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Interim managers: to the rescue?

Interims are lone wolves and should not be encouraged to integrate into a company



Nick Jarman, interim director of children's services at Doncaster Council. Photograph: Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

Recently we've been seeing a marked increase in the number of companies that are turning to interim managers, rather than hiring permanent members of staff as they struggle to operate in a climate of budget cuts and hiring freezes. These organisations are looking for new ideas and new ways to get the job done. To achieve this, interim managers are being parachuted into businesses to tackle large projects, often at very senior level.

We know that hiring an interim manager can be beneficial for an organisation for a number of reasons. You can bring in that experience for a certain amount of time without bringing in any extra head count. As they're coming from outside the organisation, interim managers can really see the wood from the trees and don't have any organisational baggage. They can also really intensify or accelerate a program of change.

When bringing in an interim manager it is vital is to strike the right balance, so that your organisation can experience maximum rewards — it is important to remember that an interim is neither a manager nor a consultant, and to realise that they are in fact a very different beast. Their skills and experience can be applied to many different problems and situations.

At the same time, companies also need to be careful that interims don't become owned in the business or go native, which can happen if they are there too long.

An essential part of hiring a successful interim is to get the initial contracting right. Remember that interims are not just an extra pair of hands — they should be facilitators, not just doers. Some organisations can use interim managers inappropriately; all they're really doing is getting in temporary help to turn something around. The key factor is does the change then stick? They need a very clear remit from the beginning; that they need to train a team to take change forward.

If you're thinking about moving into interim management it's vital to remember that it's not just anyone that can step into an interim management career. Because of the uncertainty and short-term nature of the work, an interim manager will need a fierce drive and ambition to constantly be on the lookout for new opportunities.

Interim managers do not need a particular skills set — rather a certain orientation. Interims will always be lone wolves. They only eat what they hunt, as work-wise they 'feed themselves' by hunting out new positions through networking and word of mouth. Their experience set can be vast and, of course, they need the experience to be able to manage projects. They need excellent communication skills, the ability to build teams fast and focus on deliverables and implementation. Additionally interims need to be very clear on why they are doing something and tend to work best on project work as they are very delivery focused.

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