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Startup Eyes Burgeoning Consulting-Technology Arena

by Jackie Noblett, Journal staff

As management consultants look to make greater use of technology to streamline their workloads, one Framingham company is entering the fray with its own online assessment tool.

Breakthrough Business Performance, which opened in April, launched its Web-based BreakthroughAssess program last month. The program is billed to save consultants hours in developing and sending out needs-assessment surveys as well as crunching numbers and creating reports.

While the company didn't disclose how many orders it has taken, it has dozens of negotiations under way with small to midsize consulting firms both in the United States and abroad.

The company is the first local one looking to leverage technology to make the life of the consultant easy. Others include as Tulsa, Okla.-based CorporateSurvey.com and Omaha, Neb.-based View Assessments International Inc.

"(Online assessment) tools are becoming more and more accepted, but not the norm," said Denise Clancey, vice president of the New England chapter of the Institute of Management Consultants and president of Boston's Teledirect Partners Inc., a telemarketing consulting company.

But Clancy said these tools will become more common as consultants increasingly need to synthesize a growing mountain of information quickly.

"There is so much information you need to gather in the business and people you need to talk to. Assessment tools help you do that in a specific and easier way," she said.

Breakthrough Business Performance arose out of its founder's own frustrations with the time required to complete projects. She said speed is now a key component to a consultant's service.

"What today's CEO will tell you is what they really need is a fast way to assess problems and come up with solutions," said Ronna Cohen, president of BBP, and herself a former consultant with The 20-20 Group. "This tool helps us quickly get through the analysis and get to the solutions."

About a year ago, Cohen began to develop a program to automate the tedious assessment-development and analysis process, bootstrapping the company with her own funds. The company, which is not yet profitable, now has about a dozen employees.

The program enables corporate consultants to generate surveys quickly by presenting prospective clients with boilerplate questions in 25 different subject areas as well as some customized

queries. Once the surveys are returned, the program crunches the numbers and, using stored research, generates company-tailored reports in a matter of hours.

A single license for the Web-based tool costs about \$2,500.

Cohen concedes that in-house administrators could easily use the program to do all of the behind-the-scenes work, but she argues that is not what business executives hire a consultant to do.

"They're assuming consultants can do the research, but they want (from the consultants) is solutions, they want positive change," she said. "This allows them to get to the value-added part of the service."

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