

From Outsider to Insider

A total consulting experience finding order in the chaos

By Lisa Acomb

Brian Sill, FCSI, president of Deterministics, once mentioned, “the moons aligned” when I came in contact with his company last winter through a pro bono consulting crusade hosted by Deterministics and the University of Washington Business and Economic Development Program (BEDP). The BEDP joins UW Business School students with alumni companies to help minority-owned Seattle area businesses improve their business success. By chance I happened to stumble upon the business through my search into the foodservice consulting industry.

My experience with Deterministics began when I started working with the company and the BEDP in their attempts to improve operations efficiency for a minority-owned, quick-serve chain of restaurants in the greater Seattle area, Ezell’s Famous Chicken. It was through this initial experience that I first tasted the innovative and responsive company culture that I would grow to appreciate in the months to come. Working side by side with one of the company’s project managers and Brian Sill, I got my first real experience of what foodservice consulting really is like. Through an initially overwhelming series of on-site time studies, hours of production line observation, customer surveying, lengthy discussions with restaurant owners, statistical

breakdowns of service delivery systems and concluding recommendations, Deterministics guided me through the intricate organization of a real-life consulting project.

Along the path of this three-month project, both frustration and anticipation drove me to discover deliverable results that would improve this business’s state of mind and financial position. There were several occasions where I had to revise and reorganize time studies, collect additional data, and find actual constraints to production. It was challenging, but I learned through taking action and observing my mentors’ constant communication and thorough analysis. Their diligent search for answers to making the small business more efficient via statistical information, engineering knowledge, and marketing common sense led me to develop a greater appreciation for the uniform results that this consulting firm offers.

Taking a subjective situation and making it directly measurable is perhaps the most powerful notion that I took away from this first interaction with Deterministics, and the obvious logic pushed me to pursue the company further. Fortunately, the FCSI Educational Foundation offered Deterministics a summer internship scholarship, and Brian offered me this position so that I could continue my involvement with the company and the foodservice consulting industry.



Gathered in the kitchen of one of five Ezell’s restaurants are Brian Sill; Skip Roland, Rotary Board Mentor; Heather Hummel, BEDP Student; Lisa Acomb, BEDP Student and FCSI Scholarship recipient; Lisa Dittmar, BEDP Student; and Ezell Stephens, founder of the chain.



At the packaging station of one of five Ezell's restaurants Wayne Rudd, Manager, Brian Sill and Lisa Acomb smile for the camera.

For the first half of the summer, I devoted my efforts to helping the company implement its new Labor Analysis System for T.G.I. Friday's. This was an exciting time because I was able to participate in their Systems Engineering side

of consulting – rolling out a software solution. I was able to see Deterministics develop a custom software package, manipulate its elements to fit the client's goals, and set up a web-hosted system from the Seattle office.

Without hesitation, I jumped right into this project. The years of experience of Paul Malmo, co-founder of Deterministics, was apparent in the results this software was able to produce. I assisted with the data entry and system analysis, gaining a comprehensive understanding of how restaurants make staffing decisions based on menu mixes, customer demand patterns and service routines. No longer can I enter a restaurant without recognizing the pattern: two people hosting with three servers and two cooks out back – all these decisions are planned and deliberate. The new Labor Analysis System takes an objective view of restaurant operations. Spending time with the entire company, I found that each team member is committed to imaginatively solving complex operational issues facing the foodservice industry.

The second half of my internship was spent doing fieldwork under the supervision of Graham Comley, project manager. Deterministics started a prototype engineering project looking to reduce waste, speed up the production line, and design new store layouts for Cold Stone Creamery. Confident in my newly-developed abilities to

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take time studies, the company sent me out with their handheld software to study one local store's processes.

It was very difficult at first to blend in with the employees and capture all the necessary time components, but after a few days of non-stop timing, I found that it gradually became much easier to track all the steps in production. At the end of every session, I noted any qualitative observations and presented them to Graham, and he considered them as possible concluding recommendations.

In this scenario, the most important thing I learned was how to act professionally in an unfamiliar environment. Trust was a key element in the timing process; Graham and Brian coached me on communication and professional skills during this undertaking. Initially, it was difficult convincing employees that the studies I was undertaking were not a personal reflection on their performance. However, once they realized that the work I was doing would ultimately lead to improved service for their customers, we developed a friendly bond. At this project I was able to sort through ambiguity firsthand and start to see how to make Cold Stone's processes more objective, based on the actual data that I had collected. It was an empowering feeling.

As the summer came to an end, so did my internship, but I took a great deal away from these past months of experience. I learned about a new industry that is excit-

ing, dynamic and in constant flux as new methods are developed to improve customer service. Additionally, company culture is an important aspect of the success of a company. At Deterministics, I found a community of hardworking, ethical, and creative thinkers. Lastly, this internship gave me a mentor and a friend in the consulting and foodservice industry, which has been both influential and inspirational for my future career. This opportunity that the FCSI Educational Foundation Scholarship afforded me has been outstanding experience in my personal growth and development. I thank them for this opportunity. 🌍

Born and raised in Washington State, Lisa Acomb recently graduated with honors from the University of Washington with a degree in business administration, emphasizing marketing. Lisa's interest in the foodservice industry stemmed from a community-oriented consulting project with the university's Business and Economic Development Program, where she was intrigued by the critical relationship between superior customer service and restaurant production capabilities. After her internship, she joined Deterministics where she currently works. She hopes to explore the marketing and operations management arenas further as she begins her professional career. As an aside, Ezell's, her first project, has been touted by Oprah Winfrey on her show as the best fried chicken she has ever eaten. She had them out to the show to feed the guests and she still orders airmailed packages once in a while.

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