

Featured interview

SAM BRIDGER, EXECUTIVE INTERIM



Professional executive interims: a different breed of talent solution

In March 2017, Sam Bridger celebrated ten years as a freelance Marketing Director and Consultant.



The former UK Head of Marketing for Mercedes-Benz Smart Cars had enjoyed a successful 20-year corporate career before making the jump and setting up her own business. She explained to Nigel Wright it was something she never imagined doing until it happened: "I was a corporate woman and the idea of leaving permanent employment and losing my company car, laptop, health insurance, pension, etc. was inconceivable."

After five "amazing" years working at Mercedes Benz, following a restructure in 2006, Sam was offered redundancy. Having reached a fortunate point in her career where she could step back and wait for the right opportunity to come along, Sam chose to work as a freelancer until she found the right role: "It had to be a director level position, and the

location and the brand had to be right. It was up to me; I was under no pressure to compromise."

An ex-colleague secured Sam a six-month Head of Marketing contract at a London advertising agency, and upon completion of that assignment, Sam was offered her first "proper" interim role as Assistant Director of Strategy and Marketing for NHS Blood & Transplant. By this point, she explained it was clear to her that being an interim director was, in fact, the right next step: "It was accidental when it happened, but made perfect sense. My area of specialism is re-energising brands and businesses; I don't tend to do 'keep the chair warm' roles, which are just about maintaining the status quo. As an interim, the opportunity to introduce fresh commercial thinking into different sectors



means I can make a material difference in a short space of time."

When Sam took on the NHS assignment, she established Sam Bridger Consulting Ltd. and never looked back. Now, with 10 years under her belt, it was interesting to

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learn her perspectives on how the interim market has evolved during that time, as well as her views on why more companies should consider making a senior interim appointment.

First, Sam highlighted, it's important to understand the difference between a temporary worker, a consultant and a professional or "career interim", as they each offer companies different types of short-term talent solutions. An interim, for example, is introduced into an organisation to cover a role and deliver against certain objectives, as well as manage an existing team. Temporary workers and consultants are usually project focused and less restricted by a job description. While an interim normally commits to an organisation for six to twelve months and doesn't usually have any extra professional commitments alongside that contract, consultants will manage many briefs simultaneously. Temporary workers are more likely to re-enter permanent employment when a suitable vacancy emerges.

Sam noted that the circumstances of the last decade, beginning with the great recession in 2008, have helped clarify the role of a professional interim as being different to that undertaken by other kinds of consultancy: "My interim career started at a time when the employment market was suddenly flooded with people. Businesses realised they could take advantage of this flexible resource to fulfil project-specific needs and maintain momentum through difficult times. She went on to explain how, when the economic environment improved and most of those temporary workers returned to permanent employment, companies acknowledged that professional or career interims – i.e. the ones who chose to set

up their own business and chose to remain outside of the permanent talent pool – could offer a different,

broader and more strategic temporary solution.

Whilst many organisations now recognise the value of an interim, Sam argues that companies could further utilise their potential when an 'empty chair' scenario arises – especially at the executive level. Empty chairs can appear for a variety of reasons; resignation, long-term illness or maternity leave or when a new department or strategy is required and the search for the permanent postholder may take a while.

In addition, Sam believes it's critical that the organisation makes the interim's objectives and remit crystal clear to the existing team – especially when it differs from that of the permanent post holder: "An interim director can be viewed as a threat by some in the business; maybe they're worried their work will be criticised, or they're uncomfortable that an 'outsider' is suddenly in a position of

authority. A professional interim knows it's important to keep focused on the business challenges and ensure there is no personal criticism – therefore minimising conflict and getting everyone working together to find solutions rather than facilitating a culture of blame."

Sam added how sometimes internal politics are unavoidable and interims must learn to "walk in and get on with it." In her words: "When a vacancy arises, people are often jockeying for position and you must learn to deal with internal conflicts. If an interim's remit is clear and agreed by everybody from the start, however, it's easier to hit the ground running, understand the issues and identify the opportunities – making sure everyone is aligned and focused."

Describing it as the "proudest moment" of her career to date, Sam shared her experience as interim Marketing Director at Australian bar chain Walkabout. The business had lost its 'Aussie' authenticity, and its young and "unruly" student clientele was damaging the brand, and in some cases the venues. Walkabout was



struggling to attract the new investment critical to its survival. The executive team were aware of many of the issues, but their focus on keeping the business running day to day meant that they hadn't had the chance to face the facts and make the material changes the business needed.

Her strategy was to improve the complete guest experience and attract a broader, more female and more responsible customer base. It involved identifying new customer segments, how they interacted with, and what they needed from, the venues; developing a new brand position and generally improving all aspects of marketing. The strategy was implemented in a short timeframe and resulted in an increase in daytime trade, food sales and dwell times and secured the business new investment from partners who offered "a virtually open chequebook."

The Walkabout case study, Sam noted, is an example of good practice for using an interim solution: "Walkabout didn't need a permanent Marketing Director, but recognised that by hiring me for six months I would introduce new skills, a different perspective, more seniority and indeed more diversity to its all-male executive team. These were all qualities that went beyond the basic duties of the day-to-day role, helped generate fresh thinking and challenged the whole team to step up and embrace change."

While most of Sam's contracts involve her covering a role or creating a new strategy for the permanent post holder to implement, she is hopeful that more organisations will start to think about ways to introduce new skills and fresh insight on a short-term basis, regardless of whether a vacancy exists – to view interims in a more 'consultancy' capacity. There's a misconception in her view that hiring a consultant requires a huge investment involving companies like McKinsey or KPMG. Her argument is simple: "Senior

interims offer a high-level service but in a cost-effective and flexible way. It's not a cheap option, but an interim will deliver from the word go, and contribute a lot in a short space of time."

Recruiters, in Sam's view, can help promote the benefits of interim solutions. Those with long term relationships with, and a deep understanding of, their clients can advise them on the types of interim skills they may need. When seeking a new opportunity, besides her own network, Sam explained how she will only work with specialist recruiters who are proactive in recommending interim solutions and suggesting the value add services available: "Recruiters I speak to who ask me to keep an eye on their website don't get called back. It's about building relationships and for that recruiter to know when there is a fit between me and their client."

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Companies who want to appear attractive to senior interim candidates can be more mindful of what motivates people to pursue an interim career. Operating at a senior level, Sam explains, means you can choose the organisations that best suit your needs and values: "At this stage, it's not really an interview process, more a discussion about whether the two parties can work together."

For Sam, embracing flexibility and diversity are two areas which she believes attracts the best interim talent. With regards to flexibility, she highlights, the tendency for companies to fill a role in a 'like for like' way doesn't always secure the best talent: "Those companies that are open to more flexible working arrangements are always more attractive to interims and consultants, as we often no longer work an



office-based, five days a week, nine to five routine."

Similarly, with diversity, Sam is enthusiastic that more employers are seeing the benefits of using interim appointments to introduce diverse thinking into their business. This is especially important, in her view, when the senior management team are unrepresentative of their target audience, for example, female consumer brands with male-led boards. Yet, she warned that introducing an interim to boost diversity shouldn't be a 'tick box' exercise: "It should act as a trigger to analyse the diversity of the whole organisation, as well as the senior leadership team."

When asked about the advice she would give to other people considering embarking on an interim career, she emphasised that there's never a right or wrong time to set up your own business. However, she felt there were certain qualities and attitudes necessary to make it a rewarding choice. Sam explained that any self-employed person must understand the value of building and maintaining a good network. Getting good at selling yourself is important too, as is staying current in your area of expertise.

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She noted how blogging and using social media can be a good way to cover all these areas. If an interim does choose to use these tools to promote their services, however, Sam's advice was simple: "... have a clear and consistent position and point of view; commit to doing it regularly and try to achieve a balance of being relevant and consistent and not bombarding people with the same content as everyone else."



Sam further revealed how those who enjoy seeing the results of their hard work might not be cut out for an interim

career: "Often you leave a job before the impact of your actions are realised and success may even be attributed to others."

You can't take that personally; you've got to move on, accepting that although you've worked hard to produce something amazing, someone else will take care of it now." Multi-sector experience is another valuable string to an interim's bow, and if an employer is ever concerned that Sam hasn't worked in their sector before, her message is clear: "If you keep employing the same people, you'll keep getting the same results."

Having recently completed a six-month Head of Customer Marketing assignment with travel rewards business, Avios, Sam is currently focused on consultancy projects, tackling multiple briefs and enjoying the flexibility to manage her own time: "I think it's important to take a step back after a major interim assignment to take the time to absorb new ideas, learn new skills and get back in touch with your network."

Sam admits it can be challenging managing a business while giving your full attention to clients, but is very happy she chose to move into a professional interim career: "The ability to choose your brief, manage your work-life balance, and constantly meet new people is incredibly rewarding. I wouldn't dream of going back to a permanent role now!"