

MARTIN SCHNEIDER
CEO OF BRAINFORCE

T: +41 44 448 41 41 | E: management@brainforce-ag.com



www.brainforce-ag.com

Martin Schneider began his professional career in Consulting Engineering. He then worked for ABB and ALSTOM in various international functions up to senior management level and restructured a US-based technology company. As of 2004, he's the CEO of the BRAINFORCE Group, and as of 2007 – its owner.

BRAINFORCE Group has been a leader in interim management and expert solutions for almost 40 years. Headquartered in Zurich, Switzerland, the company has subsidiaries in Europe, the Baltics, Russia, Africa and Asia, as well as a strong network of partners in the Americas. Here, Martin tells us more about his company and the benefits of interim management.

Q In your opinion, how important is it to have first-hand experience of running a business in order to be an effective interim manager and to provide valuable insight to other business leaders?

Business leaders are typically people with strong self-confidence about their knowledge, capabilities and skills. If they realise that their counterpart has an equivalent level of knowledge and experience, they tend to trust and accept them. Interim Managers are usually needed in difficult, non-routine situations. The goal is to achieve sustainable results as quickly as possible, based on their past learning curve, an above-average ability to lead and motivate people, and last but not least - an entrepreneurial mindset. The same way a 'silverback ranger' knows his forest inside-out, an interim CEO knows his profession and has been successfully steering operations through tough challenges for years.

Q Why is an interim manager more effective to optimise organisations? How can cultural and historical challenges be overcome?

I believe that a manager who has previously led, optimised or restructured e.g. three different management structures has a higher success rate to do the same with the fourth management structure. An interim manager comes in with an analytical mind and an unbiased view. He also has no aspirations to stay there forever, which eliminates the negative political aspects.

Furthermore, he brings in leadership skills, cultural sensitivity and a portfolio of best practices from his several previous assignments in different company cultures. All these aspects are essential for the success of an interim manager. Once an interim manager "changes sides" and becomes a permanent employee, the dynamics and perceptions around him change. His gaze, as if blinkered, is restricted to the part of the road that lies immediately ahead of him and thus, the value-added of the interim management approach vanishes, from our experience, within one or two years.

An interim manager usually is able to gain the trust of the people in the company within a few weeks due to his seniority, objectivity, empathy, cultural sensitivity and strong professional track record. An interim manager usually gets to know what truly is going on in an organisation amazingly quickly. People start to talk as soon as they realise that the interim manager is there to help and to give the credit for the achievements to the internal people who were actively involved in the project.

Q What do you find are the most common issues that organisations struggle with, from a management perspective?

In a nutshell, I would say that weaknesses we observe are often connected to weak internal communication, slow decision-making and 'over-engineered', rigid and bureaucratic internal processes. An experienced interim manager has learned how to communicate effectively at all levels.

Due to the work overload and limited management resources, management decisions are not always implemented to the last consequence. An interim manager brings in additional management capacity and is dedicated and responsible for the completion of implementation.

Today's world is heavily regulated, even over-regulated in many areas. As a consequence, management at all levels are motivated to make 'safe' decisions only, as opposed to brave ones and even worse - to sit out problems. Such managerial shortage is cascading down organisations.

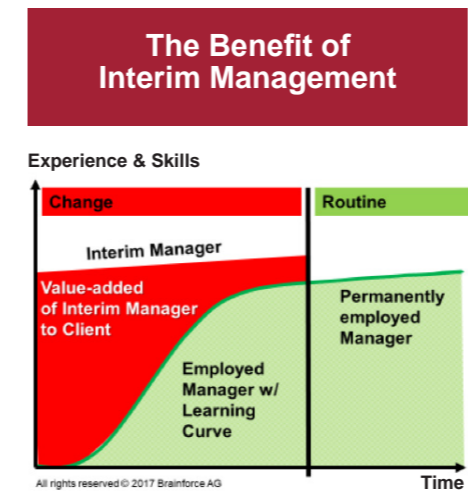
Another major problem that I've seen is the belief that IT systems lead to better decisions. They should only be supporting the decision-making process, not substituting it. As there is no perfect information in this world and ambiguity is more common than clarity, despite Big Data, the human decision power based on previous experience and intuition generally leads to better results. Why are the 'Hidden Champions' typically family-owned and/or family-style managed companies and not corporates? Why is one of the key factors of successful corporates their ability to keep entrepreneurial behaviours alive?

100% standardised and measured processes kill people's ability to think out-of-the-box, to respond with common sense in exceptional situations and to nourish positive creativity.

An experienced interim manager has the capacity to judge where and to what degree of sophistication new processes should be introduced, and existing

ones optimised or simplified. They take a more entrepreneurial approach.

Last but not least, today's trend towards 'the cheapest solution is the best solution' is detrimental to companies' sustainable performance. In most cases, the 'cheap' internal solution turns out to be the most expensive solution due to the learning curve needed. Simply put, time is money. This expensive learning curve can be avoided by deploying an interim manager who has already gone through the learning curve previously. The value-added of an interim manager generally exceeds the cost of a learning curve by far.



Q Can interim management play a role in developing managerial talents within the business?

Certainly. In fact, we often observe businesses burning young talents by promoting them too fast to the next level when there is an unexpected early departure of their superior. In such a situation, the deployment of a well-picked interim executive for a few months can save the business a lot of money. Why? The interim manager will build-up the young manager's skills step-by-step by assigning him new responsibilities and being his neutral mentor during this phase. An example: a young manager talent without previous restructuring experience was assigned to restructure a complex engineering

and manufacturing operation. The perspective was to lead this international operation as their CEO after restructuring. The corporate management decided to save the investment for an experienced restructuring interim manager who would have further developed this young manager during the restructuring phase as his deputy. The result was that the young, promising and capable managerial talent was overwhelmed by the complexity of the restructuring situation, and left the company before the completion of the restructuring. The corporation lost time in the restructuring, as well as a good future managerial talent.

Q What are the advantages and disadvantages of promoting senior positions from within, vs. external recruitment?

Promoting senior positions from within is the traditionally preferred approach by most companies. The reasons are manifold: familiarity with organisation and processes, cultural fit, known strengths and weaknesses of the individual promoted, etc.

However, there are also substantial disadvantages. Without 'fresh blood' entering from outside, there could be rope team building, less innovation and lower agility. A typical statement one can hear very often is: "We have done things the same way for 20 years, why should we change our way of getting things done?".

To fill senior positions from the outside is particularly important if an organisation is in a phase of transition (e.g. cultural change, disruptive technologies challenging the business

such as Industry 4.0/IoT/Digitalisation, etc.). Interim managers particularly bring in the required "fresh blood" instantly and due to their unbiased view and changing management experience are able to break up rope teams and change the culture into a new direction. Once a new desired state is achieved by the interim CEO, he hands over the company to the new permanent CEO selected with the appropriate profile.

Q What are BRAINFORCE's philosophy when helping clients with interim management and consulting services?

Our philosophy is to provide managerial solutions within days at a high-quality level, and to achieve results which exceed the investment for the interim or consulting assignment by far.

Q What makes your company unique?

We are a fully integrated service provider and work with our own people. We do not believe in the franchise model in this demanding management field. Founded in 1979, we have a wealth of experience in the field and are proud to say that we are the 'original' in the interim management provider industry in continental Europe. Over the years, we have perfected our professional, quality-focused M.A.S.T.E.R.-3-Pool Management and customer-relationship processes.

BRAINFORCE's experts stand out for their extensive leadership experience, with proven successes in design and implementation, as well as having a positive mindset and a winning personality.

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