

325 CONSULTING

INTERVIEW SERIES

WITH

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INTERVIEWED BY DOMINIC MOORE

BIOGRAPHY

I am the Skunkworks Manager at 7-Eleven Australia, the largest private retailer in Australia. I always get raised eyebrows or a laugh when I tell someone my title – Skunkworks are essentially a small, loosely structured team with diverse skillsets, working autonomously on projects that challenge the status quo.

Prior to joining 7-Eleven, I worked at A.T. Kearney for almost 7 years. My interest areas were in customer experience – I was part of the team that pioneered Pivotal Customer Events, and in testing ideas in a live environment to learn if they would work, rather than merely PowerPointing recommendations. My other passion was mentoring and coaching. I was a lead trainer in the APAC region, teaching New Consultant Orientation skills amongst other courses.

I have a MBA (Honours) from London Business School, Bachelor of Science (Physiology and Mathematics) and Bachelor (Hons) of Engineering (Electrical & Computer Systems).

CAREER RELATED QUESTIONS

What is the best thing about your job?

My job is a great mix of thinking and doing. I identify the problems that are worthy of solving, then (try to) run the Skunkworks team like a lean start-up to test solutions to those problems. If we can prove the solution solves the problem, my team hands this over to a deployment team, so that we can focus on the next thing.

It's a fascinating role and industry to be in and stretches me in so many ways. Four things that come to mind:

- 7-Eleven is a growing business, but has looming major threats (as does the whole petro-convenience sector)
- My team's outputs are thrust in the limelight – we try to fail fast/ succeed quickly by putting our ideas in stores, which gives me a great sense of purpose and reward
- I need to think about the customer and there's not one, but two very different customers – those that buy something from stores, and those that buy licenses to run stores (our franchisees)
- Unlike consulting, the people I manage have very different skillsets to my own (e.g. Data Scientist, Creative Technologist)

What is the most challenging project/problem you have worked on either as an external consultant or an internal strategist?

The biggest problem I face is best described by Clayton Christensen in Innovator's Dilemma. The customer-facing propositions that my team test may only address a small but potentially growing market and the margins on these may be lower than the business is used to. Having said that, we do have the freedom to test the idea, so the challenge is how I use the findings and insights from the trial to tell the bigger, long term potential.

What advice would you give someone transitioning from a consulting firm to a role in industry?

From my own experience I have two pieces of advice.

Firstly, get used to not being constantly evaluated and provided with developmental feedback. As a consultant, I was accustomed to knowing when I did the right thing and conversely, how to improve. There was a rigorous and structured path with clear expectations on what you needed to demonstrate for the next promotion, and mentors and training programs to help you get there. In industry, you're unlikely to have this, so if you're anything like me and enjoy a pat on the back now and then, or need clarity on how to get to the next step (or simply know what the next step is), you need to tone down these expectations and perhaps find external mentors.

Secondly, this may sound strange as consultants are notorious for being hardworking and motivated, but my advice is to stay motivated. Unlike in consulting where you may be dedicated to one project at a time and there's clear deadlines set by the client or Partner, in industry you may have multiple projects going on at a time, unclear priorities, and it's easier to negotiate longer deadlines if need be. And there may be no one giving you the clarity that you may be used to in consulting. This advice may only be relevant for those like me who left consulting at the Manager or below level – although I was managing a team with many tasks, I was still focused on that one client; at more senior consulting levels I imagine you'd be very used to having a million things going on at once!

Who has influenced your career the most and why?

Probably my husband. He gets to listen to all of my work stories, and because he knows me so well, if I do ask him for advice then the advice he gives is usually right for me. From a practical standpoint, support from my husband is what cemented my decision to do the MBA in London, which in turn exposed me to the most diverse set of classmates to learn from.

What is the favourite piece of advice you have received and from whom?

“Be more like ... “. This was the advice given to me by an informal mentor when I had just returned to A.T. Kearney after the MBA.

The person he wanted me to be more like was a consultant that I thought “how did they pass the interviews to get here?” Despite this person not having the skills that I was particularly strong in, they had other skills that I hadn’t even recognised as being important. The advice both put me in my place and gave me the clearest direction and example possible in how I needed to improve.

PERSONAL INSIGHTS

As a child what did you want to be when you were older

A martial arts superstar. I still have dreams that I’m flying through the forest Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon style.

What are your three favourite books and what are you currently reading?

I’ve read lots of great books and still have so many I want to read (and not enough time!). Three of my favourites so far are:

- Moonstone by Wilkie Collins
- Far from the Madding Crowd by Thomas Hardy
- Travels with my Aunt by Graham Greene (in fact I love all his stories)

I’m currently reading On the Road by Jack Kerouac. I usually have a business book on the go too – I’m waiting for What Customers Want by Anthony Ulrich to arrive.

Who is your personal or business hero/heroine and what quality do you most admire in them?

I highly admire risk takers. By this, I mean people who take personal risks to pursue something they think is worth doing, rather than employees who take the 'safe' option (such as taking a salary like myself). Of course, famous entrepreneurs spring to mind (such as Richard Branson or Elon Musk) but I don't actually know much about them apart from what I read in the media.

However, I do get to talk to lots of entrepreneurs in my job – the franchisees who are running their own businesses. Although there has been some recent negative publicity surrounding 7-Eleven franchisees, I have been consistently impressed by the franchisees I've met, who are brimming with ideas and insights and who have to be very entrepreneurial to successfully take on and run a 7-Eleven store.

Who would you like sitting next to you at a dinner party and why?

Donald Trump. It would certainly make for an interesting discussion and whilst he's sitting beside me at a dinner party, he can't cause too much trouble can he?

What is your favourite quote or motto?

The best time to plant an oak tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now.