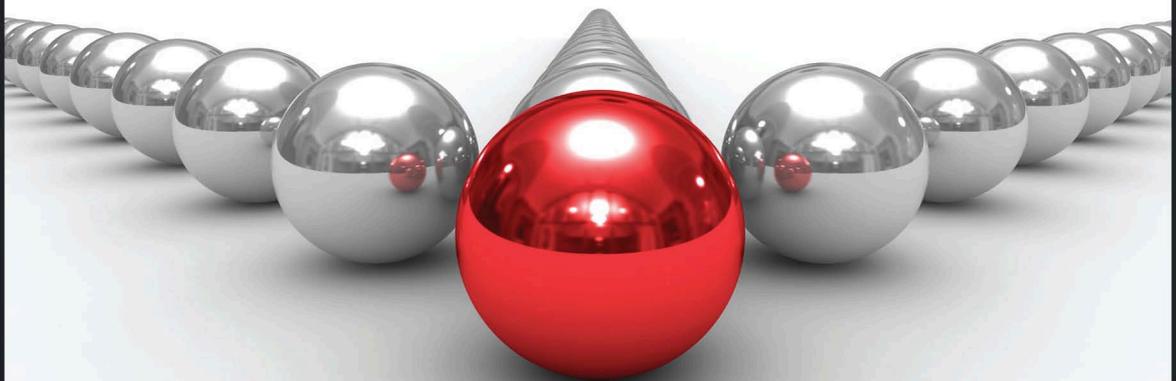


# REINVENTING PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

**BUILDING** *Your* **BUSINESS**  
*in the* **DIGITAL MARKETPLACE**



**ARI KAPLAN**

has also heightened their expectations. Clients find answers to the simple questions before reaching out to an accountant, doctor, or lawyer with the serious issues they ultimately face. Those professionals who are answering the questions are also benefiting, regardless of whether the questioner ever retains them. They are using the Web to optimize their visibility. It is a modern version of a free consultation (within the confines of all of the ethical rules associated with such communication, of course).

Similar to the hair salon example, professionals can add a button to their sites that allows a visitor to instantly chat with him or her (or a virtual staff member). Consider the most popular questions that people will ask an accountant: How do I file for an extension? Is there a cap on the mortgage interest deduction? How much of my home office can I deduct? “You are making it easier for a potential customer to become a current customer,” Qureshi says. “The scale should be increasing if the amount of leads are increasing,” he advises. You must deliver the service, but you can leverage a variety of the tools to generate the leads and connect with potential clients. He suggests that reminder programs, chat systems, and surveys help generate opportunities much more quickly.

“Competition is so high now,” says Qureshi. One does not need a premium expert for basic matters. “We beat companies that are much larger than us and lose to four guys in a basement in India,” he adds. Often an established expert can overcome the challenge of a few kids in a garage. Today, however, it is hard to make that distinction and a sensitive economy encourages people to take calculated risks with commodity-type projects that require little sophistication. “If they can get the job done, you will have to adapt,” says Qureshi.

Liann Eden and Dena McCallum adapted. They were in some ways the proverbial kids in the garage competing against the major forces in an industry that was always fairly insulated from competition other than its peers. The founders of independent consulting powerhouse Eden McCallum started the company near the end of the Internet boom in 2000. The London-based firm did not even have a web site for about a year.

Like Harris in the legal field and Ferguson in accounting, Eden and McCallum, both former McKinsey & Co. consultants, believed that clients were interested in retaining top-quality consulting resources in a different way than they could access it from the

top-tier consultancies. In addition, as with their peers in the United States, the rise of the Internet changed the way professionals in the United Kingdom thought about the balance in their lives. “People were management consultants because they loved the work and did not want to be part of big corporate organizations,” says McCallum. “They wanted to be independent and be part of something that was innovative rather than blue chip,” she adds.

They studied the marketplace and realized that the number of alumni from large consulting firms across the globe began to outpace the current number of employees at those firms. This shifted the supply of talent. Technology then allowed those talented individuals to work remotely and access information that was once too expensive for freelancers to access. The dot com boom and bust changed the way professionals thought about their careers. “People who had blue chip educations and experience defined success differently,” notes McCallum. They began to characterize success as broader than financial rewards and sought freedom over wealth.

Since they were not initially expecting to compete for the sophisticated work for which a global corporation might seek the assistance of a traditional consulting firm, Eden and McCallum networked with their former colleagues and other contacts. Their goal was to secure consulting projects and place highly experienced and well-educated professionals in those organizations.

People were management consultants because they loved the work and did not want to be part of big corporate organizations. We are part of disaggregating the full bells and whistles.

*Liann Eden and Dena McCallum, co-founders, London-based Eden McCallum*

One of their first clients was referred to them by a colleague at a large firm that helped to create the company’s global strategy. When the company, an Internet service provider targeting small businesses, needed a UK approach and a web site to link all of its offerings throughout Europe, it determined that a smaller organization like Eden McCallum would be better suited to provide support. “As we have evolved over the years, we are now doing the global

corporate strategies ourselves, but back then there was a view that we were synergistically a very good option for follow-on work,” says McCallum.

The firm and its flexible model have proven to be very resilient over the past 10 years. “During the last two recessions the firm performed well. Many companies let their internal strategy and group corporate resources go during the downturns, but they still had important issues to resolve and turned to us for support,” reports McCallum.

Leveraging the talents of Eden McCallum allows an organization to perform the project quasi-internally since the consultant is often resident on site, but the outside expert offers more objective answers. “Clients that want to be involved in crafting solutions and developing their strategies want to work with Eden McCallum,” says Eden. The company has taken two important steps to ensure success.

First, it has generally identified the population of people to whom its services are most valuable and in what situation. While it might compete for large-scale global consulting work, it is more frequently considered the alternative to the mainstream consulting organizations. It is perceived to be more nimble and cost-effective, yet equally as talented because its employees are alumni of those larger organizations.

Second, the company has cultivated a vast network of referral sources within its client and consultant pool. Most of its new consultants and clients come via referral. “We are usually quite good at maintaining contact with people and following them through their careers,” says Eden. “It is an old-fashioned relationship business, but it is fundamentally about genuine interest in others, rather than a marketing tool or system,” adds McCallum.

There has to be a conviction to start, Eden points out. She was four months pregnant when she and McCallum (who was one month pregnant) started the company. “There is no ideal time, but in retrospect it was great to start in a downturn because clients were thinking creatively about how to bring in external support and the traditional firms were not recruiting as much,” she advises. “If you think about things too much, you will never do it.”

Traditionally, large consulting organizations attracted large clients because they appeared to have a tremendous infrastructure

with a proprietary team of experts and unparalleled research capabilities. Today, there are vast networks of independent forensic accounting experts, medical professionals, legal authorities, and, of course, talented consultants. Even LinkedIn and alumni networks allow one to access a host of web-enabled information. Access to that information was once a unique feature of large consulting firms, notes McCallum. “We are part of disaggregating the full bells and whistles business model,” adds Eden.

There are also freely available answers to millions of common research questions available online that a fairly basic user can find in minutes. Market research and competitive intelligence could be free, but is certainly available for a fraction of the cost that it was when Eden and McCallum founded the company.

Travel and document production are similarly commoditized functions. There is no longer a need for internal travel agents or an entire document management center. Professionals can arrange worldwide travel on a variety of simple web sites and technology has made paper copies almost unnecessary. “When the tricks of the trade became accessible to everyone, it became about the consultant purely as an intellectual body,” says Eden. “The fact that you can work remotely and share documents releases the industry’s view that you need to be based at a desk in an office every day,” she adds.

That realization made a freelancing career acceptable to a mainstream workforce of highly educated and experienced professionals. “Early on there was a sense that only people who weren’t very good consultants would leave the traditional firms” says McCallum. “There has been a big shift and it is not a dubious career choice anymore.”

As individuals become chameleons to changing industries, they are fueling improvements centered on client concerns and streamlined operations. Professionals have an opportunity to seize this moment to reshape their practices to grow more steadily and efficiently.