



AGENCY PODS

The Definitive Guide

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Agency Pods: The Definitive Guide

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Introduction

This book is our guide to the Agency Pod model of business operation, and how to implement it step by step into your organisation, borne out of our own experiences transitioning to the model. But before that, a few introductions are in order.

World of business, meet us. We are Chief Executive Officer (Timothy Biddiscombe) and Chief Services Officer (Mosawer Bhatti), respectively, of a reasonably well-known Customer Experience (CX) and Marketing Automation Advisory Agency based in London, United Kingdom. Which one isn't overly important, but feel free to look us up on LinkedIn if you feel an insatiable curiosity, or if you just want to say hi.

We've also known each other for almost 25 years, worked together numerous times, even lived together once back in the day, and as such pretty much have each other's cadence. It isn't some symbiotic echo chamber where we nod vigorously at whatever the other has to say, in fact we disagree often, but coming from a place of mutual respect and trust, we're always able to find the common ground to create understanding and accord, and even work the occasional business miracle.

So, when we found a subject we were both deeply passionate about, we decided to collaborate on one more project, to help companies globally, and the people that make them great, by defining a structure that tackles many of the endemic **problems** they are facing.

What Problems?

Whatever the background and vertical they operate in, most companies today are busy experiencing one, many or all of the following problems:

- (1) A lack of collaboration: a struggle to enable collaboration and find common ground between departments and/or individuals.
- (2) Being slow to respond and adapt: an inability to respond quickly to changing client needs and market conditions, and are seeing a reduction in spending from clients, or worse, attrition as the clients move to new Agency suppliers.

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- (3) Inefficient resource allocation: ineffective deployment of resources across multiple clients or projects, resulting in disparities that affect quality, accuracy and morale, often discovered far too late to quietly address.
- (4) Lack of personalised service: a common gripe among customers looking to change their provider, many companies struggle to provide a truly personalised service to their clients no matter how hard they try.

Enter the Agency Pod

We first heard about the concept of Agency Pods back in 2020, while the world was busy staying indoors for reasons we do not need to get into here. Boutique agencies of our size and shape (sub fifty heads) all the way up to companies in their thousands were moving to the Agency Pod model, which made us curious why we weren't doing it, and if there's one thing we (and our respective wives and dependants) can agree on, we become most annoying when we're curious.

Speaking of one thing we're certain you'd also agree on (or you wouldn't have bought this book) is that curiosity is all well and good, but information is much better. Way back in 2020, we found little to no information online that could guide a company through this process and especially no blueprint we could follow, so were we meant to make it up as we go along?

More likely, we reasoned, there's a top secret elite cadre of highly paid Business Analysts who are hoarding this information, and giving it over to the highest bidders, typically the world's leading System Integrators and Management Consultancies, and based upon the feedback of those who proofread this book for us, that's exactly what is happening.

Help came in the form of an exceptional business consultant of our long acquaintance, Andrew Stevens, renowned UK-Based practitioner of the Entrepreneurial Operating System (EOS) and all-around nice guy. He very kindly introduced us to a couple of Managing Directors of his acquaintance whose organisations had been through the process of retooling their service and delivery arms to the Agency Pod model and both had seen significant benefits, internally in the form of morale, ownership and productivity; and externally in the form of customer satisfaction, repeat business and profitability. Following some detailed interviews where our exhaustive questions were patiently answered, we felt empowered to create a plan we could follow, and have been following for the past year.¹

And finally we got there. It hasn't been easy. It definitely hasn't been without its challenges, but has it been worth it? Well, we certainly think so, early signs are great, and the ultimate evidence will be in the next phase of our organisational growth, empowered by a futureproofed structure to allow us to meet tomorrow's

¹The same information could have been garnered by posting on LinkedIn and asking for help, but in this competitive age, there can be a reluctance to appear vulnerable in such a public forum.

challenges head on, and ultimately adapt to them more readily than our competitors are able to.

It is important you appreciate truly that nothing worthwhile is ever easy, and not just as an easy soundbite to trot out in the introduction, but as a mantra you exemplify when you hit bumps in the road, when the truth is that the bumps tell you that you are on the right path. And at all times remember the unofficial motto of the Corps of Royal Engineers within the British Army, who have been solving problems for more than 900 years, since it is most appropriate to this endeavour:

Through mud, and blood, to the green fields beyond.

This book is intended to provide a roadmap to convey your organisation, no matter the vertical, or your respective size and maturity, into those green fields of the Agency Pod model. Through this book you will see tools and suggestions to assist in educating, and getting buy-in from your colleagues, while building the business case to make your vision a rock-solid reality.

While the primary audience for this book is a business' management and leadership teams, who will be the ones to drive home this organisational change, we have written it with the wider audience in mind. This book is also designed to be used as a tool to help you win over hearts and minds internally should you so wish, and to enlist the wider organisation to help you identify, manage and mitigate the risks and opportunities inherent in making such a change to your model, since they are ultimately the ones who will decide if it is to be successful.

Many companies globally now have successfully implemented the Agency Pod model to improve their internal collaboration, increase their agility and better serve their clients, turning them into happy (or happier) clients. Whatever your business model, it's all about happy clients after all, since they have you on the speed dial for repeat business, and repeat business is in reality the only kind of business that truly counts. As an example, publicly available research published by Frederick Reichheld of Bain & Company shows increasing customer retention rates by 5% increases profits by 25–95%.²

The name itself, 'Agency Pod' is something of a misnomer, it implies that it is for Agencies only, which are just one of the types of business that can greatly benefit from this new structure. In fact, the name actually relates to the overall function of a Pod within your business, it acts as an internal Agency, servicing all your business' disparate needs, hence the name 'Agency Pods'. Don't blame us in any case, it's not our name.

And don't take our word for it, here are a few examples of companies that have embraced this approach, and are well-documented success stories.³

²Loyalty Rules, Frederick F Reichheld 2001/<https://thecxacademy.org/the-science-of-customer-retention-strategies-that-actually-work/>

³It's interesting to observe how the Agency Pod model is given different names by different companies to imply uniqueness and ingenuity, reminiscent of how sooner or later everyone works on a Project Phoenix.

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Accenture ^a	Accenture has embraced the ‘liquid workforce’ model, which involves assembling teams of experts from across the company to work on specific projects. This approach allows Accenture to tap into a broad range of expertise and resources and deliver tailored solutions to clients in a highly efficient manner.
McKinsey & Company ^b	McKinsey & Company has implemented the ‘network of teams’ model, which involves breaking down silos and enabling cross-functional collaboration. This approach has helped McKinsey to deliver more comprehensive solutions to clients and drive innovation across the organisation.
Deloitte ^c	Deloitte has adopted a ‘mission-based’ approach to organising its teams, with each team focused on a specific project or client need. This approach has helped Deloitte to be more responsive to clients’ needs and deliver highly personalised solutions that meet their specific goals.
Mindshare ^d	Mindshare has implemented ‘The Loop’ model, which involves assembling cross-functional teams of experts who work together to deliver highly targeted and effective advertising campaigns. This approach has helped Mindshare to improve collaboration, increase agility, and drive better results for clients.
Spotify ^e	Spotify are among many technology firms that have used what they refer to as the ‘tribe and squad’ model to organise and optimise its teams including those working in software development, as well as advertising and marketing. Each squad consists of no more than eight people who work closely together to develop new features and services for the music streaming platform. This approach helps Spotify to quickly adapt to changing market conditions and continue to deliver a highly personalised experience to its users, even during times of intense competition.

^awww.runn.io/blog/liquid-workforce

^bwww.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/to-weather-a-crisis-build-a-network-of-teams

^cwww2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/uk/Documents/strategy/deloitte-uk-mission-based-teams-reconstructing-businesses-as-an-evolving-network-of-teams-and-outcomes.pdf

^dwww.marketing-interactive.com/mindshare-launches-loop

^ewww.atlassian.com/agile/agile-at-scale/spotify

These are just a few examples of companies that have successfully implemented the Agency Pod model (known by many names) to achieve their business goals and solve long-standing organisational problems holding them back; there are many, many more you've probably come across already which may have piqued your interest in this concept. The benefits these organisations have experienced are myriad, but common factors include increased efficiencies, time and resource saved, which translated to money saved and improved commercial outcomes for both the companies and their clients.

Looking back then at those four endemic problems, how does the Agency Pod model address them?

- (1) **Lack of collaboration:** The Pod structure encourages and stimulates more effective teamwork by creating a greater sense of ownership and accountability. By bringing together individuals with diverse backgrounds and skill sets, and creating a dedicated team for each account, group of accounts or project, the Pod structure can help to break down those silos and promote cross-functional collaboration.
- (2) **Being slow to respond:** The Pod structure enables much greater agility to adapt, and the adaptation when it happens is a much less painful evolution. With a dedicated team assigned to each account, group of accounts or project, companies can quickly pivot their approach as much as needed, without sacrificing quality or accuracy.
- (3) **Inefficient resource allocation:** The Pod structure enables far better resource management and ability to scale. By dedicating small multi-functional teams to specific clients or needs, companies can ensure that resources are allocated most efficiently and that each team member feels, and is ultimately held accountable for their contribution, effectively templating your business growth.
- (4) **Lack of personalised service:** The Pod structure enables stronger, and longer lasting client relationships. By assigning dedicated teams of multidisciplinary resources to each client, that the client has full access to, enables companies to build stronger connections and provide that elusive personalised service the clients crave, leading to increased client satisfaction and a much higher level of retention over time

Overall, the Agency Pod structure is designed to benefit forward looking (or at least, lagging behind) companies that are looking to improve their client relationships, staff satisfaction and retention, collaboration, agility and resource allocation. Should you find that these typical problems resonate with your own pain points, we have got some great tools for you to take advantage of in the coming chapters.

By creating dedicated teams aligned by groupings logical to your business (e.g. vertical, account, client or project), companies can get busy making a regular, measurable contribution to client profitability. As a byproduct of this enhanced service, customer relationships will flourish, through delivering a more

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personalised service to stable, long-lasting client accounts, by highly motivated resources who are empowered to significantly enhance the quality and efficiency of the work they are part of.

The key message for you to take away is that this approach is highly effective for companies that want to improve collaboration across their commercial and service teams, increase their overall agility and empower dedicated groups of people to deliver highly personalised solutions to customers who will come back to you time and again, revving up your profitability.

Now, let us get into the details, and you can get to work plotting your own revolution, the way we plotted ours. . .

Chapter 1

What the Hell Is a Pod Anyway?

To start with, it's always good to create a common understanding, so we can confidently discuss the same concepts and know where we stand.

The origin of the 'Agency Pod' itself is curiously not attributed to a single inventor or source, though of course it must have one, barring unlikely events of parallel evolution. The concept of using small, interdisciplinary teams or Pods to work on projects has been around for many years, and has been adopted by many different industries, including many of the World's foremost advertising and marketing agencies, but the concept of organising your teams to operate that way in perpetuity, is something rather newer.

It brings to mind a relevant anecdote once shared by an old acquaintance of ours who worked in a data processing capacity for the British Secret Intelligence Service, who once scoffed '*James Bond does exist, but it's at least twenty different people*'. Think on it for a moment, what is more realistic, one super talented polyglot who executes policy (with emphasis on executes in this example), or a small, multifaceted team of individuals with different and varying skills, strengths and weaknesses who work together to achieve very specific objectives? In that somewhat extreme spycraft example, the happy customer is, we suppose, the general public who would never know what acts of malice had been averted, so there the analogy ends, but still, food for thought. Whatever name it goes by, the Agency Pods concept is perhaps a natural inclination for those of us with a little imagination who see the flaws inherent within typical departmental structures that have been in use for well over a century, and wonder if things really have to be this tedious way.

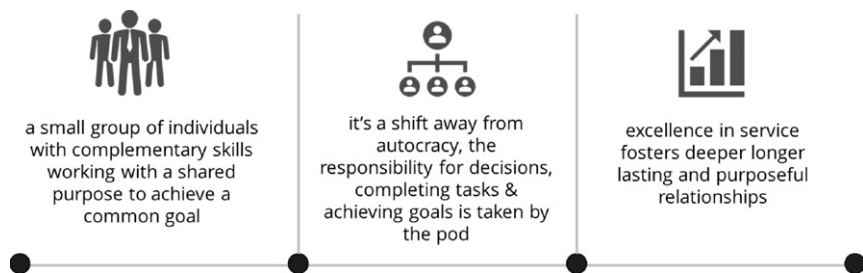
The term 'Agency Pod' has gained significant traction in recent years, and is often associated with the global powerhouse advertising agency R/GA (formerly R/Greenberg Associates). R/GA has been widely recognised for its extremely successful use of the Agency Pod model, which it started implementing in the late 2000s. The Agency's Founder & Executive Chairman, Bob Greenberg can be credited with the formalisation of the Agency Pod model in its modern guise, and you only have to look at R/GA's rampant growth over the past few decades to see how the model can empower an organisation to innovate, stay relevant and scale up, while keeping a long way ahead of the curve in an ever-changing industry.

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The Agency Pod structure is a modern approach to organising Client Services and Service Delivery functions within an Organisation of any kind, be it B2B, B2C, Marketing & Advertising based, or something wholly different again. Be confident that you have found yourself among friends, weary travellers.

The concept is centred around the idea of small, cross-functional teams or ‘Pods’ that are responsible for specific clients, accounts or projects, as opposed to the traditional model whereby single function departments are responsible for small, discrete parts of many different client or project deliverables. Traditional single function teams tend to communicate among themselves poorly, if at all, which is impressive given how many meetings they organise between themselves. Agency Pods on the other hand are designed to be highly collaborative and nimble, allowing agencies of all kinds to become much more responsive to client needs and changing market conditions.¹

The responsibility and accountability of a Pod is total. A Pod is an autonomous unit within your business, with its own targets for both sales to and commercial development of existing clients, and delivery of work or utilisation – simply put, keeping the expensive resources you are paying, busy doing things that generate value for both your customers and yourselves. That accountability is one of the keys to success, because without it, quality of delivery can and will bleed through the cracks between the responsibilities of different departments each owning a small piece of the jigsaw puzzle.



The Agency Pod structure typically consists of one or many groups of 5–20 people, with diverse complementary skill sets aligned around your (or more appropriately your clients) strategic goals. The nature of these skill sets is limitless depending on your vertical and specialisation, but common essential skills can include Account Management, Strategy, Creative and varying levels of Technical expertise.²

¹When we talk about clients, they could easily be internal stakeholders as much as external clients, we will make no distinction in how we talk about them, they still need to be happy to give your Pods repeat business, and they will still change their minds all the time.

²New Business sales typically stay outside the Pod structure and are owned by traditional Sales staff or Founders, but remain closely affiliated to the Pods, since the goal of new business sales is to create new customers, who are Account Managed by, and work delivered for, by the Pods, but that is a tale for another time.