

# ***Consulting Skills that Increase Profitability ... with Impact***

***Hewitt Associates are a global Human Resource outsourcing and consulting organisation delivering a complete range of integrated services to help companies manage their total HR and employee costs, enhance HR services, and improve their workforces. Their groundbreaking work around engagement and best employers is world renown.***

***In Australia, Hewitt's reputation as a top shelf consulting organisation resulted in impressive growth for the business. This growth led to a need to revisit their consultant development with a view to speed up the development process while guaranteeing clients a high level of quality.***

***In this case study, Andrew Bell, one of Hewitt's leading consultants discusses how they achieved this.***

***Andrew starts by describing the previous model of consultant development***

We had been using an apprenticeship model to develop consultants. We developed junior consultants by having them work as bag carriers; watching, observing, discussing, getting feedback and gradually getting more exposure to key projects. This takes time and seemed to work well at the time.

About 3-4 years ago we found ourselves in a situation where two issues highlighted the need to review our consultant development strategy. These issues were:

1. A rapidly growing business
2. Increased expectations from our new team members

With a rapidly growing business and our approach to developing consultants causing tension, senior consultants were finding it harder to spend the time to develop the junior consultants and the clients were asking us to complete a higher volume of work.

As well as the growing business, we also noticed a change in the levels of satisfaction with the team. I think there was something of a generational shift where our new apprentices or new team members were expecting to grow more quickly, take on larger projects and work with more established clients.

I'm often reminded of the saying that it's the plumber's house where the taps leak. The question becomes one of cause or symptom. Do the taps leak because the plumber couldn't be bothered doing more work when he gets home or is it because the plumber has such high standards when it comes to plumbing that anything short of perfect is unacceptable. From my experience of working in HR teams it is more often than not the latter. People who work in HR teams and consultancies have a heightened awareness of what should be and are therefore not as tolerant as others of anything less.

Absolutely. And that was very clear in the feedback we were getting from our team members via internal surveys about development opportunities.

**So the business model had outgrown the development model.**

Yes. And when that happens you need to revisit how you bring people into the company, how you introduce them to your culture, how you develop them.

This is especially so in an environment where culture and values are so important you need to think very carefully about the model you use because you want the model to reflect the values of the organisation.

We needed to evaluate how we developed our consultants. One of the key elements of development is how to build core

skills quickly. We wanted to improve the quality of the service we delivered to our clients so we were quite clear about the competencies required. This is where the work of Impact came in.

***So were they the competencies that were identified by head office?***

Yes. They are the core themes on which the skills are based. When we say that they were developed overseas, they are applicable worldwide. Our approach is fairly consistent throughout the world and the core themes are general enough to encompass local requirements.

What we then did was identify a range of development modules that we thought would speed up consultant development by providing structured experiences. These experiences allow the participants to understand the skill, practise that skill in an experiential environment, receive direct feedback, practise again and prepare for application on a consulting project.

We also needed the masters or senior consultants to attend the program as well.

I think that one of the things that you often get in that environment is that the masters often think they have learnt everything there is to learn. But we went in with a bit of a 'trust us on this' approach.

What worked for us in the longer term was the way the experiences were structured, the level at which the content was pitched and the development over time of the apprentices. This kept the Masters interested for as long as required and then there was a natural handover of the reins to the apprentices. So the attendance sort of supported the intention of the program.

On top of this, the content was pitched in such a way that opened the Master's eyes. I remember one session where we had everyone providing feedback to each other across the

whole team. This proved to be a very powerful session for the Masters who aren't used to getting very much feedback.

It took us a while to get to that point as by that stage we had spent one or two days together every second month for about 9 – 12 months. We needed to persist with getting people to provide each other with feedback over each session.

Yes and I think that was a comfort, political and an environmental issue. I think that when you create the right environment where people are forced to experiment a bit, then they are more open to feedback. In fact in the right environment, with the experimentation frame it becomes more 'feed-forward' than feedback.

Ok So we did a series of sessions over a period of about 3 years.

Yes that's right a series of modules some of which we repeated several times for both new team members and refresher purposes. We also identified some particular skills that needed developing.

We also made a concerted effort to ensure that back on the job the learning was being applied. We were making sure that development conversations were being initiated and that our service quality was being improved as we now had specific areas to focus on.

We were also reinforcing and strengthening our project management structure so that people were clearer about their personal development goals for each project and that those development goals were reviewed at the end of each project.

This is an excellent example of managers taking responsibility for using every day experiences as an opportunity to develop their team members.

At the same time, across the region we had identified high potential future consultants and we worked to speed up their development and ability to manage higher-level projects.

We used much of the same material for the high potential group but we pushed them much harder and set higher expectations. The program largely held the same pattern and produced some great results.

We are now seeing the high potential group:

- move into senior consulting roles
- become some of our best project managers
- become people who are highly valued by our clients
- become leaders

What other results would you say we have been able to generate from the work?

Well it is always hard to isolate direct cause and effect in organisational interventions such as these, but I think clearly when we look across our business we have fairly quickly developed a team of people into well-regarded Hewitt Consultants. They have a great ability to build constructive long-term relationships with clients.

We actively measure this, as it is a KPI of our business. This is measured through feedback, data and surveys.

Now of course we don't have a pilot group and control group that we can compare but I am very confident that clients are benefiting from this focus on development. The management team now feel far more confident about our project management ability as:

- Fewer things fall over
- There is increased clarity about change in scope on projects
- We have greater project profitability than we have done before.



## **Some things to reflect on...**

How does your organisation currently develop its key team members?

What works well about that process? What needs to be improved?

In what environment does your organisation exist and how can you align your development strategy?

Who are the Masters and who are the Apprentices in your organisation's key roles?

How can you increase the opportunities for natural development to take place between these groups?

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