

FINANCIAL REVIEW

Smart Money

Software does the hiring

Carolyn Burns sold all she owned to invest in her DIY recruitment company Expr3ss! Now she's tripling her staff numbers to serve a growing client base.



Carolyn Burns wants her software sitting on every company's website to help them find staff.

Photo: Nic Walker

Enterprising women

Anne Fulwood
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As a centre-forward playing representative hockey for South Australian state teams in her youth, Carolyn Burns became an accomplished playmaker, navigating her way to the goal or creating opportunities for others to score.

She has applied characteristic tenacity and purpose to the creation of her own business, Expr3ss!, which is gaining traction as a new model for the recruitment industry. Expr3ss! provides software packages integrated with company websites, enabling them to recruit for themselves: "An affordable, streamlined solution to securing the best staff."

It is the alternative to paying big fees to traditional recruitment firms, and part of an emerging trend for businesses of all sizes seeking cost efficiencies.

Burns launched Expr3ss! in Adelaide in about 2003, but it has been a long road to gain traction. "I tried to offer the idea to recruitment firms back then, but got shown the door as it was too disruptive to their model of upfront fees and commissions," she says. "Their fee structure annihilates businesses that want to grow."

So strong was her belief in her idea that she sold everything she owned in Adelaide, yielding about \$120,000, to invest in Expr3ss! "I had to find customers, sick and tired of looking for staff, who would buy it," she says. She relocated to Sydney about 2006 and was down to her last \$10,000 – after investing in product and website development, marketing and rent – before her first "breakthrough" client, Spend-less Shoes, came on board: "I haven't looked back."

REVENUES HEAD TOWARDS \$3M

The growth trajectory is on the rise, up 80 per cent for the 2013 financial year nudging towards revenues of \$3 million for 2014. Burns expects her staff numbers, now seven, to treble in the next year to serve a growing client base, about 200 and rising. Contracts range from \$6000 to \$40,000 per client, with options for long-term contracts or per-project agreements: "The biggest change in the past two years is that the average size of the accounts has risen dramatically to about \$25,000 per year, per client."

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The essence of Expr3ss! is a survey developed by Burns's business partner, psychotherapist Glyn Brokensha, featuring a 168-point opt-in checklist for prospective employees to fill out. Along with other data, it is distilled into a report to highlight performance under pressure, for example, or how the applicant may interact in a team.

It takes, on average, about six minutes to fill out the Expr3ss! application form. Burns says: "It identifies their can-do attitude, their will-do approach and their fit-to-the-role characteristics. The flash and friction points can be seen immediately."

It also eliminates the need to read through mountains of CVs: "Why use CVs as the gold standard? Time and again they are a virtual advertising document, glowingly written but not necessarily accurate.

"We are doing so much more of the client's thinking, and the system will use our matching algorithm to the point where there are three buttons to push to get the person they want," she says.

Burns also claims her software will help streamline business reporting for recruitment compliance under the Workplace Gender and Equality Act, introduced in 2012 for companies with more than 100 staff.

Clients already report a diminution in the churn rate of staff, Burns says. Beaumont Tiles, of Adelaide, says its rate has dropped from 20 per cent to 2 per cent in the past two years. Adams Cleaning and Maintenance, also in Adelaide, has dropped its churn rate from 47 per cent about six years ago to about 5 per cent. "They can now win multimillion-dollar contracts because they have a secure and stable workforce, with good people on the job."

Another national client says Expr3ss! methodology has saved him about \$150,000 a year in direct costs related to recruitment.

THE DRIVE TO SUCCEED

Disappointment early in life at home in suburban Ascot Park in Adelaide, and on the sporting field, has imbued Burns, "about 50", with a remarkable energy and drive to succeed. Her parents separated, money was tight and she says she played hockey "seven days a week to maintain my sanity". Chosen in the first Australian women's hockey squad, in anticipation of the introduction of the sport at the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games, Burns could not progress as she was unable to afford to travel interstate to train.

She turned her focus to finding work in a variety of office or data-processing roles, until a big breakthrough with her appointment as executive assistant to Roger Sexton at Morgan Grenfell in 1986. A serial autodidact, Burns admits she first accepted jobs and then found a way to succeed in the roles. She studied commerce part-time at the University of Adelaide while at Baron Partners, "to back-fill the gaps in my knowledge".

The genesis of her idea for Expr3ss! was the result of work with Baron Partners on the sharemarket listing of Hostworks Group, the Adelaide-based website hosting and digital solutions company which floated in about 1997 and was later bought by Broadcast Australia, now part of Canada Pension Plan Investment Board.

"I needed to gather a team to build Hostworks and get the business structure in place for growth," she says. "I had to find people with specific skills and the right attitudes, and I didn't have much time."

She encountered Brokensha at a corporate conference, used his early survey templates to successfully select Hostworks staff, suggested a collaboration and Expr3ss! was the result.

"I want to be sitting on every company's website, being their careers page and helping them identify the staff and people that would see their business take off," she says.

For now, Burns is taking off on her first holiday in two years, with her laptop at hand and with the end game always top of mind.

"Bill Gates always said he wanted Microsoft to be on the computer on everyone's desk. I want Expr3ss! on everyone's computer on that desk." ■

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Software that Solves
Staff Selection