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Top Consultant's Mick James talks to Nicola Davis, managing director of N2 (squared) Consulting...

Starting and growing your own consultancy is one of the biggest steps you can take, and all too often it's one which is forced on consultants. Sometimes the motivation is different - to give something back, to make a different kind of a difference.

Nicola Davis is very much a career consultant, having plunged straight into a consulting career after leaving University.

"Management consultancy seemed sophisticated and interesting, I couldn't get my head round doing a nine-to-five job in the same place," she says.

She joined a small, entrepreneurial consultancy in Nottingham, after writing a "cheeky letter" in reply to an advertisement for a more experienced consultant. She stayed five years before moving to a larger consultancy to broaden her experience, finally joining Deloitte to experience delivery and implementation on very largest projects. There she met her husband - also a consultant, also named Nick - and by 2005 she was beginning to question her work/life balance.

"I started to get tired with the travel, and because my husband was also a consultant we could both be sent anywhere," she says. "I wanted to be able to choose the work I did, and I didn't want it to always be about commercial decisions."

With her husband she came up with the plan for N2 (squared) Consulting, focusing mainly on SMEs but also working with the charity sector.

"We wanted to be able to make an impact and really take our clients somewhere, so SMEs really play to our strengths," she says. "Working in large organisations, sometimes the front line is too far away. We like the creativity of working with entrepreneurs, businesses that take risks every day."

Charities seemed a natural complement to this work.

"The idea to target the charity sector came out of that," she says. "We are not charity specialists but approach them as people who have been firmly embedded in the business world. That sector should be even more motivated than the commercial sector to make a profit - the more profit they make the more people they help."

The initial plan was that Davis would focus on business development and relationship building, while her husband would be the "delivery arm".

"We wanted to build a business, not just to be a couple of contractors," she says. N2 (squared) Consulting's preferred route to market is through intensive networking, both on a person-to-

person basis and through organisations, such as the IoD (Institute of Directors), where Nicola is a great believer of "not just being attendees but getting stuck" in and get involved at the committee level.

Another route is to offer clients a certain amount of discounted or free introductory work upfront.

"We do a small amount of pro bono work for charities, one client at a time, to show our commitment to the sector and what they will get for their investment."

Davis will also run a half-day workshop for a commercial client.

"I'm happy to spend the time with them and see what comes out of it," she says. "Usually what will come out of it is a detailed set of client requirements - you've almost workshopped the problem."

This is intensive work, but ensures that there is a genuine empathy and cultural fit with clients, which in turn is a great predictor of success for the project.

Because of the relationship-based nature of the business, Davis has found it hard to step back from delivery work, and for this reason the firm has decided to take on another consultant. Unusually for a small consultancy, they've decided that the initial growth plan is to hire graduates.

"Because all the work with clients is so personal they wouldn't be happy just to be handed to someone else," says Davis. "The new person will work on every project and do a lot of the legwork - there'll be a lot of blending. The advantage for clients is that their budgets will now go a lot further, they can have us for longer."

Eventually the plan is to start more graduates and as the business expands and they gain experience, to also second them into industry.

"It's a long haul, but they will go through a rigorous development programme, which will cost us a lot of money," says Davis.

It's very early to say what shape the business will take, but Davis can look ahead to a firm that might consist of 25 people, with a ratio of two consultants to one director.

"For me the perfect size of a consultancy is about 25, more than that and you start getting into procedures and bureaucracy, and you need a different type of person to run it," she says. "Getting there might take the majority of a career, and after that we hope to see a group of directors coming up behind us."

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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