MANAGING GROWTH IN A KNOWLEDGE-BASED ORGANIZATION

– A case study of Alfa

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ABSTRACT
Alfa is one of the world’s leading IT advisory companies, with consulting abilities. Alfa Nordics is a successful part of Alfa focused on consulting in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Alfa Nordics will double their number of employees by the end of 2010 and we were asked to investigate how Alfa Nordics should enable this growth while keep being successful in having high profits, a strong brand, motivated employees and satisfied clients. By using theories about KBOs (Knowledge-Based Organizations) and conducting interviews with employees at Alfa Nordics we identified what makes Alfa Nordics successful today and what they should do to keep these success factors when growing. To keep their success within the organization Alfa should keep the execution teams small, recruit a dedicated resource manager and improve the knowledge exchange between the countries. To keep making successful engagements they should keep defining the problem in the best way for the client, ensuring sales and keep having the right employees. To keep their success in employing top consultants they should be visible in talented people environments, show that they are growing and develop a more thorough recruiting process.
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DEFINITIONS

Engagement: The assignments Alfa have with their clients. An engagement both includes the process where Alfa sells the assignment to the client, and the delivery process.

MANAGEMENT ROLES

Vice President (VP): Head of Alfa and the management team.

Partner (P): Senior consultant fully responsible for a vertical unit. That includes revenues, delivery quality and client relationships. The bulk of the P’s time should go to managing and developing client relationships, and ensuring that Alfa’s deliveries exceed expectations.

Associate Partner (AP): Senior consultant responsible for a vertical unit in one of the Nordic countries. The bulk of the AP’s time should also go to managing and developing client relationships, and ensuring that Alfa's deliveries exceed expectations.

Execution Team Manager (EM): Senior consultant working with deliveries and responsible for leading an execution team. This includes people management and career development of the consultants in the team. (interviews, Alfa)

DELIVERY CONSULTANT GRADING

Grade 1: Experienced consultants who can work as either engagement manager or delivery consultant in an engagement. The consultants working as APs or EMs are mostly at director level.

Grade 2: Work as engagement manager or delivery consultant in engagements.

Grade 3: Experienced consultants with 10+ years of experience.

Grade 4: Consultant with 5+ years of experience.

Operation Specialist (OS): Responsible for administrative work, for example handling the contracting process, financial management, resource management and helping consultants with documentation. (interviews, Alfa)
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND

In today's society, companies acquire much knowledge and problem solving from external resources. Business is no longer just an exchange of products, instead much business is exchange of knowledge. Today there are companies that make all their business of selling knowledge and problem solving to other companies. In this essay we call them Knowledge-Based Organizations. As an example of typical Knowledge-Based Organizations, there are today a big variety of consulting companies, helping other companies with everything from taxing, IT-strategy and cutting costs.

KBOs are characterized of not having any physical products, instead their products are their knowledge. The features of the products are that they are high-complex, non-standardized, creative and strongly dependent on individuals (Sveiby, 1989, p.13). Alvesson(2004) describes a KBO as an organization which is using advanced knowledge in order to create value for their clients. (Alvesson, 2004, p.29-30)

KBOs can be distinguished from other organizations, by looking at the nature of how it is managed, and how it is organized. KBOs have a high degree of autonomy, downplay organizational hierarchy and use flexible organizational structure. This is because there is a need for extensive communication in order for complex problem-solving activity to work. (Alvesson, 2004, p.21)

Alfa can be seen as a KBO and is one of the world's leading IT (Information Technology) and advisory companies. The Alfa brand is strong and stands for high quality, trustworthiness and knowledgeable in IT. (Alfa, 2008)

The consulting practice is staffed by senior consultants with "hands on" experience of delivering IT related engagements. They help clients use and manage IT to improve business performance. This could be by creating sustainable IT efficiency, or applying IT to drive improvements. (Alfa, 2008)
The consulting practice is divided into geographical groups. Alfa Nordics is one of these, and has three offices with employees in Sweden, Denmark and Norway. (interview, VP, Alfa)

1.2. FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM

Alfa Nordics started in the nineties and is a successful part of Alfa with a good reputation internationally. Since the start they have had high profitability, a strong brand, motivated employees and satisfied clients. (interview, VP, Alfa)

In the beginning of 2008 Alfa Nordics got a requirement from the Alfa head office; their revenue had to double by the end of 2010. To be able to reach that goal Alfa Nordics will have to double in size by the end of 2010. Henceforth we will refer to Alfa Nordics as Alfa.

Growth leads to change in the organization, which can be difficult in a KBO. It tends to add administrative costs, while diminishing the returns on competence used. Growth also tends to formalize networks into structures and the need to standardize processes and use rules increases (Nurmi, 1998, p. 29).

This is also stated by Jacobsen (2002), who claim that the need for rules and supervision grows, because when the number of employees gets too big, they can no longer stay in direct contact with each other (Jacobsen, 2002, p. 122)

This rapid growth will lead to changes and opportunities for Alfa, and to keep their success they need to handle the growth carefully. The features of a KBO, according to Alvesson (2004), are having a loose and non structured organization, which conflicts with the changes of growth that Nurmi (1998) states. Alfa's challenge is to have rapid growth while keeping their success. By success we mean having high profitability, a strong brand, motivated employees and satisfied clients.
1.3. PURPOSE OF THE ESSAY

The question for our essay is

*How will Alfa keep being successful when growing?*

To answer our question we will first, based on theories and interviews with employees at Alfa, identify Alfa’s success factors today within three focus areas; the organization, the engagements and the employees. Then, based on these success factors, we will give recommendations to what Alfa should do to keep being successful within these areas when doubling in size by the end of 2010.
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To help us fulfill the purpose of this essay and identify success factors for Alfa we have chosen to use theories stating features of a Knowledge-Based Organization within the organization and the employees. These theories will be presented in this chapter. We will not present any theories about the engagements since that area is completely based on the empirical material from the interviews with Alfa employees.

The theoretical framework used in this essay, were found in literature and academic articles. In them there are many different names for the definitions of a company like Alfa. We will consistently use the term Knowledge-Based Organization (KBO) in this essay and this is done not to confuse the reader with different names and terms. The theories will be used for three purposes; to help the reader understand Alfa as a KBO, to identify Alfa’s success factors and to support our conclusions.

2.1. FEATURES OF A KNOWLEDGE-BASED ORGANIZATION

A KBO (Knowledge-Based Organization) sells knowledge. It differs from other service companies in the complexity in the problems they solve, where a KBO solve complex, non-standardized problems. In a KBO it is not possible to standardize the operations, instead they have to treat each customer, more accurately called “client”, individually. The features of a KBO’s products is that they are strongly dependent on the individual, non-standardized, creative and complex. (Sveiby, 1989, p.11-13)

KBOs can be distinguished from other organizations, by looking at the nature of how it is managed, and how it is organized. (Alvesson, 2004, p.21)

2.2. THE ORGANIZATION

2.2.1. THE STRUCTURE OF THE ORGANIZATION

The organization of a company is traditionally regarded as a structure of two dimensions. Vertically it consists of layers of management and operations. Horizontally, it is divided into functions or units, each of which specializes in the
area of its expertise. Such a structural view however is not appropriate in a KBO. Instead the organization should be flat with few and penetrable layers, there should be no strong hierarchy and formal administration should be kept to a minimum (Nurmi, 1998, p. 28). This view is shared by Alvesson (2004, p.21) who believes KBOs should have a high degree of autonomy and downplay organizational hierarchy.

In a KBO, the organization should be decentralized and separated into small units. This leads to more people getting responsibility and authority, which lead to increased commitment and motivation among the employees. There should be flexible and loose organizational borders and no strict horizontal departments. This enables the employees to use each other to stimulate ideas and creativity, and have mutual exchange of information and knowledge (Nurmi, 1998, p. 27-28). Dalsgaard and Bendix (1998, p. 50) also state that flexible organizational borders are important for a KBO. The employees have use for each other’s competence, and in an organization with strong borders, the exchange will be more difficult. Optimal knowledge exchange is according to Dalsgaard and Bendix (1998, p. 181) one of the biggest challenge for a KBO. Alvesson (2004, p. 21) states that KBO’s use flexible organizational structure because there is a need for extensive communication in order for complex problem-solving activity to work.

2.2.2 MANAGING THE ORGANIZATION

The boundary between management and operations is blurred in a KBO. Nurmi (1998) claim that hierarchical managerial status without leadership based on competence is counterproductive, instead the management should participate in operations, thereby learning and adding to the knowledge and core competence of the company. Managers can best be characterized as experts who serve as part time managers. But managers also have internal roles, they provide help when needed and serve as senior mentors or experts. This is done by directing processes, rewarding and developing employees. (Nurmi, 1998, p. 29-30)
2.3. THE EMPLOYEES

To help us structure the success factors for the employees at Alfa, we will use Sveiby’s competence definition. We will also use theories to identify what kind of competence is important when working in a KBO and theories on how a KBO should handle recruitment.

According to Sveiby (1989, p.40), the knowledge is the KBO’s most important asset, and this knowledge is embedded in the employees. Therefore it is of high importance what employees the KBO has.

2.3.1. COMPETENCE OF THE EMPLOYEES

Sveiby (1996, p.106) states that competence can be divided into four parts.

- **Know-how**: “to do” Physical and intellectual skills to achieve results.
- **Values**: what you believe in and what feels right for you.
- **Knowledge** “to know” Knowledge obtained by information, for example academic studies.
- **Experience**: what you get from learning from your own mistakes and successes.

In a KBO, the employees should be willing to cooperate and be open to work in groups. They have to be self-managed and take responsibility (Nurmi, 1998, p. 180). It is also important that the employees share the same values. If they do, there is little need for steering and formal control. (Dalsgaard and Bendix, 1998, p. 29-30)

One value that distinguishes a KBO is that formal titles are not important. Titles constraints people and the KBO employee should not be limited to a work description or a title, instead the employee’s area of responsibility should defined by the actual task. (Dalsgaard and Bendix, 1998, p.55-56)

2.3.2. RECRUITING NEW EMPLOYEES

Alvesson (2004) also points out the importance of recruiting. The crucial issue is to recruit and retain employees with the best qualifications possible, given the nature of existing and potential tasks. The best company is the one able to
employ the best workers. Because of this, a lot of resources should go in to recruiting and selecting new employees. (Alvesson, 2004, p. 139)

It is always challenging to find and attract the right employees to a KBO. The best people can choose where they want to work and a company needs to be able to attract them in the hard competition. Attracting new employees are in many ways the same as attracting new clients and the company needs a strategy for doing this. (Sveiby, 1996, p. 25)

An important part of being able to attract the right people is having a plan for the recruitment. Successful organizations use a recruiting plan as an integrated part of its strategic thinking, and it is the most important strategic weapon to influence the organization’s direction, business concept and position in the market. By recruiting specific types of employees the management can change the company’s orientation, even without forming specific strategies. If the management doesn’t have a recruiting plan they will not be able to develop the organization in an aware way. Instead they risk to preserve a structure that will not be able to change together with the changes in the market. Management that have created a recruiting plan have instead gotten an active choice to develop the company’s knowledge and market position. (Sveiby, 1989, p. 72)

The features presented in the theories regarding the KBO organization and employees will be used in the analysis as support for our identification of, what we call, success factors. The theory about recruiting will serve as endorsement for our discussion about the importance of having a thorough recruiting plan.
3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, we will present the methodology of our research and how it will help us to fulfill the purpose of this essay. We will also present our method to analyze the data and discuss the criticism of our sources.

3.1. CHOOSING THE PROBLEM

We are writing this essay as an assignment from Alfa, and together we decided upon the purpose. We were to give an outside opinion about what competences Alfa will need in the following two years, when doubling in size, and what Alfa should do to keep being successful. By successful we mean having high profitability, a strong brand, motivated employees and satisfied clients.

The company wants to be anonymous and therefore we call it “Alfa” in this essay. We have also chosen to not specify the names of the interviewees, Alfa’s delivery consultant grades, numbers and execution and vertical areas.

Since our understanding of Alfa and the consulting business was very limited going into this process, we started looking into theories and conducting interviews with employees to learn more about Alfa. After having conducted a few interviews and studied theories about KBO:s we realized that we wouldn’t be able to give a good answer to what competences Alfa will need when growing. This was because there are no theories to help us analyze the situation, and the information we were given in the interviews were not detailed enough for us to make any conclusions. Instead we decided to focus on how Alfa should grow while being successful. We decided to identify what makes Alfa successful today i.e. identifying their success factors within three focus areas, these being the organization, the engagements and the employees, and what Alfa should do to keep being successful when growing.

3.2. OUR ANALYSIS MODEL

The question for this essay is extensive, and to decide upon how we were going to answer it, we started to study theories about KBOs and interviewing employees at Alfa. During this process, we developed our own analysis model to structure and analyze the data material. That model will be presented in this chapter.
First, based on the interviews and theories about KBOs, we decided to define successful as having high profits, a strong brand, satisfied clients and motivated employees. There are innumerable factors that affect the success of a KBO. We call them success factors. In an attempt to limit these factors, we decided to choose a few focus areas to look at.

We chose to focus on the organization, the engagements and the employees. The organization and the employees were chosen because theories and the interviewees at Alfa state them to be very important for their success. The engagements were chosen because the interviewees state that engagements are the core of Alfa and their business, and therefore also their success.

In our model we claim that the organization of Alfa affect their profits, the satisfaction of their clients and the motivation of their employees. Alfa´s engagements affect their profit, their brand and the satisfaction of their clients. Finally, the competence of Alfa´s employees affects their profit, their brand, the satisfaction of their clients and the motivation of their employees.

We decided to identify success factors within the focus areas that make Alfa successful today. This was done with help from theories and information from the interviews. We claim that if Alfa keep their success factors, they will keep being successful when growing.

This model will be used in this essay to analyze the data and give suggestions to what Alfa should do to keep being successful when growing.

3.3. SCOPE

For this essay the time limit was 10 weeks, and due to that we decided on the purpose and scope. We have only interviewed employees at Alfa, which means that the data presented in this essay is based on the employees’ thoughts about the company and its future. When talking about the future in this essay, the horizon is set to 2010.

We decided not to take any financial data into account and this essay is only based on interviews. This means our suggestions doesn’t have any economic justifications but are merely based on our reasoning. This thus means that our
conclusions are more like hypothesis about potential development areas and these should be validated and justified with more detailed financial analysis.

3.4. COLLECTING DATA

This essay is mainly based on interviews with employees at Alfa. There is also information from the Alfa homepage and a theoretical framework taken from literature and scientific articles.

3.4.1. INTERVIEWS

Together with the Vice President (VP) of Alfa, we choose to interview the Partners (Ps), Execution Managers (EMs), Associate partners (APs), delivery consultants and an Operation Specialist (OS). The management was chosen because they have a good understanding of how Alfa works, and the delivery consultants and the Operation Specialist because we wanted to get a perspective from the delivery and administrative side of the organization. We have conducted 12 interviews, each lasting about an hour. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

The interviews were qualitative and semi-structured. We choose this approach because we needed to get a good understanding of Alfa, the organization and its dynamics to be able to fulfill our purpose and identify what makes them successful and what they should do to keep this success when growing. The semi-structured interviews gave the interviewee a chance to decide what to focus on and express what they considered to be important.

During the interview process we got a deeper understanding of Alfa and their situation which led to new questions. Because of this, every interviewee didn’t get the same questions, but everyone got a chance to express their opinions about the three focus areas.

3.4.2. WRITTEN SOURCES

After reading many theories from different authors we decided to use theories from Sveiby (1986, 1996), Nurmi, (1998) Alvesson (2004), Jacobsen (2002) and Dalsgaard and Bendix (1998) because they are applicable to a company like Alfa,
and help us identify success factors for Alfa. The data taken from Alfa’s homepage consists of information about Alfa’s business and operation areas.

3.5. OPERATIONALIZATION OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theories we have read about KBOs in the research for this essay helped us to get an understanding of KBOs and their features. They were, together with the first interviews with Alfa’s employees, the basis for our choice of the three focus areas and the questions for the following interviews. All of these theories are not presented in this essay as their relevance for the purpose was considered too small.

The theories presented in this essay are mainly used to help identify success factors within the different focus areas at Alfa.

3.6. OUR INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA

The information and opinions have varied quite a lot from person to person and the interviewees have not always focused on the same things. This makes the data hard to categorize. We have tried to be as objective as possible, but ultimately the data is colored by our opinions and prejudice. We have also tried to let the reader know how many of the interviewees agree on specific things using phrases like “all of them”, “many of them”, “a few of them” and “one of them”. When writing for example “many of them” agree on something, it does not mean that the others disagree. Generally not all of the interviewees expressed an opinion about specific matters. If there is a disagreement among the interviewees, we have tried to explicitly state so.

3.7. CRITICISM OF THE METHODOLOGY

We started out without any hypothesis and with open interviews. We didn’t have any information about Alfa before we started with the interviews. This made it difficult to ask specific questions. The more interviews we conducted, the more information we got and this made us focus more on areas which we found interesting. The structure of the interviews changed slightly during the interview process. The effect of this is that the data is not as comparative as it could have been, if we had conducted more structured interviews and kept the same
questions. Another effect of this is that we didn't make the interviewees in the early interviews focus as hard on the focus areas of this essay, as we did with the interviewees later in the process.

3.8. CRITICISM OF THE SOURCES

We got a strong suggestion from the VP to interview these specific persons inside Alfa. We were free to interview others as well, but because of the time limit we chose not to.

Six of the interviewees, the MPs and APs, are persons who are mainly responsible for sales. This makes the essay more focused towards sales and has a sales perspective.

When interviewing persons and asking for their opinions, the information you get, is always colored by the person's personal goals and agenda. Because of this, the data in this essay are not objective and should not be treated as facts, as it is the interviewees’ colored opinions.

Our limited knowledge of Alfa and consulting business has made it hard for us to value the information we were given in the interviews.
4. EMPIRICAL FOUNDATION

In this chapter, we will present the information about the three focus areas from the interviews with employees at Alfa. We will describe each focus area, what the challenges are now and when growing.

4.1. THE ORGANIZATION

Alfa has offices in Stockholm with 50 % of employees, Oslo with 25 % of the employees and Copenhagen with 25 % of the employees. All the employees are based in one of the countries, but are shared in the organization, and can work in engagements in any of the countries. (interviews, Alfa)

Since last year, Alfa have had a new organizational model which can be seen in figure 1. In this model the client market is divided into four vertical units; A, B, C and D. For each vertical there is a Partner (P) who, in some verticals, together with Associate Partners (APs), is responsible for sales of engagements, staffing of engagements and reaching Alfa’s financial target in that vertical. The Vice President (VP) is responsible for the total financial target for Alfa. (interviews, Alfa)

Together with the verticals there are three execution teams that specialize in a specific area of competence and span horizontally over every vertical. All delivery consultants are placed in one of these teams based on their competence. There is team X with 70 % of the delivery consultants, team Y with 15 % of the delivery consultants and a team Z with 15 % of the delivery consultants. Each of these teams is led by an Execution Manager (EM) who is responsible for people management, reaching the financial target, and an expert in the execution area. The purpose of the teams is that consultants with competence within the same area should be able to exchange experiences and develop their knowledge in that area. The Alfa organization also includes Operation Specialists (OSs), which are administrative roles.
4.1.1. ORGANIZATION OF THE EMPLOYEES

All the consultants at Alfa have either a management or a delivery consultant role. All the delivery consultants have a grade, based on experience, which is linked to their salary.

4.1.2. CHALLENGES FOR THE ORGANIZATION

The Ps/APs all express that they don’t really care about which execution team or which grade the consultants have when choosing them for an engagement, the consultant’s competence and suitability is more important. Many of the interviewees agree this kind of more informal approach can be challenging when the organization grows and the managers cannot personally know all of the consultants. Today Alfa have a formal process for how to staff the engagements, where the VP, EMs and Ps/APs together decide on who are the best consultants available. Many of the interviewees feel though that Alfa needs to develop a more well organized staffing model that is less dependent on managers’ knowing the individual consultants as part of this growth process.

Many of the interviewees are satisfied with the current organization and its features since it gives them big possibilities to work on different projects, with different people and in different roles. They find this motivating and according to

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**Figure 1: The organization model of Alfa (power-point presentation, Alfa, 2008)**
one of the interviewees, only a few people have left Alfa since the start in the nineties.

Today, the interviewees try to minimize their administrative work to be able to spend more time on delivery and sales. A few think they need more help with administration when growing, while many others feel that it is unnecessary with too much administration since it can lead to more costs.

The EMs express that the execution teams should be a place for knowledge exchange and skill development. The EMs says they can manage an execution team of up to 10-12 consultants. The interviewees emphasize that it is very important that people from different execution teams are flexible and work together on engagements.

All of the interviewees agree on that Alfa should have a good cooperation between the countries. Consultants based in Sweden should be able to work in Denmark or Norway and vice versa. This improves the knowledge exchange in the organization. Today, most of the consultants work in their home countries, mostly due to the fact that Alfa is selling too much in the different countries, in order to be able to use consultants across borders. Also cultural and linguistic barriers are given as a reason. The interviewees feel there can be improvements in this area when growing.

4.2. THE ENGAGEMENTS

All of the interviewees are convinced that much of Alfa’s success in the past have been due to their engagements. Alfa is a premium priced consultancy and therefore it is of highest importance that the clients are not just satisfied with what Alfa delivers. As one of the interviewees pointed out:

“Our clients expect to be surprised when hiring Alfa”

Alfa’s aim is to solve complex problems for their clients. According to the interviewees the client often doesn’t know what their problem is, just that they have one. They come to Alfa because they think Alfa is the consultancy that is most qualified to consult them.

The engagements can be divided into two parts, the sale and the delivery.
4.2.1. SALES

Alfa has historically had very good sales records and today they are selling more than they can deliver. They are thus heavily importing also resources from their international organization to work with the Nordic clients. Ps/APs are responsible for selling engagements at Alfa. Each of them have their own clients, meaning that they are responsible for client relationship management with a specific set of clients, trying to understand their targets and problems and sell consulting to them. Alfa sells their engagements usually at a fixed price depending on the value for the client. When the engagement is sold, the P/AP together with VP and EMs, puts together a team of delivery consultants from the three horizontal execution teams who are the best ones to make the delivery for the client. (Interviews, Alfa)

The interviewees claim an essential factor for being able to sell engagements is that Ps/APs have good relations with their clients. These good relationships are always based on successful consulting projects in the past that have exceeded clients’ expectations. Alfa’s strategy is heavily based on serving the existing clients in the better way. This thus means that Alfa is not looking for new clients even when the key objective is to double the business volumes in two years. Therefore it is very important that the Ps/APs keep having a good relationship with their existing clients.

The key success factor for Alfa’s Ps/APs is that they are seen as advisors for the client, and not just sales persons, who knows the client’s main issues. In that way Alfa can recommend to the client what they need to do in order to solve their problem, and how Alfa can help them to do that. Ps/APs are also always in the end of day responsible for ensuring that Alfa’s projects exceed clients’ expectations. They need to thus always be involved in steering the delivery work. The level of involvement depends on the many factors, like maturity of project manager and team, and overall complexity of an engagement. (Interviews, Alfa)

Many of the interviewees emphasize that the client doesn’t always know what their problem is, and that Alfa needs to put a lot of focus on finding and understanding the real problem before it can be solved. When doing this, Alfa
suggests the best solution for the client and not the one that brings the highest financial benefits for Alfa.

4.2.1.1. CHALLENGES IN SALES

According to the interviewees, a key problem for Ps in any consultancy is to balance their time between business development and delivery management. If Ps spends more time in delivery, their immediate sales performance might suffer. On the other hand, only successful engagements create strong client relationships and credibility that the Ps needs to be successful in the longer run.

Most of the interviewees in Alfa also agree that the Ps/APs should have the main responsibility for sales when growing, though everyone in the organization should keep their eyes open for new business opportunities. Some Ps/APs felt that they would need more support from the delivery consultants when the growth expectations get higher. Today delivery consultants in Alfa don't get credited about sales in any way, and many of the interviewees believe this could lead them to miss some major sales opportunities.

Alfa has however been a very successful organization over the years, and the sales has not been a problem for them. The key bottleneck has always been delivery capacity. Alfa must thus be very careful in ensuring that they will develop their sales capacity well in accordance with its delivery capacity, and steering current delivery consultants to use more time in sales does not really support that direction. (Interviews, Alfa)

In the current business development model there is one P in each vertical and additionally several APs across different verticals. Some of the Ps/APs are of the opinion that they should be responsible for fewer clients going forward so that they can work more closely together with them. Additional complexity comes currently from the fact that several Ps/APs have clients across different countries. Some of the Ps/APs would like to be more focused on clients in one single country and believe Alfa should recruit more Ps / APs going forward. Other interviewees emphasize that the delivery capacity traditionally has been a bigger problem for Alfa than sales and any developments in the sales area must be done well in accordance with increases in delivery capability.
4.2.1. DELIVERING

The interviewees describe that on a typical engagement the delivery team consists of 2-5 consultants, each with different competencies and experiences. The teams change for every engagement, depending on the characteristics of the delivery. There is usually one engagement manager who is responsible for the engagement. This can either be the P/AP or one of the delivery consultants, depending on the complexity of the engagement. How the consultants organize their work and what roles they take in the team are flexible and up to them to decide. The key is to ensure that each and every delivery exceeds client expectations.

The interviewees state that Alfa treats every client individually. Every client is unique, their problems are unique and there is no standard way of solving their problems. Because of this, Alfa does not focus on solving the client’s problems by offering specific “solutions”, instead they sell their intellectual property and people, who in their best way will help the client. All interviewees agree that the clients and their needs should always be in focus.

Many of the interviewees claim that Alfa’s intellectual property and their people make them unique on the market, and it is important that they use these to provide extremely pragmatic solutions for the clients. The clients are not interested in “fancy” theory, they want practical solutions that make their business better.

According to the interviewees, the employees at Alfa are very good at working in teams. The delivery teams are often small, which demands much responsibility and self-management from the members. The interviewees claims everyone in the teams bring value, making the team work very efficiently and come up with solutions for the client in a very short period of time. As the clients are paying for the solution and the value that it is providing for them, the business model for Alfa generate high profits.
4.3. THE EMPLOYEES

4.3.1. COMPETENCE

According to the interviewees, the employees are very important for Alfa and Alfa does not have just any consultants, they have the best ones. Here we are going to present the things that the interviewees claim are the most important features of Alfa’s employees.

The employees are self-starters and self managed and able to work without any significant need of guidance and supervision. They are analytical and are able to tell the client something the client has not thought of. They are also inquisitive, wanting and being able to seek out and use new knowledge and research.

The employees combine confidence with humbleness and are prestigeless. They are team players and do not chase their own economic targets but strive to do what is best for Alfa and the team. They are flexible and enjoy working on new engagements, with new people, new clients and in new roles. They are motivated by challenges and solving complex problems and not by money.

The employees have backgrounds in consulting, and very good understanding and experience of IT. They are very competent in at least one of Alfa’s execution areas, and experience.

4.3.2. RECRUITING EMPLOYEES

In this part we will discuss how the recruiting is done at Alfa, by first describing how the process works today in finding and choosing candidates.

4.3.2.1. THE RECRUITING PROCESS

Today there are several ways for how Alfa search for new candidates. Either they use a recruitment unit in the UK who handle the process, or the consultants at Alfa use their contact networks to find good candidates. When they have found a candidate that might match their need, people in the management team, depending on the position they are recruiting for, conduct 2-4 interviews. There is no standard structure for the interview. It is up to the interviewer to ask what he/she thinks is important and relevant.
After the interview the candidate prepare and present a case to parts of the management team. If the candidate meets Alfa’s requirements, an offer will be given. The new employee will then be given a grade, based on his/her competence, and be placed in an execution team. (interviews, Alfa)

Alfa has, according to the interviews, during its years in business, only had a few unsuccessful recruitments. When growing, they need to ensure they keep the same quality. Previously, Alfa has not been recruiting in this pace, and therefore, the interviewees feel they need to develop their recruiting practices.

4.3.2.2. CHALLENGES IN RECRUITING

FINDING CANDIDATES

All of the interviewees agree on that a mix of recruiting from contact network and head-hunting agencies is the best. They claim the good thing about recruiting through contact networks is that Alfa already know much about the person and his/her competence, so they don't need to test the competence as much. But many interviewees also point out that contact networks are limited, and Alfa risks to miss out on good candidates that are not part of their network.

Many agree on that Alfa, when growing rapidly, should improve the candidate search, to secure they keep recruiting only top consultants. The interviewees believe that there are many good candidates out there, and Alfa gets many applications from people today, but it is always challenging finding the right ones.

Many of the interviewees emphasizes that the Alfa brand is very strong and does not need any more marketing or visibility. There are a few who disagree and think that Alfa should be more visible in environments that have talented persons, for example Universities and other consultancies and show that they are growing. There are also suggestions to be seen at external seminars, roundtables and discussion forums.
RECRUITING EMPLOYEES

According to the interviewees, everyone in the management team has a responsibility for recruiting though it is not part of their primary targets, which makes recruiting less prioritized. The interviewees in the management team see the recruiting as time consuming, and they feel they won’t be able to spend enough time on it when growing. All the interviewees think that the managements should stay involved in the process but that someone should have recruiting as a main high priority, either internally or externally.

Most of the interviewees think that the recruiting process needs to be developed because of the significant growth targets. They believe it can be risky to expand without making any changes in how the recruiting is done.

CANDIDATE INTERVIEW

Many of the interviewees think that Alfa’s recruitment process is depending at the moment too heavily on the pre-selection based on applications and then case studies. This in practice means that too many candidates end up failing badly in the case presentation as their competences and background are not thoroughly enough investigated in the actual interviews. When the recruitment volumes go up in Alfa, it must be able to eliminate unsuccessful candidates as early as possible in the process meaning that interviews must be planned and conducted more thoroughly. Alfa must be able to make sound, fact-based go / no-go decisions after each and every interview to ensure effectiveness of its recruitment process.
5. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the analysis, we will present the success factors for Alfa in the three focus areas and look at the challenges Alfa will meet when growing. In the conclusions, presented for each focus area, we will state how these success factors bring Alfa success. Finally we will give suggestions to what Alfa should do to keep being successful in the focus areas when doubling in size by the end of 2010. We will start with the organization, move on to the engagements, the employees and finally summarize our conclusions in a final conclusion where we will fulfill the purpose and answer the question for this essay.

5.1. THE ORGANIZATION

Alfa’s organization leads to success by increasing the profits and the motivation of the employees.

5.1.1. THE SUCCESS FACTORS TODAY

As stated by Nurmi (1998), Alvesson (2004) and Dalsgaard and Bendix (1998), the features of a KBO is that they have loose and flexible organizational borders, small work groups, decentralization, leaders who participate in operations and develop the employees, a high degree of autonomy and no strong hierarchy, little administration and an optimal knowledge exchange. These features lead to increased commitment and motivation among the employees and it stimulates ideas and creativity, which are essential when working with complex problem-solving.

Alfa has many of these features in their organization today and the interviewees claim to be motivated and satisfied. Consultants from different execution teams, work together in small groups on engagements, and take different roles in the team depending on the engagement and their competence. This is a sign that today's organization is very flexible and have loose borders.

The organization is decentralized in the way that the composition of the teams and the roles within the teams change with every engagement. This creates a shifting leadership among the delivery consultants. Also, the organization has many different leader roles such as Ps, APs, EMs and the VP.
The leaders all participate in the deliveries and the EMs are responsible for the people management and knowledge exchange in their execution teams.

All of the interviewees express that the grades of the consultants are not so important, pointing towards that there is no strong hierarchy in the organization. The administration is kept low, with only a few administrative employees in the organization.

According to the interviewees, one success factor of the organization is that they are able to use the total competence in the organization effectively, by staffing their engagements with consultants best suited for the specific delivery. This is often due to the VPs, EMs and P/APs personal knowledge of the all consultants and their competences.

5.1.2. CHALLENGES WHEN GROWING

Jacobsen (2002) and Nurmi (1998) states that a rapid increase in size can be problematic in a KBO. It tends to add administrative costs, while diminishing the returns on competence used and formalize networks into structures. It creates a growing need to use rules and standardizations because the employees can no longer stay in direct contact with each other. This conflict with the success factors mentioned above. This conflict can also be seen among the interviewees at Alfa; the need for more structure, management and administration when recruiting new employees versus wanting to stay flexible.

Another challenge for the future is improving the cooperation between the countries. Today most of the consultants only work in their home country which blocks the knowledge exchange between the countries.

5.1.3. CONCLUSIONS

The success factors we have identified in Alfa’s organization are their small and changing delivery teams, EMs who work in deliveries and handle people management, a changing power structure, little administration and knowledge exchange in the execution teams. These factors have led to a creative environment where the employees are motivated.
Another success factor in the organization is their way of staffing the engagements, based on the Ps/APs personal knowledge of the consultants and their competence. This has enabled an effective use of the consultants, contributing to high profits. It has also led to the use of the best competences on specific deliveries, leading to top quality deliveries, contributing to satisfied clients.

To keep being successful in these areas, Alfa has to keep the flexibility in the organization but at the same time make sure that they can handle staffing, people management and knowledge exchange when growing.

These are our suggestions to what Alfa should do to keep being successful when growing.

- **Keep the execution teams small**

  Alfa should have small execution teams, each led by an EM. The EM should be responsible for the knowledge exchange and the skill development of the delivery consultants. Based on what the current EMs have said there should not be more than 10 -12 delivery consultants in each execution team because the EMs will not be able to coach larger teams than that. We believe this will lead to a good knowledge exchange between the team members and help with their personal development.

- **Recruit a dedicated resource manager**

  Alfa should recruit a dedicated resource manager. This person should keep track of the consultants and their competences to help the management in staffing the engagements in the best way. We believe this could help Alfa when the organization grows because the management will not be able to personally know all the consultants and their competences anymore.

- **Improve the knowledge exchange between the countries**

  When Alfa is growing, the possibilities for consultants to work in different countries will also grow since there will be more consultants “free” in the
different countries. Alfa should enable this and not let cultural or linguistic barriers stand in the way. We believe this will lead to a better knowledge exchange between the countries.

5.2. THE ENGAGEMENTS

*Alfa’s engagements leads to success by increasing the profits, the brand and the satisfaction of their clients.*

5.2.1. THE SUCCESS FACTORS TODAY

We have divided the engagements into two parts; sales and delivering. We will here discuss why and how Alfa are successful in engagements.

5.2.1.1. SALES

The P/APs are successful in selling engagements. This is partly thanks to their good relationships with their clients. Ps/APs must have strong role in ensuring that the deliveries to their clients are successful. Good relationships are only built with successful actions. They have also been good at putting the clients’ need before their own financial targets. This is the only way which enables them to be successful in their P/AP role in the longer run.

5.2.1.2. DELIVERING

Today, the deliveries are successful. Alfa consistently help solving complex problems and exceed their clients’ expectations. This is done by treating the client individually and putting the client’s problem in focus. Alfa have also been successful by having access to valuable research which they use to make the best decisions for the client.

The consultants at Alfa are very good at working in teams, where everyone in the team takes responsibility and work efficiently to make the deliveries as good and as efficient as possible.

5.2.2. CHALLENGES WHEN GROWING

When growing, it is important that Alfa can increase their sales of engagements to be able to support the new employees, otherwise they risk having consultants unoccupied. This will raise the pressure on the Ps/APs.
When it comes to continuing making successful deliveries while growing, they need to make sure they keep solving complex problems and keep surprising their clients in their deliveries.

5.2.3. CONCLUSIONS

Alfa is successful in sales because the Ps/APs have good relationships to their clients, are seen as advisors and put the clients problem in focus. This makes them able to sell engagements with high margins keeping the profits high.

In the deliveries, they have managed to solve complex problems and surprise their clients, which have kept the clients satisfied and Alfa’s brand strong. Alfa have also been able to deliver efficient, contributing to high profits.

When growing, Alfa has to ensure they sell enough and with acceptable margins to support all the employees and keep their financial performance at the required level, and that they keep delivering according to expectations by strengthening their brand and continue to have satisfied clients.

These are our suggestions on what Alfa should do to keep being successful when growing.

• *Keep defining the problem in the best way for the client*

When Alfa is growing rapidly, the Ps/APs will have bigger pressure to increase the sales, so that the financial target is reached, a goal that is going to double the following two years. Because of this, we believe there is a risk that Ps/APs start selling engagements that are financially beneficial for Alfa rather than the best solution for the client. The Ps/APs also have to make sure they don’t favor any of Alfa’s execution areas. To do this, every P/AP need to have a good knowledge about all of Alfa’s execution areas, and how they can help the client.

• *Ensuring the sales*

It is difficult for the P/AP to balance between selling and delivering. They have to keep strong relationships with all their clients, at the same time seek new engagements, and be involved in the delivery.
Today, Alfa are selling more than they can deliver but when growing, they need to sell more to support the new consultants. We have three suggestions for making the sales more stable when growing and not suffer at the expense of the complexity of the deliveries. All increases in sales capacity must be done well in accordance with changes in delivery capability.

1. *Having more consultants with high seniority in the organization*, who have enough knowledge and experience to be able to take responsibility and lead more complex engagements. This way, the EMs, Ps and APs will not get “too” involved in the deliveries, making the sales suffer.

2. *Having more management with sales targets*. By this, each person will be responsible for fewer clients, and in that way be able to work more with the deliveries. This could be by having additional APs with sales targets in the verticals.

3. *Having delivery consultants more engaged in sales*. Alfa must however be very careful with this as its key bottleneck has always been delivery capacity, not sales.

• *Having the right people*

To be able to deliver in the same quality as now, when growing, Alfa need to make sure they have people who are able solve complex problems for the clients and do it fast. In the following chapter we will present what kind of people are the “right” ones and what Alfa should do to ensure they can recruit them.
5.3. THE EMPLOYEES

Alfa’s employees leads to success by increasing the profits, the brand, the motivation of the employees and the satisfaction of their clients.

5.3.1. THE SUCCESS FACTORS TODAY

According to Sveiby (1989), the knowledge is the KBOs most important asset, and the knowledge is embedded in the employees. The employees of Alfa have the following competence presented by Sveiby’s definition.

- **Know-how**

  The employees working at Alfa are responsible and self-managed. They also have very high intellectual skills, they are inquisitive and are able to take theories and research and translate them into practical solutions for their clients. With this know-how they are able to solve complex problems for the clients and tell them something the client has not thought of.

- **Values**

  When the organizational structure in a KBO like Alfa is put to minimal, the importance of the employees sharing the same values increases. If they share the same values they know the boundaries and don’t have the need for formal steering (Dalsgaard and Bendix, 1998, p. 29-30).

  One important value for a KBO stated by Dalsgaard (1998), is that the employees are not focused on formal titles. The employees area of responsibility is defined by the task, and not a title that constraints him/her. We have identified this value among the employees at Alfa, who argue that they don’t care about their titles. The employees are prestigeless and able to work in different positions, with flexible leader settings.

  Another important value at Alfa is that the employees focus on what is best for the company. This concerns for example the managers’ financial target, where they focus on Alfa reaching its total financial target, rather than their own. Also, the employees at Alfa are not motivated by money, they are
motivated by working in a challenging environment and solving complex problems for the clients.

- Knowledge and experience

The employees at Alfa don't just have the right know-how and values, they also have deep knowledge and experience in Alfa's head orientation - IT.

5.3.2. CHALLENGES WHEN GROWING

According to Alvesson (2004), the best company, is the one able to recruit the best workers and that a lot of time and resources in a KBO should go into recruiting and selecting new employees. Alfa has to ensure they keep recruiting top consultants when growing.

5.3.2.1. ATTRACTING TOP CONSULTANTS

According to Sveiby (1996), attracting top consultants is hard, since the best people can be picky about where they want to work. Attracting new employees are in many ways the same as attracting new clients and KBOs need a strategy for doing this.

Many of the interviewees believe that the Alfa brand is strong enough to make people apply and want to work at Alfa. A few believe they could be more visible in talented people environments and show that they are growing.

5.3.2.2. THE RECRUITING PROCESS

According to Sveiby (1989) a recruiting plan should be an integrated part of the strategic thinking in every successful management. The recruiting plan is the most strategic weapon to influence the organization's direction and position in the market. A KBO that develop a recruiting plan will have an active choice to develop their knowledge and market position.

The recruiting process at Alfa has not been treated as a focus area in the past, where the focus has fully been on building client relationships and exceeding client expectations in every individual engagement. Everyone in managing positions has been responsible for taking part in the recruiting, but this is not a part of their target, which makes it low prioritized. The recruiting process has
been working well so far but many of the interviewees are afraid that it will not be able to handle the heavy recruiting the following two years and that it will take a lot of time and resources in the organization from selling and delivering.

5.3.3. CONCLUSIONS

We have concluded that the success factors for the Alfa employees are their specific set of competence. All of the stated features within this competence combined are what makes Alfa successful regarding their employees.

Employees with the stated features are likely to be motivated working at Alfa where they share the same values and are able to work in a challenging environment.

Employees with the stated know-how, experience and knowledge are able to satisfy Alfa’s clients and sustain their brand by surprising the clients in every delivery.

Employees with the stated competence who are aligned to the organization are able to make top quality deliveries in a short period of time leading to high profits.

For Alfa to keep being successful in only having top consultants in their organization when growing rapidly, they need to ensure they attract, recruit and introduce top consultants. Based on the interviews, these are our suggestions to what Alfa should do to keep being successful when growing.

• **Being visible in talented people environments.**

Alfa consulting should be more visible in talented people environments, where they can expect to find top consultants that suits the organization, for example at the big management consulting companies.

• **Show that they are growing.**

As one of the interviewees pointed out, it can be a competitive advantage for Alfa to show that they are recruiting, despite the financial crisis. Top
consultants who feel unsecure at their positions at their company, will be more willing to change to Alfa, which feels more safe and stable.

- **Focusing more on recruiting**

Alfa should focus more on the recruiting. This could be done by making someone internally or externally responsible for recruiting. The management should still be involved but the main responsibility should not be theirs. Otherwise, when growing rapidly, recruiting will take a lot of valuable time and energy from selling and delivering.

- **Develop a more thorough recruiting plan**

1. **Identifying the need.** To be able to meet the need on the market Alfa have to identify what people and competences is needed.

2. **Specifying the need.** State what position and grade they are recruiting for and what competence and experience is needed for that position.

3. **Searching for the person.** When Alfa knows what person they want, they need to know where to search for this person. Based on the interviews, we believe a mix of recruiting from contact network or head-hunting agencies is the best way to go.

4. **Testing the person.** After finding a person who seems to have the qualifications to suit the position, the person has to be tested on his/her competence to make sure he/she fulfills the need. This should be done during the interview process. To ensure the quality of the consultants they recruit, all candidates should be asked the same basic questions. Then, dependent on which position they apply for, they should be thoroughly tested on the relevant knowledge and experience that is needed.

Alfa is currently using a recruitment plan as a key recruitment tools. However based on the interviews, we have a hypothesis that Alfa should benefit from developments in these areas, especially due to the fact that they will recruit much more consultants than ever before. However, validating this hypothesis
would need a lot of additional work that is not reasonable within the scope of this study.
6. FINAL CONCLUSION
Alfa is a successful company with high profits, a strong brand, motivated employees and satisfied clients.

The purpose of this essay was to give suggestions to what Alfa should do to keep being successful, when doubling in size by the end of 2010 by identifying success factors within three focus areas; the organization, the engagements and the employees.

To keep having a successful organization with motivated employees and high profits, Alfa need to keep their success factors and should keep the execution teams small, recruit a dedicated resource manager and improve the knowledge exchange between the countries.

To keep having successful engagements with high profits, satisfied clients and a strong brand, Alfa need to keep their success factors and should keep defining the problem in the best way for the client, ensuring sales and keep having the right people.

To keep having successful employees enabling high profits, a strong brand, motivated employees and satisfied clients, Alfa need to keep their success factors and they should be visible in talented people environments, show that they are growing, and develop a more thorough recruiting plan.
REFERENCE LIST

PUBLISHED MATERIAL


Alfa (2008), Alfa.com

ORAL SOURCES

1 VP, Alfa, (2008-11-21)


2 Associate Partners, Alfa, (2008-11-12)


2 Delivery consultants, Alfa, (2008-11-21)

1 Operation Specialist, Alfa, (2008-11-05)
APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, VICE PRESIDENT

Background

Earlier work experience, how long at Alfa and in which roles?

The Vice President Role

What responsibilities? What work tasks? How much time do you spend on different tasks? Would you like to change anything regarding your role?

Alfa

How do other companies see Alfa? Is the brand well known? Does people in the business know that Alfa is going to recruit? How does Alfa differ from other consulting companies? What is Alfa best at?

Organization

What do you think about the organization today? What is good, what can be improved?

The Execution teams: How big should they be? What is their purpose? How is the knowledge exchange between the countries?

The Verticals: Can the current Ps and APs can sell enough to support Alfa when growing? What is the relation between the P and the AP and their financial targets?

Selling: If a consultant sells an assignment, is that rewarded? Do you think more sales should come from consulting?

Knowledge exchange: What is the relationship between the different countries? Do consultants from the different countries work together? Which country do you think has the biggest potential?
The recruitment process

What do you think about the recruitment process today?

Are you able to find the right people? How could it be improved? Who should recruit? Locally in the different countries or central in the Nordics?
How do you find the right people for Alfa? Personal network? Head hunting agencies? Other marketing?
How are you going to take care of the new employees?

Growth

Why is Alfa growing so rapidly?

Do you feel that Alfa is missing any specific competences?

How is Alfas financial situation?

How are you going to handle the financial situation?
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, PARTNER

Background, the Partner role

Who are you?

What are your responsibilities?

What are the biggest challenges/ difficulties/ problems in your role? Are you satisfied with your role and what comes with it?

Engagements

What is your relation to the client?

How is the process for a typical engagement?

Example on a typical assignment?

The Vertical

How does your vertical look like today?

How profitable is your area for Alfa? How could it be more profitable?

Alfa

What is Alfas success factors?

What should Alfa do to secure/guarantee new engagements in the future? Where lies the biggest challenges?

The Growth

Alfa is growing. How do you think this should be done?

What kind of competences do you need more of?

What are the key factors that will assure Alfa being able to grow and still be profitable?

In what ways has the financial crisis affected Alfa? Will you have to change any of your strategies due to this?
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, ASSOCIATE PARTNER

Background, the Associate Partner role

Who are you?

How do you work together with Partners?

What are the biggest challenges/difficulties in your role? Are you satisfied with your role and what comes with it?

Engagements

What is your relation to the client?

How is the process for a typical engagement?

The Vertical

How does the vertical market look like today in the Nordic countries?

How will the market develop the coming years?

Does the market in your country differ from the or the other Nordic countries?

Recruiting process

Is it difficult to find the right competences? More difficult in specific countries?

What competences are needed when growing? What is the most important things for the people that you recruit? Know-how, knowledge, experience, values?

Alfa

What is Alfa’s success factors?

What should Alfa do to secure/guarantee new engagements in the future? Where lies the biggest challenges?

The growth

Alfa is growing. How do you think this should be done?
What kind of competences do you need more of?

What are the key factors that will assure Alfa being able to grow and still be profitable?

In what ways has the financial crisis affected Alfa? Will you have to change any of your strategies due to this?
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, EXECUTION MANAGER

Background, the Execution Manager Role

Who are you?

What are your responsibilities?

What are the biggest challenges/ difficulties/ problems in your role? Are you satisfied with your role and what comes with it?

Engagements

What is your relation to the client?

What role do you have in the delivering?

The Execution area

How does your execution area look like today?

How profitable is your area for Alfa? How could it be more profitable?

Alfa

What is Alfas success factors?

What should Alfa do to secure/guarantee new engagements in the future? Where lies the biggest challenges?

The growth

Alfa is growing. How do you think this should be done?

What kind of competences do you need more of?

What are the key factors that will assure Alfa being able to grow and still be profitable?

In what ways has the financial crisis affected Alfa? Will you have to change any of your strategies due to this?
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, DELIVERY CONSULTANT

Background, the delivery consultant role

What is your background?
What is your role at Alfa?
How is it to start working at Alfa?
How do you work with the deliveries?

Alfa

What is the image of Alfa?
What differs Alfa from other consulting companies?
What do you think about the organization?

The recruitment process

What do you think about the recruitment process?

The growth

How do you think Alfa should grow?
What people does Alfa need?
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS, OPERATION SPECIALIST

Who are you?
What is your role at Alfa?
What are the biggest challenges in your role?
What do you think about the organization?
How will your role change when Alfa grows?
What people do you think Alfa needs in the future?