

A small owl with brown and white speckled feathers and bright yellow eyes is perched on a mossy branch. The background is a dark, gradient blue.

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Multi-faceted, but feeling invisible?

How interim managers can
achieve visibility and better
pricing through focus

A Lucilius Interim® Memo

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According to Luk Smeyers at The Visible Authority¹, only consultants with a focused, deep, and hence unique, profile can hope to become visible experts in their field: Their advice will be sought; RFP's will become a formality; price, a detail. --- In this memo, I examine how Luk's thinking applies to the interim profession and how we can employ his ideas to increase our margins through consistent focus. --- Luk, thank you very much for commenting on the draft of this paper.

¹ Visit www.thevisibleauthority.com for Luk's personal story, his insights, and perspective.

Visibility and Margin

For consultants yearning to free themselves from margin pressure, Luk Smeyers at The Visible Authority has intriguing advice: “Focus”, he says, “on the smallest addressable problem at whose solution you excel. Build your unique profile by developing deep expertise in your field and sharing it freely. Do not allow your focus to dilute.” Over time, Luk says, you will become visible, your advice will be sought. When a potential client initiates a project in your field, you have a good chance to be the consultant of choice, because your super-sharp profile lets you stand out. Price will be a mere detail.

An attractive proposition, no doubt, one aspect of which seems especially appealing to us interim executives, who are always struggling to find time for our own marketing: Recognizable expertise will help us select projects that are apt to deepen this expertise, thus further strengthening our focus, our visibility, and – if we play our hand well - our fees, making it easier yet to decline projects that are off-profile – a virtuous circle.

But while there are commonalities between consultancy and interim work, there are also differences. Therefore, dear follow-interim managers, I want to explore in the remainder of this memo if and how Luk’s ideas can work in our profession.

“I conclude, in a nutshell, that focus has great benefits for interim professionals – as long as it is bolstered by significant all-terrain capability on hot stand-by.”

But I won’t do that

Let’s start with focus. Recall the last time you were recruiting. Did you come across candidates who claimed to be good at everything? Did you find them convincing? Or did you think they’re either not being truthful or unable to make up their mind about themselves? Worse, a good-at-everything CV would probably not have made it onto your top pile in the first place. Mostly, we do not look for ‘good at everything’. We want the best person for the role. The resume which strikes us is the one which credibly tells us why its sender is the right choice for exactly this role.

The same applies to an interim professional pitching for her or his next mandate: Trying to be everything to every possible client does not make you desirable. If you want to stick out for a particular assignment, you have to project, and be able to demonstrate, focus in a credible way: Your target customers, your core capability, the benefit you will create, etc.

All-terrain

So far so good, but for interim managers, this is not the full story, because once on the ground, assignments often become rocky or muddy or morph into something entirely unforeseen.

For example: Based on your data modelling profile, you were hired to fix a BI project that is languishing “because of a poor concept”. When you’re there, you find that the Head of IT and the Head of Finance are bitter enemies and that the first is doing everything he can to derail the project (led by the second). You confirm that, yes, there is a technical issue: The accounting output does not conform to the BI data model. But also: The Head of Accounting always knew, but never told anyone because he was afraid to bring bad news. Which for the CEO, who prides himself on the fear-free, no-blame learning culture he single-handedly created during the past quarter, is even more unacceptable than the issue itself.

The conceptually minded consultant would adjust his or her data model according to the new insights and consider the job done.

As an interim manager you have a tougher set of objectives to meet: You need to turn the situation into a success. Understand. Build trust. See which relationships can be salvaged. Enlist support and create workable coalitions despite differing interests. You also need to revise the accounting treatment of the transaction causing the technical issue and explain the change to the staff accountant. And acquaint the CEO with cultural reality.



The ability to manage whatever you find underneath the problem for which you were originally hired, is a huge part of your value proposition as interim executive: You are sought because you combine focused consulting skills with the broad problem-solving capabilities of generalists. This all-terrain agility is a must-have, no matter how sharp your profile.

Skip if pressed for time

There are two further aspects. Both may limit how much time you invest in profile-building:

- Luk says consultants should build their visibility by freely sharing high-quality content. But creating high-quality while you’re up to your elbows in the guts of a derailed project is tough. You could outsource, but this can come at the expense of authenticity, and in interim management, whatever content you share must be true to your personality.

- Also, interim managers will likely see lower returns: Even the sharpest profile will sell only once at a time, while the conceptual expertise of a consultant can be sold multiple times.

Conclusion and Action Steps

Interim Managers will benefit from a clear, unique profile, which conscious focus will yield if nurtured by a sustained flow of on-focus content. But any positioning will have to be buttressed by an all-terrain capability to manage whatever reality one finds in the field. Given lack of scalability, interim professionals may want to devote less time to content creation and profile building than a consultant would. And they will remember that interim management remains, at heart, a highly personal business.

Eager to reach for visibility through a more focused, high-profile positioning? Or interested in calibrating your own approach? Here's my take on what you can do:

- Building on your strengths, define your target customer, your core capability, the type of situation you are best placed to address; then start transmitting on this frequency.
- Determine what amount of time you can sustainably devote to content creation and invest that amount consistently, regardless of whether it's a lot or little.
- Use lulls in between project to top-up this amount.
- In your content, focus on what you do best, and leave everything else aside.
- Be genuine; share your own thoughts; do not re-hash boring, insight-free platitudes.

Incidentally, the virtues of a clear profile were pointed out by one of my mentors when I started out in this line of work: "There are 12,000 interim managers in Germany. That's a big number, and it means that, whenever you pitch for an assignment you'd be good at, there will be a competitor who is excellent. So, get clear about what you do extremely well and focus."

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Written in Frankfurt and Bregenz

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