

INTERIM CAREERS

How to get the best out of interim managers (Louise Etheridge)

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You may think that hiring an interim manager is a panacea for all your organisational evils.

They will fly in and with one burst of their superhuman powers will sort out that restructuring programme, fix the new IT system or fine-tune the purchase strategy implementation and leave your organisation stronger, fitter and smelling lovely. Sounds great? But things are not so straightforward. If you don't do your homework, you will be picking up the pieces long after your interim has ridden off into the sunset.

To ensure a successful outcome to your project - and it is important to view this in project management terms - you should ask yourself four questions:

1. What do I want?
2. How do I prepare existing staff?
3. When do I want this to happen?
4. How will we manage this?

There are two aspects to the first question: what are the outcomes you require and do you need an interim manager to do it?

Steve Carter, managing director at management agency Robert Half Management Resources, says: "Clarity of role is important. Consider and define the project objectives."

Professional HR interim, Robin Taylor, asks: "Is an interim manager actually needed? Too often the requirements have not been properly considered. "Do you need an interim manager, an executive temp or a consultant, or do you have the talent already in-house?" Taylor says.

It is vital you understand the difference. A temp will beaver away, maintaining the status quo, while management consultants will roar out their advice, and then leave.

On the other hand, interims are, according to Taravat Taher-Zadeh, chairman of the Institute of Interim Management, "appointed to implement and should combine technical knowledge and qualifications with soft skills such as managing, leading and being cognisant of company values". So, if your situation requires a task-focused implementer with excellent soft skills, it is likely you will need an interim.

Interims can also bring a fresh perspective into an organisation.

This was the experience of Frank McKenna, director of HR at Whipps Cross University Hospital, East London. He says: "When one of our directors left, we brought in an interim to offer a different skillset. Because of the interim nature of our appointment, we were able to take the 'risk' of engaging a specialist who had not worked within the NHS. "It was refreshing because they brought a different perspective to how things were done."

Preparing existing staff

It is highly likely some staff may feel threatened by the new appointment. They may see it as a vote of no confidence or believe that the interim is there to do the management's dirty work.

"Interims are not in the business of winning popularity contests," says Rachel Smith, managing consultant at Veredus Executive Resourcing. "Often the role of the interim is to diagnose a situation and implement a recovery plan which is not always popular."

However, leaving staff to get on with it can lead to overt or tacit resistance to the interim's objectives. "Style of management is just as important as ability to deliver," says McKenna, "as the interim will move on but the team needs to be kept functional."

It is not enough to rely on the political skills of the best-fit interim when introducing them. Patrique Habboo, managing director of Praxis, an interim management agency, says you must discuss and gain buy-in from your colleagues, and communicate why interim management is being considered and the benefits that will be achieved.

At interim management agency Intramezzo, director Dermot Hill suggests executives responsible for the operational delivery should be involved in the recruitment process to increase buy-in, as well as gain a wider perspective on the right candidate. Induction is also important, says Hill. The most senior sponsor of the project should introduce the interim to the key players in the first couple of days of the assignment.

Timeframe for recruitment

If your task is urgent you may have to change the way you normally recruit. Carter says: "Sometimes, the main obstacle is the client's inability to move quickly enough in terms of recruitment procedures. This sometimes means they miss out on the best candidates."

With this in mind, you may need to condense your normal recruitment process. This is possible if you use an interim provider with accreditation from a professional body.

Look at the provider's track record and ask for references and don't forget to tap into your HR networks. Word of mouth is the best advertisement for an interim provider.

Annie Balch, managing consultant at Veredus, warns: "The best interims are always in high demand, but if you can show an element of flexibility you will have a richer shortlist as there are always good interims about to finish other projects."

The advice of Rachel Venner, a senior consultant at Interim Performers, an interim management agency, when interviewing interims is: "Expect to interview three interims per assignment and keep it to one interview. A second interview should be treated as an introduction to the team."

So, you now know the role, the staff are all for it and you have snapped up a juicy interim. The final stage is the management process and here is where the details become important.

Don't strike the deal without clarity. According to Habbo: "It is critical to define project terms and what legacy the interim should leave behind. The agreed details should include the project aim, objectives, deliverables, timescales, resources, and the key dependencies."

You should also cover communication and reporting. "Be clear on the outset how long the assignment is for and stick to it," advises Frank, who says you may also be able to maximise your investment by using the interim's skills broadly and getting them to look at more than one area.

An interim also needs tools for the job, and not just the obvious things like a desk or IT access. Danny Hodgson, consultant at Veredus, says that to be effective, "interims need a clear mandate and support from the very highest levels of the organisation". If not supported, he says, an interim will lose credibility and will flounder.

Interim management, if handled well, is a powerful and flexible resourcing tool and HR has a holistic role to play in getting the best out of a placement of this sort.

Aside from choosing and using interim providers, facilitating staff understanding and interim induction, HR is in a position to review interim effectiveness and establish best practice for their organisation.

Managing interims

1. Know what you want: establish aims, objectives, timescale and resources
2. Prepare your staff: tell them why you need an interim manager and how it will affect staff. Answer questions.
3. Know who you want: get the right skills, knowledge, experience.
4. Give them the tools: induction, terms of reference, resources and support
5. Review: did the assignment work? If not, why not? What would you do differently next time?