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CASE STUDY & CASE INTERVIEW

# CONSTRUCTING CLIENT CARE

Company: AECOM

Position: Corporate Vice President - Client Care Program

Industry: Construction

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**01** A Word from the Search Chair

**02** Case Study

**04** Process & Statistics

**05** Case Interview

# VISION AND CLARITY ARE IMPORTANT

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David really helped me to understand that particularly when we were trying to get a couple of candidates to really come and shake loose and talk to us.

I also learned just how valuable the vision of a program for example, for this client care program, the vision of the program and the growth and support of the program in the company is to a potential candidate."



Jordan Sweeney  
**Head of Industrial  
Accounts - AECOM**

# CASE STUDY

Across the globe, AECOM's clients in the public and private sectors count on them to take on the most complex challenges and pioneer innovative solutions that push the limits of what's possible – including the world's longest cable-stayed bridge, the largest greenfield port development mega project, and the tallest tower in the Western Hemisphere.



## CHALLENGE

Even though AECOM's Client Care Program is now a successful global analytics team devoted to optimizing the firm's project excellence and client experiences, just a few years ago it was a fledgling element of the company still getting off the ground.

A newly created role of Corporate Vice-President, Client Care Program was identified to help grow and develop the nascent division – whose existence was a relatively new concept in the engineering and construction industry, in general – into the client feedback powerhouse it is today. Leading the hiring charge were the two creators of the program, a company president and a director, who each had a huge personal stake in seeing both the hire and the program succeed. The program was one of the top three initiatives for AECOM's CEO at the time.

“We were very, very involved and very interested in the hand-off of this program because we wanted it to continue to be successful,” said AECOM Industrial Strategy Director Jordan Sweeney, and member of the hiring committee. “This was something that even at the shareholder level was considered critical to our success as a company.”

The ideal candidate for this new senior role had to be a market researcher, a statistician, and behavioral expert while at the same time having a passion for client service and feedback. The ideal candidate also needed to be senior enough to lead an important new division at a large multinational company, while also whose approach could inspire the C-suite to think about new ways of looking at information and client care.



## STRATEGY

An intensive research phase was first conducted by Perry-Martel to locate the most ideal candidate for the role. Because the hiring authority already had well-defined opinions on the type of individual they wanted to attract, the initial search phase was spent creating a Position Profile and reviewing relevant resumes closely with Ms. Sweeney and the hiring authority to determine the benchmark candidate.

“I’ve heard people refer to my searches as unicorns, which I guess is another way of saying I’m looking for a mythical creature,” said hiring authority Seth Deutsch, President of AECOM’s Industrial Group. “But I know the people I want exist. (Perry Martel’s David Perry) understands the depths and the complexities of our thinking, and the types of people it takes to be successful in our group and our organization.”

After identifying and engaging with the eventual desired candidate, a first face-to-face meeting between the candidate, the hiring authority and Perry- Martel was then arranged to gauge the candidate’s psychology and determine their potential “fit” within the company and the group. This was followed by a progressive, five-stage interview process conducted in partnership with the hiring authority. Through ongoing brokering by the executive search firm, the desired candidate eventually earned enough of the hiring authority’s respect that his own feedback was used in the creation of his eventual new role.



## RESULTS

Luke Williams, a former Ipsos researcher, New York Times bestselling author and developer of a client feedback mechanism called the Wallet Allocation Rule, was identified as the desired candidate by Perry-Martel and eventually hired as Corporate Vice-President, Client Care Program at AECOM. Mr. Williams said Perry-Martel’s approach in engaging him was unlike most search firms, who typically recruit to finish a short-term project and not to provide long-term value to both the company and the individual.

“I’d never heard a recruiter before break down an opportunity that made sense in my terms, which I thought was really refreshing,” he said, adding that most recruiters he’d been contacted by are simply “looking to close that deal and move on to the next one, and David doesn’t work that way. “He wants to close that deal, and he wants to stick with you after that deal is closed for a number of years making sure he’s helping you through the process.” Mr. Deutsch agrees, adding that Perry-Martel acted as part organizational psychologist and part recruiter during the entire process, while always keeping the organization and individual’s long-term interests in mind. “And my personal belief is that (this approach) tends to have the best, most long-lasting outcomes on successful searches.”

# PROCESS: THE INSIDE OUT APPROACH



NEEDS ANALYSIS



CAMPAIGN PREPARATION



TALENT ATTRACTION



TALENT ASSESSMENT



DEAL MAKING



ON-BOARDING



SUCCESS

## STATS AT A GLANCE

### CLIENT INFO

Name: AECOM

Industry: **Construction**

Role: **Corp. VP - Client Care Program**

### SEARCH INFO

Candidates Contacted: **195**

Screening Interviews: **117**

Search Committee Interviews: **9**

Candidates Presented: **4**

Time to 1st Interview: **17 days**

Time to Offer: **93 days**

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# CASE INTERVIEW

Peter Clayton from the Total Picture Radio interviews AECOM's Head of Industrial Accounts Jordan Sweeney following a recent Corporate Vice President of Client Care search.



**PETER CLAYTON**  
CEO - TOTALPICTURE.COM



**JORDAN SWEENEY**  
HEAD OF IND. ACCT. - AECOM

## PETER CLAYTON

Jordan Sweeney is Head of Industrial Accounts and Strategic Sales Industrial and Market at AECOM along with Seth Deutsch, President Industrial group at AECOM. These two senior leaders were instrumental in conducting an unusual high level executive search for a true purple squirrel which is recruiting jargon for an extremely difficult skilled professional to find and recruit.

Leading the search for Seth and Jordan, executive search partner David Perry, managing partner with Perry Martel International, components of the search which took about six months had the intrigue and ingredients of a good spy novel and I'm happy to unravel it here in a leadership channel edition of Total Picture.

AECOM is one of those highly successful global organizations you may never have heard of with nearly 100000 employees including architects, engineers, designers, planners, scientists and management and construction services professionals.

AECOM is a premiere fully integrated infrastructure and supports service firm with clients in more than 150 countries around the world. To add to the complexity of this story AECOM was in the middle of a significant acquisition during this search with one of its largest competitors URS.

Joining me to set the stage for our story today is Jordan Sweeney, Jordan, thanks for taking time to speak with me. So tell us about your current role at AECOM.

## **JORDAN SWEENEY**

Well, thanks Peter. My current role at AECOM is really to use the key accounts in the industry and market as a kind of grounds for testing new innovative service offerings that we would then scale to the rest of our business and our operating group. As well as getting involved in other types of strategic partnerships and sales opportunities.

## **PETER CLAYTON**

Well that's a good lead-in to my asking the next question which is who are you and Seth looking to bring in to your organization and what made this search particularly difficult and unusual?

## **JORDAN SWEENEY**

Actually Peter as I thought more and more about this question and as we discussed previously kind of the workings of what went on I could safely say that I think we were trying to bring in the exact combination of Seth and myself in one human being.

When we begun we thought that we could get Seth, myself and a person with an inordinate amount of experience in the client care space who could bring particular challenges and vision to our program that Seth and I could not bring.

## **PETER CLAYTON**

Like I mentioned in my opening, your company has close to 100000 employees around the globe, I'm sure you have highly competent in-house executive level recruiters. Why did you decide to use an executive search company for this particular search?

## **JORDAN SWEENEY**

Client care was very new to our company. It really is new I should say, if I could say, to the engineering and construction world. We really wanted and outside observer and an objective opinion in how we would bring someone in to shape the future of where we were going.

We were very focused on our program as Seth and I propped it up in the company. But we wanted really to go out in the market and explore really what was out there and so we felt that we needed an executive recruiter to just get us that type of exposure and to get us to the right people quickly because we really didn't have the time to sift through a lot of candidates.

## **PETER CLAYTON**

You had mentioned to me and I think this happens a lot when you and Seth were first discussing this new role you were in somewhat of a Mary Poppins Road, looking for someone who is perfect in every way. So how did David help you refine your search criteria and goals?

## **JORDAN SWEENEY**

David did a number of things. The first is that I think he listened and we were on the phone so I'm imagining that he listened with a wise smile on his face as we described this perfect human being who could do everything and be everything and was the industry expert.

So he listened to us first and actually created a profile of a person both in personality as well as in experience that we thought that we wanted and then what he did is continuously challenge us to go back to what we had written down which was really great for Seth and I.

We can both get quite far from where we started with all of our ideas and brainstorming sessions and David was very disciplined to keep us always going back to the same document and the same point so that we were always editing and refining the description of the person that we wanted.

## **PETER CLAYTON**

What are the unusual pieces of this whole search? Is the fact that both you and Seth, senior level executives within your organization were so actively involved in the search?

Oftentimes especially in large corporations what would happen is you and Seth would take this job back to the chief Human Resource Officer and say alright, go hire an executive search firm and find us this individual, why did you choose to get so involved in the search personally?

## **JORDAN SWEENEY**

Well we were both very personally invested both from just an operational perspective with this program meaning that we had both been critical cogs in the wheel, so to speak, in actually creating our client care program. Additionally, we were personally responsible to our C-suite for the success of the program.

We were very, very involved and very interested in the hand-off of this program because we wanted it to continue to be successful. This is one of the top initiatives, top three initiatives for our CEO.

It was in fact reported on and reported to our Board of Directors so this was something that was considered to be even at the shareholders level, critical to our success as a company and I think that merits quite a bit of involvement.

## **PETER CLAYTON**

Yeah, I think you are right, that's really interesting. And it seems to me that as you talk about that David really helped you and Seth to find the position more precisely to make sure you were actually bringing the right person with the right skill sets into your company again back to your point that this is an entirely new role for AECOM.

## **JORDAN SWEENEY**

Right. This was something that as I said client care in the engineering and construction world is not something that is put first and foremost. Safety is put first and foremost and engineering excellence and the normal types of things.

But client care is becoming a very hot topic because it's really helping leaders to understand how to shape their revenue projections over time with organic growth. So this role really drastically kind of changed between we thought it would start as an operator role, we started with it as an operator role.

And then David through other methods that I'm sure we are going to talk about later, like benchmarking and even some of the interview tactics that he had, he really helped us to understand not only what we were looking for but what was available in the market.

And so those two points what was available and what we really needed and wanted that helped us to really define the rest of the program and the future vision of the program.

## **PETER CLAYTON**

Well let's get into this a little bit. Can you explain to us the concept of the facilitator, challenger and coach roles that David introduced you to in conducting an interview and what you learned through this process?

## **JORDAN SWEENEY**

Yes, that was a very interesting half a day there to have spent with David and Seth. We did a personal interview, a face to face interview with our first candidate, a benchmark candidate and then had other interviews over the phone. But it was very interesting to utilize David's methodology going in where he sort of wanted to remain on the periphery of the interview process for the beginning.

He wanted to facilitate, he wanted to set it up and then he really wanted to allow the candidate to really kind of free flow in their discussion. And then we would have sort of these coach and challenger, I hate to say good cop-bad cop kind of mentality.

But in essence you do have one who is constantly making sure that they challenge what the candidate is saying which for us was a particular value because our candidate was going to be in front of our CEO and our CFO and in front of potentially board members.

And if you can't handle it kind of in an interview you really can't handle it at a board level. So that was a great way for us to really determine the executive presence that we were really looking for. The coach role was very interesting which I would say I probably took on a little bit which was not so much of an encouraging but kind of a brainstorming session to share my ideas and to share what we had been.

## **JORDAN SWEENEY**

And then to hear if there were any additional ideas or additional improvements, if you will, on anything that I had said. It ended up that those three roles were very natural for the three of us I think in the interview Seth being a challenger and David being a facilitator, myself being the coach. I think it was a fantastic approach and I will now likely conduct all interviews with three people in the room.

## **PETER CLAYTON**

Interesting. I think this concept of using a benchmark candidate, if you will, is very interesting and I'm sure that really helped everyone really refine the search to come up with exactly who you really needed to bring into the organization.

## **JORDAN SWEENEY**

Right, the benchmark, if you speak with David I'm sure he would be gracious enough not to tell you how impatient Seth and I are. But I wasn't entirely sure what the benchmark candidate process would really do. I thought it would slow us down at first.

But it actually was throughout the process I was very impressed with the discipline of both David and his approach. The discipline of choosing a benchmark candidate was just extremely valuable. It not only saved us time in reading résumés because the benchmark gives you zero, zero.

And if you are not moving towards the better of the benchmark candidate then you don't really need to waste your time. It was incredibly valuable from just not having to read so many résumés but then it really helped us to understand where we were targeting in the pool of professionals that we were really looking at.

If this was our benchmark candidate then what were the other qualities that he was missing and who in our pool of candidates has those qualities. So it was incredibly valuable to have that benchmark candidate.

## **PETER CLAYTON**

So as this search evolved, Jordan, the job description became much more of a leadership executive role than that of an operator. So can you kind of take us through that? With the benchmark I'm sure that helped influence this but what other factors influenced the shift into much more of an executive role?

## **JORDAN SWEENEY**

Well there were a few things. As you said the first was simply just the availability of what we were looking for in a pool or in the market really. But there was an additional element that was the acquisition that we were going through.

## **JORDAN SWEENEY**

When we first started the search we were fairly certain that the role would actually end up reporting into our organization. In actual fact we hadn't shared with David when we started that we were in the middle of this acquisition, we weren't allowed to disclose any information.

And so we kept that under wraps and then halfway through our time we closed on our deal and there was a lot of shifting of the business as you can imagine. What happened was the client care program ended up in a different operating group than ours.

So what we really were looking for then was someone to be the visionary of the program because we were not going to be so involved with it. We really needed someone who could stand up for what the program should be and what it represents in terms of the corporate kind of mandate of the skeleton of the program, so to speak.

But also someone who could challenge our C-Suite to think about new ways of looking at information, new ways of looking at client care and really honestly fill a knowledge gap that Seth and I just couldn't fill because we didn't have 15, 25 years in the industry.

So it really morphed over time as a consequence of both our internal business shifts as well as what we saw in the market. And when we tested that benchmark candidate and we said we really need more of an executive level and more of an executive face than what we had.

## **PETER CLAYTON**

I think it would be very helpful if you would define for us what client care means to your organization. What does this encompass?

## **JORDAN SWEENEY**

Well, there is the reality and the dream. The reality of what it encompasses at this moment in time is a client survey tool and program. So we started with what is called the NPS methodology, the Net Promoter Score methodology which is essentially gauging a customer's loyalty to your company; Whether or not they'll come back to.

This was tied to a lot of our financial metrics and organic growth and things like that. But in essence in 2014 that was client care because that's what Seth and I implemented throughout the company. Now what we would like it to be in 2015 in beyond is much more.

Not only more of an analytics and data driven client care program in the sense of the survey but also starting to incorporate metrics and KPIs and ways of measuring the success of a bid and a pursuit and its effects on a relationship in our account management program and in our large municipal and state types of clients.

## **JORDAN SWEENEY**

But David was gracious enough to walk me through that and always showed tremendous professionalism and poise in his ability to continue on what he knew was a tried and proven method that he knew would yield the right result.

He would tell us sometimes that he agreed to get us the right person and if that means that it's a little bit of a struggle he is willing to see it all the way through because he wants to deliver the right person for us.

## **PETER CLAYTON**

What specifically did you learn from David when it comes to recruiting senior level executives into an organization?

## **JORDAN SWEENEY**

From an observer's perspective I learned quite a bit about how long it takes to court someone. I really never looked at recruiting as kind of selling a person on a new firm but that's because I've never really recruited anyone before. It's probably very straightforward for other people but for me I never thought about it.

So David really helped me to understand that particularly when we were trying to get a couple of candidates to really come and shake loose and talk to us. I also learned just how valuable the vision of a program for example, for this client care program, the vision of the program and the growth and support of the program in the company is to a potential candidate.

We had so many folks who asked David, is there executive level buy-in and is there executive level support for this position because if there isn't I won't even consider it.

And so it was really, really valuable for me to see that David already knew that these were the types of questions that were going to be asked and so he was thoroughly prepared for all this and could really anticipate these types of questions.

## **PETER CLAYTON**

Well that's really interesting. I think that's a really valid point that you make. I mean the individual that you ultimately recruited into your organization had a great job and he was very happy where he was. So it took some real salesmanship and convincing to get Luke to even talk to you guys.

## **JORDAN SWEENEY**

Absolutely, absolutely.

## **PETER CLAYTON**

Great. Well Jordan thank you very much for taking time to speak with me today here on Total Pictures. It's been very nice to get to know you.



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