

THE NEXT STEP

HOW AMBITIOUS BUSINESSES CAN
ACHIEVE THEIR POTENTIAL



“MEETING TARGETS
IS NOT ENOUGH”

Interview with Lisa Dargan
URM Consulting Services

COMMISSIONED BY



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A report commissioned by SAS Specialist Accounting Solutions considers the biggest challenge for any independently-owned company which has the potential to go further.

The ability of the owners to scale the business.

In their own words, directors talk about the issues they are having to address and how they want to achieve their goals.

The interviews will be brought together as a report to be published by DECISION magazine and then as a digital book.



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“Rather than simply setting a target and then hitting it come what may, building a business is best achieved by consistently surpassing customer expectations - because sustainable growth doesn’t come from putting your core principles at risk.” Not that Lisa Dargan, a director of URM Consulting Services is suggesting that an ambitious company should eschew something to aim at. She says it’s about context.

“To deliver and perpetuate our three drivers of quality, reputation, and service excellence, we need to have consultants who are driven by wanting to help the client achieve their goals and who are passionate about what they do to make that happen,” she maintains. “Getting the balance right is both the ethos of our company and what we have to deliver. It’s about getting everything synchronised - the client’s needs and aspirations and meeting the required international standards and regulations.”

Originally the risk management, information security, and business continuity company was the division of an IT services group before being spun off as a separate legal entity. But it continued to share back office functions until the three URM directors were able to assume full ownership in 2018.

Lisa Dargan



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The majority of URM's fifteen or so auditors, consultants, and trainers each have some ten years of experience. "Previously, most had cut their teeth as in-house specialists at large organisations where they enjoyed the work but not the politics, and were looking to broaden their skills and experience," says Lisa.

"Something I've wanted to do for some time is to balance the more experienced team members with younger people who have the innate qualities we require and would bring fresh ideas to the table. The challenge for us is to provide them with appropriate work experience and the mentoring support they wouldn't get if they joined one of the big four global accountancy and consultancy firms. The flipside is that they need to have a real desire to really be involved and go the extra mile. We have to be prepared to give them more of our time, but because our senior people have a passion for what they do, they want to take on a mentoring role."



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That isn't the only way that a culture of willingness manifests itself to the benefit of company and client. "We needed to work with a client's office in New Zealand," Lisa explains, "and that meant for one day a week we had to change our working hours to accommodate the time difference. Our people were prepared to do that without a second thought, which comes from understanding the needs of both the company and the client."

The final split from the group came about as a consequence of a number of issues which coincided at the same time and which crystallised thoughts and intentions. Lisa recalls one in particular: "It is fair to say that we benefited from a cost perspective by utilising their back office functions, but there was a growing frustration over the lack of flexibility and control. There was one particular incident when one of our team, who had done so much more than we could have expected of them, submitted their expenses which needed to be paid straightaway because the amount was more than it was reasonable for them to pay out of their own pocket in advance. The system wouldn't allow it. So a valued



consultant and team member had been prepared to put themselves out of pocket to get the job done, and we couldn't reciprocate that flexibility. I realised then that if we were to follow our ethos and values, we had to control the whole operation, including back office functions.

“What has changed since the buyout from my own perspective? By default I feel more responsible on a personal level for the team, and I spend more time drilling into the numbers because I need to know all the detail.”

And Lisa comes back to the subject of how best to continue to move in the right direction. “I hear stories about larger competitors using contractors to undertake projects, but this just doesn't work for us. How can outside consultants be expected to demonstrate a firm's ethos when this is just another assignment for a few months? Becoming more profitable and increasing the client base is all well and good, but it has to be sustainable,” she points out.

“Of course it's happy days when sales are growing, but will your people still want to be with you if they are suddenly having to work weekends

and there's little or no room for flexibility? We don't incentivise the team based on time utilisation, because working flat out, 100% of the time over an extended period is simply unsustainable - And how could we then respond to immediate or urgent requests from existing clients? In the long-run, people are more productive if they have a balanced lifestyle and aren't in danger of burning out.

"So if there's a new idea about doing something, a great opportunity for diversification, or a requirement which is outside the norm, first we consult with the team to get their thoughts, because consultancy really is a people business and they have to be comfortable with what they are doing.

"We had an enquiry a number of years ago to deliver our core services in a country where there were Foreign Office travel cautions in place. When we consulted with the team, we did have someone who jumped at the chance, but if nobody had wanted to take up the opportunity, we would have simply turned it down.

"If you employ positive people who have experience and passion, then you really should listen to them. Every organisation does some things better than others and it's important you have an environment where everyone feels comfortable to contribute their ideas, not just provide feedback when you ask them to. You must be genuinely prepared to listen and act on what they are telling you."

Looking back, did Lisa envisage being a co-owner of a company when she finished her formal education? "No," she says candidly, "but my sixteen-year-old daughter said to me the other night that she didn't know what she was going to do as a career, but she wanted to run her own business."



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In the meantime, Lisa has two pieces of advice for anyone who has taken that step or is about to. “I’ve got a sales background so I know the importance of never giving up, and the need for persistence,” she says. “You’ve made twenty-five calls and haven’t got anywhere, so it’s about being able to make that twenty-sixth call as though it was your first.

“And when you make a wrong decision, don’t be afraid to admit it both to yourself and the team.”

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About Specialist Accounting Solutions

‘We strive to give our clients the most reliable, accurate and insightful financial information’, says founder Sean Hackemann. ‘Our passion is to help businesses fully understand the numbers which in turn helps them create, grow and sustain great businesses’.

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