



Dan Reardon

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to being named CEO in 2005, Dan Reardon served as President and Chief Operating Officer and as Vice President heading the company's Process, Strategy, and Enterprise Customer Relationship Management service areas. Reardon is also the founder and board member of Cordence Worldwide. Prior to joining North Highland in 1997, Reardon was Director of the Southeast Organizational Change Practice for Arthur Andersen Business Consulting. He also spent two years in London helping Andersen start its consulting practice there. During a leave of absence from Andersen, he was Operations Manager for a printing company in Northern Ireland. He holds a B.S. in Industrial Management from the Georgia Institute of Technology.

COMPANY BRIEF North Highland (www.northhighland.com) is a global consulting company with a proven record of enabling great returns on clients' investments. Their high-caliber consultants offer deep experience and expertise across many diverse industries and service areas. The firm specializes in solving tough business challenges, being easy to work with, and nurturing long-standing relationships with the most recognizable brands in the world. North Highland is a member of Cordence Worldwide, a global management consulting partnership.

How did the concept for North Highland come about?

From the outset, the idea was to design a different model within consulting. The industry lost its way in the 1990s when compensation became a higher priority and firms took their eyes off of serving the customer. This ultimately led to consulting being viewed as a less noble career.

In launching the company in 1992, we focused on three things in order to change the way the world thinks about consulting, and more broadly, professional services: first, make sure we do everything with integrity – about 50 percent of consulting projects fail so we strive for, and have achieved, a 99.9 percent success rate.

“Going Slow to Go Fast”

An Interview with Dan Reardon,
Chief Executive Officer, North Highland

Second, to back that up, we guarantee our work.

Finally, we also wanted to make sure that the people we hire have the experience necessary to affect change in our clients. So we only have high caliber consultants.

How can you differentiate your firm in a crowded market?

Through experience and expertise. Our average number of years of experience is 17; our competition's average is probably more like five years.

Every firm has outstanding consultants – we just have a much higher percentage of them within our delivery team. So instead of having one expert on the project team for a client that shows up every two weeks to review the work, if we have a team of 20 assigned to a client, 18 of those are experts.

Where the clients see that is in the efficiency of the work. We do it faster and it's more focused.

Once clients experience working with us, it's a rare exception that we don't get a second, third, or fourth project. For most of our main accounts, we have been with them for at least 15 years.

Is your expertise specific to a certain industry?

It crosses all industries.

We are now at over 2,600 people and we have an industry overlay. We have go-to-market strategies for energy and utilities, financial services, health care, life sciences, media, entertainment and communications, public sector, retail and consumer products, transportation, and travel and leisure, which we have built up over the past six to eight years.

Our primary go-to-market strategy is through what we call our local market presence, where we pick a city with current clients and a lot of potential clients, plant our flag there, hire great people in that city, and focus primarily on those clients. This means we can recruit the best people who are getting burned out on the travel from our competition, since we can offer them a low-travel model. We also have travelling teams that account for about 15 percent of our workforce that allow us to pull in additional expertise when needed.

The other nuance of the local model is an ability to go deep with our clients to understand their businesses since we have the same people there year after year working with them. We get to know the company so well that we gain even greater efficiency in our work.

Another outcome of our model is that we have lower turnover because we have much happier consultants.

As growth has come, how important has it been to maintain an entrepreneurial feel and innovative spirit?

We can still do that because I meet with all employees for two days when they're in their first year. We talk about who we are, what our values are, and what good work looks like, and we explain that if they want to stay, they need to understand the values. We call it “Going slow to go fast.”

North Highland is 100 percent owned by our employees. As owners, it is critical that each individual feels he is a part of the foundation of the company so that he can return to his local office and quickly help us build the organization.

I end that meeting by reminding employees that they own North Highland. My job is to model those elements so they can see me living the culture. Their job is to help protect and institutionalize the culture and spirit.

All of the things we're doing today were originally drafted by one of our consultants in the field, so it's part of our culture to be entrepreneurial. Our compensation system is very entrepreneurial because everybody has a high variable portion of their compensation, which makes you wake up every day feeling like an entrepreneur.

Is it critical to build a diverse workforce that mirrors your clientele?

We have a program called Inclusion and Diversity because if you focus on inclusion, diversity happens. So our energy is focused on inclusion.

North Highland continues to roll out programs where we take people from very different backgrounds and we give them stressful things to read and talk about in a personal way, which helps them understand others from a different perspective.

Everyone also takes an assessment test to figure out how inclusive-minded they are. Everyone scores lower than they think they will. We're all biased, so our thrust is to work on becoming self-aware so we can then change how we react.

How critical has it been to engage around corporate responsibility?

It's all about leaving the world better than you found it. With a focus on local markets, I and our people can do that.

We require our executives to get engaged locally because it supports our whole ethos of being a locally based consulting company in each of the markets we serve, so we need to make the community a better place.

To the extent that we can help our communities thrive, they will attract more businesses and we will have more clients to serve in the long run. ●