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A Management Consultant With A Conscience



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A Management Consultant With A Conscience

The words 'working for free' and 'management consultant' aren't often seen in the same sentence. But there is one woman determined to prove that it can be done, whilst giving something back to the community at the same time. Managing director of N2 (squared) Consulting, Nicola Davis is quietly working with the not-for-profit sector helping charities improve and extend their services. And vowing never to charge a client a penny until they can see the value of her work in the business, Nicola is successfully carving a niche for herself. Nicola explains how 'pro-bono' consulting works, the positive feedback she is getting from her clients and how it is possible to run a successful business whilst doing a good deed.

"In the first six months I had to really prove myself to the charities," ex Deloitte consultant Nicola tells. "I had to demonstrate that I had ideas and experience that could really help them become better at what they do. And telling people what is wrong with their business is a delicate area. Charities have stretched budgets and resources and do not want to be 'looked down' upon by the private sector. I had to prove I was genuine about their causes and that I could really help them reach more people, without patronizing them.

"Luckily I've got a history of working within the community, with schools and networks, and I'm genuinely passionate about giving something back. I was able to sensitively introduce some new ways of working that I thought would tackle some of their big issues, such as how to build corporate relationships that give them new resource and sponsorship, and how to build alliances and partnerships so they can win new business. I initially worked for free until they saw that I could really make a difference to their business' She smiles. "They have all become paying clients now so I'm doing something right!"

Nicola was with Deloitte for many years, and it was when she was doing some work with a local school that it hit her that the people who needed her help most couldn't access her in the suited and booted world of consulting. So she decided to start her own business that would teach vital business skills and models to communities that would bring benefits right to the people on the street.

Nicola found that offering 'pro bono' consulting to charities was a good way for them to try consulting for the first time, without wasting precious funds if it wasn't for them. Nicola says: "How pro bono works is: I start work with the client, we check they have a genuine need for what I can offer them, I introduce them to new business tools and techniques that I think will help them, with proof that they are guaranteed to recoup their investment. Only after this initial 'free' period where a client has agreed that they will recoup their outgoings will I do paid work.

"I think it's the socially responsible and honest way to do business," Nicola continues. "But I'm not shy to admit that yes, I am running a business and I want to earn money once I have proved myself to a client. Charities are used to having to buy the cheapest of

everything all the time, but I want them to see if they get real value out of something for the business its worth paying good money. And the way I do it is ethical, they try it and get a result first, and then we begin a working partnership.

"It would be easy now that N2 is up and running to think, 'OK now forget the freebies'. But that isn't what we are about. I make a point of having one pro-bono project on the go all the time. Then I'm confident that however big we grow, we are always true to our roots. To me, the mix of giving something back and using my intellect to help charities improve their business and bottom line feeds the soul."

Nicola is passionate about closing the gap in performance between third and private sector organisations but says that charities themselves must recognise their attitudes are partly to blame.

Nicola says: "A lot of charities are embarrassed about being too focussed on the bottom line and using business models to provide a better service. They think that is best left to the private sector. Rubbish! Charities would be able to help more people if they became more business like." However, she says realisation is finally dawning. "There is huge competition for funding and the public is much more aware, and demanding to see where their donations and funding is going. Charities know they can't coast anymore, and are having to change the way they operate."

The good news is that those who do adopt a more business savvy approach are usually delighted with the results.

"My clients like Help the Aged and Nottingham Community Network were delighted when I first started sharing ideas on how they could build alliances and consortiums to win bigger contracts, ways to create new revenue streams and how to partner private companies and volunteer groups," Nicola says. "It really opened their eyes to how efficient they could become and what they could achieve if they made some changes. It took them to a totally new place," She smiles. "That for me is the biggest buzz of all."

Nicola continues to look for more charities to help, and not content with being an MD and a mother, she is also on the West Yorkshire Committee for the Institute of Directors. Her next challenge is continuing to grow N2 (squared) Consulting and also tackling the SME private sector. "SME companies often house some of the smartest, most innovative brains in the business world," tells Nicola. "And I intend to help them adopt some new ideas and techniques so that they can become as efficient and profitable as the big boys."

For more information on N² (squared) Consulting's services and how to get more out of your external consultants, please visit: www.n2-consulting.com or call 0845 3311314 for a no-commitment consultation.



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