

WEDNESDAY MARCH 1 2006

## BUSINESS LIFE ENTERPRISE

### WOMEN IN BUSINESS

# 'It wasn't going to fit any more'

Liann Eden and Dena McCallum started their own consultancy after high-flying careers

**L**iann Eden and Dena McCallum were both pregnant when they launched their London-based consulting business in 2000. It is not how most women expect to start a job with a new company. But their baby boom and the birth of Eden McCallum were intimately linked.

At 36, they had both enjoyed high-flying careers at McKinsey and in big business but had decided that the pace and the travel were incompatible with having young children. "It's a personal thing," says Canadian-born Ms McCallum, who had been responsible for the Asia Pacific region for Condé Nast, publisher of Vogue, GQ and The New Yorker. "I want to be able to see my children every day, morning and night. I don't think you can be successful in a big global firm without travelling."

Ms Eden, an American who worked in marketing at Unilever and Siemens before joining McKinsey, says the environment was "incredibly" fast-paced and demanding. "It takes your all. After maternity leave for my first child, I decided it wasn't going to fit any more."

The long-time friends, both married to Britons, hit on the idea of creating a pool of experienced, independent consultants who could be tailored to projects with companies that did not want "the big guns" from Bain, Boston Consulting Group or McKinsey or could not justify the expense.

The "small idea" took off. From its beginnings in a room at the top of Ms McCallum's house, the business has grown to reach a turnover of £8.75m last year. It has delivered 300 projects and won testimonials from the likes of Sir Richard Branson and Andrew Higginson, Tesco's finance and strategy director.

Eden McCallum's use of about 200 freelance consultants keeps overheads low, allowing it to charge about half what the top strategy firms ask and to dedicate senior people to clients for longer, they say. More than



Dena McCallum (left) and Liann Eden

Daniel Lynch

two-thirds of clients have asked them back.

They decided not to seek external funding, in order to retain control. "Otherwise, a third to half of your time is spent managing external shareholders rather than growing the business," says Ms Eden. Being in professional services meant they did not need start-up capital beyond their own savings.

They have taken a deliberately cautious approach to expenditure. They did not take a salary for three years; nor did they run an expense account. Instead of taking clients out to lunch, they met them in their offices. "Our growth was all funded from cash flow as business came in," Ms Eden says.

Their biggest early challenge was attracting the calibre of staff they wanted – the people who manage the relationships with the consultants and clients. "You're asking people who are successful in the corporate model to take that leap," says Ms Eden.

Flexible working has been an important part of the solution. To make this possible, they split the responsibilities traditionally borne by senior consultants, so that the in-house team manages client relationships while the consultants deliver the projects.

Small businesses often complain about the cost and burden of managing parental leave and flexible working. Eden McCallum, with a staff that has expanded from five to 24, has found the opposite to be true.

"There are lots of roles that you don't need a full-time person for," says Ms McCallum. "This business has produced 10 and a half babies. Our revenues have grown by over 80 per cent every year, yet we managed to cope." Two-thirds of the staff work flexible hours.

David Hoare, a former partner with Bain who sits on the advisory board, says this flexibility does not mean a casual approach. "They have very high standards," he says. "They have

got to be tougher on themselves on time management – they don't have time to mess around."

One thing they underestimated was how much time it would take to manage the business. "We assumed that, as we grew, the time spent running the company would reduce and we'd spend more time with clients," says Ms Eden. "It's the reverse. As the company gets bigger, we need to provide more leadership."

Their partnership is important. The two women, each of whom owns half the business, met while doing MBAs at Insead in the early 1990s and share values. "I don't think either of us would have started it or would have made it as successful or enjoyable if we hadn't been in partnership," Ms Eden says.

They also benefit from a creative tension. "I'm the realist and Dena's the optimist," she says. Ms McCallum breaks in: "I'm always pushing for more and Liann's always pushing us back to reality."

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