

Swim, Cycle, Run – Why Winners Win

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Sport has long been used as a metaphor for good business practice but it still provides a powerful insight into what distinguishes a successful company from an unsuccessful company. In this article, I compare the factors that contribute to success in one of the newest sports, triathlon, to the factors that make the best professional services companies equally successful. Most, if not all, of these factors, you may already be familiar with but what I hope this article does is present them in a way that is both memorable and illuminating.

To start, let me describe triathlon to you. Many will be aware of the sport from media coverage of the famous Ironman race held annually in Hawaii. If this is the case, your immediate reaction might be that triathlon is just for the super-fit and slightly deranged. Well, Ironman is certainly a remarkably challenging race, with the fastest international athletes still taking 8½ -9 hours to complete it, but there are races for the mere mortals among us that make triathlon the inclusive and fast-growing sport that it is.

Triathlon is a multi-activity sport consisting of the three disciplines of swimming, cycling and running. These are always done in this sequence with a changeover point or transition between each discipline. The athlete is timed from the start to the finish, including these transitions so being able to switch rapidly from the swim to the bike and then to the run is an important skill; in fact, the transition is often called the fourth discipline.

There are differences in the individual disciplines between races. The swim leg can be open water, in a lake or the sea, where all the athletes in a category start together and compete head-to-head, or pool-based, where the athletes go off one after the other and just compete against the clock. The bike leg is usually road based but some events include an off-road mountain bike course, and similarly, although usually road based, the run leg can be cross-country.

There are also variations in distance. The shortest event comprises a 400m swim, 10km cycle and 2.5km run and a typical novice competitor would take approximately 45-50 minutes to complete the event. The sprint event comprises a 750m swim, 20km cycle and 5km run and a typical club triathlete would take 70-80 minutes to complete. Finally, the classic event consists of a 1.5km swim, a 40km cycle and a 10km run. This is the event that elite triathletes would compete in at Olympic level and would take 120-130 minutes to complete.

So what makes a good triathlete? What makes winners win? There are five key elements that, in my opinion, are critical and these are:

1. Consistent standard of disciplines
2. Mental and physical toughness
3. Technical skills
4. Training
5. A good coach

1. Consistent standard of disciplines

However good a swimmer, if a triathlete is a poor cyclist or runner, they will not be competitive at the highest level and vice versa. Of course, all triathletes will have a discipline they like or dislike the most but this doesn't mean they can ignore their weaker disciplines. As far as possible, the successful triathlete will need to be equally competitive at all disciplines.

2. Mental and Physical Toughness

There is no doubt triathlon is a challenging sport and demands the highest level of mental and physical toughness. Any triathlete will aim to increase their physical strength and conditioning, by setting increasingly difficult targets and develop the mental toughness to cope with the times when things go badly and stick to their plans, both during training and the race itself.

3. Technical Skills

Although sheer strength and stamina goes a long way, good technical skills are critical for a good triathlete to become a winner. Whether this is a good powerful stroke in the pool, an aerodynamic body position on the bike or a smooth, efficient transition, these skills need to be practised until they are second nature.

4. Training

As indicated above, what makes a triathlete successful is never seen by the spectator. The race itself is just the tip of the iceberg and the hours of practice and training are what makes winning possible. The average club triathlete will train for 1-3 sessions per discipline per week, of varying distance and varying pace. Once a base level of fitness is established the next step is to improve speed and technique and then maintain this during the summer race season.

5. A Good Coach

At some point, however self-motivated, a triathlete will reach a plateau of personal fitness and skill. To progress beyond this requires a coach who can bring a different perspective to the training, objectively give feedback to the triathlete and act as a motivator and supporter.

So what parallels can be drawn between these strengths and those of a professional services company that is perceived as 'world class'? In my opinion, there is a direct correlation with the following:

1. Consistent standard of each discipline
2. Motivation and leadership
3. Skills and knowledge base
4. Continuous improvement
5. A good consultant

1. Consistent standard of each discipline

For any organisation, there are a number of core disciplines that need to be mastered if they can claim to be world-class; policy & standards, organisation & resources and systems & support all underpin a companies operation. Just like our triathlete, the world class company needs to be equally competitive at all disciplines to win.

The **policy & standards** are the procedures and guidelines of an organisation that define how the organisation does business. They set the quality standard for the organisation and, by the

nature of their repeatability, they have a direct influence on client satisfaction. The typical process flow for a professional services company is described in Figure 1:

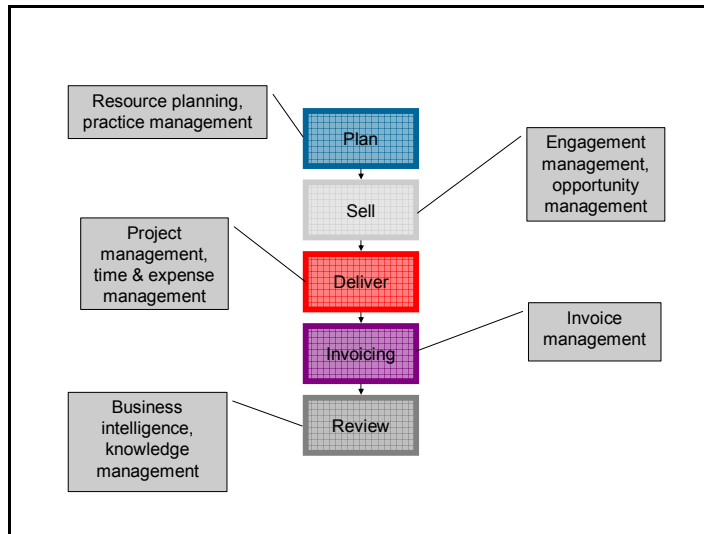


Figure 1: Core Disciplines - Policy and Standards

The **organisation & resources** of the service company are the raw materials from which the services are created. So careful thought needs to go into both the type of resource, in terms of technical skills and experience, and the way in which these are organised to meet the anticipated needs of the client base. A classic three level organisation is shown in Figure 2 but a structure based on client sector or service type may be just as valid.

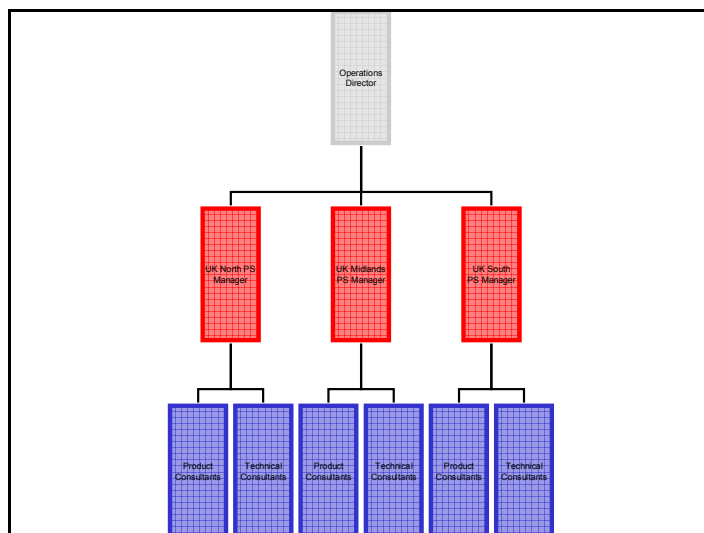


Figure 2: Disciplines - Organisation & Resources

Systems & support are necessary to ensure compliance with standards and policies but also to minimise the cost of the administration necessary to achieve this. The degree of sophistication of these support systems depends on the size and complexity of the service organisation. As Figure 3 shows, the simplest organisation can effectively operate with paper based procedures or basic PC applications, while more sophisticated companies will require departmental applications such as project accounting, or an enterprise-wide Professional Services Automation (PSA) application:

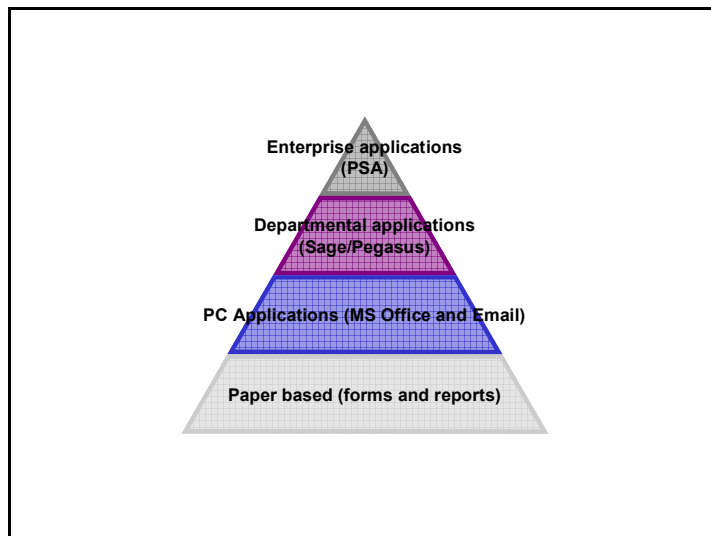


Figure 3: Core Disciplines - Systems & Support

2. Motivation & Leadership

One of the fundamental differences between a professional services company and, say, a manufacturing company is the impact poor morale can have on productivity and profitability. Nobody wants to work in an unhappy company but in a services business, there is a direct effect on quality and efficiency that can directly affect the performance of the organisation.

With a team of professional consultants to manage, the emphasis is on team building and coaching rather than supervision. Every staff member is looking for a career, not just a job, and so there is an added focus on personal development through new and challenging assignments, which needs to be balanced against company objectives of utilisation and productivity.

3. Skills and knowledge base

For our professional services company to become world class, it needs to continually develop new skills or update old ones that can be packaged into higher margin services. Just as a product has a shelf life, so does a service and only by refreshing the skills of the organisation can it continue to develop and grow.

New skills and service offerings impact all three key disciplines described above. Standards and policies need to be updated to take them into account, while resource organisation likewise needs to be reviewed. One positive benefit is that new services offer an opportunity for staff to tackle a new area of expertise and add to their personal development which can be very motivational. Finally, a system for maintaining the expertise of the organisation in a knowledgebase that can be used by all staff, will allow the value of the most experienced staff to be applied by the least experienced.

Just like our triathlete who improves their performance by perfecting their technique, by developing the key skills needed to deliver the right services and supporting with an effective knowledgebase, our world beating professional services company can become more productive and profitable.

4. Continuous improvement

Our triathlete knows that without continuous improvement by following a rigorous training program, he/she will soon lose their competitive edge. In the case of the professional services company, to stand still is equally fatal and instead there should be a program of incremental improvement in each of the three disciplines of standards & policies, organisation & resources and systems & support.

Incremental change has the advantage that it is relatively low risk, both in personnel and financial terms. Change management in a services organisation is primarily an exercise in people management and will necessarily involve a significant investment in team and individual training; if too big a step change is taken, the investment required to deliver this would have an impact both in direct cost of external training/consulting fees and indirect cost of lost income from fee-earning staff.

5. A Good Consultant

With a little reflection, most companies would be able to identify the need to grow by continuous improvement. But the majority of them would not be able to put in place such a program and effectively follow it without external help. Why is this? Well, just as our triathlete needs a coach to provide feedback and motivate them to improve further, so our professional services company needs an external consultant to help them become a world class organisation.

There are well recognised reasons for this; an external consultant can provide objective feedback about the company's performance and devise a 'training plan' of continuous improvement to take them to the next level. He/she can help coach them at a tactical level and provide motivation and support to the organisation. The consultant can deliver the knowledge and experience that may be missing in smaller, less developed organisations and act both as an agent of change and part of the management team.

So, in summary, the factors that make a triathlete a winner have a direct parallel with the factors that can make a professional services company world-class. By continuous development of the core disciplines of standards & policy (**what** is done), organisation & resources (**who** does it) and systems & support (**how** it is done), an ambitious and motivated company can grow in terms of productivity and profitability. To achieve this requires a process of incremental change supported by an external 'coach' who can challenge the organisation to try and do more, while giving them the confidence to take on the challenge.

About the author:

Steve Kirk AIMC is the founder and director of SGK Consulting. As a consultant, project manager and director, Steve has over 15 years experience in the enterprise software marketplace.

SGK Consulting helps ICT organisations to establish or develop their professional services operations to be more efficient, more productive and hence more profitable.

Steve also runs the triathlon group at Stratford upon Avon Athletic Club.