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RIDING THE BOOMS AND BUSTS

Surprisingly, being an accountant can be an exciting, sometimes even bumpy ride. Star Business Solutions' CEO, Trish Hall, is still in the saddle though after 20 years – and even relishing what is currently a rugged ride for everyone.

By Heather Caulfield

Hall has long experience of riding the ups and downs of economic cycles over the past 20 years. The CEO of Star Business Solutions was a chartered accountant in the late 1980s and early 1990s and saw first-hand the impact of booms and busts.

Her first job was with Price Waterhouse, in Sydney. She worked in the small business division, carrying out accounting, tax and audit projects. While she enjoyed the variety that came with consulting and found she was naturally at ease dealing with clients, it wasn't until one of her clients began trialling a new accounting software package that Hall had her "Aha!" moment. She learnt the software quickly and was soon invited to join Price Waterhouse's accounting system implementation group.

That was the beginning of a 20-year involvement with business software consulting, and led to a career that has taken her around the globe. She's held a variety of consulting roles. This has included a five-year stint as general manager and chief operations officer for Star in the United States. She is currently CEO of Star Business Solutions, Australia. Her clients have ranged from publicly listed software companies to engineering enterprises to public sector agencies to not-for-profit organisations.

"One of the reasons I've been doing this work for so long is that I've been able to go from one business to another, learning about their operations and contributing to improving their businesses, and making them more efficient. You get to know all the different personalities and that keeps you fresh," she says.

"One of my clients, in the US, was a company that conducted analyses of hardware and software for criminal investigations. Another was a major provider of telecommunications services to Alaska. One of the most satisfying projects that I've ever worked on was for a division of Bridgestone. This was a large implementation of financials distribution and job-costing. It was very satisfying, as our efforts really did have a positive impact, benefitting a lot of areas in their business. And they were such a great bunch of people."

Hall's travels have even included a one-month project on the small Pacific island nation of Kiribati. Here she worked on the deployment of a new accounting system for the island's government.

"This was probably my most unusual client," she says with a smile. "I flew there on a very small plane that island hopped its way to this tiny place where there were only two hotels and lots of Australian and New Zealand expatriates. But the ocean was the most beautiful blue. It was a lovely place to be. It was quite an experience, and, I suppose, that's why so many expatriates never leave."

Taking Away The Pain

When asked what the characteristics of a good consultancy are, Hall states: "The people make the practice." And she describes the best consultants as those who are adaptable, knowledgeable and empathetic.

"They have the ability to change mindsets easily and to quickly pick up on client nuances. They think laterally and create strategies that will make a client's pain points go away."

Just having the right people, however, isn't a complete recipe for consultancy success, Hall says. It's the way consultants cooperate and work together that makes the difference.

"A good practice has a great team feeling. Younger consultants need to feel free to approach senior staff and ask questions." For example, Star resells Greentree's software. This is a fully integrated software system that's purpose-built for small- to medium-sized enterprises. It has 80-odd modules. "No single person can know all those modules in detail, so we share knowledge and run ideas past each other," says Hall.

The result: a more comprehensive and better thought-out solution for clients.

Hall lists two other top consultancy traits. "Great customer service and the product you're reselling has to be good. Both are critical. The better the product, the better the overall solution will be."

Downturn Blues Mean Singing a Better Song

Hall believes that even though Australia is unlikely to feel the full brunt of the current economic crisis compared with some countries, global events mean more emphasis is being placed on getting the combination of product and consultant just right.

"Product has grown in importance because clients are under cost pressure and they need to know that their solutions will lift business performance – not just at the end of the month, but on a day-to-day level."

"Some of our clients are saying that this is a great time to make changes," she adds. "They aren't as busy as they were 12 months ago, so they have the time to deploy new applications or add functionality. Others have reduced their staff numbers and are looking for ways to manage with fewer people."

Since Christmas, Hall has also noticed a small but significant increase in the number of medium- to large-sized companies reviewing the cost of upgrading and maintaining their existing systems, and considering a move to middle-tier applications like Greentree's.

Star opened a new office in Canberra in February. Hall says this was a bold step, but that fear of the unknown shouldn't inhibit companies from trying to do what they feel is right.



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Over the next 12 months, Hall's focus will be on building Star's presence in Canberra, as well as growing the business in Sydney and Melbourne. "Given our pipeline, growth will continue to happen. It may not happen as quickly as we once hoped, but it will happen," she says.

Hall is also keen to develop her company's expertise in new directions, particularly in the area of mobility. "Greentree is just on the verge of releasing mobility solutions that will, for example, allow sales people to use their PDAs to put in sales orders. They will also give warehousing and distribution organisations new abilities when it comes to picking, packing and monitoring stock levels." It's an area of increasing interest to many of Star's clients.

Whatever the next few years bring, one fact is certain, Hall is unlikely to stand still. While she no longer seeks the travel and work experiences of her early career, her love of challenge and client engagement will see her continue to expand Star Business Solutions in the years ahead. **Z**

Have USB, Will Travel

Hall's choice of favourite business tech device isn't a cute mobile or PDA, or even a stylish laptop – it's a USB modem; Huawei's E169 slimline USB modem to be precise. But she has good reasons for her choice.

"It might seem like a simple gadget, but I rely on my wireless broadband connection to keep in touch with what's going on. It means I can get onto the internet while on the run and access documents back at the office quickly, regardless of whether I'm sitting in the car or grabbing a coffee between meetings," says Hall.

"I've had PDAs in the past, and received emails on my phone, but this is by far the best way of using my time. Emails on a small screen just aren't efficient. What's more, when I am out at a client site, the client is paying me good money to work on their implementation. It's not fair to be distracted by looking at my PDA every five minutes to check what emails have come in. The majority of emails aren't urgent anyway."

Hall's device-of-choice plugs into any USB port on a laptop or desktop computer. It provides a roaming broadband-speed connection to the internet, via Optus' Australia-wide 3G network. It can also be used internationally, via Optus' partner roaming agreements with other countries.