# Interim management: the first 30 days

Lenzburg, 2014, Heinz Sommer[1]

Interim managers have just 30 days

Politicians have 100 days, employees 90 days, and interim managers 30 days to come to grips with a new role. Then comes the intercept point. They have to meet either the voting public's or a line manager's expectations and return added value to the system, at least from the client's perspective. In the case of interim managers, 30 days is the upper limit. At that point, depending on their mandate, they must be able to provide quantitative and qualitative evidence of their efforts. In other words, an interim manager is much more obviously and intensively required to comply with this 30-day deadline, given that expectations of their performance are significantly higher than those for a regular employee.
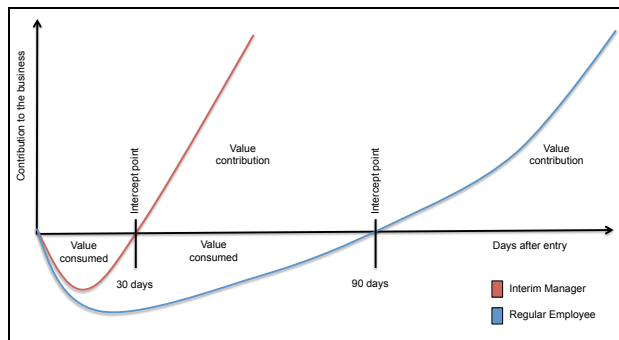
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The figure above is a simplified representation based on the "break-even point" approach by Michael Watkins[2]. It shows how the contribution by a new employee and by an interim manager evolves over time. The author's intention is not to call employee performance into question; rather this development is completely normal. Employers generally grant employees more time. They complete orientation programmes, have to acquire knowledge in their new area of responsibility, learn how to use tools and get to grips with internal hierarchies. But there is one very important factor that we have to understand – these employees do not want to make any mistakes. This invariably means that the employee is less dynamic, as they want to avoid treading on any toes or harming themselves. When starting work, they want to avoid "traps" – a first impression could potentially put their future career path in the company in jeopardy – at any cost. Of course there may be wide variations in the described behaviour, which is clearly related to the new employee's position and role. Personality (social skills and life experience) and professional experience can also have an impact, depending on the situation. An interim manager has a certain status in the company. Naturally, they have to comply with the company's basic rules (e.g. existing credo, confidentiality, code of conduct). They can nevertheless act freely and independently within the company, pursuing neither career objectives nor any political agenda. Their goal is to realise the mandate with the requisite consistency and authority. They are congruent in how they think, speak and act, and are thus authentic leaders in everything they say and do (see also the article "Interim management: authentic leadership").

Focus

Unlike employees, who usually learn all about their new role as part of an orientation programme, an interim manager often has nothing but a 2- to 3-page document (possibly a role or project description, or a general mandate for change) to help them fulfil their role. All interim managers urgently require a systematic approach to preparing the information, data and details needed for the mandate so that they do not exceed the 30-day time limit. This can only be achieved by focusing intently on key aspects of the mandate, avoiding various distractions at any cost. Yet this does not mean that interim managers should seal themselves off from their environment. On the contrary, they must be highly attentive and aware of the characteristics of both formal and informal environments, and quickly learn how to read and integrate these, with the necessary filters, into day-to-day life to fulfil their role.

Preparation

Depending on the mandate, an interim manager should spend the first 30 days compiling, analysing and simultaneously structuring the requisite data (facts and figures etc.) and information (opportunities and risks etc.) as quickly as possible. Ideally, data compilation should start with the history and, depending on the company, include printed documentation and electronic data (primary/secondary data pools such as GDM, SAP, analyses, data from consulting firms, market surveys, competition etc.). An interim manager must also gain access to the requested data and compile it in a suitable form so that they can remain somewhat neutral in terms of reviewing and potential editing. Information and data should be structured by priority, for example, by time and importance or by specific contract (e.g. termination and payment deadlines, contract conditions). At this point we need to address the issue of tools. Every interim manager should possess sufficient theoretical and practical know-how as well as a handful of tools for their day-to-day needs without getting bogged down in this. After all, the client has

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the final say in how they want the findings presented. Regardless of the choice of tools, solid preparation of data, facts and information is always helpful during realisation.

Communication

Communication skills are an important characteristic of the professional interim manager. We can also see these skills as an interface between preparation and implementation. Not only is this characteristic essential during the first 30 days, but also during this phase that has far-reaching consequences. It makes no difference whether the role involves line management, a project or a change – the interim manager needs to communicate if they want to get to the information they need. Communication builds trust. Interim managers know how to get employees involved, regardless of their hierarchy level, ask them relevant questions to serve a specific purpose, or give answers where necessary and asked for. Any such questions are to be fairly and respectfully posed, but always with a concrete goal in mind. If the interim manager becomes aware of a few unpleasant facts in the course of their preparatory data gathering, they know how to subtly ask questions of employees without being directive. They are aware of their special function and build trust, which they also expect from their opposite number. Everyone knows the old saying – that there are no stupid questions, only stupid answers – but an interim manager is living proof that this is a fallacy. They do not consider answers alone and instead concentrate on facts. An interim manager communicates openly (without chat), transparently (where the mandate requires it), and target- and solution-oriented. They are, in every respect, conscious of the need to either speak or stay quiet and treat all employees equally. They focus on the mandate. Whether personal communication or e-tools, honest and open communication stands for notification and is an umbrella for knowledge, insights and experience – in the end, it can only take place in a dialogue.

Implementation

After carefully preparing the data, facts and information, and with the help of the right communication, the interim manager is then in a position to jointly develop and implement appropriate plans in the organisation. Whether this is feasible in the first 30 days depends on the scope of the mandate. The interim manager must also have a handful of tools available for this implementation, so as to get to the heart of the content. Depending on the mandate, these plans may affect one or more of the company's various levels (normative, strategic operational). Through high-quality communication, the interim manager can connect the various audiences directly to their mandate or indirectly with each other. During implementation, they pay attention to signals received through feedback received in dialogue during the preparatory phase. Above all, implementation may fail if specific individuals or groups are not on the same wavelength. This especially applies to informal organisations, i.e. the hierarchy that does not appear on the company's organisational chart. It is worth approaching "injured parties" with a triage-like approach. Often it is not the people crying out the loudest who need the most urgent attention. In any case, it is important not to change directions arbitrarily but to consistently pursue your own mandate.

Conclusions

The first 30 days are critical for an interim manager in terms of the success of a project. Efficient preparation, communication and implementation (in progress) are yardsticks for the client, managers and employees showing how the partnership with the interim manager will develop in future. This is independent of the type of mandate, whether it involves line, project or change management.

1) Heinz Sommer is long-standing interim manager and CEO at companytransfer AG. Founded in 2008, the company specialises in life science interim management services. For more information visit the company website www.companytransfer.ch.

2) Michael Watkins, The first 90 days. Harvard Business School Press, 2003