



Interim Insights: A conversation with Peter Jenkins

In today's evolving corporate landscape, the role of an interim leader in Corporate Affairs has never been more pivotal. These leaders step in at moments of transition, challenge or transformation – bringing clarity, stabilising teams and reputations, and shaping strategic narratives when organisations need it most.

As part of our Interim Insights series, Olivia Grant, Associate Director and leader of our interim practice, is speaking with Director-level interim professionals to discuss approaches and frameworks that enable them to make immediate and meaningful impact. We will explore what exceptional interim leadership looks like and why it continues to be a critical asset for organisations navigating change.

▶ About Peter Jenkins

I have 25 years' experience across media relations, public affairs, national campaigning and employee engagement. I have worked across the corporate, charity and public sectors with an emphasis on regulated industries like water, energy and social care. I have successfully managed very large and small corporate functions and had a lot of experience working within some high-profile trade bodies. In that time, I have worked in a succession of long term and in some cases shorter-term interim and permanent leadership roles.

▶ **When you step into an interim leadership role, what are the first signals you look for to understand whether the corporate affairs function is aligned – or misaligned – with the organisation's strategic priorities?**

Often you will have done the groundwork at the pre and interview stages, so you already have a feel for an organisation before you start in the role. In my case, I'm regularly speaking with my network, so it's not unusual for me to know someone who has either worked at, or interacted with, that organisation at some point. It's amazing what you can find out by talking to contacts beforehand – this often gives you a real sense of what an organisation or leader is like, which will help you understand what is really going under the bonnet.

Once in post, being time limited means that it is imperative that you understand quickly whether the corporate affairs function is aligned. It is essential to seek out the key information early on - for example – relevant strategies, business plans, board minutes and so on. However, probably even more important is the conversations with key members of the team and SLT colleagues to find out where the pressure points are: What's really going on? What's on the mind of the CEO? What the key deliverables are and by when?

▶ **Interim roles often mean entering during moments of change or crisis. How do you quickly assess the reputational risk landscape?**

Interim leaders are often brought in to fill a gap in resources and expertise or to lead a specific time-bound project often at a time of change. Many interim roles can also involve elements of change management and crisis management. Joining an organisation during a crisis or transformation has happened to me a lot! For example, I joined the water industry during a reputational crisis and joined an established corporate firm facing an ownership takeover, the arrival of a new CEO or Chair, and so on. Being able to deal with change management and reputational risk is essential to be an effective interim whilst still delivering short-term impact. In that situation you need to keep asking the right questions to make sure the right mitigation or people are in place: Do they have the right processes? Do the team understand them? Do they have the right crisis comms plans?

▶ **You're frequently the 'new face' in the room, sometimes managing established teams. What's your approach to earning trust rapidly with both senior executives and key external stakeholders?**

Two things, firstly, for me being visible is important – certainly in my latest interim assignment I was present at their offices in Westminster 4 days a week and often with additional work commitments in the evenings as well. I was dealing with multiple stakeholders at the highest levels and responding to some of the leading stories in the news agenda, that day. It was never a 9-to-5 role and I knew this when I accepted it. That's why it's important that you are highly visible and at the disposal of the CEO, SLT colleagues and the wider team certainly in the initial months.

Secondly, is to understand quickly the stakeholder landscape and building new positive relationships. The relationship with Chair, for example, can often be overlooked but is vital, as by doing so, you're naturally adding value (by having conversations) early on at the highest levels of the organisation – which is critical.

▶ **Contractors are expected to deliver value immediately. What framework practises or approaches enable you to make high-impact decisions within your first month?**

To be successful interim director you need to have a laser focus on what really is important. This means prioritising who you build relationships with and not getting involved in every initiative where you could be helpful. What is essential is to deploy your expertise where it will have the greatest impact. In the past I've been conscious of overcommitting; with shorter interim assignments you can be much more selective in what you get involved with and be ruthless with your time and only tackle the priorities and problems that deserve your attention. That said, I'm always conscious when doing interim roles, that you need to start delivering value from day one, so going back to what I said earlier, speed and focus are the approaches that I always adopt in my first weeks and months.

▶ **What legacy do you aim to leave when stepping out of an interim role, and how do you measure the value of that longer-term legacy?**

Legacy is a big word and I'm not sure I would use that in this context as there are a few variables in play. It depends on the length of the interim assignment and why you have been brought in. For example, is the position cover for someone on extended leave, parental cover, or is it a transition while the organisation needs to fill a gap to decide on a permanent solution? I've been in the lucky position that several of my interim roles have transitioned to permanent on a couple of occasions. On one assignment, the CEO asked me to do some fresh thinking about the directorate, the team and their priorities. This was incredibly empowering and meant I had the full authority to implement positive change, which helped drive the objectives of the whole organisation. I essentially wrote my own plan and subsequently delivered on it.

▶ What advice would you give to someone navigating the job market during a challenging geo-political time?

Network, network, network and don't give up even when the situation can look a bit bleak. I had a very difficult period back in 2019. I had been made redundant (they had sold the company) from a job I loved and for a company with a unique culture. This was before Brexit had happened and the general election that year – unfortunately the job market, to put it mildly, was horrible back then! I did a couple of things instead – I joined an amazing charity as a trustee – Carers' First – where I am still on the Board. I did some pro bono PR work for some friends working in other charities. I travelled a lot that year and made new friends. I also made the life changing decision to move out of London to the countryside – a decision I haven't regretted for one moment. So, looking back it was a year of major change for me, but work turned out to play only a small part of it of that.



How we can help

Whether you are seeking your next professional challenge or building a team to achieve lasting impact, Ellwood Atfield supports communications, policy, and advocacy professionals at every stage of their career. We welcome the opportunity to speak to you.

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