



Reference Stories

John Groarke | Sydney | January 2022

Me and my stories ...



As Australia's "Mentor to Consultants" – a statement by my clients – I have been enthusing consultants and professionals to confidently breakthrough with distinctive, focused, sustainable and profitable enterprises since 2001, by drawing upon my expertise and insights in:

- strategic positioning
- professional services marketing
- consultative selling
- delivery optimisation
- operations improvement
- talent development.

My clients – sole practitioners, boutique consultants, and, large brand-name firms – all aspire to a 'better enterprise' ...

Me and my stories ...

... and we accomplish this noble objective through projects in one or more of these areas ...

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... using a set of enterprise building methods purposefully designed to generate growth and create value.

START-UP

Setting up the enterprise

**Grant Thornton
Management
Consultants, UK**

Established management consulting services (MCS) in the Newcastle-upon-Tyne office of Grant Thornton UK with four consultants at start-up.

Initial MCS services included Information Technology and Operations Management.

Financial results are not available, but the firm would terminate an MCS service if it was unprofitable after two years – this did not happen with either of these services.

**Sole practitioner
and boutique
consultant
participants:
three courses for
the University
of Sydney's Centre
for Continuing
Education**

I am not permitted, under the teaching agreement, to initiate a commercial relationship with participants, but they can approach me after their courses, and some are now clients.

I have been repeatedly told that my advice and guidance works and gets the desired results.

Many participants have gone on to build distinctive, focused, sustainable and profitable enterprises, as consultants and professional advisors in a wide variety of disciplines.

More than 300 people have participated in three public training courses since 2005 - *Starting, Operating, and, Boosting a Consulting Business*.

**NSW Government –
Trade & Investment
– Small Business
NSW**

Conducted half-day workshops – *How to make a living as a consultant ... the fundamental actions* – during the annual MicroBiz Week and Small Business September initiatives.

More than 100 people attended these workshops between 2009 and 2011, when these initiatives ended.

**Australian 'top 5'
Sydney-based
business school**

Conducted two workshops each year – *Consulting ... is this the career for you?* – and – *How to make a living as a consultant ... the fundamental actions* – for the MBA and PhD students at this renowned business school (top 5 Australia, top 60 global).

I also provided one-on-one careers advice to potential consultants.

**Blue Mountains
Regional Business
Chamber**

Conducted a workshop – *How to make a living as a consultant ... the fundamental actions* – for clients of this NSW Business Chamber.

Penrith Valley BEC

Conducted a workshop – *How to make a living as a consultant ... the fundamental actions*.

**The Donington
Group**

Conducted a monthly workshop – *Consulting and starting your own consulting business* – for individuals in outplacement at the Sydney office of this national career transition firm.

**'Clearly Business'
Sydney Metro BEC**

Conducted workshops – *Consulting as a career ... is it for you?* and *How to make a living as a consultant ... the fundamental actions*.

REPOSITION

Changing market position

Generalist boutique consultant, with an established brand-name

A boutique consultant providing specialist consulting services for 22 years. Profitability had been declining, however, and it was heading into a loss-making position. At one point, it had employed around 15 people, but at the time of my engagement it was down to one or two employees plus a pool of sub-contractors.

By modifying the services focus and bringing in highly qualified senior 'grey hair' consulting resources as associates, we transformed the enterprise into a 'game changer'.

This transformation has not been easy, and some associates have gone, being unable to cope with a collective model that relies upon close co-operation to be rewarded. However, there is now a core group of committed and well-rewarded associates carrying out premium, high-value work.

This boutique has a low cost base and the owner has modest profit aspirations. This has enabled 66% of fee income to be returned directly to the delivery consultants, and up to 75% if they were also responsible for the sale. These percentages are well above the norm for similar business models.

**Operations
Improvement
boutique
consultant,
operating in one
sector**

This boutique had 20 consultants, with about half working as employees and the rest as sub-contractors because of the cyclical 'boom or bust' nature of the sector that they currently operate in.

I developed an implementation plan to:

- consolidate their current position in the current sector – there are seven competitors and their market strengths and weaknesses were very well known (the senior consultants in all of these boutiques, including this client, had worked for a large global operational improvement firm which had closed), and
- take the existing enterprise into a totally different sector, which has a very similar, almost identical, operational improvement need – this was a classic case of 'out of the box' thinking. By drafting in some very specific sector expertise, it will be a viable enterprise.

REVITALISE

Re-establishing on a new and improved basis

**PwC Consulting -
Strategy & Change,
Australia & New
Zealand**

Prepared a 120-person consulting practice in two countries for an IPO. Due to the following issues, the current and projected 'trading results' were unlikely to convince investors that the planned financial objectives would be met:

Financial recovery on projects had dropped by 24% over the previous five years:

- Work was being done for 'free'
- Reputation was at risk due to troubled projects (some known in the public domain)
- Consultant competency and knowledge was a growing issue
- Business rules compliance was erratic and low (putting quality accreditation at risk).

I addressed these issues by concentrating upon the sales and delivery processes – in particular, sales pipeline management and project control (stakeholder commitment, business benefits, work and schedule, team performance, scope, risks, financials).

Results over a 15-month period were 6% revenue growth, 30% profit improvement and 10% increase in the number of projects completed on time and to budget.

The IPO ("Monday") did not proceed – PwC Consulting was acquired by IBM.

IBM Business Consulting Services - Strategy & Change, Asia-Pacific

Worked on the integration of IBM's existing consulting business with the acquired PwC Consulting business – 800 consultants in 16 countries grouped into five regions – to form IBM Business Consulting Services.

Continued to build-upon the planned IPO transformation, previously described, to achieve these largely qualitative results over a 30-month period:

- Introduced market relevant service offers in each region
- Created and implemented pertinent consultant development training programs
- Conducted training in methods and advanced consulting skills in AUS, CHN & IND
- Developed and implemented a knowledge management process which increased knowledge capture from 15 to 80 projects per year
- Developed an action-oriented operational planning process that enabled regional management teams to manage on a quarterly basis
- Managed internal communications program, and established communities of interest in business, operations, IT and organisation & change strategies
- Teamed with global colleagues to provide an Asia-Pacific perspective in the development of global directions for service offers and business initiatives, and to direct the deployment of service offers and initiatives across each region.

**Human Resources
boutique
consultant,
specialising in
Organisational
Renewal**

Well-established boutique, but the owner had just dissolved a partnership arrangement and he was not meeting his revenue and profit projections. In order to service the potential workload, he had engaged four sub-contractors on an as-required basis to utilise some very well developed and proven consulting methods.

Over 30 months, we more than doubled revenue and profit. We worked out the issues and challenges, and determined the unrealised opportunities, in six key areas; strategy, marketing, selling, delivery, operations, talent. Solutions and remedies were developed and implemented in each area.

Most remedial actions were associated with increasing the average daily rate, sub-contracting out the lower-risk, non-premium work and raising the proposal win-rate to over 90%.

We have now created a premium brand for the high value work that the owner and senior sub-contractors can perform, leaving the remaining sub-contractors to service most of the original business under the existing brand.

We are currently working on the establishment of a third brand which will license and implement a niche HR software solution that the owner has had developed by a third-party.

**Management
Development sole
practitioner,
plus associates**

Established sole practitioner, but struggling to make money. The owner has no prior experience in professional services. However, he is a subject matter expert in management development, and had developed a good reputation, which triggered the move into consulting.

A true 'back to basics' project – point solutions had to be developed for urgent problems in marketing, selling and delivery – before work could commence on deciding services provider type and appropriately setting the six success levers (strategy, marketing, selling, delivery, operations, talent).

These solutions have paid off, and have been sufficient to fund the development of what will be a premium-value advisory enterprise. This in turn has attracted some high calibre associates who wish to utilise the quality intellectual property.

**Australian
Government's
Enterprise Connect -
Enterprise Learning
and Mentoring
(ELM) program**

Appointed as a Mentor for services-oriented enterprises, until the program ceased in 2011. Principal client was a national boutique consultant, also operating in Asia, specialising in operational excellence improvement through 'Lean' techniques.

We worked on restoring profitability, improving the employee value proposition, assessing alternative enterprise models, changing business structure and enhancing customer relationship system – all with good results.

**Corporate Social
Responsibility sole
practitioner**

Recently established enterprise to distinctively exploit this emerging niche.

The key issue was one of strategic positioning. The owner felt he was a specialist provider of consulting services. But our detailed examination of his current enterprise showed that he is clearly a 'game changer'. This was further reinforced by our competitor analysis, showing that they were all operating as specialists in this niche.

So we developed an implementation plan to establish the 'true' enterprise and to exploit the market as a game-changer within a narrow window of opportunity.

**Professional
advisory firm, with a
wide portfolio of
services in
Management
Consulting, Capital
Raising and Coaching,
plus a range of
solutions (workshops,
ebooks)**

A one-to-one mentoring project, working with the managing director. A respectable set of clients and a quality network of professional contacts had been established over the first three years, thus creating a good reputation.

However the foundations set down three years ago for the intended firm, were not the 'right' foundations needed for the current and the planned firm ... a common problem.

We successfully used the approach described above to define the current and planned firm and to develop an implementable action plan.

Consulting and Training business unit, within the commercialisation arm of an Australian 'top 10' university

This business unit plays a key role in the commercialisation activities of a well-regarded NSW university (top 10 Australia, top 40 Asia). But whether the unit would be a sustainable and profitable enterprise after some enforced cost-cutting and a drop in revenue due to the economic climate, needed to be established along with a supporting action plan.

The challenges were far-ranging, from ... 'what are our core service offers' ... through 'how do we attract academic resources to consult via us' ... to 'which process helps us to determine the winnable opportunities'. And all with an underlying need for me to mentor the unit's staff to accomplish their business objectives.

I deployed three of my five key models to completely define this enterprise and to develop a prioritised action plan across six areas (strategy, marketing, selling, delivery, operations, talent) as well as the required systems and processes. I also dug deep into my kitbag of tools, tricks and tips to develop outline solutions / remedies for each action. Many of these were 'implementation ready', leaving just a few to be finalised during implementation.

Human Resources
boutique
consultant,
specialising in;
Leadership
Development,
Leadership
Coaching,
Leadership
Facilitation

A straightforward one-to-one mentoring project. The principal, a well-known practitioner in his field, needed a 'sounding board' as he grappled with some significant, but not uncommon, issues. He had personally outgrown the enterprise he started (the original brand), but could neither establish the 'right' business model nor find the right people to run it, while he developed the new brand. This new brand would be the principal himself, though it needed some original brand revenue to get up and running. Plus he needed to stop working in the original brand, and to reduce his time working on the old brand ... and naturally that was a hard thing for him to do.

We used a very structured approach to treat each brand as a separate enterprise so that we could freely identify and define all the issues as well as the unrealised opportunities in each. The subsequent implementation plan effectively re-assembled the enterprise as one entity, but with its two brands. And because all of the remedies behind the actions already existed, implementation quickly kicked-off, and proceeded well.

EXTEND

Adding new services and service areas

**Information
Technology
boutique consultant**

A well-established boutique, with five principals and 16 staff, serving two specialist IT consulting service areas under the one brand-name in NSW and Victoria. It is a recognised brand with a strong reputation in both service areas and a 'to die for' client list.

The boutique decided to add a third service area under the 'ownership' of one of the principals, who is renowned for his expertise in the particular specialist area.

I was engaged, for my IT experience in the specialist area, to work on finalising the consulting methodology and to conduct projects while we 'incubated' the methodology and prepared a business case to launch the new area.

Significant high-profile projects were carried out in both the private and public sector, and these 'proved' that this new service area would be a worthwhile extension to the existing boutique. These projects were carried out for well-known organisations and were won against international brand-name consulting firms.

My client has now fully established this service area, under two principals, and increased staffing to service their large clients in both Sydney and Melbourne. And in 2013 they were acquired by an ICT professional services company providing services to clients in both the private and public sectors.

Human Resources boutique consultant, specialising in; Developing Core Leadership Capability, Talent Identification and Development, Harnessing Potential

The project started with the premise that this boutique would enter the market with a second, separately branded, enterprise. But there was concern that this could put the established brand at some risk.

The project finished with one enterprise, an enhanced version of the existing boutique organised into three distinctive layers; Develop core leadership capability (bottom), Identify and develop talent (middle), Harness potential (top).

Each layer has its own value proposition, and the business value that a client would derive from the service offers in each layer increases as that client moves up. But a client can also move around a layer, where a four-box methodology, underpins and links each of the service offers.

The unique four-box methodology is what distinctively links this enterprise together. In each layer the purpose of each box is the same, but the tasks are different. And it's this simplicity which helps a client appreciate the increasing business value of the journey from 'developing core leadership capability' through 'talent identification and development' to 'harnessing potential'.

This project did not put the existing brand at risk – in fact, it has been strengthened.

**Accounting sole
practitioner,
plus sub-contractors**

Originally a bookkeeping enterprise with a high penetration of SMEs in specific sectors, the owner saw potential to offer higher value adding services to both existing and new clients.

We decided to add three additional layers to the original enterprise, much like the building of a layered sponge cake. Each layer has a higher value potential than the one immediately below. However, we will not move to implement a layer until there is sufficient cream (ie profit) from the one below.

As we move up, the owner will engage sub-contractors to service the lower layers, at a reasonable margin. This will free up the owner to provide the higher-value premium services of the higher layers.

Boutique consultants, with specialist and game changing services

This story is a consolidation of my work with several boutique consultants, all with very distinctive services.

Each boutique had established a positive reputation for their specialist services. But over time, some of some of these services had 'morphed' into game changers. And with that came both external and internal 'confusion' as to what the boutique's purpose really was. Plus there was the hard reality of the greater business value of game changing services not being realised through higher fees, which could be easily justified.

The overall approach for all of my work is designed to deal with these issues, and that approach been deployed 50+ times. Not all specialist boutiques aspire to become game changers, either in full or in part, but I make them aware of what is required.

RECOVERY

Rescuing the enterprise

Boutique consultants

This story is a consolidation of my work with several boutique consultants, who have asked me not to openly disclose their services.

To halt their current and/or projected loss-making situation, we set out to answer the four big questions:

1. Shall we close?
2. Do we create a new and improved enterprise?
3. What about collaborative and co-operative relationship/s with other boutiques?
4. Do we sell?

Three of the four answers are rescue-focused, and central to those is the identification, development and implementation of 'fast fixes' to soundly support them ... fixes in key areas that can be quickly implemented. And I already have proven solutions / remedies designed to improve top and bottom-line results in these key areas: pipeline management, project and financial control, business development, and, the employment model.

None of my clients had to sell ... all survived as going concerns and in better shape. All implemented my solutions / remedies to improve both top and bottom line, and the 'obvious' remedy of reducing costs only played a minor part within each firm.

ADVISORY

Advising senior management

**Engineering,
architecture and
environmental
consulting firm**

A board advisory role to a 7,000-person firm operating globally, for two years.

The requirements of this role drew upon my professional services business experience (at the time) of 11 years, and my IT consulting experience of over 31 years.

**CEO and Senior
Executive leadership
organisations**

I run a workshop – *How to optimise the value to be gained from an external consultant* – which answers three key questions – Why do you need a consultant? How do you select one? How do you manage one?

PRO BONO
'Putting back'

NSW Enterprise Workshop

www.enterpriseworkshop.com.au

Presenter (services strategy), Review panellist, Trial judge, Mentor ... from August 2007 to February 2017, when this pro bono initiative closed

I volunteered ... I like helping others by sharing my skills, knowledge and experience

Women in Film and Television NSW

www.wiftnsw.org.au

Business plan judge, Business pitch judge, Presenter (business plans)

I was approached ... I am amazed at the 'parallels' with consultants

Small Business Mentoring Service NSW

www.nsw.sbms.org.au

Mentor

I applied ... SBMS organises mentoring, and I have brilliant talented clients

CSIRO ON Prime

<https://oninnovation.com.au/en/Programs/ON-Prime>

ON Innovation Mentor on consecutive programs - #4 (1 team, Canberra), #5 (1, Sydney), #6 (1, Sydney), #7 (2, Sydney & Wollongong), #8 (virtual, National), #9 (virtual, National)

I was 'dobbled in' to the CSIRO by a Federal government contact in Canberra



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