



Polson & Co

How to Achieve Win-Win Outcomes between Clients & Consultants: Some learning from a consultant broker over 20 years

Polson & Co. has recently celebrated its 20th anniversary in the Recruitment and Consultant Brokering business. I would like to share some of my insights from matching consultants with the needs of clients.

We will start with the needs of internal people. Then we will share some insights about how consultants can be more successful. Naturally, clients will benefit by getting an insight into how consultants think and consultants will similarly benefit from seeing how clients think.

In the presentation we will workshop some of the elements and address specific issues raised by the particular audience.

Clients

Drivers that Influence how Internal HR/D Professionals Service their Internal Clients

Internal HR/D professionals are charged with the responsibility of improving the performance of their organisations. External consultants and trainers are resources that the internal people can call on to support their objective.

Some Basics in relation to Engaging External Consultants:

- Your reputation rests completely on the success of the consultant you engage
- Consultant selection is a critical process and decision
- Managing consultants to get the best from them is a skill worth developing

So basically, hire someone who not only does a good job, but who also makes you look good.

Options for Selecting a Consultant:

There are a number of ways in which one can select a consultant or trainer. Each has its advantages and drawbacks. We will discuss specific processes at the conference workshop.

- Ask colleagues
- Engage who is already there
- See people who approach you
- See consultants in action first – e.g. at AITD conference!
- Search websites
- Go to large well established organisations
- Go to small firms where the person you talk to is the person who will deliver the service
- Use an independent search party such as a consultant or training broker, or bureau
- Select Pty Ltd businesses only – this gives you added legal protection

Some Pitfalls in Selecting a Consultant:

It is very hard to really know how someone performs until you actually see them in action. Some people come across as ineffective at the interview stage, often because they hate selling, but this does not mean that they are not excellent when they are in front of a group of people. NLP trained presenters sometimes fall into this category – the NLP processes are so good that even people who do not have a natural gift can perform very well because the NLP training is so effective. Similarly, some people can be subject matter experts, but hopeless at developing skills in others.

Your independent source of HR talent

Here are some common errors in selection:

- Little dependable data on the track record of the consultant
- Using a good consultant in an area outside their area of expertise (Most people only excel in one or two areas, so you need to hire them only in the areas of passion and expertise)
- Hiring your mates

Tips for Managing Consultants

- Be aware of your own attitude. (e.g. Do you want the help, or has the help been imposed? Are you competing with them? Do you have a need to exert power over them? etc.)
- Contract clearly so everyone knows what is expected
- Get the administration sorted out – who do what by when?
- Don't over, or undermanage the consultant

Consultants

How to Deliver Excellent Service and Run a Successful Business

Your role is to meet your client's need and also be a successful business person.

It is not sufficient to just be good at consulting or training – you need to be good at making prospects aware of what you offer and you need to be good at making a profit that keeps you viable, well rewarded and a secure long term option for your clients.

Start with a Great Concept

The basic concept of having an independent recommendation for consultants is a good deal for clients. It does not cost more, (as the consultant pays the brokerage fee) and gives the internal client peace of mind because they are using someone recommended by a third party with extensive experience in doing it.

Identify Why You are in Business

It is important to know what stage your business is in and what your key objective is.

e.g. Are you running a practice or a business? With a practice one tends to do the delivery personally. With a business one has the objective of ensuring the share holders get a good return and that it is a sellable entity. To illustrate how having a different objective requires a different strategy at each life cycle, I will share the stages our business, Polson, have gone through:

1. Pre Polson

When still with Mobil Oil in 1984 I started doing some consulting work as a paying hobby. I liked this, but liked working in Mobil more. But it was useful dipping my toes in the water.

2. Establishment of Polson Training Brokers

In 1989 I saw the need for an independent service to advise clients which consultants they should select. I had been fortunate enough to do the BlessingWhite MPG[®] program a year or two before which helped me clarify what I wanted and get a realistic appreciation of my talents and limitations. I realised what I was really good at was matchmaking. I used this skill to good effect when arranging blind dates as a student and later as Employment Services Manager at Mobil. Having been a trainer I combined my training and recruitment skills and started brokering consultants.

At this stage the driver was simply getting established and surviving. About 80% of firms fail in this period.

3. Polson HR & Training Brokers: The Mature Years

We grew rapidly from 1993 reaching a turnover of over 5 million dollars one year. We had offices in Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney and Brisbane with an associate we launched in Perth. During this phase around 20% of our income came from Asia.

The driver at this stage was growth. Then the focus was consolidation with the view of having the business sellable by the year of 2000. Only about 1% of consulting firms are sellable because the IP generally rests in the head of the founder, hence when they stop contributing, the business collapses.

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You need to have processes documented and a motivated team to stay on if one wants to sell a consulting business.

4. Empower: Part of a Global Consulting Firm

We were approached by a newly established firm Empower (Owned by Manpower) as part of their global strategy to buy up a number of boutique consulting firms to provide global consulting solutions. We sold the business to Empower on April 1 in 2001. (Now there is an omen.....) Our driver was to get funding to expand the business into Asia – and for the owner to get some well earned cash.

5. Phoenix – Polson & Co

The brokering business did not sit well within Empower and was discontinued. In 2005, after our non-compete period elapsed, Polson & Co was started. Our driver this time was profit and the joy of doing what I loved. By 2007 it was running very nicely. Despite the GFC, the last financial year has been our most profitable ever.

6. Polson & Co and L&D Nexus – the Next 10 Years

We will continue running Polson & Co as a boutique consultant brokering firm. The objective is to remain small – but profitable

We have also established L&D Nexus which provides an end to end master vendor service, drawing on the consultants registered with Polson. This is independently managed, which leaves me free getting involved in community service. For instance, providing learning services to deserving projects in PNG and Cambodia.

At each stage of the business the objective, strategy and my personal role have been different.

Market Differentially

It is no point having a good solution and good service to back it up, if no one knows about your solution. Marketing has been one of the most enjoyable aspects of running a business for me. We have done the normal things such as keeping people informed of recruitment and development opportunities with newsletters and articles. But in order to get noticed, one has to do things differently.

I have indulged my recreational passions and morphed them into our marketing strategy. Thus we have enjoyed the company of clients at a variety of weekend events which included: Swimming with dolphins, racing yachts, white water rafting, clay pigeon shooting, archery, snow camping (did not get many takers for that one!) wine tasting, hiking, abseiling, ropes courses and cycling.

The marketing has let our clients know that we like to have fun in addition to being passionate about people development.

We like combining marketing with development. For example, the exchange of thinking that has taken place during our respected network dinners at great restaurants has been highly stimulating and enjoyable.

Even if one has good solutions (great consultants, applicants, venues, speakers), one also has to look professional. We followed Winston Marsh's advice early and made sure what left the office looked professional. E.g. Professional logo, letterhead, phone answered by someone other than the owner etc.

Establish a Relationship with Suppliers at the Cutting Edge

Many of the best consultants leave large consulting firms because they have the confidence to compete on their personal expertise. Freed from the large overheads that large consulting firms have, the individual can be more than competitive. We have been to partner with many of the best consultants in the HR and HRD field. It also pays to get support from printers, IT people, web designers etc.

Hire Exceptional Team Members

The interesting nature of our business has attracted many talented team members. The stretch at work, stimulation from consultants and clients, has resulted in us developing an attitude of life-long learning and continual improvement. This added to what they arrived with: people skills, service focus, integrity and resilience. The fact that so many of our former employees are now our clients demonstrates their talent.

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Engineer Purposeful Diversity

One has to be realistic about what one is good and not so good at. Great synergy results when all the holes are plugged and everyone works together respecting each others' strengths. For example, without excellence in the execution (administration and customer service), it is hard to maintain dependability and hence trust.

While everyone has learned not to express discrimination, we know clients harbour unexpressed preferences. So try to offer choice. A wise old bloke and a smart young woman can for example. both can do the job, but client preferences determine which relationships are the most personally satisfying for them. If one is doing work in Asia, it is handy to have someone who can speak their language. One of our team, Penny Yew, can speak 4 Asian languages.

The Leader Must Lead

For those who want to run more than a one person show, Goffee & Jones ask the challenging question, "Why should anyone be let by you?" We have to establish our CASE to lead:

- Establish a community
- Be authentic
- Establish significance, relevance and meaning with the team
- Excite exceptional performance

It is a lot easier to teach than do this!

Sharpen the Saw

To stay at the cutting edge we all have to continue learning. Sadly, many consultants are reluctant to invest in their own development.

Profit Keeps Everyone Engaged

Machiavelli's advice to his princes: "The first rule is to keep your head on." If you don't make profit morale drops, employees lose their jobs, clients get less service and consultants get less work. One has to ensure one is efficient and that overheads are carefully controlled. We have seen many successful consulting firms go broke when they expanded too far and could not carry the increased overhead with their cash flow.

Decide how much financial risk you and the team are comfortable with. If you want to get rich, you are likely to have to be prepared to borrow money and take bigger risks.

Mutual Need Fulfilment – the Basis of Most Ongoing Relationships

If one wants to be successful in this field one needs to be able to identify what your partner (be it client or consultant) wants, and then give it to them if you are able to and if your needs get satisfied in the process. So you have to find out what people want and need if you want to be a successful internal or external consultant.

A Question of Balance

The achievement is important, but so is the process in getting there. You may want to consider your work/home balance as well as the sort of relationship you want with loved ones. Running your own business can be most satisfying. So is servicing your internal clients. Developing your and other people's competence is a great way of making life more enjoyable and meaningful. Live the dream.

Reg Polson

Below: Reg Polson at work at marketing events

