if someone does need extra support from that. We've had someone in my team who had a joint problem, which affected their working, so we got them some physio, to try and help them get back on their feet again, because it's not going to get better by someone just having time off, let's see what the company can do to make that better. So it's all bespoke to the person but again, around the manager, knowing their team and being empowered to do what's necessary to make their working lives better and having that closer relationship.

**Trudy**

Yeah. And in terms of you acquiring companies and other businesses, how do you then deal with that, bringing in a new culture, they've gone through a totally different time at their old company. Also, things like the onboarding, and how that gets handled, given. It's a group of people from a different company, and some of the potential things like job losses, changes, and the transitions that have just gone on there.

**Greg**

I think Trudy, there's a couple of bits here. And I think part of our company is about having adult conversations, this stuff is not easy. Okay. Typically, there will be job losses, because the reason we acquire another company, and it depends, actually, I'm sorry, to be really clear, if it's an energy, retail business, chances are, we're more efficient. Therefore, you know, we'll be able to manage the company with often very many fewer people. We make decisions really quickly. So helping people that are not gonna be part of the future, find something else, from the off. So they're not sitting there worrying about what's going to happen, being led down the garden path. So hard conversations very early are really important. And then really helping thereafter. Because it's not their fault, they probably got a brilliant job just for a company that, you know, didn't then in the end, win in the marketplace, I think then within that, it's then really trying to embrace the talent. That's innate in so many people. So we don't want the processes of those companies, and we don't want their culture. But we want the talent, their people.

And I think for a lot of people who've joined us through acquisition, you know, they describe it as a breath of fresh air. And a lot of them we're not exactly the happiest companies. Part of the reason that companies get acquired is if things aren't going well. You know, whether for some people that is the end of the road, but we will help them the best we can. And for others, it's a new beginning. So I think that's that's what we're looking at. It kind of comes at doing things like energy retail, and we don't use words like HR as a sort of dismissive commoditization of humans, right, humans, as, you know, incredibly special, each individual value creator, and what this business is built on.

So the people in the future, genuinely, I hope, kind of feel that this is a place to flourish. And when we're acquiring businesses that are in whole new sectors, we're largely acquiring for the people. Right? It's the talent of the people, that and the stuff they've created, in areas that we're not currently experts that we want. So in those scenarios, where I hope we do, is we create a great place for that town to flourish. But again, within the processes and culture of our company, hopefully then means that you don't end up with silo ization. You don't overpair the time and end up with all these individual citadels. But we are, you know, one society,

**Russell**

This leads nicely on, I want to get on to this whole area of communication within the teams. And so you've talked about flat structures, you know, people being empowered to take responsibility. What about across functions though, because in lots of businesses you wouldn't even talk to, you know, or even know, half the people outside of your own department. So how is their regular dialogue between colleagues across different teams that they work together well?

**Rebecca**

Yeah, I mean, we have no walls between functions at Octopus. And we vigorously knock down those walls should ever they occur, because one of the most dangerous things in organisation is where, an operations team gets a bit grumpy with marketing, because marketing keep doing stuff to drive the business that makes them busy, and marketing get a bit grumpy because they're trying to drive the business. And then every time they do something, operations get jumpy, people are calling more. And then operations get jumpy, because tech isn't delivering all the stuff they'd like. And then tech gets grumpy because they just have this massive list of things that they need to do that, you know, they haven't quite delivered yet. And you just end up with all this incredible amount of circular grump, where everyone's just unhappy with each other.

And actually, if you strip all those walls back and you relentlessly talk to people about everybody being here to grow the business and to add value and to enjoy what they're doing. It's not about marketing driving the business and making ops busier. It's about everybody working together to drive the business. And actually how you can practically work around that. So we have something called yaygering, where tech people and developers will go and sit with an operations person as they work and understand how they work for the whole day and understand how they use the systems and what works and what doesn't work. And they'll identify all kinds of stuff, they'll go, oh, hang on, I could build a bit of code that made that really easy, oh, I could just do that. And I'll just go away and do it. And then they'll go back to their desk, and release that.

**Greg**

Can I just come in on that? Because I think this kind of thing about functional walls is one of the most important considerations that we've had since beginning the business. And years ago, I ran this business where there were just three of us. And every Friday, we go for a pint. And what we found was during that time, of course, what we talked about was work. And it really helped create an informal way of resolving things that had otherwise hung in the air or creating new ideas or coming together, as that business group went from three people to 30 to, I think maybe just under 100, that Friday night pint carried on. Now, the bill used to be like £20, and by the end, it was in the hundreds, if not more, and we got acquired, and the company that acquired, I remember the finance director very quickly saying, look, obviously, these Friday night things, we're gonna have to work out how to bring the cost down, and I said no way. This brings our whole company together. And it reminds people, week in week out, that everyone they work with in other functions, cares as much and is as smart as and as driven as they are. And that is worth however many pounds we're spending on our Friday night bar bill.

And so when we started this business, we began that right from the beginning, now here we are with, even during COVID, we'll have three, four or 500 people on a zoom call every Friday. And the most important thing is to remind us we're all here for the same reason. And regardless of what function we work in, we're all great people doing our best. And if tech gets something wrong and the system crashes. It's not because they're crap, it's because they're working so hard to keep bringing new things in. And because we're so successful at growing and continually uprating it. Similarly, you know, if marketing accidentally set an initiative like before the rest of the business was ready for it. And we're inundated with customers and the phone lines are melting, it's not because they don't care about everyone else. it's because, in the quest to get this out the door, or because it was more successful than we expected, we couldn't have got ready. And then the same for every function. So I think that ability to keep coming together is one thing that differentiates us from silolized companies which allow that resentment or lack of respect to grow between functions. And the reason I wanted to really emphasise this, is that anyone who's listening who works here, today in 2020, this is important to us. Maybe in 2025, it will be even more important.

**Russell**

And what about monitoring, what your colleagues are saying, you know, about the business? Did you look at things like Glassdoor, for example sites like that?

**Greg**

Yeah. So we do a bunch of things. So first of all, many functions of business run something called Officevibe, which on a daily and weekly basis is asking questions about how people are doing. And that's an incredibly important part of our understanding of what we do. And we certainly look at Glassdoor. But for example, my personal slack is actually a way in which I learn a tremendous amount and create permission for people to feel comfortable letting us know when something goes wrong, or when there's something they're worried about, or something that they're proud of. And through all those channels it is important, I think, so I got an email from someone a few days ago, he was leaving the company. And his experience hadn't reflected everything that he thought we stood for. And, you know, the ability to phone them up and have a chat, like half an hour on the phone with them to really understand more about it, was invaluable.

And similarly, someone tweeted at me, I got a tweet about happy customers, they do it well, your customers maybe happy but your staff aren't and I dropped him a direct message. And it turned out he was the father of one of our team. And he felt that her talent was going unrecognised, and she was stressed. And he told me a lot about it. And I never knew the identity, we were swapping Twitter DM's. But I talked a lot to understand what was going on and amazingly, you know, he said, look, this is what's been really helpful. And a few months later, he dropped me a tweet, a DM and said, look, my daughter's just been promoted. She's over the moon, that rough patch is gone. And by the way, it wasn't even something I had done, because I never knew who she was. But that dialogue was really helpful to me to know how someone felt, even if I didn't know who they were. Because, we've got to make the machine better. But as I say, you asked, do we try to monitor and solicit? And I hope we do it in every channel.

**Trudy**

Great. So just dipping back into something we've been talking about earlier. And that's around flexibility. What is the company's attitude and approach to remote working?

**Greg**

I mean, look, we've been remote, almost from the beginning, there is a friend of mine, set up a business, an online clothing retailer. And then her husband was a diplomat and got posted. I think it was Estonia. And suddenly, she got this business in the UK, and she couldn't be there. And so this is maybe more than a decade ago, She built a remote team and ran it from Estonia. And all of the people who worked in her team were remote. And, I remember that she talked to me about how they use digital channels to stay in touch on a human level as well as a business level, it really struck a chord with me, and it really enabled her to tap into talent that perhaps, other companies didn't have access to. Often it would be people who lived in an area that didn't have any sort of companies doing that sort of work. And others it would be parents whose employers weren't flexible to a return. And so she had access to all this talent, and that talent had access to a job and a career that otherwise wouldn't be there. So it was a real win win. So very early in our history as a company, I thought we should do the same. And so I think we were probably six months or nine months old as a business, when we deliberately started recruiting people who could work remotely, and making sure that the infrastructure to support that. And I was always really proud of it because of the career opportunities that gave people who were otherwise not getting them with, with less enlightened employers. But it also gave us access to talent, and gave our customers tremendously capable support around the clock. And then finally, you know, you believe in this stuff you do, because it's right. And then with COVID, we were more prepared than almost anyone else for going to full remote working. So I think it's been a tremendous strength. It opens up things you've never imagined, by the way. There was one of our customer team that was in a relationship with a guy who's moving to Canada and she could just take the job with her.

**Rebecca**

Yeah, I mean, this, actually, for me personally has been an incredible strength as well. So the early, specifically recruited remote working team, our Digi Ops team are mainly women. And it's mainly women returning to work, haven't had kids and it's women from incredibly professional backgrounds, all absolute superstars.

But it's difficult to come back to work and juggle small children. Society is still not quite there yet, it's hard being a woman having kids and trying to do a professional job. And so not only does it mean we've kind of tapped into this super incredible plot of talent, but also they can support each other as well. And it's incredibly powerful when you look at the talent of someone and how you can enable them to work for you. And with you rather than expecting someone to, like Greg said, just the beginning be a brick and fit in a box, which is nine to five in an office and behave in a certain way, you get so much more value out of people, and people get so much more value out of you as an organisation as well.

**Russell**

Okay, well, that actually leads nicely onto something I wanted to come back to you on Greg, which is the fact that, you know, today companies are very much judged by all stakeholders on their ESG credential. So environmental, social, and governance. The positive impacts on the environmental part is obvious. So given the aim of delivering cheaper, greener energy, so you know, big tick there, but how do you view your role in society as a business in integrating a social purpose into the company?

**Greg**

Actually, almost, I think the question shouldn't apply to us if we're doing our job. Because we were founded to drive change in society that's needed. There are two things that were critical. One, we talked about climate change. And you know, we're a business. The observation I made early on was, what if you have a business that made money out of fighting climate change, rather than by causing it, great. We've now aligned our shareholder interest making money, with our purpose and drivers, human beings, which is to fight climate change. That's cool. And the second one is social justice. And social justice has got a wide range of meanings.

But in the first instance, for us, high energy prices, and deceptive or at least difficult to decipher, energy bills and pro and tariffs. The difference for a low income household like a single parent between being able to afford to send the kids on a school trip or not. For old people, or people on very low incomes, it might be the difference between sitting at home all day, shivering, and being able to feel comfortable that you can afford to put the heating on. Yeah, this is fairly fundamental stuff. In the long run, you know, I think the next five years at this business are about taking our UK kind of developed mission global to advanced economies. But over the five years following that, hopefully we can start to democratise clean energy into, you know, emerging economies and other nations too. So I think, you know, for us, our business is built in a way that should deliver both what other companies retrofit as ESG. And the obviously very important thing as a business, which is making sure that we make money and we deliver a return to the people who've invested in our mission for us,

**Russell**

Rebecca, I spotted you nodding along to a couple of bits there. I mean, what's your experience. You know, from your side of things in the company?

**Rebecca**

Yeah. I mean, the reason I joined Octopus was that both, I was totally bowled over by the vision of bringing cheaper, greener power to everyone. And the way that everyone I met, including Greg, talk to so articulately about that, and creating a successful business, which had those values at the core and could do that, but also the tech that underpinned the business and the tech was the proof point that actually, the business could do that as well. So it was actually proof that you could be green and good and do things differently and create a different kind of business.

And this was how that was enabled and actually showing how you build a business in and from the ground up, you build a business where diversity is built in from day one, because you have the ability to support people who want to work in it in a different way, whether that's somebody who prefers to work from home or that someone who has to work around the kids or whatever that is that actually, modern businesses and business like ours can be just as successful, more successful than then other businesses just by embracing humans and the talents of humans and the desire for humans to make the world a better place and formulating a business around that.

**Russell**

It's been fascinating hearing both of you share your passion for this for this business and its culture. And Rebecca, one thing I wanted to sort of like ask you, your as the person in charge of communications, how do you strike that balance between ensuring Greg's passion for everything, you know, that the company stands for, which clearly comes through in this conversation, and a lot of the comms, obviously, that I've seen him do. So his passion is as a leader, and then not, you know, the result not being everyone seeing this as Greg Jackson Limited? You know, and so ensuring it's the Octopus Energy message that has been delivered? How do you manage that?

**Rebecca**

We shouldn't feel in any way awkward about the fact that we're a founder led business and many things that we've done so far, Greg set a lot of the initial objectives and values of the business, but we've built on them ourselves as an organisation, and Greg talks about the fact that he hosts the party, and it's the people who come to the party that made the party and we've built and delivered and increased our culture and our values and how we do things in every direction. And so it’s actually has become bigger than Greg. And I think if you look at other organisations, if you'd like Tesla, you probably like Elon as well. But Elon is not everything there is about Tesla, Tesla is a fantastic organisation with a number of key dimensions and metrics are outside of a kind of charismatic founder but there's nothing wrong with the fact that that's a very strong element of their overall narrative.

**Trudy**

We're just following on from that, do you feel you're winning in terms of the perception of Octopus internally and externally? And that's in terms of the brand, how the brand comes across? How has it been perceived? And how also, you're articulating that message? How's that going?

**Rebecca**

Well we can never say that we're winning. It's always to try hard and to try harder and keep developing it. And what's exciting is that our message continues to develop, and we learn from both internal and external people, how we can make that work even even harder for us.

**Trudy**

Do you feel that's a consistent message, though? Whether it's internal or external, so your employees, as opposed to your customer and partners? Do they all feel the same about the brand?

**Rebecca**

Yes. I've been surprised actually, when I talk to people internally about how passionately they believe in and feel about what we're doing here and how we're trying to get that message of cheaper green power out there. That's why people join the business. That's why they stay with the business. That is why they strive to help grow the business as well and all, the fact that is a good place to work. And we'll let you be yourself and all that kind of thing is incredibly important, but actually out of that core people are here because they're striving to make a difference and drive green power around the world.

**Greg**

In terms of, are we getting a consistent message, I think what loads of companies do is they'll come up with a catchphrase, and then apply it to what they do anyway. And then hope the people echo about the catchphrase, now, whether or not people echo about the catchphrase, it doesn't change what you really are. Now, actually I don't think we've really got a well articulated, well spread mission statement or set of values, and all that stuff. But I think that we behave in a way that is broadly consistent with everything that we've talked about today, and that will unpack over the next few episodes. And therefore what people echo back is what we really are, rather than what we wish we were or what we say we are.

**Russell**

When you say you don't have the mission statement. But I mean, if you could just sum up your culture, whether it's in a list of words or bullet points or a phrase or whatever, but how would you sum up the culture of the business, Greg?

**Greg**

Look, I think the thing we do is really understand that people are special, that everyone's an individual, and that we've got one go at life. So if we can make the eight or nine or ten hours, whatever day that we are working or involved in work a part of our life, because we are ourselves throughout it, we’ll live fuller, richer lives. I think we will contribute more to the company and can contribute more to us.

**Russell**

Tremendous. Greg Jackson, Rebecca Dibb Simkin, thank you for joining us today. It's been a fascinating chat, it's been a long chat! One that is certainly longer than we anticipated but Greg, what do you want listeners to do from here? Do you want them to contact you? Do you want them to follow you?

**Greg**

Well, I think it was interesting enough, we'll turn it into a podcast series, they should probably subscribe. And either way, who would listen to this, I hope that new team members will listen and be able to, over a period of time get an understanding of where this company has come from and what they're part of, I think people that are thinking about joining us should hopefully listen and get a sense for themselves of whether they like this, kind of, revealing about the way we are under the hood. And then outside of that as a company, we’ve got ideas about how organisations can better deliver for customers and for society, and for the people who work in them. And maybe we can start to form a conversation about that.

So if you're a business leader and stuff here, that's interesting, would you agree or disagree? Drop me a note. And then I guess if you're a competitor, I hope it was interesting as well. Because I certainly find that a lot of what we do and say, publicly, comes back to me through those channels, too. So, you know, for whatever reason, people have had a listen. And maybe if you work in another organisation, you want to take these ideas in your own company, drop us a note, follow me on Twitter, follow the company on Twitter. And let's enjoy this kind of very porous, open, collaborative approach to building the future.

**Russell**

Brilliant. Well, you know, given we've talked about technology led business, can we get your CTO on for the next one, maybe talk tech?

**Greg**

Well I mean, if you think this one was long. But yeah, look, yeah, we can definitely do that. I don't know, Trudy, what would you like to pick upon in the next one?

**Trudy**

Well, I think I like the tech story, where it's evolved from, I think there's really something important to share. We've kind of got a lot of grounding on what you're all about and where you came from. I think tech is the natural next step, actually.

**Greg**

Great. Okay. Next one, tech.

**Russell**

Excellent. So it looks like the tech story will be the next one. So we better wrap this up now. So thank you all for listening. Thank you for watching. If you've been watching us online as well, and from myself and Trudy, it's been an absolute pleasure to kick this podcast series off. So we'll see you next time. Thanks a lot.

**Greg**

Thank you, everyone.