

Fine-Tuned Focus

Q Analysts' specialization brings 'deep competencies' and rapid growth

Q Analysts appears in this month's Center Stage, in which we interview leaders at innovative staffing firms. Based in Santa Clara, Calif. Q Analysts ranked No. 10 on Staffing Industry Analysts' 2010 list of fastest-growing U.S. staffing firms and No. 1 on the 2009 list. We interviewed Q Analysts Senior VP Stephen Graziani about the company.

Q: Can you briefly describe the type of staffing your firm does?

A: Q Analysts is a technology consulting and staffing services company. We specialize specifically in software quality assurance and testing as well as business intelligence and data warehousing. Because we have a strong resource delivery process, our clients inevitably turn to us to fill other IT staffing needs.

We're very specific about clients: Fortune 500 companies and other "enterprise" firms. We deliver our services by the person, filling individual requirements one at a time; as a managed service where we staff an entire team but where the client manages deliverables; or as a managed project where we are accountable for the deliverables as well as the team.

We are intensely focused on the telecommunications, healthcare and technology industries.

Q: Why did you decide to start in the area of quality assurance and testing?

A: When Ross Fernandes started the firm in 2003, he knew that customers were seeking more from services companies than most national firms could provide. They were seeking the combination of

technical expertise during the sales and qualification process and rapid access to talent specifically in the area that was important to them. Having a technical focus was needed in order to do this.

Since Ross had built a successful quality assurance practice for a national firm previously, and because he recognized that every large company used those skills, it was natural to start here. Technical acumen remains an important differentiator for us — especially as many of our competitors are hungry for any bit of revenue they can find and claim they staff everything. Which may be true — but can they excel?

Starting with a technical specialization helped us excel, which led to two things: First, it enabled us to grow revenue 100 percent a year for our first six years, becoming one of the top 10 fastest growing firms in the industry for the past two years (No.1 in 2009). Second, it helped us define and internalize a process to build technical practices — deep competencies — in particular technology areas that we can then bundle to support our clients. We've since taken that competency to build a very successful business intelligence and data warehouse practice.



Stephen Graziani,
Q Analysts senior vice president

Q: What helps set Q Analysts apart from other IT staffing firms?

A: I mentioned our technical acumen and practice focus, but that is only part of the story. Even the largest and most sophisticated customers are facing significant challenges — a very complex operating environment, global competition, a changing technical landscape and shifting macro-economics.

What we're seeing is that the large companies are really turning to technology to give them a competitive advantage. Technology today supports all mission-critical (and often life-saving) functions delivered today in America. And the complexity of systems in most major corporations is enormous.

We help the people responsible for building and supporting an array of applications

and technologies get the solutions they need even as they face constraints that include reduced budgets, aggressive timelines, integration standards, tenure rules for talent and arcane procurement processes to name a few.

In this environment, several things set us apart. First, our practice focus enables us to build long-term, supportive relationships with our consultants — giving us access to talent that never hits the open market. Our clients get better-qualified resources that are more stable and likely to succeed. All of our recruiters and business development managers receive ongoing and extensive training in business intelligence and data warehousing as well as quality assurance and testing that leads to a Q Analysts Certification. This enables our sales team and recruiters to use their expertise throughout the sales process and the recruiting process.

Beyond that, we built our business on knowledge management principles. Our processes and systems are aligned to help us learn about our clients and candidates, capture what we learn and use that knowledge to create highly customized but cost-effective solutions.

We also have a highly scalable infrastructure that supports all areas of our delivery model. We really can do work from anywhere without loss of productivity. And we can do more with less people.

Q: How does Q Analysts' management of internal staff help make the company successful? I understand the company has very little turnover in internal staff and is very selective about whom it hires?

A: I think there are several things that contribute to the low turnover.

First, it's the hiring process itself. We made a very specific effort to eliminate the sort of gut emotion associated with typical hiring practices. We put together a structured, multi-step evaluation process to objectively understand the capabilities and talents of the people we are interviewing, and to give them a very extensive exposure to who we are, what we do and how we do it. It takes a little more time and a lot more discipline, but I think both the candidate and Q Analysts are enriched by the process.

Second, it is the culture of the organization that makes a difference. We like to think of ourselves as a learning organization that is in a constant state of improvement. Ross believes learning is a continuum and we are each on the same path. We are all given the opportunity to continue learning and in a non-critical way — there is a sort of gentle coaching and support that I think is healthy and motivating. This is one of the things that has me waking up every day feeling really good about coming to work.

Third, it's the relationships people on the team have with each other. People like and trust each other. We've set up twice-a-week meetings that facilitate knowledge-sharing and openness. And every quarter we bring everybody from all over the country for a two-day working session. It's an environment where people feel comfortable asking questions, sharing ideas and working through challenges.

So, when people transact their business, they feel good about what they are doing. If they don't know something, they don't panic or pretend. Rather, they reach out to their manager or the rest of the team for support ... and it's there.

What I've observed is that once people begin to gain the knowledge and expertise, they are glad to share it.

Finally, I would say that we've put the power to get things done into the hands of our team. They don't need to go to a senior manager to transact their business, to find ways to provide superior service to their customers. They have the training and the tools to do that. I think that empowerment keeps people engaged.

Q: How critical is keeping up with the latest technology for the firm's internal operations?

A: This is a great question. Just this year, the U.S. Department of Commerce's Minority Business Development Agency for San Francisco recognized Q Analysts as their technology firm of the year, specifically for this, the application of technology to support our business.

Every component of our operation is supported by a single technology platform. That includes our client

relationship management, candidate tracking, time keeping, knowledge repository and more. It's all a single, Web-based application. And we use Web conferencing all the time with video cameras so that we can see each other regardless of where we are. Of course, given our clients, our telecommunications tools are state of the art.

That sort of pervasive technology enables us to be connected whatever we're doing. Access to these systems real-time is important because we built the company on knowledge management principles — we use that technology to capture what we learn and improve the delivery of future transactions. A nice benefit is that we've been able to grow our business with probably a quarter of the administrative staff than a typical firm in our industry.

Q: How had Q Analysts been able to innovate in terms of recruiting?

A: We have trademarked the term "Follow-the-Sun Recruiting Model," which is a series of processes that enable us to execute a singular delivery model from a recruiting standpoint.

Our operation is now international, with recruiters situated in each of our major markets, a centralized U.S.-based national recruiting team and teams in two countries overseas. The "Follow-the-Sun Recruiting Model" is a way of doing business that enables the team to act as a singular unit to support our clients. And we've integrated our client relationship process with our resource delivery process so that what we learn about our clients flows very quickly to our recruiting organization.

We're a stickler for documentation, so all of our recruiting communications, all of the e-mails and dialogue with each consultant and candidate, is captured and leverageable. Over time we get smarter and smarter about who we're talking to. This helps us serve our candidates and our clients. And we've effectively been able to move to a great extent off of the job boards as our primary source of candidates and into our internally managed talent communities. **si**