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Impact Interview: Paulette van Ommen



Name: Paulette van Ommer **Role/Function:**
Director Health & Sustainability, Europe &
Indonesia, Ahold Delhaize

What are you working on these days?

At [Ahold Delhaize](#), a global food retailer, I guide and support our brands in Europe and Indonesia to achieve our ambitious health and sustainability goals. Our European brands include Albert Heijn, bol.com, Delhaize, Etos and Gall & Gall. The Ahold Delhaize family also includes brands like Giant, Hannaford and Fresh Direct in the U.S. Important areas include climate action (which includes, for example, our renewable energy program and the transition towards offering and selling more plant-based proteins), tackling food waste and thinking through what's next in our biodiversity, packaging and healthier sales

strategies. Many of these topics go beyond our direct operational control and involve engaging suppliers and customers as well.

What sparks my curiosity and passion is building the capabilities of my colleagues together with thought leaders and storytellers – from behavioral scientists to film makers – from outside our company. For example, I initiated and lead the “Creatives for Change” network within our company, which includes a learning curriculum for creative professionals who have a direct impact on the behaviors and choices of millions of customers every single week.

In addition, I’ve created the internal “Ahold Delhaize Impact Cinema”. Soon, this will enable any community of colleagues to host film screening events that spark meaningful conversations on social or environmental topics that truly matter to them.

What was the “aha” moment that sparked your interest in social impact?

At the age of sixteen I served an education-focused NGO ([Edukans](#)) as a high school ambassador. For a week, we visited schools in Uganda for whom we’d be fundraising for a full year. Upon return to The Netherlands, I initiated the development of Uganda-themed classes in my own high school that teachers were able to integrate in their curriculum.

I guess that’s when I started helping others integrate societal topics in their work – but most of all, in their hearts and minds. A funny, recent anecdote to illustrate that point is that of a sustainable finance colleague of mine, who attended my high school and is still in touch with a teacher we both had. When chatting about what I’ve been up to, this teacher wasn’t surprised: “So... Paulette is still doing what she did in the early 00s!” Although my ways of working have certainly evolved since, he’s right: that passion is still there.

Looking back, it seems that somehow even before that trip to Uganda, I had decided I want to focus my time and energy on having a positive societal impact. At the age of eight, I remember giving talks about child labor. In my first high school years, I campaigned for Amnesty International and IFAW to raise awareness for human and animal rights. As a student, I got myself

involved in topics like social entrepreneurship, inclusive finance and sustainable trade of tropical commodities while studying and working in the U.S., UK and Latin America.

How did you break into the social impact space?

In 2009 I initiated my first full-time corporate role. I sent a spontaneous email to EY (I noticed there was no public information about its sustainability progress, so figured there was work to be done). It somehow reached the (then) newly appointed Benelux CEO and his strategic sustainability team.

Luckily, the CEO had already decided that diversity and inclusion and sustainability were the two areas where he wanted to make a difference. Back in 2010 that wasn't quite the mainstream agenda of Big Four CEOs, nor of their clients, so it took significant engagement.

A year after I started, the Dutch Prime Minister left politics and joined EY. Soon, we all teamed up to accelerate our joint sustainability agenda: both internally and externally. Those were five great first years! A great foundation for a unique and more international adventure in the following years, as Royal DSM's Global Climate Lead.

A first tip I'd like to share is to not narrow a search for an impact job to job titles that have "sustainability" in them. There are countless jobs in an organization that can (or should) make a truly significant contribution without that being an explicit title – whether in finance, marketing, HR, logistics or any other functional area. In the end, sustainability can be part of everyone's job.

A second thought is to look at newer, younger businesses (both with and without B Corp status) whose reason for being is to solve a societal problem. Their culture, purpose and business model is already in line with that mission. Such organizations therefore probably won't need a sustainability professional to change them from within. They do however need strong talent

across a variety of non-sustainability functional areas. It can be very meaningful for professionals who are looking to build their impact career, to contribute to the success of such organizations.

Working in social impact is often about driving change. What is the skill or trait that has been most important for your work as a change agent? How did you learn or hone it?

Over the years I have found out how important it is to have a broad range of skills in addition to subject matter expertise. The book "[7 Roles of a Sustainability Professional](#)" describes very well how sustainability professionals must constantly switch between roles: the stimulator and connector (challenging, activating and inspiring others), the innovator, the strategist (leading others), the coordinator and initiator (supporting others) the mentor (empowering others), networker (engaging others) and the monitor (reporting, tracking progress). This sounds like a lot, but it's also what kept my work interesting.

As you explore and develop this versatile set of skills, it's important to not just be aware of your strengths, weaknesses but also your "hidden treasures" and "strenuous gifts". These are terms my husband laid out in his book "[What is Water?](#)" and I find it incredibly helpful.

Strenuous gifts are skills that don't give you a huge amount of energy when using them, but they're ones you truly master. For example in my case, although I'm skilled at managing and structuring complex multi-stakeholder processes, it's not my greatest passion if it becomes too dominant compared to more creative or entrepreneurial work. I have to be intentional about this balance. What can be tricky about these skills, is that others might think they actually do you a favor when asking you to tap into them. You have to be mindful about the frequency of saying "yes" to prevent it from becoming draining.

Hidden treasures are where it gets really interesting: skills you don't master yet, or perhaps aren't widely known for, but that give you lots of energy when you have a chance to develop them. For example in my case, I enjoy applying my creativity to

develop innovative concepts and campaigns that will help to mainstream healthy and sustainable choices for mainstream customers.

I love asking colleagues, friends and anyone approaching me for career advice, about their hidden treasures. Where appreciated, I offer ideas on how to develop them: whether as an experimental part of their current work, or through potentially less risky settings, like networks or voluntary roles outside of their day-to-day work.

What most excites you about the social impact space right now?

What keeps me energized is the huge potential we still have – as a species on this precious planet – to change our mindset, culture and behaviors. While this is extremely tough, I find it a helpful thought that if we are able to create the crises we find ourselves in, we also have the ability to solve them.

Retailers, media, advertisers, artists – and anyone else that can help to reimagine how we define well-being for people and planet – have a huge responsibility here. For example, by promoting new social norms for customers to pause and think for a moment to consciously reflect on their shopping behavior (rather than stimulating impulse buying). My marketing colleagues of our brand in Greece recently started experimenting with this in their latest campaign together with WWF.

In parallel, the influence, power, and hence responsibility, of large businesses must be used as a force for good, and I'll continue to be a critical and constructive voice for that in whichever organization I work with.

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