

Equinox talent management as collaboration



Things are a little different at IT consultancy Equinox. Managing Director Roger Dalglish says that they focus on highly experienced staff (members of the team have an average of over 15 years experience in the information technology industry) rather than employing teams of junior developers.

Established in 1995, Equinox is a \$10M New Zealand-owned software development, IT consulting and training company with offices in Auckland and Wellington. With 50 staff and 15 contractors, the company provides specialist capability in all aspects of the software development lifecycle from concept to delivery.

Equinox offers independent advice and has strong capabilities in all key software development technologies- and has earned a leadership position in complex performance testing and troubleshooting, enterprise and software architecture and business analysis.

Roger Dalglish says that because of their highly skilled people, they have very little internal management structure.

"We have discussions with our consultants then they just get on with it, our people are self managing. It's a very flat structure – we don't want to micro-manage our people and talk about all of us being 'big enough and ugly enough' to look after ourselves."

Roger Dalglish says that they attract the sort of people that allow them to provide a genuinely unique service to their customers.

"We're constantly pushing the boundaries of traditional thinking and ultimately we've earned the credibility to influence 'how things are done' within the software development lifecycle."

Equinox is a member of the EEO Employment trust and has consistently been a finalist in the Unlimited 'Best Places to Work' survey.

Environmental Factors

The founding partners of Equinox put a huge effort into the vision and values of the company in order to create a collegiate atmosphere where knowledge exists to be shared.

"It can be hard in the IT world to get people to put their hand up and say, 'I need help', but that is what we've achieved with our company culture. Our staff are all highly intelligent people in the top five to ten percent of capability, so they are all extremely talented," says Dalglish. "In addition, our clients expect highly competent consultants who sort out issues and deliver high quality results in a timely manner."

In order to attract these people Equinox has an unusual recruiting model. Dalglish says they specifically look for "slightly cynical, battle-scarred people" and those who have experienced some failures, rather than recruiting recent graduates.

Equinox had no formal talent management processes in place, and used company forums and other informal methods of communication. As the company grew, people were missing out on the forums and other opportunities because they might be working off site or in meetings. This was well intentioned but sometimes inconsistent, and while Equinox did run annual performance reviews, they were sometimes under prepared for these.

"We felt we needed to work out why some people really excelled, so we looked at a lot of different talent management solutions to help us with this," Dalglish says.

Requirements

Equinox worked out their three key requirements for a talent management solution:

1. pragmatic – the solution needed to be easily understood by non-HR people

Results

Equinox has been using Sonar6 for just over a year and the results are really beginning to show. Equinox is planning a lot more investment in formal training, as Sonar6 has greatly helped the company decide what areas to focus the training on. Gaps identified by Sonar6 have also helped Equinox to decide on the most relevant conferences and courses for staff to attend to further improve their skills.

“At Equinox our philosophy is to have ‘one foot outside your comfort zone’ to accelerate consultant learning and growth. Sonar6 allows us to work with each consultant and to really zero in on what their growth aspirations are. It has also given a view of the natural peers for each consultant and allowed us to see what paths their peers have taken. We can either encourage the consultant to take that path, or gently push them in a new direction,” says Dalglish.

Sonar6 has also added a level of discipline to the management of Equinox.

2. well designed – it had to be easy for all to understand and something that management and consultants could relate to
3. a New Zealand solution – aside from a desire to “buy Kiwi made’, Equinox felt a New Zealand product with on the ground support and service would be better suited to them, rather than dealing with a large US (or multi-national) supplier.

“I’ve always thought that once a company such as Equinox has accounting and HR departments, we’d be in big trouble! We needed a talent management system that we could understand quickly and easily; it had to have cut through and get to the point,” says Dalglish.

Dalglish says that another reason Equinox chose Sonar6 is they wanted something that would scale well as the company grew. Equinox currently has 50 permanent staff and is aiming for around 80 people, so needed software that would grow with the company.

Sonar6 Solution

Roger Dalglish says that they were impressed by the Sonar6 toolkit because it is pragmatic and easy for non-HR people to understand.

“We were keen to maintain a flat team-based structure at Equinox – and we saw Sonar6 as a collaboration tool rather than a management tool.”

Dalglish says the implementation process was a real strength for Sonar6.

“They really tuned into our company culture and understood that we wanted a pragmatic, non-waffly HR solution. We sat down with Sonar6 and they listened to what we wanted and got it straight away. Their recommendations were spot on and ‘spoke’ the Equinox language.”

The next step for Equinox was to sit down and use the

“It has removed the ‘ad hoc-ery’ of a small company. Typically IT companies have a rapid turnover of staff and there is often a two year cycle before people move on somewhere else. Equinox is different and many staff have been here for eight to ten years. Sonar6 has allowed us to recognise talent early and help us retain it so we can maximise our return on that talent.”

Equinox has only just started using Sonar6 for performance reviews. They plan to have completed a full performance review with each staff member by the end of this year using Sonar6.

Dalglish says that they are also looking forward to Sonar6’s new self assessment feature.

“This is particularly relevant to our very independent staff. We also plan to have our clients provide assessment of consultants. We think our consultants will value client rather than internal feedback as being a totally independent evaluation.”

Sonar6 toolbox to benchmark good performance across the company. This created a whole-of-company view that Equinox initially used to compare relativities of salary and iron out minor discrepancies.

Next Equinox used Sonar6 to look at particular attributes of individuals and identify gaps in skills. This allowed them to focus on growing their staff’s skill base and provide appropriate mentoring to individual consultants.

Roger Dalglish sums it up by saying that essentially Sonar6 is a very well designed, elegant, fully functional management and collaboration tool that is perfectly suited to Equinox’s approach to people management.

“In software, visual systems really are the best. We always describe Sonar6 as ‘elegant’ and it embodies simplicity. I got my head around it in 15 minutes - it looks simplistic but actually isn’t... and this is the art of good software.

“Everyone who has used Sonar6 really ‘gets it’. The interface is so natural you don’t get stressed trying to use it. The Sonar6 team has very clearly put a lot of effort into the design, and it is one of the better products I’ve ever seen.”

Summary

Implementation of Sonar6 has given Equinox an elegant, simple and visual way of managing and challenging their top talent, while fitting perfectly with the company’s collegial and independent ethos.

Sonar6 founder Mike Carden believes that, while it might sound contradictory, the programme delivers both structure and flexibility to companies like Equinox who are looking for a simple and adaptable solution to managing and retaining top talent.