

## Leading and Managing Professional Service Firms in the Infrastructure Sector

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### First impressions

This is a book written primarily for practitioners that is also a very useful academic resource. The subject matter is about leading professional service consultancies in the construction sector and how these firms organise themselves and operate.

It is well written, clear and highly informative. The author is a high-level Executive in one of these professional service firms and has also been a “pracademic” in that he keenly follows the literature. His book cites seminal work, standard texts and theoretical sources and a number of freely available “white papers” and other industry expert sources. I found it useful and it filled in some gaps in my knowledge about how these firms operate. It is many decades since I worked in a quantity surveyor’s office and when I was a client-side project manager dealing with these consultants on a day-to-day basis. Also, not only technology has changed a lot since then but also the way that the client, contractor and consultants collaborate. This makes a book like this invaluable as a reference source to be able to better understand the lived experience of a senior manager in these professional service firms in general, and in the construction sector in particular. My only criticism that is mildly negative is that the book kind of fades away finishing at the end of Chapter 16 without any finishing off chapter that could have summed up the book chapters and commenting upon the impact and contribution that these firms make.

### Book structure and content

The book is not long, 160 pages excluding references and the index, and each of the 16 chapters are quite short and concise. This is useful for those readers who may be wanting to skim it and focus on what concerns them directly or others, like me, who are looking to get a decent appreciation and understanding of the lived experience of those working in this type of organisation. It is somewhat “goldilocks” in that way: not too long to be tedious and highly technical but not too skimpy to be superficial. I felt that I had learned some new things after finishing it and it made sense to me given my experience in these firms several decades ago.

After a short introduction, Chapter 1, that does a good job of setting out its objectives and aim, it moves to Chapter 2 about strategy. The chapter holds no surprises and presents a fairly conventional overview of strategy. It is, however, strategy within the sector of the business of engineering consultancies for the construction infrastructure industry sector which could be applied to heavy engineering such as rail, roads, pipelines, etc., or government institutional projects such as hospitals, educational campus development, etc. When discussing vision and values, for example, it is explicit and it provides useful maps, for example Table 2-2 is a map of an indicative organisational strategy map. This may look at the financial, client, process and people strategy perspective that includes suggested key



performance indicators (KPIs) for each. Chapter 3 discusses the nature of the firm and in eight pages it provides some useful insights from this type of firm's perspective. It is a sound context chapter and would be useful to a practitioner and researcher/student who is trying to understand how this system works. Chapter 4 is important to most in this firm's situation as it is about marketing and communications. It is a short chapter but links to following ones such as Chapter 5 on business development and Chapter 6 on winning proposals. Chapter 5 gives another useful table on client relationship management issues with a column identifying issues and a column of responses to those issues. I think these provide a good check list for consultants and those clients dealing with consultants from these firms. It also provides a useful tool for researchers or students to see categories of things they should understand and consider. The chapter content is quite substantial and well presented. Chapters 5 and 6 may well provide the most "meat" in this book. I do not think that there are many books that are available that covers this type of content as comprehensively while remaining readable. Chapter 6 may actually be a good chapter to read for anyone interested in project procurement and delivery choices. Chapter 7 links to this in terms of developing growth but discusses growth through mergers and acquisitions (M&A). It is a short but interesting chapter much of the M&A literature is written about large manufacturing, production or IT organisational M&A which is managed (or mismanaged) in different ways to the M&A world of professional service firms. That chapter possesses some useful personal insights of Tim Ellis'. Chapter 8 moves into an overview of project management from this kind of firm's perspective. What may be considered new and filling existing publication gaps is the emphasis on PM and relationship management of trust for example in Table 8-1. The three elements of trust of credibility, reliability and intimacy are not new but the table provides a thoughtful summary of concepts relating to those three elements in pithy explanations of each concept within that matrix. This chapter also explains the project management office and how it may be used in the firms various activities such as consulting, design, project management, construction services and support services. The next chapter, Chapter 9 on operational management flows logically and covers a number of aspects that would be very useful to practitioners needing a check list of things to consider and manage. Chapter 10 discusses commercials, the commercial or financial sustainability aspect of managing a professional service business. Chapter 11, Contracts, flows well from Chapter 10 discussing contractual obligations and expectations in quite some detail. Again, this would be useful to practitioners in this kind of business. Chapter 12 discusses risks and opportunities and while there are many texts and other books I can think of that covers this ground well I would say that this does so well from this professional services firm perspective. Chapter 13, Knowledge management, is short and while it has a few vignettes in it (referred to as case studies) that would be useful in a class setting to stimulate discussion it does lack depth in terms of KM and organisational learning. However, there are many good texts on that subject area. The intent of this chapter seems to be to remind the reader of its importance and not overlook KM. Chapter 14, People and culture, has some useful insights and discussion on recruitment and selection in this workplace setting that would be very handy for those entering a career in this area. Chapter 15, Business systems and processes, is only two pages and so provides a reminder but probably could have done with suggested further literature and books to follow up on. Chapter 16, How to increase the chance of success, does try to wrap up the book chapters to set them in context. It does attempts to pull the book's threads together. There are useful reflections and observations presented.

### **Summary**

I summarise my personal impression of the book as follows. First, when Tim contacted me about his new book I agreed to do a review because I felt that it could be useful to the many

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thousands, tens of thousands globally, of students of project management who are early practitioners trying to understand the world they work in. I would definitely recommend this as great background reading for that purpose as well as for those mid-career practitioners who need to find a good role model, mentor, or other form of access to understanding how the “system” should work. I would imagine that at about 169 pages that experienced practitioners in this field could usefully use the book as a very handy checklist and *aide memoire*. Thus, I think that the book makes a valuable contribution and it is one of few, none other I am currently aware of, that fulfils this role.

I also think that it is a good reference book for practitioners, academics and post graduate students that do not work for a professional services firm such as the ones addressed by this book but need to understand the value proposition of this type of firm. The reason I specifically think that it could be good for that type of potential reader is that it is so important for those of us in the construction industry to better understand each other’s perspective and potential contribution. This books stresses, and I feel that the trend is emerging for a future where most meaningful jobs and careers will be one in which all parties are engaged in intense collaborations, that relationship engagement and management is central to business and outcome success. This book provides people dealing and collaborating with professional services firms,a very well-written clear account of the nature of these companies. It provides a useful road map of how to lead and participate in the management of these firms.

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