

Interview of the month:

Interim Management: „Account without unknowns“

Sanet-MD Dr. Gunter Denk interviews MAX A. BRÄNDLI about the “Pro and Cons” of his profession, and the question why this profession has not yet conquered Asia despite its implicit dynamic.

What is Interim Management?

Interim Management is a temporary service on the level of Management, which covers limited tasks in line- and project management.

What kind of companies are for what reasons interested to employ Interim Managers?

The answer to the first part of the question is simple: In principle all companies. The second part of the questions covers many reasons. A company needs to temporarily fill in a management position due to a sudden loss of a manager or due to lack of finding the right person internally. In this case Interim Managers can fill the gap in all management positions for a defined period. This is for instance the case when a specialist for a project is needed or when a temporary management position has to be filled in a part of the world for which a company finds nobody internally with the required cultural and professional knowledge.

The Interim Manager agencies advertise that they have the right manager for each job, this based on a large pool of managers. Does this not raise the suspicion that such agencies serve as employment agencies for jobless managers?

Absolutely not! The major part of such pool members are self-employed, this after they have accumulated many years of management experience as employees in companies. They are typically between 45 and 65 years old and have decided to use their knowledge as independent professionals. An Interim Manager works in average 60% in a year. Therefore, there remains a lot of scope for development.

How much costs an Interim Manager in relation to an employed manager?

The total costs are about the same as for normally employed managers. Our advantage: The costs are predictable. Nowhere on this level of fixed employment are

the costs comparatively transparent. Normally, the fees for an Interim Manager are based per day of work. There are no further costs such as for days not worked due to vacation, illness, accident etc., thus an „**Account without unknowns**“.

For what timeframe are you normally employed?

The contracts run rarely less than three months and rarely more than two years. The average lies between six and twelve months.

Based on your own experience, are Interim Managers sometimes offered a permanent contract once the interim period is completed?

In fact this is the norm. We are most of the time approached and offered a permanent position, either in the position we occupied as Interim Manager or for another management position. However, I always did decline such offers

Why?

It is very important for a successful Interim Manager to be independent. After all it is for this reason I chose this interesting professional activity.

I have the impression that an Interim Manager must be very mobile?

You are absolute right. Somebody who wants to be Interim Manager must be 100% flexible and mobile as it concerns timing, duration and place.

You conducted a market research on the subject of “Interim Management in Asia”. Why is it that Interim Managers in Asia are not particularly popular yet at present?

This is a difficult question. Normally a trend needs at least ten to twenty years to really start to penetrate a market. Asia is still many steps lagging behind Europe, where Interim Management has become an accepted profession for a multitude of companies and government agencies in recent years. However, I am strongly convinced that Asia will catch up soon.

On the other hand it is weird that European companies rarely use Interim Managers for their Asian subsidiaries. In the last few years I experienced only few searches for East Asia and the Middle East. In my mind the European companies should be very interested to use experienced Interim Managers with good local cultural knowledge to set up companies in this part of the world.

What else did you find out in your market study?

The study covered only Thailand. Thailand is really not attractive for Interim Management. Too many restrictions and permanent problems with work permits. In addition, the business levels are here rigorously hierarchical structured. Every one

that comes in from outside is initially regarded as an intruder, especially if you are a foreigner. Based on my experience the opportunities are much better in Singapore and Hong Kong.

If you would be in the Management Board of a company, why would you hire an Interim Manager?

An Interim Manager has a clear and undisguised view of the matters which happen in a company. There is no time to cultivate friendship and rivalry. In addition, I as an Interim Manager can openly express my opinions, can easier enforce certain decisions and in general I do not need to take consideration of negative consequences. This because I do not need to be afraid that such decisions may backfire on me. Most of the time this independence is a valuable advantage for the company especially when such decisions involve personnel matters.

In short, I experienced that in difficult tasks such as restructuring an Interim Manager has more liberty of action than an employed Manager.

Exists there the typical Interim Manager in contrast to the typical Line Manager?

Absolutely! The Interim Manager loves his freedom, his independence and this in the intellectual and material sense. He has a less pronounced need for security. He continually searches for new challenges, for things, which enlarge his horizon. I dare to argue that the Interim Manager has a more profound background knowledge than a Line Manager.

What are the downsides of the job?

Naturally the absence of security, the price we have to pay for the independence. Furthermore, an Interim Manager is always on the search for a new assignment. He must at the same time acquire and execute. During an assignment, he is obliged to refuse job offers and when an assignment is terminated new offers may take some time to come. This can be very uncomfortable at times.

“In principle there are more common grounds than differences even in much different companies.” Would you subscribe this remark?

Actually no. In retrospective I can say that each assignment was totally different. As some examples I have worked for banks, telecommunication companies, in the electronic industry, in the construction sector and for a data cable manufacturer. I was active in Europe, the Middle East, Asia/Pacific and China. Believe me when I tell you that there were no similarities between the different assignments.

What tipped the scales to alter the course in your professional career on order to become Interim Manager?

After 30 years of classic management I could not support anymore the political interferences. All the back and forward that normally happens between the staff on the management level. I realized that I could not find myself anymore in such an environment. Then, late in my career the opportunity as Interim Manager opened up for me.

As Interim Manager can someone not just say: In a few months I am away, so what....?

For god's sake! First: After all there is the professional ethic. This means that regardless how long the assignment lasts: The job will have to be completed and this in a professional way. It is precisely one of the advantages of Interim Management that we do not just provide theoretical solution, but that our work consists in finalizing a given task. Second: The persons on the management level know the black sheep. Once you mess things up, this will be noted by them and then you are not chosen anymore. It is such simple.

Finally, a good Interim Manager is unbiased, result driven and hands-on.

Max A. Brändli, graduate in business management started his professional career with Arthur Andersen in Switzerland and Kraft Foods in the United States. Between 1984 and 1994 he acted as Finance- and Administration Manager Europe for a midsize American company. His last employment as line manager was with Givaudan-Roure in Switzerland, where he was Finance Director Switzerland and member of the management board.. Since 2000 he acts as Interim Manager for many multinational companies in the Middle East, Asia/Pacific and China. In 1996 he completed an Executive MBA at GSBA, Zürich, Switzerland.