Bespoke Software Solutions for Big Business Problems

Thomas Granier - *CEO*

About Equal Experts

Equal Experts' agile practitioners combine technical excellence and business pragmatism to deliver simple bespoke software solutions to big business problems.

We offset delivery risk by trusting only talented, highly experienced people to employ relentless quality processes and a "zero tolerance" attitude to defects. We make heavy use of open source technology wherever possible, which dramatically lowers total cost of ownership for clients.

By leading by example and grounding everything we do in concrete software deliveries, we are able to bring our experience to bear, helping large organizations through their digital transformation.

Customers include Camelot and Telefonica and our software solutions underpin major initiatives such as O2's Priority Moment's customer loyalty campaign as well as myO2 self-serve capability. We are using our private sector experience to help UK government departments like HMRC and the Home Office to roll out their digital strategy.

For the last three years in a row, Equal Experts has been singled out as one of UK's fastest growing companies in the tech sector, with sales reaching £24m this year.

The company attributes its strong growth to a disruptive business model in technology, only employing consultants with over 8 years experience.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: *Mr. Granier, would you tell us the concept at Equal Experts?*
Mr. Granier: At the most basic level, Equal Experts is a company of grown-ups who know we can do a better job than most other IT consultancies.

At the heart of things are our consultants. They are all senior, some are partners and the majority are Associates – freelancers from our highly selective network of like-minded associates, built through personal referral.

We share a larger chunk of our income with our consultants. They enjoy an environment with less politics, and more freedom. This means we attract outstanding, empowered people who can stand on their own two feet.

This non-leveraged model – where we have no junior consultants – translates into fewer overheads, less waste and a bigger concentration of talent – which means more value for money for the customer.

And because our teams only have senior people, we can be successful in complex ecosystems like the large and very large corporates – whether its servicing the 22m mobile customers of O2 through self-serve and e-commerce, or digitising HMRC services for 41m personal and 5m business taxpayers in the UK.

CEOCFO: *What are some of the challenges working with larger companies that have so many more users?*
Mr. Granier: Launching brand new digital products gets very hard because of the sheer size of the companies, the number of stakeholders involved, and the integration with legacy systems.

We have many challenges but two strike me as most common:

Firstly, for us to get anything done, we need to break through the organisational silos. We have people that do not want to work together and do not know that they should be working together. Matrix structures and also a culture of projects instead of products and services are not ideal and tremendously difficult to change.

The second main challenge is how quickly can you get something out there. In the digital world, you want to release a new version of your product early and often, but large companies will be working on many initiatives in parallel which creates contention on people but also on testing and integration environments where most deployment processes will still be manual. Also, they will be very risk adverse and protective of their brand which means it is difficult to get early versions of your product tested by real life customers. Without this kind of rapid feedback, it is really difficult for these corporates to compete in the digital space with the Googles and PayPals of this world.

CEOCFO: *In spite of that, why do you like working on these types of projects?*
Mr. Granier: Nobody has really cracked how to innovate in the corporate world or how to deliver large programmes of work efficiently in IT. The scale of these problems is what makes it most exciting. We can make best use of innovative technologies to overcome some of our customer constraints. We get to build products that go to millions of users. We help provide digital services that will touch many lives.

CEOCFO: *How do you keep the solution user-friendly?*
Mr. Granier: We have come a long way from twenty years ago when software developers were supposed to design and build user interfaces mostly by themselves. Now, we have a huge emphasis on UX design with user-centered methods and extensive user research and user testing. We just released a product in China where we worked with many users based in China recording how they interact with the product and tweaking it until we got it right.
Above all things, we try and go to market with a Beta product that includes a minimum set of features and we listen to real life user feedback to enhance it. This approach is made very difficult, however, when the corporate client has set aside a £10 million budget and wants to go live in one big bang with every single feature they can think of.

> **"I think this concentration of empowered and talented doers in our teams – which is so different from the norm in IT – is the main reason why we are successful." - Thomas Granier**

CEOCFO: *How do you reach potential clients?*
Mr. Granier: We have a lot of repeat business – multi-year relationships with all our major clients – which is key to our success. We also get many word-of-mouth referrals. This is what got us to over £10 million in revenue. In the last two years, we have also invested in a sales team and increased our networking efforts – participating in industry events and organising small networking events with C-level prospects and customers. We are also getting more prospects in the retail space on the back of products like giftbak.co.uk that was built through our startup incubator in the last 12 months.

CEOCFO: *What is your geographic reach and would you like to see it expand?*
Mr. Granier: Right now it is very much a UK business. In terms of delivery centers, we have an office in India of 50 people and just opened an office in Canada to focus on mobile devices – but both work for the UK market. As far as new customers and new markets are concerned, that is going to be for next year. We are looking at opening an office in mainland Europe and one in the States, possibly in New York.

CEOCFO: *Why is this the time for expansion?*
Mr. Granier: I think we want to export our model, which is working very well here in the UK and is getting quite repeatable. We always said we wanted to expand and in particular go to the States when we were ready for it and now we have money to invest – we just need more time to make it happen!

CEOCFO: *What are the two or three components making your approach different?*
Mr. Granier: Our main competitors are the large system integrators, even though we are small fry in many ways compared to these suppliers. But, we can still deliver the same large scale digital initiatives.

A big difference is that we do not have this typical leveraged model where many junior consultants are led by and leverage a few experienced consultants. We strictly employ people with over eight years of experience and often fifteen or twenty – and these people are still hands-on, whether they are developers, testers or analysts. They bring their maturity and their knowledge of what works and what doesn't, leading by example – doing the work - instead of just telling more junior people what to do.

I think this concentration of empowered and talented doers in our teams – which is so different from the norm in IT – is the main reason why we are successful.

The rest leads naturally from having only experienced doers – we don't use buzzwords, we don't write power points, we don't do architecture in isolation from writing the code, we don't use enterprise software monolithic products. But, we do use open source software, we do follow disciplined agile software practices, we do implement rapid feedback cycles and we improve the overall capabilities of our customer one day at a time.

CEOCFO: *What are the intangibles you look for in your people?*
Mr. Granier: I still interview pretty much every single person we hire in the company so I am facing this question every time.

First, are they going to be passionate about the same thing I am? It's essential to keep the work we do in line with our Associate's main interests. Our main focus is innovative tech, delivering great digital products and being empowered by the customer to make improvements.

Then are they going to do it right? Striving for simplicity instead of being clever, having a willingness to share the pain the customer is experiencing right now, the confidence to challenge the status quo but open-minded enough to adapt to the customer constraints – all these things are essential to making a good EE consultant. But above all, for me it's about low ego.

I think the days of the arrogant consultant coming to tell the customer how to run their business are long gone – or at least they should be!

CEOCFO: *When you are talking with a prospective client, do they understand the difference and is there an aha moment that they understand what you have to offer that others do not?*
Mr. Granier: It's a difficult one because IT is plagued with everyone using the same words over and over again until they have lost their meaning – so it's hard to come across as genuinely different and to stand out from the crowd. But, after we have started working onsite with a customer, after those first few months of working together on a release – when we have a chance to prove ourselves and show some working software, and demonstrate how open and straightforward we are – then yes, I believe the customers get that they are onto something good – and our extensive repeat business is the best proof of that.

CEOCFO: *Why pay attention to Equal Experts?*
Mr. Granier: If you are a customer and keep getting disappointed by your IT suppliers that fall short of your expectations.

If you want to transform your organisation to move into the digital space and need a no nonsense trusted partner.

As far as we are concerned, we want to keep on growing while staying true to our model, so we can be a disruptive force in software – doing our bit to reduce the waste, frivolous spending and delivery failures that are too often synonymous with traditional corporate IT programmes.

BIO: Thomas worked for various IT consultancies in France, the US and the UK since 1995. Over that period, Thomas wore many hats delivering large scale enterprise solutions for blue chip clients– from software development, business analysis, to project management. A chat about Agile with Ward Cunningham in the early '00 changed his world drastically for the better.

In 2007 Thomas Granier got fed up with the traditional consulting model: excessive layers of hierarchy were stopping people from making meaningful decisions, overheads were high and people had to be kept busy, even if the work didn't add value to the client. He noticed that a couple of experienced people would lead a team, but the people actually doing the work were often learning on the job – 'wasteful' was just one word for it.

There was clearly a gap in the market for a hybrid software consultancy. Equal Experts was born.

Equal Experts

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