

Are the consultants we need already working for us?

The time has come for organisation leaders to reshape their traditional IT, Finance and HR support functions into high value added Business Partner and Internal Consultancy roles.

An interview with Mark Thomas

So what is the fundamental problem?

All too often when faced with declining business performance or the need to reduce costs, business leaders reach for the telephone to bring in the external consultants. This approach frequently disguises fundamental flaws in the way most organisations work. The irony is that the solutions that external consultants push and charge huge sums of money for already lie within most organisations. So in response to the question “Does the organisation already employ people who can generate the required solutions to difficult problems?” we believe the answer is often a very strong “Yes.”

So why don't leaders listen to the people who work for them?

The reasons for this problem typically involve a range of issues:

- Business leaders may lack confidence in the people who work for them – they may not believe that their people have the necessary skills and perspectives to do the work
- The past performance of their support people has led the leadership to dismiss the idea of utilising existing skills. They may have already failed on important projects or simply not been proactive enough in highlighting problems and taking action
- Internal staff have themselves failed to successfully promote their skills and capabilities. They may have been too complacent and reactive in their approach. Their internal brand is poor
- External consultants can of course provide leaders with a potential scapegoat should things go wrong. This is often an easier option to go for than utilising internal resources.

So what does the classic support function need to do to change to this way of working?

In order for the concept of Business Partnering and internal consulting to become mainstream traditional support functions need to learn the art of what we call the “art of client management.” Support specialists need to shift their focus from what we call a “colleague” to a “client” perspective. One of the reasons outsourcing has become such a global business is not simply a question of cost. Outsourcing has also been driven by internal levels of dissatisfaction with existing service. So for support specialists to succeed they need to first change their mental models and then follow this up with a real change in their day to day client management.

So can anyone learn a Business Partner skill set?

Mark Thomas: Our programmes have great success in equipping people with such a skill set because they are highly practical and experiential. We try to bring the realism of the real world into the learning environment and so people leave having acquired real “can do” skills. We base our programmes around our own real life experiences and we pride ourselves on saying that we are not trainers but rather we are successful business consultants who help others become the same.

So what are the classic hurdles that people have to overcome?

A classic failing of traditional support managers in making the transition to Business Partner or internal consultancy is that they expect the client to tell them what to do. They see the relationship as one of “master” and “subordinate”. Yet successful business partnering demands a proactive approach where the relationship is based on a level of real equality.

Critically, Business Partners need to challenge the thinking and assumptions of their clients. This is of course quite challenging if you also happen to be on the payroll! But our programme shows people how to navigate some of the classic traps associated with this transition.

What other challenges do people face in moving to the role?

I think being able to judge the right moment to take a stand and push back against your client is critical to the success of any successful Business Partner. Telling your boss that they are talking nonsense is never easy, and even though you probably won't say it in that way it is vital that you do challenge your internal client on important issues. Otherwise you are not acting as a consultant but rather a management doormat and business partnering is all about challenging the status-quo.

All too often support specialists and managers see themselves as experts who have to deliver the right solution. Traditional management thinking is shrouded in the "right answer" approach and this often drags support specialists into difficult situations and political battles. Yet in business there are always several solutions to any problem. Good Business Partners tackle this challenge by skilfully presenting options and managing their clients through a process of evaluating which solution is most appropriate.