

Martijn Verbeek: Innovation @ Ahold

Two and a half years ago Ahold asked us to find a new Senior Manager Strategic Planning & Innovation. This role was created by Jan de Heij, Senior Director IT Strategy & Innovation at Ahold Europe. The role was part of the CIO office and the aim was to streamline the strategic IT planning process, create a vision & roadmap for the future of shopping and initiate new technology-enabled, innovative concepts for Ahold in Europe. We identified Martijn Verbeek, Manager Innovation at Eneco who was hired for the role.

What triggered you to listen to us 2.5 years ago when we called you for the opportunity at Ahold?

I had been at Eneco for over 10 years and before that 5 years at KPN Mobile, in product development, marketing & sales and innovation roles. At the time, I was working on the delivery and commercial launch of a new concept called Toon. I had a great role within Eneco as Manager Innovation, connecting the different business units to create new sustainable energy business models and concepts for our customers. I was triggered by Ahold because retail is a very different industry with a lot of change and opportunities in its business model ahead. I liked the fact that it is consumer focused, the products are very visible and everyone has an opinion about them! In energy, the product is a commodity and the service to clients is the main differentiator; in retail the omnichannel shopping experience as a whole is important.

How was your start at Ahold:

I was hired by Jan de Heij, and he is still my manager. He started the innovation team that I'm now responsible for. Jan wanted to make absolutely sure that this was taken well care off, and I had to gain his trust to handle this well.

Jan also hired me to add to the competences within the Strategy & Innovation Management Team with more business/customer orientation and relationship building to extend the connection of innovation within the organization. Quite different from the strategic and analytical skills in the MT that dominated at that time. The consequence was that it took us some time to really understand each other in our way of thinking and working. Furthermore, roles were shifting within the team, improving clarity in roles and responsibilities. Therefore it was not so straightforward to start in my role. But everything settled well.

The topics we are dealing with are 'hot'. We give regular updates to executive management of Ahold. At the start I noticed how very different both companies are. Jeroen de Haas (CEO at ENECO) has an inclusive approach and internal cooperation to reach the company's goals is a key priority. Ahold is listed at the stock exchange and as a global company a much bigger organisation with a different dynamic than Eneco. Within Ahold I found highly skilled people that are proud of and loyal to the company. I needed to get used to the fact that involving colleagues and (approval) processes take quite a

lot of time in a large organization, slowing down the innovation cycle. Building the bridge however takes you further. Retail is a more dynamic and diverse industry than energy, which possibly explains the bigger (market) pressure you feel in this firm.

What is innovation in Ahold:

We aim to be the innovators and entrepreneurs within Ahold. Innovation in retail is very broad: from new products on the shelf, packaging, supply chain innovation to omnichannel shopping and customer experience in the store. My team is focused on creating new customer (and associate) facing concepts, enabled by new/emerging technology. We're working on many different topics with a technology element in it. For example self-scanning and – payment on your mobile phone. Another example is the online-





in-store: smaller outlets can have bigger (online) stock despite their restricted number of physical square meters. With the addition of bol.com (bought by Ahold in 2012) a new wave of possibilities has emerged: including ideas of ordering online and picking up in-store. Another idea is a concept to consider stores as a platform to boost local social-cohesion. Albert Heijn could be a place for people to connect or help others; for example with a innovative platform, people could easily deliver products for neighbours who are less mobile; technology can take care of requests & payments in real-time.

How is innovation managed in Ahold:

As a team we defined key topics that enable the future (omnichannel) shopping experience for our customers, based on customer and technology trend analysis. We created a roadmap and come up with ideas for new concepts to validate our vision. This includes input from and co-operation with start-ups and other external sources. Every year the innovation team launches around 10 trials (proof of concepts) for real-life testing in one or more stores. We develop these in an agile, iterative way to learn fast. The PoCs deliver proof of perceived value by customers and we learn what is needed to scale up. When the evaluation is positive, we scale the trial to a pilot in several stores, to create a proper business case for rollout. Most of our store managers are quite keen to co-operate, as there is always a lot to learn about our customer needs in these pilots. We aim to have a

turnaround of 100 days from idea to real life testing.

What do you expect to happen with innovation at Ahold?

The retail sector is changing fast, due to the rapid growth of online, new competitors and business models and emerging new technologies. This creates great opportunities for innovation.

The focus of Ahold is on speeding up innovation and agility of the organization.

It's still early days in terms of online and omnichannel grocery shopping, with mobile applications that make the customers better informed and enable shopping anywhere and anytime - this gives a wealth of opportunity for Ahold to serve our customers better.



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