


[Home](#)
[Mission](#)
[Services](#)
[Testimonials](#)
[Clients](#)
[About](#)

You Are Here: SEP 2004



Focus

A Newsletter published for clients and friends of Wagner Consulting Group

SEP 2004

VOL. VII, NO. 3

Cultural Metaphors: Anthropology and Professional Service Firms

I had the notion that combining an anthropology lesson with organization concepts of professional service firms (i.e., accounting, architecture, engineering, law, etc.) would be interesting. At least it's different.

Hunters and Gatherers – A time of scarcity, simplicity, and leisure

Prior to 12,000 years ago, human beings were hunter-gatherers. Hunter-gatherers were relatively mobile, and groups of hunter-gatherers had fluid boundaries and composition. Opportunistic, they led a nomadic lifestyle, and had flexible and rapidly evolving cultures. The essence their economy was to exploit many resources lightly rather than to depend heavily on only a few. They had only a light impact on their environment.

Hunter-gatherer societies had only low-level social structures. They lived in a small, personal world defined by the band, which seldom consisted of more than 250 people. There was often a chief, but even the leader participated in collecting food. There was rarely surplus food, and this scarcity resulted in few bureaucrats or artisans.

Because of their mobile way of life and their methods of subsistence, hunting and gathering economies supported a low child-to-adult ratio. There were natural checks on fertility, so the human population stayed in balance with available resources.

These nomadic groups had few valuable possessions, and were consequently less fearful of outsiders. Moreover, pair bonding (“marriage”) between groups was common. Mergers between small groups would be likely.

For a professional service firm, a *Hunting* culture implies the following:

- Individual or small group entrepreneurialism
- Diversity and flexibility, with decentralized decision making
- Competitive internal atmosphere, with loose internal structure
- Management and rewards based on results (Eat what you kill)
- Low leverage (low Junior to Senior ratio)
- Highly variable types of work and clients, with shorter/smaller engagements
- Optimum market positioning: Creative, innovative, leading edge

Page Links

[Case Studies](#)
[Signup for our free newsletter](#)
[Newsletter Archives](#)
[Downloads](#)

- Grow by merger, and
- Expand by offering the same service in new markets

Farming – The rise of civilization

The first farmers appeared about 10,000 BC. Settled agricultural villages represented a radically new way of life for human beings, unlike anything that had existed before. First, agriculture means living permanently in one place. In addition, it formed the basis for a new way of life we call civilization.

With the emergence of a sedentary way of life:

- People could invest for the long term
- People devoted a considerable amount of effort building permanent dwellings
- Human tools no longer had to be portable, so the “tool kit” expanded
- Specialization becomes possible
- Wealth acquires meaning because one can accumulate desirable objects
- As specialization emerged, knowledge itself also became a form of wealth

One acre of land that is farmed can support 100 more people than an uncultivated acre. Unlike the self-limiting fertility rates of hunter-gatherer societies, agricultural populations tend to expand dynamically. Moreover, agricultural/civilized societies can have a profound impact on their environment. As human civilization evolved, scarcity steadily declined, but so did leisure time, and bureaucracy began its steady growth.

For a professional service firm, a *Farming* culture implies the following:

- Firmwide collaboration
- Focus and strategy, with coordinated decision making
- A cooperative internal atmosphere, with an organized internal structure
- Management and rewards based on values and judgment *in addition* to results
- High leverage (high Junior to Senior ratio)
- More focused work, larger clients, and larger/longer engagements
- Optimum market positioning: Reliable, efficient, thorough
- Seldom grow by merger, and
- Expand by offering a new service in an existing market

So what does this all mean? In a simplified Black & White world, a professional service firm would be either totally Hunter or completely Farmer. However, simple does not equal desirable. Still, a predominance of either the Hunter or Farmer culture would reflect a clear focus and a business that is theoretically easier to manage.

Tom Wagner

We help clarify options so our clients
identify the Right Questions
and solve the Right Problems.

Call us at 800 422-1374 to learn more.

Copyright 2006, Wagner Consulting Group, Inc.

[Home](#) | [Mission](#) | [Services](#) | [Testimonials](#) | [Clients](#) | [About](#)

Copyright 2011 Wagner Consulting Group, Inc. - (800) 422-1374