

Two decades on from swapping professional football for a career in business, Adecco CEO Jeff Doyle is applying his competitive instincts to a recruitment industry where escalating skills shortages are creating a whole new ball game.

GAME CHANGER



One way or another, Jeff Doyle has always been preoccupied with skills. Firstly, it was those he was blessed with from birth, and honed from a young age growing up in Ireland; then it was those he feared he might be lacking at a crucial point in his professional life; and now – as CEO of the Adecco Group, one of Australia’s largest recruitment agencies – the skills our country sorely needs are at the core of his daily business.

It was Doyle’s talent as a footballer that first brought him to Australia in his early twenties. After leaving home at 15 to pursue a professional football career in the UK, stints with then First Division club Coventry City and Fourth Division strugglers Peterborough United failed to deliver the break he was looking for. And so, in the early 90s, he found himself playing for a succession of Sydney-based clubs in the predecessor to the A-League, the National Soccer League.

“I was by no means a sporting great – more a mediocre player who managed to eke out a living,” he recalls. “But I had a lot of success early in my career and I think I let it go to my head. At the end of the day, my talent wasn’t matched by my work ethic, and as a consequence I didn’t make the most of it.”

It was a lesson Doyle learned well, and one that has guided much of his subsequent success in the corporate world – success achieved despite the sobering realisation at the age of 27 that he’d made no preparations for life after sport.

“I’d been enjoying the lifestyle, but I became extremely nervous about the options I had after football,” he says. “At that point I chose to step down and play at a semi-professional level so I could establish a business career. It was one of the best decisions I ever made.”

While he attributes his initial transition into a sales role with Macquarie Stationery (now Corporate Express) to “sheer luck and good timing”, Doyle also firmly believes that many of the skills he developed in football found an expression in his efforts to progress in business.

“I didn’t have a lot of experience but I had a fierce desire to be successful and I’d learned the importance of working hard,” he says. “As an elite sports person you train everyday to hone your skills; you’re very aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the opposition; you have clear objectives; and you never give up in the face of defeat. I’d say those are key attributes in the business world too.”

Doyle also believes the qualities that define good leadership extend across both sport and

business. “In my opinion, the best leaders always have the ability to communicate widely, both formally and informally, and they are able to build rich, deep relationships – not just with their direct reports, but the entire team around them,” he says. “Perhaps the best general manager of a business I have seen was an ex-First-Grade Rugby League player who taught me the importance of building relationships, and also to ‘do’ better than you ‘talk’.”

After 12 successful years at Corporate Express, where his career progression matched the rise of the company from a \$3 million enterprise to a \$1.2 billion listed company, Doyle got the chance to test his leadership philosophy in an entirely different industry sector at Adecco. He joined the company to head up a business line that had been performing poorly, and achieved enough within 18 months to earn a shot at the Group CEO role – at the height of the global financial crisis.

The recruitment industry was hit hard by the downturn, as evidenced by the large number of smaller players forced to shut up shop. And on taking the reins at Adecco, Doyle also believed his company was not measuring up to the performance and reputation of its global parent – Adecco puts 750,000 people out to work internationally every week, catering to a wide range of industry sectors across temporary staffing, permanent placement, outsourcing, outplacement and consulting.

“The Australasian region was riding on the coat-tails of the global business, and in my opinion it had never been what it should or could have been,” Doyle says. “I’m a big believer in having a cause, and I was blunt to the team when I took over and told them we were very much in the second division. Winning the Premier League became the cause – not as a reflection of my footballing background, but rather because I think Australians easily relate to that kind of sporting analogy.”

The key issues that Doyle identified on assuming the top job were that the Group was lacking a shared, overarching strategy, and its operating systems were out of date and inconsistent. In partnership with his Chief Financial Officer, he quickly decided on a complete systems transformation to a consistent platform across the business’s front, middle and back offices – a project that has been managed internally rather than outsourced, and remains on time and on budget two years into a three-year project.

“By the end of this year, we’ll have one consistent enterprise resource planning (ERP) system, so we’re proud of that,” he says. “Now that we’ve nearly finished, people are saying it was a great strategic decision, but it was a no-brainer really – a lack of investment had left us with a myriad of operating systems for all our different business units.”

In fact, the systems issue was somewhat emblematic of the broader strategic goals that Doyle identified for the business. Adecco’s eight individual business lines, spread across the three broad categories of general staffing, professional staffing and professional services, were operating largely in isolation.

“I could see that if we could align these different businesses more strongly around customer needs, there was a lot of upside for the business,” he says. “The recruitment industry is quite fragmented – there are a lot of players and

few barriers to entry, so standards of customer service can be poor. That creates an opportunity for us to differentiate ourselves if we can execute well.”

In contrast to the internal management of the systems overhaul, Doyle decided to seek expert advice in developing Adecco’s group strategy. After widely canvassing for recommendations, he was put in touch with Graham Hubbard, a Professor of Strategic Management at Adelaide University. Best known for co-authoring *The First XI: Winning Organisations in Australia*, a book that closely examines the successful frameworks behind 11 long-term high-performing organisations, Hubbard was brought in to facilitate two days of intensive workshops with the company’s full executive team.

“The sessions were pretty tough and uncompromising, but I think it’s vitally important to foster an environment where you can have healthy and forthright discussions focused on what’s best for the business,” Doyle says. “The challenge for me was enabling each business line to be comfortable and confident working in its own space, while still playing for one team.”

An important part of that process was being flexible enough to recognise exceptions to the rule – Ajilon, Adecco’s business and technology consulting business, did not fit within the same framework as the recruitment and career services businesses. As such, its standalone business model was retained.

“You don’t want to force all your businesses into a framework just for the sake of it,” Doyle says. “Ajilon is an important part of the Group, but it operates in a different market and with a different business model, so it was important to recognise and respect that.”

For the remainder of the group, however, the result of Hubbard’s strategic think tank was what Doyle calls the “employment lifecycle strategy” – a service-oriented approach that aims to deliver a quality experience to Adecco’s clients and candidates, and also its own employees, throughout their full employment lifecycle.

For clients, that lifecycle might reflect the ups and downs of the business: through periods of hiring to periods when staff must be let go;

from the search for permanent staff to the placement of temporary workers. “The aim is to achieve a genuine consultative relationship with these employers – to be more of a partner in achieving workforce solutions, rather than simply putting bums on seats,” Doyle explains. “Our key account managers have to focus their selling approach on aligning our value proposition with the client’s own business objectives.”

Similarly, the candidate’s employment lifecycle requires service that looks beyond the next temporary placement to broader career goals. “I don’t think anybody in the recruitment industry has quite got this right yet, so it’s a massive part of what we’re trying to do,” Doyle says. “It’s about putting candidates into continuous assignments and improving their overall career, whether that encompasses a temporary, permanent or project-based environment.”

According to Doyle, the key to serving the recruitment industry’s “two masters” is the recognition of a reality that tends to sound like the ultimate corporate cliché: “We really are in the ‘people business,’” he says.

“In my former occupation in sales, you engage the customer in selling the product, but then the distribution system takes over and the salesperson’s involvement tends to subside. But in this industry, the system doesn’t take over – the relationship is pivotal and it’s one we’re trying to maintain throughout that employment lifecycle.”

In this regard, the final key stakeholder – Adecco’s own workforce – clearly has a vital role in realising the company’s renewed strategic intent. Genuine continuity of service cannot be achieved with a transient workforce, so the retention of talent is as important to Adecco as it is to so many of its clients.

“The turnover rates in this industry are extremely high because, as there are so many players, many people move on just to get that extra couple of thousand dollars on their salary,” Doyle explains. “So we’re really focused on creating a culture that is results-oriented but also designed to win the hearts and minds. If we can offer a good environment and a decent career path, people will think twice about jumping ship.”



Victory in business

Jeff Doyle is an ex-footballer running a major business. Richard Wilson is a financial services entrepreneur running a major football club. While it may sound like these arrangements are upside down and back to front, the reality is the worlds of sport and business have always been in each other’s pockets, both literally and figuratively.

In 2011, Doyle and Wilson allied their two organisations with the announcement of a three-year sponsorship deal for Adecco with A-League powerhouse the Melbourne Victory. Doyle looked like something of a genius shortly after the deal was done, with the Victory’s signing of Socceroo superstar Harry Kewell providing priceless exposure

RELATIONSHIP WITH Ai GROUP

Now in its 20th year of Ai Group membership, Adecco makes full use of available support through industry representation, member services and networking opportunities.

"Regardless of the service used, the experience has always been positive and professional," says Adecco CEO, Jeff Doyle. "Given the number of industries we cover as a labour hire provider, we utilise the BIZassistInfoline and Ai Group consultants to cross-check award rates and conditions to ensure we are consistent in our interpretation – particularly in relation to the transitional provisions and rates."

Adecco also sends its senior IR advisers to Ai Group's PIR Group conferences and industry sector briefings, both for networking with peers and for professional development.

"One of the things Ai Group does well is to consult with members across all industry sectors to best represent their views in public policy development," Doyle says. "Ai Group makes sure it stands for what its members stand for, and we see the organisation as our voice on a collective basis – there is always more power in numbers."

Doyle himself also sits on the Victorian and National Executive Councils. "My involvement at this level has given me the opportunity to be a voice for the HR services industry," he says.

Almost three years on from the sessions facilitated by Graham Hubbard, the company's strategic realignment is clearly starting to bear fruit. In 2011, Adecco was voted the leading recruitment firm by candidates from Australia and New Zealand (the Seek Annual Recruitment Awards) and also picked up a top award from Australian clients (*Human Capital* magazine's annual Gold Service Provider Award). Meanwhile, staff retention rates are at an all-time high, and financial results for the 2011 calendar year demonstrated year-on-year EBITA growth of 42.1%.

The strong performance of the business has allowed Doyle to devote more of his own time to lifting the Adecco brand and its profile. Traditionally, the business has been associated with the blue-collar temporary market, leaving the company with a job to do in terms of communicating its much broader industry coverage.

Some high profile sports sponsorship deals have been among those brand awareness initiatives, including a three-year arrangement with the Melbourne Victory football club (see box, below), but Doyle has also worked hard to lift Adecco's professional reputation by pursuing a thought leadership role – a point best demonstrated by the company's *Temporary Labour Report*.

"When I looked at what was available in terms of good data on the temporary labour market, I realised there wasn't really anything around," he says. "I thought this gave us a great opportunity to position Adecco as the go-to brand in this space – and since launching the report, we've got a lot of great feedback on it."

Adecco released its second annual *Temporary Labour Report* in February. Incorporating survey data from both employees (865) and employers (335), tied together with the help of an economic consultancy specialising in the labour market, it demonstrated that demand for temporary labour (4% growth) outpaced that for overall employment (2.9% growth) in 2010-11 – and the trend is projected to continue.

In the context of current union claims concerning 'insecure' work, the survey also presented some interesting findings: of temporary employees, 84% said they would recommend temporary work, 67% believed it

maintained or improved their skill set and 67% were satisfied with their temporary job.

"Two thirds of the people we speak to in these roles are saying to us, if it's not the ideal job for me it's certainly close to the ideal job," Doyle says. "Two out of three ain't bad, but it's the one out of three where we, together with the unions and business, need to be working on skilling people up."

According to the survey, the two-out-of-three figure also applies to the proportion of employers expecting to face skills shortages in 2012, with temporary labour high on their agenda in addressing their immediate concerns. Doyle believes it will increasingly come to the fore as the workforce ages and the skills gap grows.

"The ageing workforce is a major issue," he says. "We need to keep this 'brains trust' in the workforce, but it won't be on the same terms and conditions as before. A lot of older people don't want to work eight hours a day, five days a week anymore, and that desire for flexibility is going to continue to feed in to this trend towards temporary employment – students and young mothers re-entering the workforce are also looking to establish careers at a pace that suits them and their lifestyle."

Adecco's own contribution to the skills shortage battle is likely to be a significant one – the number one strategy nominated by clients surveyed for the *Temporary Labour Report* was the use of recruitment agencies, followed by the use of staff training as a retention tool. And following a Federal Labour Agreement recently struck with the Government, the company is also able to call on its vast global network to access skilled migration, offering 457 visas across 25 categories of nominated occupations – more than any other industry player.

As such, it would seem that Adecco's Australian outpost has now well and truly worked its way out of the second division. But in a true footballer's style, Doyle is taking it one match at a time. "We're still having fun with the Premier League theme, but there is also a serious message in that," he says. "I think we've definitely got into the Premier League over the past couple of years. Now it's all about winning it." ♦

and branding awareness for the club's new major sponsor.

"As an exercise in lifting the brand, that was a great bit of luck and good timing," Doyle says. "But the Victory are not only a great sports club – they're a well-run business and a fantastic team of people to deal with, and that makes our sponsorship much more than just a name on a jersey."

Perhaps the best demonstration of this added value is 'Victory in Business', the largest business coterie group of any sporting club in Australia, which Doyle now chairs. The group attracts upwards of 1000 people to three lunch events held through the football season – a network that Doyle describes as a "ready-made list of contacts".

"Every elite sporting club is trying to tap in to the corporate world, for obvious

reasons," Wilson explains. "We are selling ourselves as a partner to these organisations associated with the Victory to help them grow their business and their network in a really proactive way. And for us, Victory in Business is a fundamental component of how our club will exist and continue to grow."

The partnership is also more than a financial transaction in other ways. Adecco is assisting the Victory by applying its expertise in helping the club's players come to terms with the same questions Doyle himself faced as he wound down his sporting career – life after football. "The whole mindset of our club commercially is how do we engage our sponsors, and actually give them more than we're contracted to do," Wilson says.

Ultimately, however, the first question any prospective sponsor of a sporting club is

going to ask is what its dollars can purchase in terms of exposure that other forms of marketing can't. "There's an agency here in Melbourne that scans all forms of media to help businesses understand the value of different forms of advertising they might invest in," Wilson says. "For the season just passed, that data illustrated that Adecco would have needed to spend something like eight times the value of its sponsorship to get the same exposure through television, print or signage."

What's more, both men add, that calculation excludes any consideration of the relationships formed – and the enjoyment of the sport itself.