MIND THE CONSULTANCY GAP - Why consulting firms are failing medium-sized businesses

The Directors' Centre, October 2014

Executive Summary

A *service delivery gap* is reported consistently in consultancy practices.

- **79% of consulting practices reported that they delivered an above-average customer experience**
- When asked, only **16% of the clients felt they received an above-average experience.**

The reality is that consultancy practices are failing to deliver.

Between the synthetic siren calls of the gurus and the laden drones of certain academics lies a sweetspot that can really appeal to experienced business people.

What works for the entrepreneurial owner-directors of medium-sized businesses is something which does not have the dictatorial basis of either gurus, academics or management consultancies. Something that is more collaborative and participative. Something that is more respectful of their experience, expertise and achievements – and is more enduring.

What they want, what they lack, is a bigger picture that comes from focusing on **Corporate Eudaimonia** ('human flourishing'), the best possible balance of financial, physical and moral well-being. Consequently, it has wider perspectives than pure maximisation of profit.

Experienced owner-directors don't believe in miracles, or the efficacy of quick fixes. They think they have some – but not all – of the answers. They understandably don't want to be preached to, nor have their experience and expertise ignored, or undervalued. They want heterarchy (a system of organisation where the elements are unranked) not hierarchy. They want to work peer-to-peer with mutual respect.

Owner-directors don't believe that their business can be, or needs to be, transformed. They want improvement, not **revolution**, and they know that improvement is as much to do with how their business operates as anything related to direction or strategy.

They are looking for **evolution**: performance improvement over time, fitness in changing markets.

Background

The publication of *Customer is King* (2002/2014) and *Grow Your Service Firm* (2011) identified gaps between what service suppliers believe they delivered and what clients believe they received, the '*service delivery gap'*. This study builds on the *Mind the Gap* (2014) paper and uses data extracted from the larger data set used in the *Mind the Gap* paper (see Appendix 1).

This paper stands on the shoulders of work by *Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry* (1985) and subsequently, *Bain & Co* (2005).

The consulting practices (350) involved in the polls worked with clients fitting into one of three sizes:

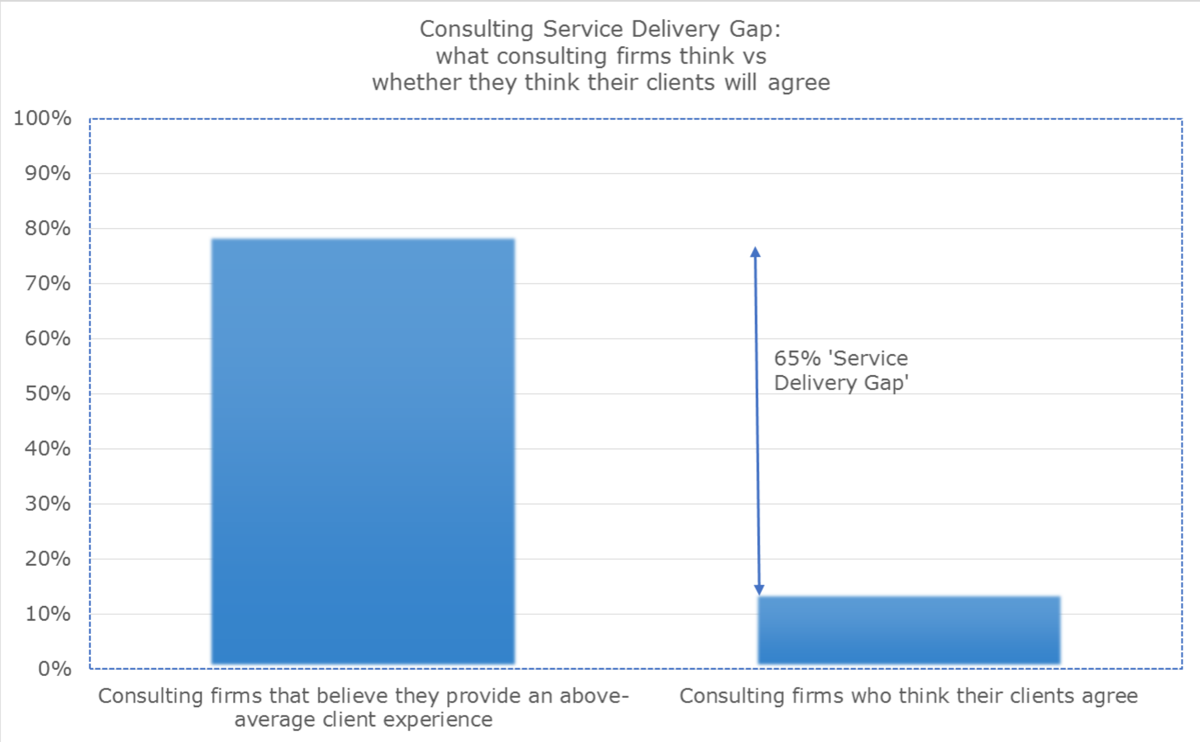
- Sub-£1m turnover - small business
- £1-£50m turnover - medium-sized businesses
- £50m+ turnover - large businesses and corporate.

Our particular interest is in the needs of medium-sized businesses.

Results

A *service delivery gap* is reported consistently in consultancy practices.

- **79% of consulting practices reported that they delivered an above-average customer experience**
- **Only 14% of the same practices believe that their clients think they receive an above-average customer experience**
- When asked, only **16% of the clients felt they received an above-average experience.**


Consulting Service Delivery Gap:
what consulting firms think vs
whether they think their clients will agree
100%
90%
80%
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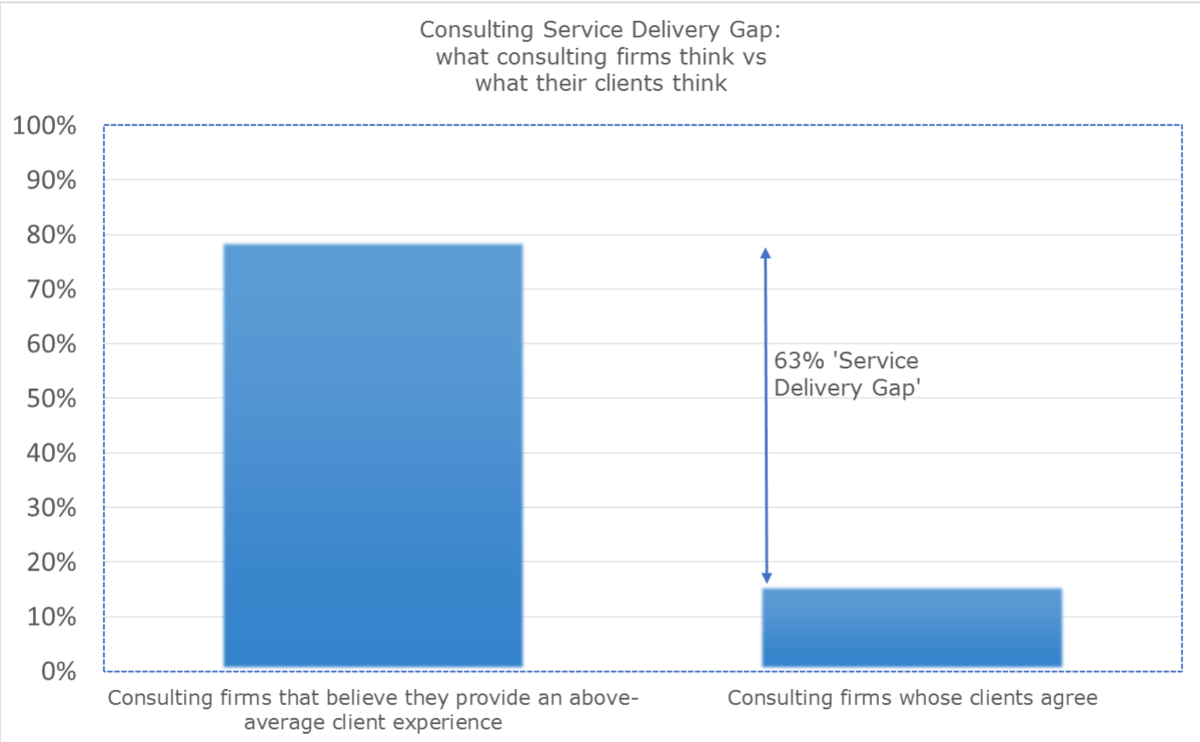
65% 'Service Delivery Gap'
Consulting firms that believe they provide an above-average client experience
Consulting firms who think their clients agree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63% 'Service Delivery Gap'
Consulting firms that believe they provide an above-average client experience
Consulting firms whose clients agree

Observations

Like male drivers, most consultancy firms seem to believe that they are above-average. However, they are not so confident about whether their clients agree.

The clients support the view that few actually deliver above-average service levels.

It is surprising that consultancy practices appear to hold logical but inconsistent points of view:

- A *totally unrealistic view* (over-inflated?) of the customer experience they are delivering
- A *totally realistic view* of what their clients think of their delivery.

This cognitive dissonance, the discomfort experienced when one holds two or more contradictory ideas at the same time, seems to be buried in their psyches (*Festinger*, 1962).

As discussed in *Mind the Gap*, the delivery gap may occur for a number of reasons including:

- Basic blindness or inability to take on customer feedback
- Being too much in love with one's own service
- Not being close enough to the client
- Failure to track and monitor every step of the customer journey
- Preoccupation with hard measures and statistics that sit neatly in a spreadsheet
- Forgetting the purpose, the why, of their business
- Inability to believe that there could be a better and more effective way of delivering
- Failure to design new products/services that satisfy or exceed customer satisfaction.

The *service delivery gap* model developed by *Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry* (1985) identifies five different gaps and the list above could fit neatly in these five categories:

1. **The Customer Gap:** The Gap between Customer Expectations and Customer Perceptions
2. **The Knowledge Gap:** The Gap between Consumer Expectation and Management Perception
3. **The Policy Gap:** The Gap between Management Perception and Service Quality Specification
4. **The Delivery Gap:** The Gap between Service Quality Specification and Service Delivery
5. **The Communication Gap:** The Gap between Service Delivery and External Communications.

Consequences

It would appear that there is a cause-and-effect (chicken and egg) loop that is difficult to unpick eg does a *service delivery gap* cause an inability to take on customer feedback or is it the reverse?

While the cause-and-effect loop is interesting to explore elsewhere, it is believed that the consequences of these gaps impinge significantly on the profitability and sustainability of the consultancy practices (*Bain & Co*, 2005).

A word of warning: correlation does not imply causation; a correlation between two variables does not necessarily imply that one causes the other!

What is not in dispute is the consistent presence of the gap!

Key Points

As outlined in *Mind the Gap,* there are issues that need to be highlighted, namely:

- Excellent customer service is difficult to measure and to consistently deliver
- Business myopia
- Service-focused businesses are not necessarily customer-focused
- There is too much similarity in the marketplace
- Most consulting firms suffer from five-year-old-itis
- The hard vs soft thinking paradox.

In terms of solutions, *Mind the Gap* suggested that the following strategies and initiatives will start to address the *service delivery gap* issues:

- Get customer-centric
- Identify key target customers
- Create a clear value proposition and a clear message and voice
- Design and align sales, marketing and operations
- Use the appropriate channels to communicate.

Consultancy firms and disruptive strategies

A glaring irony needs to be stated. Most consultancy firms educate their clients about disruptive technologies (smaller businesses with low-cost models destroying the assumptions maintained by the old-school, slow, cumbersome players who become increasingly irrelevant to their clients (*Christensen,* 1997)). These self-same consulting practices talk about the client's world but cannot imagine that their own consulting world might not suffer the same fate as their clients' marketplaces.

Consequences for consultancy firms and their clients

The reality is that consultancy practices are failing to deliver.

They believe they are over-delivering but the majority of their clients think differently. The *service delivery gap* of 63% (79-16) cannot be ignored.

The consultancy world is changing. The recent fad for guru-based and personality-based firms may have now peaked. There are now many, probably too many, so-called gurus. Or at least too many people claiming to be or being accredited as gurus. Where years ago they were successful-business-folk-turned-gurus, today they are salesmen-turned-gurus. By adopting Americanised direct marketing and presentational practices, they have become predators on the ignorant and unwary. This loss of quality and the growth in quantity has been exacerbated by the recession-driven burgeoning of the coaches market: thousands of coaches offering competitively-priced (=cheap?) services to low grade companies with little growth potential. All of this has devalued 'guruship', especially in the eyes of the prime, middle market targets.

While accepting that the principles promoted by many gurus are well-founded and well-presented, the results achieved for most client-companies are not sustainable. The gurus offer too-good-to-be-true silver bullets.

However, it needs to be said that there are routes to success, that there are some certainties of outcome, that there are methodologies to be adopted, and strategies to be identified, which do work, and these can be implemented by many client-companies.

Guru–led consultancy practices create a schizophrenic proposition

The get-rich-quick-quick, too-good-to-be-true propositions work for those who are ignorant, inexperienced, desperate, or all three.

However, this approach does not resonate with experienced business people (the middle market) who know that they need help, but don't believe in miracles. It is no surprise then that the vast majority of guru fodder are companies that are very small (or very large).

The hard thing about hard things

Most business books and their authors attempt to provide recipes for challenges that have no recipes. There is rarely a recipe for a really complicated, dynamic situation. The hard thing about hard things is that there is no formula for dealing with them (*Horowitz,* 2014)

The answer is in the middle ground? A third way?

Between the synthetic siren calls of the gurus and the laden drones of certain academics lies a sweetspot that can really appeal to experienced business people. It combines the practical methodologies of the gurus with the intelligent, analytical skills of the academics. It promises results – but neither miracles nor degrees. It is neither quick nor slow, cheap nor expensive.

Why guru/coaching fails small businesses

Here is one version of what is going on. This is perfectly simple: guru/coaching is how-to. It isn't where, when, how, who, how much, or with what result. It does not address the real problems most small/new businesses have. The smaller clients do not know what direction they should be going in – or are not sure about it; their biggest challenge is therefore strategic (where they should be going) and not tactical (how they should get there).

How-to gurus/coaches help clients get further down the road they are on faster. They don't do more than cursorily check if that is the right or best road for that particular business in its market, or with its management strengths and weaknesses.

At the opposite extreme…

While gurus/coaches are happy to work (metaphorically) for a good dinner, heavyweight management consultants want signature rights to your bank account. Where gurus/coaches work from the inside (and rarely see the big wide world), management consultants start on the outside, and work their way in. They say they can't talk about your business without understanding the world and local economies, your market, its trends, its leaders, its dynamics. Then they need to understand your company inside out – interviews, research, etc with staff, then all over again with clients, suppliers, etc. Then they need to work out the strategy for your business. Then how to implement that strategy. Then they need to hold your hand while you do it.

Big ticket, big commitment.

In the middle… for the middle…

Big companies often know that much of this is nonsense; meanwhile they know they need to be seen to be doing it.

Medium-sized companies – say from £1 to £50 million turnover – don't have the need, luxury, patience or profits to justify that approach. Neither the guru/coach nor big management consultancy approach work for them.

So what will work for them?

Well, something which does not have the dictatorial basis of either gurus, academics or management consultancies. Something that is more collaborative and participative. Something that is more respectful of their experience, expertise and achievements – and is more enduring. Something that is a two-way process: somewhere where they have something to give - and something to take.

Our peer-to-peer era

We live and work in a peer-to-peer era where knowledge, the right facts, is ubiquitous; and often it is free, or low cost. We also live in an era where 'wisdom', knowing the right answer, or the right thing to do, is as rare, valuable and valued as ever; indeed, more so in a complex world with many choices, and many wrong paths to go down. Most of us no longer believe (if we ever did) that one person – one guru – has all the right answers all of the time.

Most don't believe that 'wisdom' is equally and identically applicable to all situations, all companies, all markets, all of the time. Most believe in bespoke solutions requiring specific, not just generalised, 'wisdom'.

Middle market clients want more than just more sales/profits/customers

Most business plans, and all business how-to providers, are quantitatively focused: they talk numbers, KPIs, money, money, money. And of course they are right to start there – no money, no business. Where they are wrong is stopping there – failing to take a business on to bigger, better things.

The trouble with these entrepreneurial gurus is that they lack real ambition for the businesses they work with. Many owner-directors not only want to achieve more profits, they *can* achieve more than that, *much* more.

What they want, what they lack, is a bigger picture that comes from focusing on **Corporate Eudaimonia**.

In search of corporate eudaimonia

Eudaimonia (literally, from the Greek meaning wellness or good spirit) is perhaps best translated as 'human flourishing', and by implication is all about achieving the best possible balance of financial, physical and moral well-being.

In a phrase, getting the best out of life and work: what we want for ourselves, fellow owner-directors (and most shareholders) and for their companies. Consequently, it has wider perspectives than pure maximisation of profit.

It's about creating long-term infrastructure solutions that will help build and maintain company growth, higher margins, and ultimately, higher profits and exit value…

…but not building it only on financial performance. Respecting that sustainable corporate success requires a great brand, great products, great people, loyal customers, and an ongoing investment in development.

Owner-managers versus owner-directors

The distinction between those who work *in* and *on* the business always resonates, but there is a greater divide linked to this. (Gerber, 2001)

In practice, very small businesses (let's say under £1m turnover or have under £100,000 net profit) are owned and run by **owner-managers**, who work ***in*** the business day in, day out.

By contrast, **owner-directors** largely work ***on*** their business, while still working in it. Their role is more strategic and wider – and their businesses are usually well-established with a functionally defined staff, and a brand (not just a business). Their businesses have a turnover in excess of £1m and up to £50m, and a £500,000 net profit potential.

What owner-directors believe and want

Experienced owner-directors don't believe in miracles, or the efficacy of quick fixes. They don't believe in simple formulas for business success, and they tend not to believe in "gurus". They tend to have a justifiably high opinion of themselves mixed with real-world, enforced humility.

They think they have some – but not all – of the answers. They know they have done many things right, and failed with many others. They understandably don't want to be preached to, nor have their experience and expertise ignored, or undervalued. They want heterarchy (a system of organisation where the elements are unranked) not hierarchy. They want to work peer-to-peer with mutual respect. Almost everything about the 'guru' approach is wrong for them – and it irritates them.

Owner-directors don't…

Owner-directors don't want and don't believe an *MBA In A Day* proposition. They probably don't believe in MBAs, and certainly don't believe you can learn that much in a day. They see it as marketing nonsense that lacks credibility – and consequently doubt the value of anyone who promotes such a thing.

Owner-directors don't believe that their business can be, or needs to be, transformed. They want improvement, not revolution, and they know that improvement is as much to do with how their business operates as anything related to direction or strategy.

They are highly suspicious of 'consultants', especially those who offer high-level strategy without pragmatic implementation, and equally of those of the short, sharp shock school of thinking.

They are looking for **evolution**: performance improvement over time, fitness in changing markets.

Background commentary

This was never intended to be an intellectually rigorous work but simply a privately-funded survey to get an understanding of some of the key behaviours and drivers in the consultancy field. Specifically, it is considering consultancy from the point of view of the potential client.

Weaknesses of the study

This survey is not academically rigorous and its flaws and limitations are acknowledged by the authors. Although based on experience in the field, the conclusions drawn are more opinion than fact.

Concepts such as customer service, customer experience and customer journey are not clearly defined and only used in the most general of terms.

The study is simply a meta-study, combining a number of different business audiences. Only consultants who attend such events (conferences, seminars and workshops) were polled. The polling was approximate and not measured precisely. The original purpose was just to get a feel for the size of the gap. It is only now that we see the consistency in the results that a consistent trend can be confirmed.

Next Steps

A proposed next step would be a more thorough and more controlled investigation of the subject, using service providers and their matched clients, to explore the level and extent of the *service delivery gap*. This would then make it appropriate to assess the data using appropriate statistical tools.

Additional information

This paper was compiled in Quarter 3 of 2014 by *The Directors' Centre*. It looked at the results of 24 polls (890 participants) of business owners, managers and directors. The majority of client businesses ran independent businesses in most sectors. Desk-based research was also a key methodology.

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Appendix 1 – The Data Sources

Events with Barclays, ACCA, Business Scene, NRG, various Chambers of Commerce and small business organisations, UKTI, Business Link, IMC, IOC, IBA, IoD, FSB, ISMM, BPMA, NABO, HSBC, ICST, Bristol, Warwick and London Business Growth Programmes, Warwick Business School, 2002-2014.

24 polls, 890 participants.

Appendix 2 – "Let me tell you a story" - How gaps manifest themselves in the real world and how they should be dealt with

The starting point of this paper is the concept of gaps. Three mini case studies have been included to show how consultancy practices need to help clients in identifying and resolving gaps. In these instances, these are the perspective, agility and opportunity gaps.

These mini case studies emphasise the more subtle forms of relationships that need to develop between the consultant and client. Clients seek consultants who can work *with them* to identify gaps and *help them* to work towards resolving these issues.

These mini case studies are presented more like stories than formal case studies.

2a Mind The PERSPECTIVE Gap

Management consultants are fond of big concepts like VISION and MISSION.

We've found that PERSPECTIVE is a much more useful idea for owner-directors – and something much easier to lose sight of in the daily rough and tumble of running a business.

Take David (absolutely real examples within the last 18 months, but with names and industry sectors disguised). He'd been running a reasonably successful and profitable niche design business for 15 years, but was running out of steam as thoughts of retirement approached. He'd not only lost sight of where the business was going but, more importantly, where it *could* go, and how much it *could* grow. He also couldn't distinguish between growing the business – and him personally having to do all the heavy shifting – something he was not wanting to commit to.

We said three things:

1. **Forget selling the business** – you'll never get enough money for it because it is so heavily dependent on you personally – but do develop an exit strategy whereby the business continues, indeed thrives, and you can take a handsome dividend for decades to come.

2. **Build a middle management team** to take over the day-to-month running of the business – and (another of those consultancy words, but a good one) *empower* them – that's a polite way of saying do yourself a favour, back off, let them learn, make a few small mistakes, and establish a real career structure for those that want to commit to the company.

3. **Just look at where you are in your niche sector**: we said most of your competitors are 2-3 person studios with limited capabilities/resources. Not only are you much larger than them, you are also better than most of them. What's more, we've asked your clients and competitors, and most of them agree that you are the market leader. Start acting like one.

What happened? Turnover grew by 16% in a year. The gross margin rose by 27% (as market leader you can charge more). A middle management team rapidly took over much of the nitty-gritty of running the business. David not only started on a 4-day week as the first step to a 3-day week, but focused on an outward facing role leveraging his relationships, expertise and reputation, not poring over the figures and work schedules that others could pore over just as well.

And… there was a dynamism, buzz and ambition about the business that more or less the whole staff bought into. 18 months after starting to work with The Directors' Centre, David was looking to double the space, and 6 months later they all moved into impressive new premises – sealing the fact that they are, and will be, the absolute market leaders. That's a perspective worth having.

2b Mind The AGILITY Gap

How do you succeed as a relatively small independent business in a sector dominated by publicly quoted and multi-national competitors, and where clients are themselves often very large multi-nationals, or government funded bodies? Are you a Dodo?

Far from it: on closer inspection, the competitors are more like dinosaurs – too big, too inflexible, incapable of rapid change, and far from nice to do business with.

So how do you succeed? You make the most of being everything they are not – and you powerfully stake your claim to being a market leader, not willing to be bullied by anybody.

The client was a profitable, well-established business; fit enough to survive, but not thriving as much as the directors wanted. It was overawed by its competitors and "ever so humble" with its clients.

The upside was that it was dedicated to doing a brilliant job every time, to be responsive, and good to work with; but the downside was that because it did not value itself highly enough, neither did its clients. Fees quoted for new work were always "competitive", hence margins were too low, and the company often gave in when perfectly valid additional charges were discussed with clients.

We said:

1. **Here is a credentials presentation**. The directors said "we can't say that". We said "Yes, you can. Trust us. Try it out." They tried it out, and the prospect said, "Yes, I guess I've always thought that, but it's never been said out loud". "Oh, right", said the directors, and tried it out on the staff, who proved to be even more doubting than their directors.

2. **The responsibility for success does not begin and end with director-shareholders**. You've got open-plan offices, and an "open door" policy, but you don't spread the management responsibility load. Winning business is the responsibility of senior and middle managers, not just directors. Making sure jobs are profitable is their responsibility, not just yours. Wisdom is not your exclusive domain: listen to what they say, let them develop ideas, and take responsibility for executing them. Don't set targets - and ignore them if not met.

3. **Leverage your strengths** – dedication, commitment, strong commercial common sense – and flexibility, responsiveness, thoroughness - and expertise, applied knowledge, smart solutions – and good relations across the industry. Stop looking inwardly. Start thinking and acting in an outgoing manner.

They organised a small one-day conference inviting 20 fairly senior industry people. They ended up with over 100 including some of the most heavyweight people in the industry – everyone said how impressive and valuable it was, how only they, of all firms in the sector, could have pulled it off.

A year later everyone in the company buys into their leadership, and almost everyone in the company has a niche leadership role. The quality of projects has improved dramatically, margins are better, the pipeline of new projects very healthy, and they have just taken the offices next door to double their space.

2c Mind The OPPORTUNITY Gap

All companies face "do you – don't you" issues, but smaller companies struggle more with them, partly because they don't have serried ranks of advisors, partly because years of hard work can so easily go down the drain, and partly, except with the benefit of hindsight, it's often impossible to tell an opportunity from an "Oh, bloody hell, I wish we'd never done that".

How does a company that has successfully grown organically over a decade or several – added staff one by one, won new clients one by one, invested in one machine upgrade then a year or two later another, and all the time been self-funded – how does it make a big leap forward? Can you leap from being a "family firm" into being a "grown up" company? Is it worth it?

And how does it manage that leap? For example, in many small companies new business is a by-product of the directors' contacts and word-of-mouth recommendations. What happens if you suddenly need to grow sales by double digits? How much should you spend on marketing when all you've really done in the past is have a decent website, some trade PR, and the occasional or regular exhibition?

The problem for this client was that it was somewhat 'do or die'. They either expanded to supply the full range of post-production services their competitors did, or they faced slowly fading out. That sort of decision cannot be made by owner-directors or by their accountants (good at knowing the past, hopeless about predicting the future). You need objectivity, wide knowledge gained beyond that one sector and, above all, "been-there-done-that" experience – not in theory, but in practice.

There is desk research and market research (actually asking clients and prospects is often not reliable, but is essential all the same). There is understanding the dynamics of the company objectively (only possible by meeting lots of staff one-to-one). There is financial analysis, sales projections, and risk scenarios. There are marketing and sales strategies, and implementation plans. There are funding and cash-flow issues. There are options and recommendations.

Most often the conclusions are clear - but not decisive, because too many unknowns will always remain - and one factor, above all, has to be accounted for: the appetite of the owners for growing and risking their business.

So, at the end of all of this, there remains a gap that needs to be leaped or not and, in truth, only the director-shareholders can decide to do that.

In this case, we provided expert advice, perceptive insights, sound stats, and clearly set out options with all their consequences. That made the decision easier for the owner-directors. It gave them confidence in making the decision, and that they were making the right decision, but in the end did it change their mind about what they were going to do? No. Had it been a really bad choice, we would have said so in no uncertain terms, but they wanted to make the leap, and did. They too took over the building next door, and within 6 months could see that they had indeed landed safely on the other side.

Directors Centre

Appendix 3 - About the Authors and The Directors' Centre

The Authors

Robert Craven BSc (Hons), Economics and Politics (Bath) and MBA (Warwick Business School) is managing director of The Directors' Centre Ltd. Formerly Director of Consultancy and Training and Senior Teaching Fellow at Warwick's SME Centre and Visiting Professor at ESC Toulouse and American Liberty University.

He is currently Programme Director, Cranfield School of Management.

Robert has written six, and co-authored three, business books aimed at helping the owners and directors of growing businesses.

Martin Price concentrates on producing, and helping to implement, growth strategies that actually work for owner-directors. In the last year, three of his clients have each doubled their office space after working with him.

Business development and marketing clients include: BlackBerry, Blenheim Palace, Channel Four, Ford, Microsoft, Swatch Group and the Virgin Group.

Founder shareholder of a tour operating business sold for £40 million, an active leisure business (turning over £15 million), an exhibitions company sold to the Daily Mail & General Trust, a business-oriented West End members' club, and an images business that sells to Liberty, Harrods, Harvey Nichols, and Fortnum & Mason.

The Directors' Centre

A management consultancy that focuses on delivering sales and profit results for the directors of growing businesses. Led by Robert Craven, it is known for a free-of-nonsense approach to helping clients run the businesses they really want to run. Its approach is highly practical and results-oriented. Clients include: Bigham's, Hobbs House Bakery, Barclays, AirBus, BlackBerry, Sandals, Ritz Carlton.

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