

Turning goals into growth: How Unilever's Ilvan Yahdi uses OKRs to drive change

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the challenge organisations face in translating strategic intent into scalable outcomes, particularly in an era of rapid technological change. The author's central argument, presented through an interview with Ilvan Yahdi, HR Director at Unilever Indonesia, is that OKRs function as strategic levers for alignment and agility beyond conventional goal-setting tools. Key evidence draws on Yahdi's 15-year HR leadership experience at Unilever, describing a shift from traditional KPIs to OKRs during a major business transformation in Indonesia, which reportedly improved employee engagement, operational efficiency, and cross-functional accountability. A Moon Camp survey is cited to support broader OKR adoption, stating that 83% of companies report positive organisational impact. The article concludes with five forward-looking workforce engagement strategies centred on continuous listening, personalised learning, transparent communication, recognition culture, and leadership agility. The implications drawn favour an integrated approach combining advanced analytics, AI tools, and human-centred leadership to sustain OKR-driven performance outcomes.

Key Insights

1. Unilever Indonesia transitioned from traditional KPIs to OKRs as part of a major business transformation, framing OKRs as tools for organisational alignment and agility rather than mere goal-setting instruments.
2. A primary cultural barrier to OKR adoption was resistance to transparency and cross-functional collaboration, which was addressed through targeted L&D programmes including an 'OKR as Ways of Working' initiative focused on leadership coaching and open dialogue.
3. Analytics-driven dashboards were used at Unilever to monitor employee engagement scores in real time, enabling early identification of attrition trends and reportedly reducing attrition rates while improving productivity.

Practical Takeaways

- Organisations embedding OKRs may encounter resistance rooted in transparency and collaboration norms, suggesting that leadership development and trust-building initiatives are components of the transition process.
- Real-time analytics and AI-powered dashboards are described as enabling proactive rather than reactive responses to performance and engagement challenges within an OKR framework.

Frameworks Mentioned

OKRs — Objectives and Key Results — a goal-setting framework used to align individual, team, and organisational objectives with measurable outcomes, described in the article as a strategic lever for agility and performance alignment.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article provides a first-person practitioner perspective from a senior HR leader at a globally recognised organisation, offering contextual credibility. The five future-ready strategies articulated are internally consistent and grounded in the OKR narrative. **Limitations:** The evidence base is largely anecdotal — specific metrics such as attrition reduction percentages or engagement score improvements are mentioned but not quantified. The sole external statistic (83% of companies reporting positive OKR impact) is sourced from Moon Camp, a company with a commercial interest in OKR adoption, which introduces potential bias. The article does not describe a control group, comparison period, or independent validation of outcomes at Unilever Indonesia. The interview format limits depth of critical examination. **Biases:** The framing is uniformly positive toward OKRs with no counterarguments or failure cases presented. The publication context (ET HRSEA) and interview format are oriented toward practitioner inspiration rather than academic scrutiny.

Organizational Practice

Unilever Indonesia is described as having transitioned from traditional KPIs to OKRs as part of a major business transformation. This involved co-creating objectives across multiple departments, conducting leadership workshops under an 'OKR as Ways of Working' programme, and deploying analytics-driven dashboards to monitor employee engagement scores and attrition trends in real time.

Strategic Implications

The article reflects a broader trend of large organisations repositioning OKRs from operational tracking tools to enterprise-wide alignment mechanisms. The emphasis on combining AI-powered analytics with human-centred leadership points to an emerging dual-capability expectation for HR functions. The framing of human skills as increasingly scarce and valuable in an AI-dominated context signals a possible counter-movement to automation narratives within talent and performance management discourse.

Validation Status: passed
