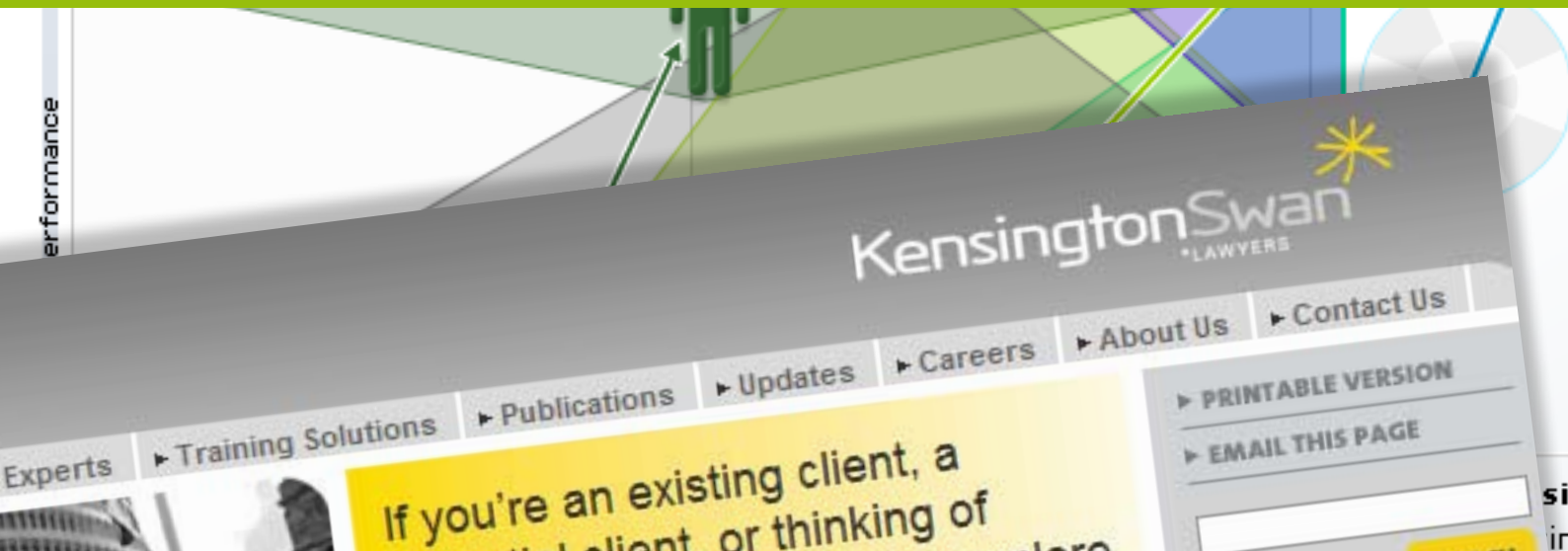


Kensington Swan

taking performance management to the next level



As one of New Zealand's top commercial law firms, Kensington Swan is not unfamiliar with finding smart solutions to complex problems. Operating nationally, it has offices in Auckland and Wellington, is governed by a board and led by a CEO. The firm is 260-strong with more than 40 partners, an expansive legal team, and comprehensive corporate services.

Kensington Swan's expert offering sits across four business units including litigation, commercial, infrastructure, and finance and technology law. The firm prides itself on successful, efficient business and treating its people and clients with an intimacy and respect that delivers results.

To meet its business goals Kensington Swan wanted to make more robust, informed management decisions that would drive the business forward. With people key to Kensington Swan's success, the solution had to be people-friendly. And, knowing that the economic climate is changing swiftly, the solution had to be flexible too.

Environmental Factors

Kensington Swan's 'product' is its people and their expertise. It makes sense, then, to focus on people being satisfied in their jobs, says Human Resources Director, Laurie Finlayson.

Three years before Kensington Swan threw out its previous competency framework and performance management system. It was time for something fresh. Underpinning the move was a new five-year strategic plan; the paper-based system focused on developing behaviours that would deliver on it.

"It was an opportunity for a major revamp that allowed us to look at what would underpin and deliver on our business strategy," says Laurie Finlayson.

People learnt the system, understood it, and it worked. Performance appraisals were good and they tied in with existing development programmes. While the firm could have continued along this track, they felt there were more improvements to be had.

"We wanted to get the top-end stuff out. We needed objective - rather than subjective - analysis and a tool to help us achieve that."

Bar graphs and paper forms had had their day.

As 2009-2010 kicks off, Kensington Swan is also keenly aware that a different operating environment is emerging. As a result, the firm's focus will be on slightly different behaviours to ensure its business performance matches the economic climate.

Flicking through a management magazine in early 2008, Kensington Swan found its answer in Sonar6. A visit to the website proved, well... fun. There were little men and sliding tools and grids. Could finding a new talent management solution actually be enjoyable?!

Over the years Laurie Finlayson had looked at various performance management systems – many of them "whizzy" – but Sonar6 was different.

"It was much simpler, more user-friendly, and cost effective. It also provided the back-end analysis we were looking for."

As luck would have it, Sonar6 turned out to be a Kensington Swan client. Further investigation found some of their other clients and suppliers also used Sonar6. And, most importantly, the feedback was all good.

So Kensington Swan looked no further – they called Sonar6.

Requirements

The firm's previous performance management system was very sound on an operational level. But Kensington Swan wanted more. They needed a tool that better evaluated the capabilities of the organisation and would inform more robust management decision making.

Kensington Swan's wish list for talent management went like this:

1. User friendly
2. Simple
3. Fast
4. Able to accommodate the firm's competencies, language and jargon
5. Capable of being weighted against individuals and key characteristics
6. Reporting was critical.

"We needed a way of accessing and using data that would identify major capability areas and enable targeted solutions, rather than blanket upgrades."

Kensington Swan wanted to identify and understand its areas of weakness and then link directly into its established learning and development programmes, succession planning and remuneration strategy.

The new talent management system couldn't be stand alone; it had to link end-to-end.

Sonar6 Solution

The first indicator that Sonar6 had hit the spot was the reaction to the demo. The Business Directors and CEO loved it!

"The enthusiasm started at that senior level, and people soon caught wind that we were working on something."

In this instance curiosity did not kill the cat. Rather, it sparked interest and anticipation. When Sonar6 entered Kensington Swan's public domain, people were keen to see what this new talent management system was all about.

Kensington Swan loaded its existing, manual information directly onto the Sonar6 system. Using its own language and jargon added credibility from the outset. Starting with a pilot in July with 40 people, Sonar6 was then rolled out across the entire firm. The first review round was

completed in October.

"It gave us a faster, simpler, more fun way to give feedback; we were able to engage staff right from the beginning. It provided better data to drill down into for analysis and, overall, offers a more rigorous talent management solution," says Laurie.

Its direct link into Kensington Swan's existing programmes meant more efficient, targeted management decisions.

"The grid view allows us to look into individual performance, from people who are 'contributing' versus people who are 'achieving', 'promising' and 'starring'. That kind of analysis informs where we need to invest individually, whether in remuneration, development or succession planning."

Sonar6 helps capture more in-depth information. Where the previous paper-based system allowed people brief completion in each section, Sonar6's online component encourages greater disclosure.

"Our people use their screens every day, so they are familiar with the 'online' concept. The option is there for people to do as much as they want with it. As a result, people are forthcoming with information and we are gaining much more to work with."

Laurie Finlayson remains pragmatic about performance reviews: "If people can get around it, they will," she says.

"But the feedback is that Sonar6 is better, faster, and more fun than the previous system, so we know it's hitting the spot."

Summary

Kensington Swan has stepped up its talent management and has no intention of slowing down. Management decisions are informed. Solutions are targeted. Business spend is maximised.

With the economic climate being the focus of much doom and gloom prophesy, it will be smart businesses that emerge unscathed. One of the most important aspects of working 'smart' is ensuring talent and performance management practices are finely tuned. Sonar6's flexibility affords Kensington Swan this security.

"With clients agonising over these uncertain times, and with workloads becoming lighter, we need to look carefully at what we are measuring. As the economy improves, what we require to operate effectively will likely change again."

But for now? "We are operating in an increasingly demanding environment and our Talent Management system needs to reflect that."

Results

On making better management decisions

"Sonar6 has produced more rigorous data which translates into solid analysis. Increased focus in decision making means the business benefits financially and we can be more targeted in our actions. The whole process has been made easier and more effective."

On tracking the team

"You can click on each person and see their strengths and weaknesses... It means I can handle each individual on a daily basis, and manage their differences to help them perform better."

"It's good to have something visual for the team to look at, to see how I've rated them compared to how they rated themselves. The response to this approach has been really positive – it enables us to discuss both discrepancies and goals."

"Sonar6 informs better management decisions, and the spin-off from that is efficiencies in targeting our spend. That's going to be invaluable as the economy tightens."

On increasing business efficiency

"Anything to save us time and increase efficiencies in this business is valuable, because that is what we sell – time. Sonar6 provided us with both efficiencies and a fun and simple approach."

"We run orientation workshops on performance reviews for new people, and with Sonar6 these were cut down from one hour to 15 minutes."

On ticking all the boxes

"Sonar6 met all the business and operational requirements – the bonus being that it had the whizzy fun stuff too, which helped us sell it internally."

"We needed something that would be seen as credible by Senior Management; not just another fancy technology piece. We wanted to give Business Directors and Senior Management a tool that would help make those robust management decisions – which is exactly what Sonar6 offered."

On pictures doing the business

"The graphics are really good – everyone likes the little men. The 'fun' aspect really suits our culture. An important part of getting a new system was the engagement of our people."

"I like the grid and the fact that you can put the demographics on the page, based on levels, teams and location."

On winning over the 'cynics'

"For the cynics it was about, "How is this going to affect my pay?" We work with smart people and they wanted to know the point of the new system and why they should do it. Sonar6 met and exceeded their expectations."