

Performance development system puts scores on the board

CO Magazine interviews Bill Lang, chief executive officer of Bill Lang International, a global provider of professional development solutions for businesses.

Some business views

1. How do you see the role of technology in developing an innovative business?

Within our company, the development of our turn-key performance development system, Scores on the Board, has involved a significant investment in understanding the IT environments of the thousands of businesses with which the system interfaces.

Although Scores on the Board operates on an ASP basis for its users, the use of email and the ability to access web sites brings with it all the issues of corporate firewalls, desktop functionality, spam filtering and most importantly data privacy.

The relationship with the CIO is very close, given our rapid development methodology where we prototype quickly and look to evolve functionality on a monthly cycle. We speak every couple of days. For example, we serve companies in several countries and as they move to and from daylight savings what on the surface appear to be simple modifications to make, the need to rapidly enhance and test the system and the have a seamless upgrade requires close coordination between the CIO and his team and our Consultants.

2. What part does your company play in the risk management function?

Our web-based systems and our websites are the central nervous system of our business. We have Fortune 500 companies relying on our services to help their managers continuously improve their people and operations performance.

Naturally, all the basics of risk management have to be covered - from local issues like server redundancy, a complete replacement system on standby through to the selection of our data centre partners have been explicitly identified.

For our client organisations such as banks, telecommunications and

retailing businesses, risk management is a primary functional area of activity day by day. Not one of our clients overlooks risk management in every business case they prepare.

One simple example of a recent risk management initiative for us has been the training of several additional programmers so that the risk of our current team coming down sick will not lead to us missing our aggressive development milestones.

3. Corporate governance and the duties of directors is an area of considerable interest at the moment. What are your views on the increased responsibilities on company directors?

Many of the directors of public companies that I know are not that perturbed because they feel that it is imposing greater disciplines on the CEO and CFOs. In many respects well managed companies can readily provide boards with the frameworks and information needed to agree strategy and measure performance against it. Perhaps the bigger question is what skills and values make an effective public company director?

It's one thing to impose more transparency but what are we doing to make being a director an attractive career proposition?

It would appear that the pendulum has swung too far across. Many of the responsibilities placed on company directors will make them liable for things outside their sphere of control. If this is true, the market will work and the supply of quality directors will dry up..... or directors and shareholders will need to change the role and relationships between directors and management.

Stakeholders and governments are now demanding even greater transparency and accountability from company directors. Is this realistic? Perhaps so, if directors have the skills to perform and the access to required information use these skills. It is the CEO who must create the access by directors to information.

4. There is a huge emphasis in Australian companies at the moment on doing business in Asia. Are you focused on Asia already?

We have started some initial conversations with financial services companies in Asia. For us we need CEOs and executives who are committed to performance development and improvement... not merely interested. One way we tell is by looking at how executives and managers are rewarded.

If there are financial incentives for living company values and improving the engagement of staff and managers we can see that the CEO understands the link between the staff, customer satisfaction and superior financial results. Many companies talk about this link, HR branches do a few surveys but, fundamentally, little change happens in many companies.

We are ready to talk when incentives are aligned with the behaviours required for long term competitive advantage. Each country in Asia is quite different to others. If we see a competitive industry structure, and a company playing to win, we like to make contact. In financial services the global players are good customers for us, they leverage those elements of their global scale and systems through unleashing local knowledge and talent.

5. What are your ambitions within the Asia-Pacific region over the next five years?

Countries with large English speaking managerial classes are our targets. These include India, HK and parts of China.

6. What industries will you target in the Asia Pacific region?

Financial services, retailing, utilities, telecommunications.

7. Globalisation is impacting the way businesses evaluate the future.

How do you see Australian businesses positioning themselves to achieve success amid lower costs and increased competition?

Fundamentally businesses and people make buying decisions based on what they perceive to offer superior value. It's a simple equation where the perceived benefits are compared with the perceived costs. If customers are focused on price alone it means they do not see any differences in the benefits on offer from competing suppliers.

Perceived benefits are a function of how well a solution solves a problem for a customer and how well the customer perceives that brand as doing so. So superior understanding of customer needs and problems, superior ability to develop and deliver the solution and, finally, a consistent brand positioning centred on superior benefits provides Australian companies with the basis for winning in those markets where we can.

Personal views – behind the suit

8. Can you tell us your educational background?

I was born in Ballarat, Vic. I was raised in a small business family and educated by the Christian Brothers at St Patricks College. I achieved B.Comm/LLB (Hons) at the University of Melbourne followed later by an MBA at the Harvard Business School

9. What was your first job?

Part-time – delivering newspapers in Ballarat ... a bit chilly at the age of 11 at 6am in July.

10. What was your first car?

Kermit the frog - my Green Datsun 1100 - the precursor to the 180B

11. How do you maintain a work life balance?

Trying to be 100% there wherever I am... so at work its 100% on, at home its 100% on. In between, while overseas and interstate, video conferences and instant messaging with the family makes it a little easier.

12. How much time do you spend travelling each month?

I average one week a month.

13. How many hours do you work every week?

In the range of 50-60 hours.

14. How many hours do you sleep every day?

Seven hours a night.

15. As a leader how do you find motivation?

As the company founder a lot of promises have been made to a lot of people, staff, partners, customers. I love what I do because, every day, I see the impact that our solutions are having on the fulfillment and success of the over 35,000 people who use them. Believing in our vision, seeing the impact everyday and keeping the promises made clearly in my mind keeps the fire fuelled.

16. Where was your last Holiday?

Treasure and Mana Islands Fiji

17. What do you do in your spare time?

Watch the kids play sport on the weekend, enjoy a shiraz with my wife and friends and get the Seadoo JetSki out for a run.

18. What car do you drive now?

The Chrysler Voyager with the family, pets and boogie boards on board. Mercedes for the commute to the office and airport.

19. And what's your next car going to be?

Great question – haven't thought too much about it.

20. If you could choose another profession, what would it be?

Broadcast journalist

21. What is your greatest personal achievement?

Persuading my wife to marry me.

22. What is your greatest professional achievement?

Getting to work with the business leaders and managers I have learned so much from and served over the years.

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23. Soap box

When it comes to performance improvement and cultural change your existing people are your greatest source of ideas and energy to make it happen.

Change imposed is often change opposed and you will never excel at serving customers if you spend a lower amount of time on serving staff. Ultimately, leaders are service providers... and one of the most important customer groups are the people in the organisation. By seeking and acting on feedback about a manager's direct service quality from his or her staff on a frequent basis I find it the most powerful way to build a high performance team, organisation and winning business organisation.

24. How long have you been in this position as CEO?

Five years 

Bill Lang's solutions are based on his global experience with industry leaders and the latest practical knowledge from the world's leading experts in professional development and business leadership and management. Industry leaders include firms such as GE, McKinsey & Company, KPMG and Harvard Business School. Bill is the author of several works including 8 Skills for Careers Success, 8 Skills for Management Success and Net Present Value – Career Resources for Harvard MBAs.