

# Unilever Ventures

**Recent changes in the employment market mean that senior executive talent can be introduced into projects on a just-in-time basis. Two recent projects at Unilever illustrate how deploying interim managers can vastly improve delivery performance in new ventures.**

The need to kick-start projects and to accelerate the delivery of performance has never been more pressing. Introducing progressive 'rapid venturing' techniques can mean that significant gains are realised, in terms of optimising returns on investment. Identifying the right senior executive expertise can move a venture's position significantly in a short space of time.

Interim management can be an effective contributor to performance and a means to quickly achieving a business's goals. Companies are turning to this form of senior executive employment as part of the human resources mix to meet the challenges of today's business environment. John Coombs, managing director of Unilever Ventures, believes interim management is "an effective way to address the short-term 'work load peaks', experienced in any rapidly growing new ventures within a corporate venturing unit".

This form of deployment offers a 2–12 month project which can be quick to set up, typically within 14 days. There are no 'headhunt' costs as the interim provider's fee comes from a percentage of the daily fee rate and a nominal set-up fee. Projects can also be terminated at short notice, proving this to be a very flexible, task-focused form of 'change and development' activity.

## The need for speed

During 2003 Unilever Ventures moved two projects forward using interim managers. The first project involved an interim purchasing manager for Rocket Lifestyle Ltd, the second entailed a retail roll-out manager for Persil Services Ltd.

"The chance to kick-start the store development management role with a burst of higher-level resource was right for the business," believes Tim Slade, operations director at Persil Services.

Tim Beard, supply chain director at Rocket Lifestyle, described the basis of his project: "To achieve the desired cost reduction a full review of the current buying operation is needed which should result in a rationalisation of the supplier base and deliver very significant cost savings. Clearly the impact on product quality, production flexibility and working capital will need to be taken into account."

## Rapid venturing

Time scales for placement can be extremely short. An integrated search effort, including database searches and screening candidates against written briefs developed specifically for each project, produced a tight shortlist of quality candidates. For the Persil Services project it took 17 working days from the first interview to agreeing a start date and for the Rocket project it took only 10 working days from brief to the start date of the project. Mr Slade of Persil Services stresses the importance of focusing on a carefully selected short list.

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The actual completion of each project was managed tightly under differing circumstances. This is a crucial part of the interim manager's engagement and requires careful planning. According to Mr Beard "the project effectively became self-managing which enabled me to focus on other areas of the business requiring more immediate attention—which was one of the main purposes of hiring an interim manager".

"The interim manager selected for the store development role quickly demonstrated his abilities as a determined self-starter. His personal commitment and flexibility were excellent," says Mr Slade, who defines the output from the 16-week project as follows:

- more than 40 potential locations evaluated
- shop fit specification reviewed and agreed with contractor
- some 15 new stores opened to specification, on time
- new supply system launched
- new opening team manager successfully recruited and induction planned

- significant reduction in model scheme costs supported
- roll-out programme spreadsheet maintained.

Apart from delivering an intricate plan defined at the outset, various other benefits were highlighted by the managers responsible for each of the projects. "In addition to the tangible savings realised by Nigel Taylor, the interim manager for the purchasing role, there was additional value generated through having his experience available to the wider team and the renewed momentum that his presence gave to seeking out further cost savings," states Mr Beard. Mr Slade amplified this 'momentum' benefit.

## Conclusion

Far-sighted corporate venturing units are increasingly turning to new forms of performance-enhancing activity and the skilful deployment of interim managers is revealing some impressive results. Cost-cutting and additional senior resource to kick-start the retail roll-out programme to achieve ambitious

business objectives yielded success in both cases for Unilever Ventures. With the pressures on today's businesses, fine-tuning the human resources mix has never been more important and the timely use of experienced interim managers can prove their weight in gold. ■

## Author

**Dermot Hill** is a director of Intramezzo, a company positioned as a market maker, with extensive links in the interim sector. Its innovative approach and network of alliance partners, through which the company has access to over 10,000 senior interim managers and directors, has enabled Intramezzo to establish an impressive blue chip client list. Dermot has extensive experience in building new ventures, establishing a track record as an entrepreneur involved in turnarounds for performance delivery.

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