# The Future of Hunter Professional Services

## Stage 2 Interviews Report

December 2015

HUNTER RESEARCH FOUNDATION

FUTURE-PROOFING OUR REGION

Hunter Research Foundation delivers insights that move the Hunter Region forward, through a unique, rigorous and innovative economic and social regional research program that has operated in the Hunter Region for 60 years.

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**Project No. 122/2015**

# Executive Summary

This report outlines the second stage of the Future of Hunter Professional Services project.

## Background

The Future of Hunter Professional Services was chosen as the second focus of the Hunter Research Foundation's (HRF's) Regional Competitiveness research program to seek insights into creating high-value jobs that will drive the Hunter's future economic growth. The project was developed to look at the dynamics, opportunities and constraints for boosting the value of professional services in the Hunter, with a focus on identifying enabling strategies that can be utilised by companies based in the Region to support stronger industry growth and remain globally competitive.

Stage 1 of the project involved a review of the local professional services industry and key local, national and global trends. A roundtable discussion was also conducted with HRF Research Ambassadors to identify key themes to be explored in more depth in Stage 2 of the project.

Stage 2 of the project aimed to obtain a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities for Hunter-based professional services firms, and to explore possible enablers in order to develop strategies that could increase the competitiveness of local firms.

## Objective

The objective of the second stage of the Future of Hunter Professional Services project was to undertake in-depth interviews with Hunter-based professional services firms to identify:

- current market drivers and challenges
- level of business planning and innovation
- key networks and collaborations
- opportunities for initiatives or strategies to support Hunter professional services firms.

## Methods

A question path was designed to support semi-structured in-depth interviews with Hunter-based professional services firms to explore the themes and key levers identified in Stage 1.

A convenience sample of professional services firms were selected from the HRF's contacts database and additional contacts provided by respondents. Selected firms were contacted by email to introduce the project and then by telephone to confirm the suitable respondent, request participation and arrange an interview date and time. Request for interview was directed to the business owner, general manager or chief executive officer.

A total of 12 interviews were conducted.

## Results

### Sample characteristics

- The majority of participating firms (83%) provided financial, legal, professional or technical services and half (50%) were large or very large sized firms employing more than 50 employees. One-third of the firms (33%) had been established in the past 10 years.
- Across the firms a significant proportion of clients were Hunter-based. Firms interviewed were not actively marketing or chasing overseas-based work. While some firms were doing some work for overseas-based clients, the work was generally Australian based and/or limited to working with people who had been clients previously.
- The location of competitors was also predominantly Hunter-based with some competition located elsewhere in Australia.

### Challenges facing Hunter Professional Services

Participants were asked to indicate the main challenges their business had faced in recent times. Major challenges identified included:

- Staffing or cultural challenges: firms identified difficulties in acquiring and retaining staff, especially senior experienced staff; creating or maintaining their organisational culture by employing staff with the right attitude; and changing needs in terms of skills mix including the ability of staff to effectively communicate face-to-face with clients.
- Meeting changing customer needs and adding value: reacting to, or anticipating, constantly-changing customer needs, and ensuring the firm is able to continually add value for new or existing clients in the face of changing needs and increased competition.
- Keeping up to date with technology: costs and access to resources to update old systems; sufficient bandwidth, internet access and datalinks to meet customer expectations and remain competitive.
- Keeping costs and prices low: given current economy and increased competition.
- Meeting current and changing regulation and compliance requirements: constant and ongoing changes placing significant costs and pressures on local firms.

### Oppurtunities for the future

Participants were asked for their ideas on what could be done in the Region to boost the growth and competitiveness of the Hunter professional services sector. Opportunities identified included:

- Increased networking through industry bodies and business chambers: with better representation of professional services with, and by, business organisations such as the Hunter Business Chamber; united representation of professional services industry and/or regional representation; utilising established and respected organisations (rather than creating a new body).
- Improved infrastructure: including transportation links, telecommunications and accommodation to help support professional service firms directly, as well as indirectly by supporting other industries.
- Coordinated regional promotion of Hunter-based professional services firms: to improve the perception of the capabilities and availability of local firms; collaboration between governments, industry groups and firms to market the region and local firms as a viable alternative to capital cities.
- Greater collaboration and coordination: between and within industries, across levels of government and including research organisations and the University of Newcastle to better achieve shared goals and objectives for the Region.

- Transition away from mining and manufacturing: with support and a clear plan from all levels of government to help the local economy transition towards the Hunter's growing knowledge-based economy.

**Innovation**

- Innovation within most firms was found to come from a combination of internal identification of opportunities, as well as from customer requests or recommendations.
- Most identified introducing new technology, primarily software, to achieve more efficient, timely processes and improved customer access as key innovations within their firms.
- Developing new products, and changing existing ones, based on a combination of changing customer needs, pre-empting future needs, seeking ways to add value, access new markets, and packaging products to avoid cherry-picking were also common.
- Barriers to innovation included organisational culture, resistance to change and lack of access to high-speed internet connections with sufficient data limits at a reasonable cost.

**Networking and collaborations**

- Networks and collaborations were generally focused in the Hunter Region with limited national or international networking or collaboration.
- Collaboration with customers was found to be especially important in establishing and maintaining strong relationships, as well as identifying ways to improve product and service offerings. Collaborating with other professional services firms was less common, and collaboration with competitors was rare.

## Conclusion

The outcomes of Stage 2 of the Future of Hunter Professional Services project provides insights into opportunities for the formulation of practical regional initiatives and strategies to support increased competitiveness of the Hunter's professional services sector.

Enabling strategies supported by the findings for both individual businesses and to boost growth and competiveness of the sector included:

- Investment in skills, education and training to improve the regional rate of secondary and tertiary-level qualifications and encourage employers to invest in employees to develop and retain experienced, skilled staff.
- Strengthening domestic and international networks broader than the Hunter Region and assisting firms to develop globally-connected suppliers, contractors and clients.
- Continued investment in information and communication technology to achieve more efficient, timely processes, meet changing needs and reach new non-local markets.
- Support for firms to foster a culture of innovation within their business, amongst employees and more broadly across the sector.

While still a developing area for the Hunter's professional services sector, strategies supporting firms towards innovation and globalisation will continue to grow in importance as the Hunter reduces its future reliance on the mining industry and seeks to diversify its customer base.

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# 1. Introduction

Hunter Research Foundation (HRF) is committed to undertaking research that will deliver insights to move the Hunter forward towards being an internationally competitive and resilient region. A key focus for the Hunter is the future of local professional services.

## 1.1 Background

Recent trends in the local and national economy have identified the Hunter Region as entering a new era of change. The Region has dealt with significant change in the past as the community and local economy navigated from a manufacturing base dependent on heavy industries to a more diversified one, although still with a strong regional dependence on mining investment and production. Part of the Hunter's diversity includes growth in the services sector, which represents an increasing percentage of employment within the local economy.

The Hunter's services sector employs approximately three out of four workers and contributes 58 per cent of the Region's economic value. Recent national and global trends suggest that in future, the Hunter's economic performance will be even more tied to the performance of its services industries. The challenge is to identify ways to improve the value added by services, and in particular, within high value-added sub-sectors such as professional services, including financial and insurance businesses, rental, hiring and real-estate services and professional, scientific and technical services.

Currently in the Hunter, professional services include approximately nine per cent of employment in the Region. This share of regional employment has fallen over the past four years, due to our broader reliance on the local mining sector, while it continues to grow in NSW and Australia. Growth in the services sector in Australia has occurred as a result of the ageing population, technological advances, and greater competition in goods-based industries. In order to remain competitive and continue growing, it is anticipated that professional services in the Hunter will need to reduce its reliance on the mining industry, diversify its customer base, and become more globally focused.

The Future of Hunter Professional Services was chosen as the second focus of the HRF's Regional Competitiveness research program to seek insights into creating high-value jobs that will drive the Hunter's future economic growth. The project was developed to look at the dynamics, opportunities and constraints for boosting the value of professional services in the Hunter, with a focus on identifying enabling strategies that can be utilised by companies based in the Region to support stronger industry growth and remain globally competitive.

Stage 1 of the project involved a review of the local professional services industry and key local, national and global trends. A roundtable discussion was also conducted with HRF Research Ambassadors to identify key themes to be explored in more depth in Stage 2 of the project.

Using the outcomes of Stage 1, the objectives and research questions for Stage 2 of the project were refined. This report outlines the tasks undertaken and the research findings from this second stage of the project.

## 1.2 Objective

The focus for Stage 2 of the project was to obtain a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities for Hunter-based professional services firms, and to explore possible enablers in order to develop strategies that could increase the competitiveness of local firms.

More specifically, this second stage aimed to undertake in-depth interviews with Hunter-based professional services firms to identify:

- Current market drivers and challenges
- Level of business planning and innovation
- Key networks and collaborations
- Opportunities for initiatives or strategies to support Hunter professional services firms.

# 2. Methods

Stage 2 of the Future of Hunter Professional Services project utilised in-depth qualitative face-to-face interviews with Hunter-based professional services firms.

## 2.1 Interview Structure

The question path was designed to support semi-structured in-depth interviews that would explore the themes and key levers identified in Stage 1 including innovation, collaboration and ability to enter external markets.

Topics included:

- Key products and services, staffing and ownership
- Current market drivers, customer base and profitability
- Changes in the business and main challenges over the last five years
- Development of new or improved processes, services or products (innovation)
- Collaborations and planning for the future
- Regional initiatives to support the growth and competitiveness of the Hunter professional services industry.

A copy of the interview structure is shown in Appendix 1.

## 2.2 Sample

A convenience sample of Hunter professional services firms were selected from the HRF's contacts database. The initial sample was expanded via additional contacts provided by respondents. The sampling aimed to reflect the range of sub-sectors and size of professional services firms in the Hunter Region within a small accessible sample.

The use of a convenience sample enabled the HRF to conduct the research in a way which was cost effective, efficient and timely in identifying current industry trends, possible opportunities and interest in proposed enabling strategies such as diversification and globalisation.

Selected firms were initially contacted by email to introduce the project and invite their participation. Where possible, emails were directly addressed to the business owner, general manager or chief executive officer. A copy of the recruitment email is shown in Appendix 2. Follow-up contact was made by telephone to confirm the suitable respondent, request participation and arrange an interview date and time.

Twelve out of the 17 professional services firms where telephone contact was made agreed to participate in an interview (71%).

## 2.3 Interviews

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 12 Hunter-based professional services firms. The interviews were conducted onsite at the participating businesses or at HRF's offices. The interviews were approximately 30-45 minutes in duration and undertaken during September 2015.

Participant responses were recorded with handwritten notes and, where possible, respondents were asked for permission to record the interviews. If permission was given, interviews were recorded to assist data collection and analysis.

## 2.4 Data management and analysis

The outcomes of each interview were entered against the key questions in a single database. The data was cleaned and checked for consistency against the interview notes and recordings. Coding frames were established to assist in analysis and the data coded. Analysis was undertaken using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

# 3. Results

## 3.1 Sample Characteristics

Key variables obtained to describe the characteristics of participating firms included services provided, years established and the number of employees. Table 1 provides a summary of these characteristics.

- Approximately forty per cent of the firms interviewed provide financial services while a similar number provide professional or technical services, including legal services. Comparison with the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Counts of Australian Business, suggest these proportions are slightly higher than actual proportions in the Hunter Region. This occurred as proportionally less firms providing hiring services participated.
- More than half of the firms interviewed were large or very large sized firms employing more than 50 employees. Of the remaining firms, the majority (42%) were medium sized firms with between 11 and 50 staff members. Small firms employing 10 or less employees were underpresented in the sample.
- One-third of the firms interviewed were relatively new to the Hunter having been established in the past 10 years. Two of the firms had been operating for more than 40 years.

**Table 1 Characteristics of participating firms**

| **Services provided** | count | % |
|---|---:|---:|
| Financial | 5 | 41.7 |
| Technical and engineering | 3 | 25.0 |
| Legal | 2 | 16.7 |
| Hiring and recruitment | 2 | 16.7 |
| **Number of employees** | | |
| 1-10 | 1 | 8.3 |
| 11-50 | 5 | 41.7 |
| 51-100 | 3 | 25.0 |
| More than 100 | 3 | 25.0 |
| **Years established** | | |
| Up to 10 years | 4 | 33.3 |
| 11-40 years | 6 | 50.0 |
| More than 40 years | 2 | 16.7 |
| **Total** | **12** | **100.0** |

**Business characteristics**

Participating firms were also asked about their client base and competitors.

- In most cases the client base was not very geographically diverse. Across the firms a significant proportion of clients were Hunter-based. Some firms indicated they also worked with customers elsewhere in NSW (predominantly Sydney) and other areas in Australia, with a few having overseas-based customers. Relationships and face-to-face contact with clients was seen as important and work with non-Hunter based customers often only occurred as a result of previous work and existing relationships.
- Firms interviewed were not actively marketing or chasing overseas-based work. While some firms were doing some work for overseas-based clients, the work was generally Australian based and/or limited to working with people who had been clients previously. There was some interest in exporting services overseas however no firm interviewed indicated this was going to be actively pursued in the short to medium term.
- The location of competitors was also predominantly Hunter-based with some competition located elsewhere in Australia. Firms did not report significant competition from overseas-based firms within their current markets. The few exceptions were large multi-nationals who already have offices based in NSW.

## 3.2 Challenges facing Hunter Professional Services

Participants were asked to indicate the main challenges their business had faced in recent times. Participants were able to provide more than one response and the responses were grouped into common themes as shown in Table 2.

Major challenges identified included:

- Staffing or cultural challenges: firms identified difficulties in acquiring and retaining staff in the Region, especially senior experienced staff; creating or maintaining their organisational culture by employing staff with the right attitude; and changing needs in terms of skills mix, including the ability of staff to effectively communicate face-to-face with clients.
- Meeting changing customer needs and adding value: reacting to, or anticipating, constantly-changing customer needs, and ensuring the firm is able to continually add value for new or existing clients in the face of these changing needs and increased competition.
- Keeping up to date with technology: costs and access to resources to update old systems; sufficient bandwidth, internet access and datalinks to meet customer expectations and remain competitive.
- Keeping costs and prices low: necessary due to the state of the economy and increased competition.
- Meeting current and changing regulation and compliance requirements: constant and ongoing changes placing significant costs and pressures on local firms.

These challenges were also discussed by participants as the main drivers of competition in the market.

**Table 2 Challenges facing Hunter professional services firms**

| **Challenges** | responses | % of cases |
|---|---|---|
| Staffing or cultural challenges | 10 | 83.3 |
| Meeting changing customer needs and adding value | 10 | 83.3 |
| Keeping up to date with technology | 9 | 75.0 |
| Keeping costs and prices low | 8 | 66.7 |
| Meeting current and changing regulation and compliance requirements | 7 | 58.3 |
| Current business environment and economic challenges | 7 | 58.3 |
| Growing need or desire to be innovative | 4 | 33.3 |
| Marketing the firm | 2 | 16.7 |
| Need or desire to offshore work | 2 | 16.7 |
| Organisation resistant to change | 2 | 16.7 |
| **Total** | **61** | **508.3** |

## 3.3 Opportunities for the Future

Participants were asked for their ideas on what could be done in the Region to boost the growth and competitiveness of the Hunter professional services sector. Participants were able to provide more than one response and the responses were grouped into common themes as shown in Table 3.

Opportunities identified included:

- Increased networking through industry bodies and business chambers: with better representation of professional services with, and by, business organisations such as the Hunter Business Chamber; united representation of professional services industry and/or regional representation; utilising established and respected organisations (rather than creating a new body).
- Improved infrastructure: including transportation links, telecommunications and accommodation to help support professional service firms directly, as well as indirectly by supporting other industries.
- Coordinated regional promotion of Hunter-based professional services firms: to improve the perception of the capabilities and availability of local firms; collaboration between governments, industry groups and firms to market the region and local firms as a viable alternative to capital cities.
- Greater collaboration and coordination: between and within industries, across levels of government and including research organisations and the University of Newcastle to better achieve shared goals and objectives for the Region.
- Transition away from mining and manufacturing: with support and a clear plan from all levels of government to help the local economy transition towards the Hunter's growing knowledge-based economy.

**Table 3 Ideas for the future of Hunter professional services**

| **Ideas** | responses | % of cases |
|---|---|---|
| Increased networking through existing industry bodies and business chambers | 7 | 58.3 |
| Improved infrastructure including transport, telecommunications, accommodation | 6 | 50.0 |
| Coordinated regional promotion of Hunter-based professional services | 6 | 50.0 |
| Greater collaboration and coordination within the industry, and other sectors, government, research organisations, universities | 5 | 41.7 |
| Transition away from mining and/or manufacturing economy | 4 | 33.3 |
| Encourage more strategic business planning | 3 | 25.0 |
| More action from government | 3 | 25.0 |
| Develop skills/capabilities for current and future local industries | 3 | 25.0 |
| Attract corporate and/or government offices to locate in region | 2 | 16.7 |
| Embrace technology and use it in meaningful/useful ways | 2 | 16.7 |
| Public and/or private sector support for start-ups and innovators | 2 | 16.7 |
| **Total** | **43** | **358.3** |

## 3.4 Additional Insights

Participants provided a range of additional insights relating to being competitive in the market place, innovation, networks and collaboration.

### Competitive edge

Participating firms were asked what they thought gave them a unique advantage in the market place. Responses included:

- Having strong client relationships: built on trust, reputation, quality of service, and communication.
- Learning as much as possible about clients to ensure needs are met.
- Offering a wide range of products and services that can be packaged to provide a complete solution for customers.
- Diversifying services offered and/or their client base to maintain stability.
- Providing advice or customised solutions, rather than low value-add services.
- Being a medium to large, established, experienced firm: having a good reputation, brand recognition and the ability to secure major customers.
- Access to, or part of, a bigger national or international footprint as part of a multi-national or through key partnerships.
- Implementing strategic staff recruitment.

### Innovation

Discussions included opportunities for the development of new or significantly-improved process, services or products. Innovation within most firms was found to come from a combination of internal identification of opportunities and customer requests or recommendations.

Common innovations discussed were:

- Introducing new technology, primarily software, to achieve more efficient, timely processes and improved customer access. Common technologies already implemented or intended in the near future included: cloud-based software, client web portals, collaboration software, video (live and recorded), real-time reporting software, customer-relationship management software, and social media.
- Developing new products, and changing existing ones, based on a combination of changing customer needs, pre-empting future needs, seeking ways to add more value, access new markets, and packaging products to avoid cherry-picking.
- Changing marketing methods to capture new customers in a more competitive market.

Barriers to innovation identified by participants included:

- Culture: discussed as a key component driving innovation. Some firms identified the need to create a more innovative culture and the negative impact of resistance to change had on achieving an innovative culture within their organisation.
- Lack of access to high speed internet connections with sufficient data limits at a reasonable cost: nominated by the majority of participants as a limitation in implementing new technologies.

### Technology

Technology was seen as both a challenge and an opportunity.

- Adoption of new technologies was seen as market driven, to help meet customer needs and expectations, and to remain competitive.
- All participants identified opportunities for adopting new and increasingly more sophisticated technology within their firms, including commercial software and the development of bespoke in-house systems.
- The cost of updating old systems, having sufficient bandwidth and adequate data links between offices were discussed as ongoing challenges.

### Networking and collaborations

Participants were asked whether their firm was part of any networks or engaged in collaboration.

- Networking was generally identified as important in keeping up to date on developments in the industry and finding new customers. Most networking involved the firm or its employees being members of professional associations, industry bodies and local business networks. Attending local Hunter-based functions and networking events was also common.
- Collaboration with customers was found to be especially important in establishing and maintaining strong relationships, as well as identifying ways to improve product and service offerings. This response reflects participants identifying current markets as being significantly relationship driven and focused on customisation of products and services to meet customer needs.
- Collaborating with other professional services firms was less common, and collaboration with competitors was rare. However, those that did collaborate with competitors or firms providing complementary services believed it was beneficial.
- Networks and collaborations were generally focused in the Hunter Region with limited national or international networking or collaboration.

### Free trade agreements

Participants indicated that, at this stage, they believe free trade agreements would have minimal and indirect impacts on their businesses. Opportunities were expected to be limited to possible work with customers who may utilise free trade agreements to expand their own businesses or investment interests.

# 4. Conclusion

The outcomes of Stage 2 of the Future of Hunter Professional Services project provide insights into opportunities for the formulation of practical regional initiatives and strategies to support increased competitiveness of the Hunter's professional services sector.

Enabling strategies supported by the findings for both individual businesses and to boost growth and competiveness of the sector included:

- Investment in skills, education and training to improve the regional rate of secondary and tertiary-level qualifications and encourage employers to invest in employees to develop and retain experienced, skilled staff.
- Strengthen domestic and international networks, which are broader than the Hunter Region and will assist firms to develop globally-connected suppliers, contractors and clients.
- Continue to invest in information and communication technology to achieve more efficient, timely processes, meet changing needs and reach new non-local markets.
- Support firms to foster a culture of innovation within their business, amongst employees and more broadly across the sector.

While still a developing area for the Hunter's professional services sector, strategies supporting firms towards innovation and globalisation will continue to grow in importance as the Hunter reduces its future reliance on the mining industry and seeks to diversify its customer base.

These findings will contribute to the development of future regional initiatives undertaken in collaboration with the HRF Research Ambassadors and supported with ongoing discussions between major stakeholders, industry bodies and levels of government.

# Appendix 1 Interview Structure

Thank you for agreeing to this interview, and for your contribution to the project.

The Hunter Research Foundation (HRF) is collaborating with key stakeholders to develop targeted initiatives that will support increased competitiveness of the Hunter's professional services sector. The outcomes of this work will include clear recommendations for policy makers and insights for individual organisations to use in their future business planning.

The purpose of the interview series is to better understand the opportunities professional services businesses face in growing and being globally competitive, and the barriers and challenges they face in trying to achieve this.

[Provide information about HRF; Confirm recording interview to assist with documentation]

1. **Could you please tell me a bit about your business?**
    - How long it has been in operation; main activities; number of staff
    - Ownership (locally owned, overseas/multinational, board, shareholders)
    - What is happening with your profitability, is it going up or down

2. **What would you describe as your key products and services? Which of these do you think gives you a unique advantage or value in the market place?**

3. **Who are your customers? Where are they located?**
    - Have you looked at other domestic or overseas/international markets?
    - What strategies have you introduced (or planning to) to access overseas markets?

4. **Has your product and service mix, or your customer base, changed over the last five years? Have there been changes in your network of inputs such as staff and ICT usage?**
    - If yes, how have they changed?

5. **Who are your major competitors and where are they located?**
    - What do you think is driving current competition in the market?
    - What are differences in competitive pressures in the local & international markets?

6. **What are the key challenges in remaining competitive in the local and international market? Have there been other challenges over the last five years & how has the firm addressed these?**
    - Staff; skills mix needed, availability of required skills, access to training
    - Marketing services of products; need for further investment or access to funding
    - Changes in processes

7. **Has the firm developed new or significantly improved processes, services or products over the past five years?**
    - What were these?

**What opportunities (if any) do free-trade agreements represent for your business?**

- Access to required labour from overseas countries?
- Cost of accessing overseas markets?

8. **Are there particular networks or collaborations that you have found useful? Are your networks and collaborations Hunter-focused or do you collaborate with businesses in other regions, capital cities, or countries?**
    - What are these? In what ways have these networks benefitted your business?
    - If collaboration is broader than just the Hunter how did you achieve this?
    - Do existing networks/collaborations meet your needs? If not, why?

9. **What could be done at a Regional level to boost the growth and competitiveness of professional services firms? How can professional service businesses based in the Hunter work together to encourage and nurture innovation at a Regional level?**

10. **Is there anything else you would like to add about the challenges or successes the firm has had in recent years, or comments about the competitiveness of local professional services?**

Thank you for your time today. Your insights will be collated with insights from other firms participating in the interview program and inform the development of targeted initiatives to support the growth and increased competitiveness of the Hunter's professional services businesses.

This is an ongoing research project and may include follow-up interviews at a later date (face-to-face, phone or via email). Would it be ok to get back in touch with you?

Can you suggest any other firms that I could interview as part of this project?

# Appendix 2 Recruitment Email

An email invitation to participate in the research program was sent to businesses selected in the sample. Where possible the email was addressed directly to the business owner, general manager or chief executive officer.

From: Ruth McLeod [mailto:ruth.mcleod@hrf.com.au]
Sent: [*date*]
Subject: Future of Hunter Professional Services

Dear [*contact name*],

Hunter Research Foundation is collaborating with key stakeholders including NSW Department of Industry to identify targeted regional strategies to boost the productivity and competitiveness of the Hunter's professional services sector. Outcomes will include clear recommendations for policy makers and insights for individual organisations to use in their future business planning. To inform this work we are now interviewing local professional services firms about the **challenges to remaining competitive, barriers they are facing and access to opportunities both nationally and internationally**.

I would like to meet with yourself or a representative of [*business name*] to complete an interview regarding your experiences in this area. The interview takes about 45 minutes and can be conducted at your place of business at a time to suit you. Your comments will remain confidential and be collated with insights from other firms to shape future initiatives.

Please contact me on 40415534 or at ruth.mcleod@hrf.com.au if you are interested in these discussions or have any questions about the project. If you are happy to participate, I will contact you in the next few days to arrange a suitable time for interview.

I look forward to your participation in this important regional project.

Regards,
Ruth

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