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Harnessing knowledge

Consulting company Innovar sets itself apart by tapping the extensive experience of its professionals

By Leslie Williams Johnson

CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Brad Shepard's confidence in the professionals that help keep **Innovar Partners LLC** growing strong can be summed up in one expression: Experience is the best teacher.

Innovar consultants are former "buyers, chief financial officers, vice presidents of operations, chief information officers, finance directors," said Shepard, co-founding partner of the operational improvement consulting company.

"It's really important that our people have lived in the shoes of the people we consult with," he said. "If you walk into a situation and you've seen it 10 times, you'll be able to get to a solution a lot quicker. We don't recommend things we wouldn't have done ourselves."

Innovar Partners helps its clients identify areas they can improve to strengthen their bottom line.

Some of the ways professional services firms might waste money are in big fancy offices, administrative overhead and training inexperienced

staff, Shepard explained, adding that, while training is important, experienced professionals who are hired come with most of the necessary skills in the first place.

Even in a slow economy, Innovar has managed to grow its revenue 123 percent from 2007 to 2009 and stay agile in an industry of bigger players, such as outsourcing and management consulting firm **Accenture Ltd.**

One of the reasons for its solid position — besides the seasoned staff — is its size: The boutique firm has 50 employees.

"We don't have this giant machine to feed," Shepard said. "It's amazing how much overhead is in any large company, whether it's consulting or anything else."

For confidentiality and competition reasons, Innovar does not name current clients.

Dobson Communications Corp. used Innovar's services a few years ago, before AT&T Inc. acquired it.

Brian Boone, who was then chief service officer at Dobson, said the cost of service per customer went down nearly 40 percent, thanks in large part

to Innovar's guidance. The company came up with a more efficient use of Dobson's call center staff through methods such as scheduling changes and training.

Boone wasn't interested in hiring consultants with only college classroom-level knowledge about operation improvement, so Innovar was appealing.

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JOANN VITELLI

Tough lessons: Brad Shepard, co-founder of Innovar Partners LLC, said his experience starting up a now-defunct software and analytics firm taught him that getting to market quickly and being surrounded by people who complement him were crucial to success.

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Harnessing knowledge

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Shepard said companies can shell out as much as \$200 to \$250 an hour for an analyst or staff consultant with very limited business world experience; but Innovar's rate is typically 30 percent to 35 percent less for consultants who have been in the trenches for years, he said.

Boone said Dobson's success in cost reductions "goes back to [Innovar's] experience," he said.

Shepard, whose career background includes leadership roles at Ernst & Young LLP, Arthur Andersen LLP and Capgemini Outsourcing, learned a thing or two about entrepreneurial business do's and don'ts when he ran the now-defunct Eyeformatics. A software and analytics company, Eyeformatics lasted a year, from fall 2004 until fall 2005, but still proved a good business exercise.

From it, Shepard explained, he realized the importance of being a subject matter expert, or having them on hand, to be involved on the front end; getting to market quickly; and having a defined runway — the capital to get the company up, running and into the targeted market.

Summing up the Eyeformatics experience, he said, "I think the lesson learned was you've got to find people who complement you pretty quickly. Finding people that complement you that you trust ... it's difficult," he said.

That's not a problem with Innovar, which was founded in 2002 by Shawn Coffman. Shepard started Adageo Group in 2006, and the two companies merged in 2008.

"[Coffman] perfectly complements my strengths/weaknesses to build the firm around," Shepard said via e-mail. "Now I am a small cog in a large wheel that operates

every day. I never take my eye off of the two most important factors in professional services — finding great clients and hiring great people."

Jonathon Davis, president of **Experient Group**, a management and technology consulting firm, knows Shepard, and though operational improvement isn't Experient's exact niche, the company has been involved in that type of work to some degree with its clients over the years.

Davis is aware of how in demand such services are now.

"There is so much pressure for companies to perform," he said. "Today, I would say operation improvement is a staple of business activities or business focus for all of our companies."

Innovar's growth strategy includes continuing to network heavily and scouting for the right talent.

Shepard added that tactically, there will be new business development professionals and an increased focus on new markets.

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