



Executive Interim Managers, Independent Consultants, Ronin & Ninjas - Market Segmentation: the Ninja's Story

By Dr Alf Oldman FCA

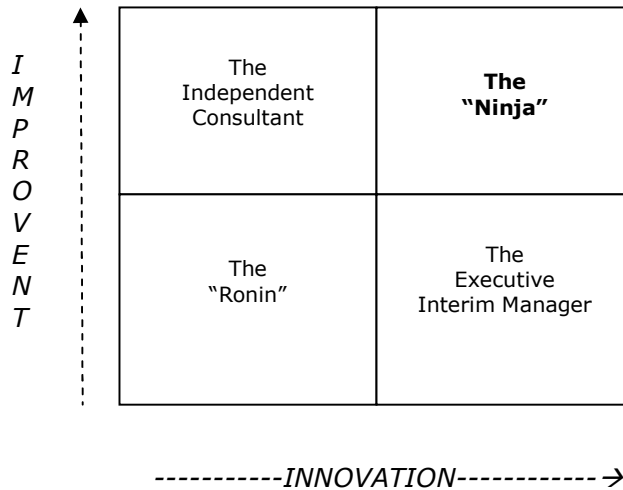
Introduction

In response to popular demand, this is my sixth "Ninja" article. This is the fourth of four related articles that are being released weekly. To recap, in my original article "[Interim Managers, Ninjas and a Road Map in a Downsized World](#)", I introduced the terms "Ronin" and "Ninjas" in the context of the interim management industry. The "Ronin" were temporary soldiers, called in to bolster troop numbers; the "Ninjas" were highly skilled and professionally trained individuals, capable of exceptional specialist services.

The series of four articles introduces four archetypes: "[Executive Interim Manager](#)", the "[Independent Consultant](#)", the "[Ronin](#)" and the "Ninjas". This article looks at the "Ninja"¹ (used figuratively).

Based upon some of my earlier, published research, I introduced a four-state model, linking cost reduction models to organisation context. I have adapted this model for interim management industry segmentation.

The Interim Management Industry Four State Model#



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¹ **Ninja**, a class of 14th century Japanese who were trained in martial arts & were hired for espionage and assassinations. Japanese from **ninjutsu** the traditional Japanese method of espionage, involving stealthy movements and the use of camouflage."

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The horizontal axis of my earlier research dealt with Weak Market Orientation and Strong Market Orientation. This is simplified to degree of Innovation. Similarly, the vertical axis of my earlier research deployed "No Turnaround Need/Successful" and Strong "Turnaround Need/Unsuccessful". Again this is simplified to degree of Improvement.

Definition of Ninja

The Ninja² is a self-employed, interim executive, manager, professional or technical practitioner, with exceptional competencies and deliverables in core professional, technical or management leadership, ability to operate individually or as a member of a multi-functional and multi-cultural team, strongly market-oriented³, strongly analytical and preferably trained in research methods and Organizational Development (OD).

The Profile of Ninja

It is likely that the Ninja will have an established track record as an **Executive Interim Manager** or **Independent Consultant**, before broadening his/her competencies to become a Ninja. To be clear, the route to becoming a Ninja may be either via proven heavy-weight executive manager achievements or as an exceptionally accomplished consultant. To qualify as a Ninja the interim manager must be able to demonstrate that he/she fits the definition of a Ninja. The Ninja is a hands-on analyst of quantitative and qualitative data, including structured interviews and focus groups. The Ninja moves "invisibly" from sector to sector. The Ninja never responds to gut-feeling, instinct, intuition and previous experience – he/she always analyses the data before intervening, typically following a pattern of progressive analysis and intervention. The Ninja is always in harmony with his/her ego. Ninjas are likely to be over fifty-years of age, fit, energetic and driven by pure challenge!

Finding Ninja (Caveat Emptor – let the buyer be ware!)

The most effective sources for finding a Ninja is strong personal recommendation/endorsement. There is currently no intermediation market for Ninjas. Because of the specialist competencies of the Ninja, it is likely that the effective intermediary will be closer to the best practice model for the **Executive Interim Manager**. The acid test

² Clearly, I use the term "Ninja" figuratively to emphasize group of interim management practitioners with very special skills.

³ Market orientation is the organization-wide generation of market intelligence pertaining to current and future customer needs, dissemination of the intelligence horizontally and vertically within the organization, and organization-wide action or responsiveness to market intelligence (Kohli et al, 1993). There is a large body of research confirming that market-oriented or market-driven organizations achieve superior performance.

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for the potential Ninja intermediary is being able to produce a short list of say two candidates, in under forty-eight hours, from Ninjas that they know well. When choosing an intermediary for a Ninja, the quality of the intermediary's service offering is critical. It would be prudent to ask the intermediary to provide three high profile references that would confirm the quality of their service offering.

Challenges for the Future

The interim management market is maturing quickly, with recent endorsement from the UK Deputy Prime Minister's Office. Changing models of intermediation, absence of robust research and industry hype are driving the market towards maturity and commoditization, at an ever increasing pace.

This has prompted me to write this series of four articles, highlighting one commodity sector the "**Ronin**", and three premium, differentiated sectors: "**Executive Interim Manager**", "**Independent Consultant**" and the "Ninja". It is only fairly recently that industry analysts have associated the Independent Consultant market as a sub-segment of the interim management industry.

Today, interim manager intermediaries are the largest providers of independent consultants. Some intermediaries have set up specialist divisions and are providing dozens and dozens of consultants to individual blue chip clients. This is in response to the recent structural changes in the consulting market. Large numbers of highly accomplished consultants with big firm track records (including former Big 5 partners), have lost their jobs in recent years and are looking to the independent consulting market which is already overcrowded with specialists by function, industry, technology etc. Currently, the major interim management intermediaries are comfortable to provide independent consultants/interims individually, in very large numbers. **However, intermediaries are not yet ready to provide full teams. When "blue-chips" start to push for innovative and cost effective solutions other than established consulting houses, there will be an increasing demand for Ninjas!** The lead Ninja will need to demonstrate an effective methodology to coordinate their interventions.

Personal Insights

Because of my own formal background in research, I have been heavily influenced by the Japanese approach to cost reduction. Japanese buyers look at products or services from three dimensions: (1) functionality; (2) quality; and (3) cost. Buyers of Ninja intermediary services would be wise to focus upon: services offered (functionality) and quality. My own specialist area of expertise as an **Executive Interim Manager** has permitted me to develop the **Financial Performance Improvement Programme**. Also, I have picked up my Ninja-type expertise in my formal research background.

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Potential Ninjas should look carefully at a research degree, as a means of broadening their core skills. They should also consider seeking out assignments that will provide Ninja-type expertise. For example, technical consultants will need to understand and become proficient in achieving stakeholder satisfaction.

The Financial Improvement Performance Programme (FPIP):

An Executive Interim Manager diagnostic tool is the first step in the **Financial Performance Improvement Programme (FPIP)**. FPIPs deploy leading edge research tools to clarify stakeholder requirements and structured planning to achieve stakeholder satisfaction. The methodology includes iterative analysis and intervention.

FPIPs have been successfully deployed in some of the World's most complex organizations. Based upon research and successful deployment, I have developed a simple questionnaire to see whether an FPIP is appropriate to your organization:

1. Has there been a pan-functional or pan-organizational record of failure?
2. Have ten of millions of Dollars been invested without benefit realization?
3. Have major consultancies been deployed and failed?
4. Is the situation potentially embarrassing to senior management?
5. Are reputations at risk?
6. Are there multiple stakeholders to satisfy?
7. Do line executives have conflicting views on solutions?
8. Is the issue multi-functional?
9. Is there a strong financial dimension?
10. Is there a critical IT or systems involvement?
11. Is there a need for change at the house-wide level?
12. Do other options not stack up?

If you have scored a yes to eight or more questions, you definitely need to contact me via alf@alfoldman.com.

Also, I am always on the look out for potential Ninjas!

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