

Interim Measure

Interim Management is enjoying significant growth as companies look for more flexible outsourcing solutions.

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Companies are realising more and more that interims can play an important role. As one HR director working in a large pharma company put it, "They may be a more practical option than making an expensive permanent hire under pressure, which may not turn out to be the best solution long-term.

"In my view, optimum times to go for interims are when a job is clearly defined and will produce an outcome that is clear - for example, filing for a product licence, producing a PSUR, drafting reports from study findings, checking and signing-off written and/or audio-visual promotional materials. In such cases, an experienced and efficient pair of hands can cover a role until a permanent person is found, or it may remain an interim position for longer, because the cost is a running cost and not headcount."

"Another instance when an interim is preferable is when the role is crucial for a company, but recruitment of a person to fill the role proves difficult. Here an interim may be the only solution. For example, this could be preparing for an MRHA inspection or dealing with any remediation that arises prior to the re-inspection.

"Interims are also particularly useful when there is an internal re-organisation pending, or a closure, merger or acquisition under discussion. Gaps need to be filled as and when key people leave, but it wouldn't be practical to recruit new staff when roles may change in the near future."

Fresh look

An interim can undoubtedly bring fresh perspective to a business, without being constrained by what has happened in the past. Project teams have a lot invested in the programmes and consequently are not always best placed to see their work objectively. A new pair of eyes can be extremely valuable, as one CEO summed up.

"An objective viewpoint is very helpful and with an interim we used recently, we benefited greatly from a fresh approach and the respect that person commanded as an authority in his field. Internal staff can be more likely to listen to someone from outside. In this particular case, it would have been very difficult to access this specific topic in-house as the project involved moving into a new therapy area. This point alone persuaded me to think more in terms of added value than pound-for-pound cost."

Keeping projects on track

“Using interims has proved a lifesaver for us in recent months,” explains a medical director. “Our company has been in merger talks for some time, which understandably has resulted in low staff morale and a headcount freeze, but our project deadlines have not changed and the work has to be done by someone. By finding interim specialists with skills and experience in our therapy area, we have been able to keep project progress on-track. Hopefully, once the future is a bit clearer, we’ll be able to take on permanents in some of these key roles.”

Good for marketing

Traditionally, marketing has not been an area where interims are used, but are companies missing out?

Interims can make a significant contribution in the event of a sudden loss of marketing expertise. An interim can bring a cross-fertilisation of ideas and experience from different companies, different products and different parts of the NHS. There is a huge pool of talent immediately available and whereas recruiting someone may take at least three months, an interim can hit the ground running in just two weeks.

A sales & marketing director has experienced the benefits first hand. “Using interims can bring strategic direction to a company early on without huge investment. You can also benefit from expertise in a specific area by using someone who is effective from day one. With an experienced marketer, you can achieve results quickly and often with a fresh view that will enhance the success of the project,” he says.

Value for money?

Is it an expensive option? Not if you use the expertise wisely, as you only pay for time used. It also gives you the financial flexibility to turn the resource on and off as funding allows.

At first sight, daily rates may seem high, but salary alone isn’t the end of the story. As an HR director points out, “To make a fair comparison, you need to take the whole package into account. At the very minimum senior individuals will receive a company car or car allowance, company pension scheme and private healthcare. That doesn’t include the compulsory National Insurance the employer has to pay and any other perks. It also excludes additional costs, which are more difficult to quantify in general terms such as bonuses, share options, childcare vouchers, maternity and paternity leave, subsidised meals and other initiatives such as employee assistance programmes.”

“It also doesn’t take into account costs associated with recruitment which would include any fees payable to the recruitment partners, as well as internal overheads associated with the recruitment process. There’s also the cost of relocating an individual and their family which can run into tens of thousands of pounds, particularly if the person has been living and working overseas.”

Productivity is another point in favour of interims as they work solely on the project in hand rather than having to get involved in internal issues, managing other people and administration. They can simply focus on the task in hand which reduces distraction and increases productive time.

What makes a good interim?

Although there is no stereotypical interim manager, successful ones possess special skills to ensure they are effective. These include:

- A specialist area of expertise coupled with experience of its application in practice on which the individual is an authority
- Strong analytical and communication skills
- The ability to assess problems quickly and act
- The skill to balance long-term strategy with short-term tactics
- Strong task orientation
- Ability to coach and mentor at all levels
- Excellent interpersonal and motivational skills
- Political awareness yet with the ability to remain detached
- Resilience and mobility
- Aura of confidence based on experience; “gravitas”

Benefits of being an interim

One of the most highly rated advantages to interims is the flexibility they enjoy i.e. the chance to choose the amount of work they do and when they do it. Assignments and companies vary, with some requiring work from an office and others offering or even welcoming the opportunity to be based at home - with regular meetings and feedback. The freedom to choose your days and hours – provided you complete the work on deadline – is a great plus for people wanting to incorporate work with bringing up a family or pursuing other interests.

A recent survey carried out by Harten Group among its consultants highlighted the benefits of less commuting time for interims, with the chance to travel outside the rush hours.

Other people felt that less overseas travel was also a welcome change as it usually meant seeing the inside of airports, hotels and meeting rooms rather than enjoying the opportunity to see a new city. “People think overseas travel is exciting and glamorous”, said one interim. “It’s anything but! If I never had to see another Business Airport Lounge again, I won’t be sorry!”

For some consultants, the work/life balance also extended to greater job satisfaction. Many respondents to the survey highlighted their enjoyment in being able to get on with the project rather than their time being bled away by the administrative overhead of running a department, including budgeting, staff management or general office politics.

Personal control over the hours worked and availability was a common plus point, with the freedom to be firm and limit working time. “Not working in a permanent role also means I can switch off more easily”, commented one consultant. “Previously, when I went on holiday, I was always worrying about what was happening at work. Now I can go and relax, knowing that my part of the project is as up to date as it needs to be without having any other organisational responsibilities”.

Working from home – or remotely from the office – has been revolutionised in recent years with new technology enabling consultants to work anywhere in the world. Email, internet, telephone conference calls and video conferencing mean that not everyone has to work in the same office and it is a great deal easier to work from home. Not only does it allow you to work where you like but also at a time that suits you.