

Against the grain

The BETC founder has never read a management book – and probably never will. Yet over the past 24 years his trusting and laidback approach has helped build an advertising giant that is not only rewriting the business rulebook but the book on Paris's future too.

By Tom Burges Watson
Photography Stephanie Fuessenich

Rémi Babinet has spent much of his career defying traditional French corporate norms, choosing instead to run his business by his own rules. He is the founder of (and the "B" in) BETC, which – with 1,100 staff – is France's largest advertising agency. While the rest of the industry has faced existential challenges in recent years, his company has remained successful and counts more than 100 international brands amongst its clients, including Louis Vuitton and Air France.

"We're not at all typical," says Babinet, as he welcomes MONOCLE to the BETC headquarters in the Paris suburb of Pantin. The truth of this statement becomes clear as he explains that neither he nor any other BETC employee has an office. Instead, he likes to try out different areas of the building, opting today to work in the spacious staff canteen. This flexible arrangement, he says, enables all BETC employees to get to know each other.

Nor does BETC have a dress code: Babinet, sporting jeans and a casual shirt, looks every bit as relaxed as the employees sitting down for a meeting nearby. He greets each one by their first name. "BETC may have been around for 24 years but it still feels like a start-up," he says, stressing that he prefers a horizontal rather than a hierarchical structure. "If you empower your staff, they manage themselves."

When Babinet founded BETC he had little prior management experience. The learning curve was steep but he says he's learnt by trial and error. "I've never read a book about management," he says. "I might read one when I retire." In his view, the golden rules of management are to do exactly what you say you're going to do and be clear about the desired outcome. He also leads by example, managing certain BETC client accounts himself.

As a graduate in philosophy and literature from a family of academics, Babinet enjoys reading. One author who had a particularly strong impact on his youth was Malcolm Lowry, whose *Under the Volcano* he read aged 21. Following in Lowry's footsteps, the young Babinet travelled alone across Mexico on a budget of a dollar a day – an experience that he believes was of greater value to him (and far more interesting) than an MBA.

Frugality was also a feature of the entrepreneur's younger years; he spent part of his childhood in an isolated Alpine village with no electricity, gas or running water. "I learnt the importance of making a little go a long way and, even today, I'm not a big spender," he says.

With its solar panels and exposed pipes and cables, the 20,000 sq m complex that comprises the BETC headquarters, much of it designed by Babinet himself, seems to embody his sense of thriftiness. That said, the value placed on employee comfort is evident: there's a state-of-the-art gym, fruit-and-vegetable garden and a well-stocked library. "Creating a workplace that employees enjoy being in makes perfect sense," he says. "We want to attract top talent from across the globe."

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of Babinet's eccentricity was when, 10 years ago, he decided to relocate the BETC headquarters to Pantin. Many considered this a bizarre choice. The area was run-down, a magnet for squatters, and the premises he took over – a 1930s warehouse called Les Magasins généraux – was a wreck. After undergoing major reconstruction, the new corporate HQ opened its doors in July 2016 and ever since property developers have gravitated towards this once-forgotten district.

From the calm of the BETC rooftop garden – where staff can opt to work among fig trees and tomato vines during the warmer months – Babinet points out across the city. "This is Le Grand Paris," he says, referring to the suburbs surrounding the city's famously picturesque centre. "The Paris of the future."

By moving to the northeast suburb of Pantin, BETC has become a poster child for the much-discussed Grand Paris project, in which Babinet is actively involved. It's a scheme that aims to connect the French capital with surrounding areas by adding more than 60 new train and Metro stations, as well as about 200 kilometres of additional railway tracks. Existing residential and commercial districts will also be given a makeover. The entire project is due to be completed in 2030, by which time Greater Paris is expected to be home to about 12 million people.

"Tourists might want the city to stay the way it is," says Babinet, whom the French media have dubbed "*un militant du Grand Paris*". "But how can we compete internationally if we don't evolve and grow?" The alternative, he argues, is that Paris could become another Venice.

Aware of the potential that such an interconnected metropolis represents, Babinet and his team produced a guidebook earlier this year – *Le Guide des Grands Parisiens* – to help people navigate the newly defined French capital. The first edition sold out within weeks. It's a measure of the entrepreneur's unorthodox approach to both life and business that he is a torchbearer for this new chapter in the city's history. "The next 20 years are going to be amazing for Paris," he says. "The image of the city is going to change enormously." — (M)



The rules:

01

What time do you like to be at your desk?

By 08.00 but it's not actually at my desk since nobody has a personal desk at BETC. It could be anywhere in the Magasins généraux building.

02

Are tough decisions best taken by one person or by a group?

I think it's better to make decisions in a small group. The number of fingers on one hand should be the maximum.

03

Do you want to be liked or respected?

I prefer to be respected. Savoir faire, experience and confidence are more important to me than friendliness. But I hate it when work isn't a pleasure anymore.

04

What technology do you carry with you while on trips?

An iPhone 10 and a Sony RX100 camera.

05

Do you read management books?

Never. I never have. So it's rather likely I never will.

06

What would your key management advice be?

Make time to listen. It makes you smarter. It's time well spent and it saves you time. Be attentive to details because they make all the difference.

07

To whom do you go for your own advice and guidance?

Nobody. The people I have the most trust in are people I never discuss work with: my wife and my children.

08

What do you find the most difficult part of your job?

To maintain a good idea through all the stages of its transformation and to ensure that it's even better when it's complete than when it was conceived.

09

Is it OK for employees to disagree with you or should they toe the line?

It's completely OK to be in disagreement – if your arguments are good.

10

If you could fix one thing about your company today, what would it be?

We haven't taken enough time to do justice to and communicate everything we're capable of doing. We do advertising for others but we've forgotten to do it for ourselves. In France we say: the cobbler's children always go barefoot.