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THE AGENCY

• EXECUTIVE SEARCH BROKERAGE •

Robin Doenicke –

The entrepreneur, martial artist & philosopher

leading Japan's recruitment revolution

Leading Japan's recruitment revolution

RI spoke with president and chief evangelist of Zensho Agency (aka "The Agency"), Robin Doenicke, to learn more about his entrepreneurial vision and the company's mission to reinvent how recruiters work

Your Zensho division has won RI's award for Best Legal Recruitment Firm in Japan every year that it was offered, and now – three more awards for The Agency division.

Yes! I can't say enough about our tribe. They deserve these as a testament to how hard they've worked and the faith they've had in me. But more than anything, winning Best Newcomer and Best Place to Work proves not only that we're doing things differently from everyone else, but that it's difference for the better.

In late 2016 you got a call from TV and film producer Chris LaVoie asking you to be the Asia-Pacific boss on his business documentary, The Movement. Why you?

Well, obviously he was impressed by my immaculate fashion sense [laughter]. Actually, when we first spoke, I asked Chris what the show was about and he said – yes, recruitment, of course, but not the status quo. We're interested in showing the evolution of the industry, and right there I knew this was a conversation I wanted to be a part of. Our ten-minute phone call turned into an hour just like that.

What does evolution mean to you?

Movement toward an overhaul of the traditional employer-



Doenicke (right) with Zentern MD, Noa Aziz

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employee relationship. There are plenty of co-factors, but a lot of the advances in how we engage, how we do business today, are thanks to technology. It has facilitated the decentralisation of power and control that's been happening by small increments since the Industrial Revolution – something that just took a massive leap forward. We're talking about a major paradigm shift.

For the last 70-80 years or so, work, and the powers that control it, has been centralised in the office or the factory. Talent would go out in search of it. But now we see a shift happening. Work is being decentralised. Work is now going out in search of talent! Take the Ubers and AirBnBs of the world as examples of this. Freelancing and the 'Gig Economy' is growing exponentially in almost every country on the planet. The recruitment industry is prime for this evolutionary leap and we are being a very active participant in this movement. The result of all this is empowerment and liberation of the individual. Which is why I felt such resonance with The Movement, because that's exactly what we're doing at The Agency.

Your launch caused quite a stir in the market, with lots of buzzwords being used to talk about you, words like "disruption," "revolution" and "reinvention." What is different about your firm?

The main thing is how we've redefined the relationship between management and recruiters – or "principals," as we're called here. The old top-down hierarchy of power and profit – that's gone, as is the absurd "chained to a desk nine-to-six" tradition. We have an environment and highly collaborative culture where initiative and entrepreneurship get rewarded.



Isn't it fair to say that initiative is something most recruitment firms encourage?

I don't think so. What I'm calling initiative is a power that arises naturally from the intention of a self-motivated individual. Someone who has been given the opportunity to think and act independently. Most firms have incredibly strict systems for enforcing behaviour – standardised behaviour – in their employees. They worship uniformity. Quotas. KPIs. It's the very opposite of initiative.

But entrepreneurship – one might reasonably ask how you can maintain a corporate identity while encouraging that.

Only if you adhere to outdated ideas of what a recruitment firm can be. Even at the strictest firms, everyone works differently. They have different characters and work styles, and trying to obliterate those differences by superimposing some abstract concept you call a "corporate identity" is going to hurt your business. We, on the other hand, aren't pre-defined. Yes, I had a very clear idea of the kind of people I wanted to work with, and we went out and found them. But what binds us is our collective "why." And I would submit that that single shared value creates a far deeper and more genuine corporate identity than any generic mission statement ever could.

Your homepage starts with an explanation of the firm's "why." Why is this?

It's much more important than what's conventionally privileged – the "who" and "what" of a company. Of course, we all have personal reasons for doing what we do, but our collective

purpose is so powerful and actually enhances the personal.

Freedom is part of this, but it isn't our "why." Freedom is the vehicle through which we achieve our "why." It enables and supports the pursuit of our greater purpose both on an individual and a collective level. The Agency exists for our people. They come first. Without them we have no reason for being. We're here to help our tribe pursue, and realise, the things that matter most in their lives. That's our "why." But I have to give props to our "how" as well. Without it, our "why" might just be a clever idea instead of an actual force that defines us.

And your support of this freedom – how does it manifest?

Anything that's within our power to do as far as helping our people, we do. We spare no expense in giving them the tools and support they need to grow their businesses. A completely cloud-based platform, cutting edge technology, research, mentoring, personalized branding and a wonderful Feng Shui inspired office space.

From what we've heard about your compensation plan, it sounds like that's a pretty major factor as well. Do you anticipate other firms copying your model?

They can't and I actually doubt they'd ever want to. History shows us that those who enjoy the most control, power and profit tend not to relinquish it too willingly... All of us at The Agency have experience working for the big establishment firms, and several of them have sealed their own fates by having way too much overhead. In order to stay afloat, they have no choice but to continue taking massive cuts of their employees' revenue.

And the atmosphere is always one of fear. It's horrible. Totally different scene at The Agency. There's buckets of laughter. Camaraderie. People helping each other within and across sectors. One principal's moment of inspiration or success ripples through the whole tribe and benefits us all. We share books, knowledge. Do things together. Meditate. Go to seminars. Get out into nature. It's magic. Our pharma ace, Richard Morgan, has a wonderful new home in the snowy mountains of Nagano where we go for our retreats. And everything about the company is completely transparent, from finances to policy to whose turn it is to take out the recycling – although that's usually me because our tribe do so much of their work remotely!

More and more companies in so many different industries are turning to the Richard Branson way of doing things - Attract incredible people, treat them with respect, support them and reward them well, and then get out of their way so they can go and do what they do best. Office hours are an obstacle to that. My philosophy of leadership is that you should empower your people so they have the confidence and ability to leave but treat them well enough so they'll never want to.

Your growth has been rapid by most corporate standards, but just to play devil's advocate for a moment, if everything is as great as it sounds at The Agency, why hasn't it been even more dramatic?

I'll be the first to say we're not for everyone. Nor is everyone for us. You need to have a certain number of years under you as well as be a self-starter to thrive in our world. Some people aren't prepared in terms of finances or experience, while others have actually conditioned themselves over time to believe that the status quo is natural and that their firm has their best interests at heart.

So you're designed for people with a degree of financial stability?

Yes, and that means for people who have confidence in themselves and their abilities as a top recruiter, a vision to succeed in life, and a reputation of strong character. The Agency's managing director, Chad Kreller, has been an absolute ace in finding and vetting the very best in our industry. But even if a recruiter checks certain basic boxes, that doesn't mean he or she is an automatic in. We onboard new principals as a tribe, and if someone doesn't fit our culture, any one of our guys can make that call. We've already turned down several top billers because our bottom line isn't about numbers. Building a wonderful business starts with having the right people, and that translates into having the highest standards about the quality of work each of us does. Because we all represent each other and the firm as a whole. Everyone is a co-director.

Tell us about yourself. What were you doing before Zensho?

I began my career as a salesperson for a postage machine manufacturing company. Think, The Office TV show but much worse! I actually did quite well though and quickly realised I had a knack and a passion for sales. At the same time, I was quite heavily involved in music. I've been a singer most of my life.

You started practicing martial arts at a young age, too, didn't you?

Six. I began with Kyokushin Karate when I was living in Liverpool, England and then switched to Wing Chun Kung Fu after my family moved to Australia when I was eight. I spent a few years doing Kickboxing before discovering the art that has made the greatest impact on my journey, and life, so far - Bujinkan Budo





Taijutsu or Ninjutsu as it's more commonly known. I began training in Ninjutsu around 1992 and haven't stopped. About eight years ago I also began training in Brazilian Jiu-jitsu and the Chinese art of Yiquan. If it's not already obvious, I love martial arts. For me, the synergy between martial arts, life and business is self-evident.

You mentioned that you were a singer once. Did you ever consider a career in music?

Yes, actually. In fact, Australia's leading music university offered me a scholarship after high school, but in the end I opted for a business career, and went to work for a global advertising agency called DDB for three and a half years before coming to Japan. My idea was to come and train at the Bujinkan Dōjō here for about six months and then return to Sydney to my advertising job. Twenty years later, I'm still here.

Like many people who have plans to stay only for a short time, I wound up falling in love with Japan and the people here. For the first couple of years I was teaching English because I didn't plan on staying. But after realising I was going to be here much longer, I wanted to get back into business, so in 2000 I joined a large recruitment firm and started recruiting in the IT sector.

How did the Zensho business start?

I felt an immediate affinity for recruitment and immersed myself in the industry from day one. That's how I learned the ropes. Acquired all the tools of the trade. One day, I had a client who

"For me, it's amazing when one of our team closes a deal and I see the impact it has on their family. That's the kind of thing that inspires me. If I can help enough people succeed, I, too, will ultimately succeed."

was looking for a lawyer – everyone told me not to waste my time as there was no market for lawyers in Japan – but I still thought I'd give it a shot. I met with a bunch of lawyers, ultimately filled the role, and then thought – why not try and find places for all the other lawyers I'd met? From there, I established the legal search practice within the organization. And then in 2003, I left that company to start my own venture, with a focus on the legal sector. Just a bit of background about the market – the legal sector is very niche, quite small compared to any other sector here.

Competitive?

Incredibly so. We felt the heat right away. But although the first year was tough, we kept up the pace, steadily built our client and candidate base, and eventually broke through and started enjoying some real success.

Okay, but then why start The Agency with Zensho doing so well?

By 2015, there was a growing sense of frustration within the recruitment industry. Lots of senior recruiters were becoming jaded about their situation. A big reason for that was lack of compensation, because most firms keep the lion's share of the revenue that recruiters make. On top of that, directors had become increasingly draconian about KPIs. Recruiters were killing themselves just to meet the requirements to send out X number of resumes and have Y number of meetings per week. They were having to do so many things that took them away from what they should really be doing, which is spending time with clients and candidates and then ultimately being rewarded handsomely for their efforts. I said to myself, "Is there no better way to do this?" and started researching the possibilities. At the same time I was wanting to expand Zensho. I knew that to do so we would have to go into other areas, but didn't want to dilute the brand, as we were known specifically for our legal recruitment work.

So to address these frustrations you had to start a new brand.

Exactly. But not just a new brand. It required a brand new paradigm. It didn't make sense to just add an automotive or consumer team to Zensho, so we created The Agency as a new division within the company.



The Agency's business model is unprecedented in the recruitment industry. How did you come up with it?

Have you got six hours? [laughs] Honestly, it was quite an adventure in business planning. About three years ago, I started researching the New York real estate industry of all places, and what I found was that many of the most successful agencies were brokerages operating under a unique model. The way they worked with and supported their agents, did their social media and marketing – their whole infrastructure, really, was extraordinary. But it was also exclusive to the real estate market, so I wondered, "Could this model work in (a) recruitment and (b) Japan?" Many people said it wouldn't fly for the obvious reason that no one had tried it yet, but I stuck with the belief that it was not only possible but necessary, and the thing that really inspired me was the prospect of empowering recruiters. Liberating them.

Could you explain what you mean by that?

I mean this is your life. And yet most people are too willing to suspend it until some imaginary point in the future. They think, "I'll be a slave to the machine for the next thirty years and then hopefully I'll have the money and time to enjoy my life." But I think you have to live to be present and fulfilled in the here and now. Enjoy your responsibilities, not resent them. Sure, we all have to make money, but I'm interested in finding ways to combine all the elements of life into an organic whole. You should be able to earn money while also having the freedom to enjoy the rest of your life, to work as much or as little as you want, when you want.

So you're referring to having work/life balance?

Yes and no. I've never really liked the term "work life balance." It's very dualistic and suggests that work is the opposite of life as though by default when we are working we aren't living. I much prefer the term "work life integration" or as Amazon's Jeff Bezos recently wrote about - work life harmony. As I see it, we each play many roles in life, some of which revolve around our time at work. But it's more than just 'work' and 'not work'. Using myself as an example, I'm a father, husband, son, brother, friend, boss, coach, business owner, colleague, teacher and student. These are all roles I play on a very consistent basis. As such, it's important to give attention to each of them in the 24 hours a day, seven days a week and 52 weeks a year that is available. You can't do this effectively if you see yourself living a binary existence that oscillates between your work and everything else that isn't your work. Work is life. Life is work. They're two sides of the same coin. If you're not being fulfilled in either you need to really look at making changes.

Sounds ideal. Some might say idealistic.

But it's already happening. More and more companies are starting to understand it's not about the hours logged but the results that need to come from the work being done. People are far more productive when they're not being slaved to death – and that's not just my opinion, but a fact supported by numerous studies. Look how many governments have shortened their official working weeks. Holland, Denmark, Norway...They did the math. So anyway, I took all these ideas and put them together and kept revising and refining the plan toward something that could actually succeed in the market, and I'm delighted to say we arrived at something extraordinary.

We launched in September of 2016, and already have over a dozen people – some of the best recruiters in the Japanese market. Several of our recruiters turned down very nice private offices in the biggest established shops in town so they could really take back control of their lives, and the atmosphere is electric around here. It's been refreshing to see the motivation, the energy that people bring to their work when it's on their terms. That's exactly why I started The Agency, and we're continuing to attract great people. That's what we're about – changing the game of how recruiters work with recruitment firms.

There are actually two other divisions in the Zensho Agency group we haven't talked about – Zentern and Tribz.

Zentern is our recently acquired internship division, and the reason it fits so wonderfully with Zensho Agency is because interning is recruitment. We're actually funnelling this fresh, eager, enthusiastic and talented next-generation leadership into our client companies. Zentern really allows us to communicate with and help a business world that we've never traditionally had much contact with, which is that of graduates and interns. It's a fun adventure and an add-on in terms of the value that we present to the companies we already work with as recruiters. Noa Aziz runs the show, and she's brilliant. An absolute dynamo. These kids get not only a first-class internship, but a complete cultural experience as well.

And Tribz?

That's our rec-to-rec division.

The Agency isn't right for everyone. But top recruiters still deserve great places to work, and that's where Tribz comes in. The managing director, Brad Corbet – he's doing an outstanding job at the helm. He brought such expansive market knowledge to the table, and has developed a truly unique client engagement plan as well. It's a powerful combination, and I think the results speak for themselves. Unlike some other rec-to-rec outfits, we're making placements that stick.

Just a quick side-bar, but what does Zensho mean?

Zensho is a Japanese word. A large inspiration for the name came from a Japanese samurai calligrapher called Yamaoka Tesshū who was instrumental in the Meiji restoration in the mid-1800s. He played a pivotal role in the negotiations that led to the opposition's peaceful surrender and the ultimate restoration to power of Emperor Meiji. He actually coined the phrase Zensho, which means 'living completely.' He elaborated to say it means to live completely in the present moment without hesitation or regrets. I thought that was fitting when we were looking to start the company – just the kind of the message we wanted to convey to our candidates and colleagues.

You've achieved a lot of success with your martial arts. Do you see any parallels between being a master

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instructor and being a recruitment entrepreneur?

Yes, many, in fact. Martial arts is about life, not winning and losing. It's not a sport, it's about living, the way to live. You know, in the beginning, you're learning to punch and kick and block and not get hit. But you quickly transcend that. All of those things are not just metaphors for, but can be directly applicable to, how we deal with 'opponents' in the professional world. It's a matter of going with the flow and not getting too attached. Not to butt heads in opposition but to redirect tension. All of these martial arts principles relate perfectly to business. They can also be found in the non-dualistic philosophies I'm passionate about, particularly Zen, Taoism, Stoicism and Advaita Vedanta.

For me it has always been intriguing to take a martial arts principle and explore its applicability in the business world, relationships or other things of a non-martial nature. I'm always pleased to find they're one and the same.

Tell us more about "flow."

As a recruiter and entrepreneur, you're constantly coming across challenges, and there are different ways you can deal with them. Martial arts has helped me to remain even-keeled. I try not to take myself too seriously and just enjoy the ride, the journey. To totally understand that what comes will come, and what goes will go. That understanding allows me to be more present, and I think when you're present you can respond more spontaneously and appropriately to what's happening in the moment without any mental baggage. I try to live my life that way, go with the flow and be present with whatever is happening right now. Of course I have to plan, just like any business person, but when I'm planning I'm also present. I don't need to be thinking about the future, which is relatively unknown, or the past, which is gone. I just focus on what's happening now. That's all I can do, and knowing that brings an extraordinary sense of clarity and peace to my life.

An admirable philosophy. And you have your own in-house philosopher now.

Tim Freke. Incredible thinker and person, and we're so honoured to have him as one of our CTM – Council of Tribal Mentors. His 'deep awake' philosophy offers a way to let go of the kinds of

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fears that tend to swirl around "the big questions" and fulfil your potential in our evolving universe. His seminars and books are real mind openers. I encourage all your readers to make time to look into him.

This CTM is like a board of advisors?

I believe it's what a board should be. They're not just a bunch of names on a masthead. Most firms leverage big names only to make themselves look bigger, but we actually enjoy regular, personal contact with our council. Nick Beames, Rob Sheffield and Angela Cripps – these are three of the most brilliant minds in the international recruitment industry, and the perspective they bring to our journey is invaluable. The entire council is coming to our annual Christmas party in Tokyo, and will give individual workshops to our guys that week. Making time in their busy schedules to fly over and spend time with us, help us grow – to me, that's a real board of advisors. It's humbling how passionate they are in their belief and support of what we're doing at The Agency. Such generosity of spirit.

Speaking of generosity, we understand you've also launched a charity initiative.

Yes. It's called Ayni, which is a Quechea word that roughly means "reciprocity." I was introduced to it while on an Ayahuasca retreat in the Peruvian amazon last year.

How does Ayni work?

Basically, we partner with our clients and competitors in choosing one or two charities a year to which we all agree to donate a token portion of our revenue. It's a tiny percentage, but given the extremely low cost-of-living in developing communities, it makes a world of difference to those in need. And when we pool that money, it actually amounts to a pretty substantial sum, one that can change lives. It's high time we changed our reputation as a bunch of bottom-liners, and so far the response from colleagues has been grand. They're really answering the call.

It's certainly good for your brand too no doubt.

Sure, but it goes beyond that. You're boosting the morale of your team. Shareholder loyalty. Clients become more interested in working with you. But mostly it's about making this planet more robust and leaving it a better place for our children and future generations.

What's your vision for The Agency?

My vision is to keep building our divisions and liberate more recruiters in Japan. For me, it's always about getting the right people on board. We don't have to grow to satisfy any particular mandate, but it's fun to share your journey with like-minded people. The energy that collaboration and community create is so strong and motivational, and it grows exponentially. Impacts and permeates everything we do. It's wonderful to see it positively affect the lives of people beyond the office. I really want to build a community. That's my goal, so we can all benefit in our lives outside of work as well.

For me, it's amazing when one of our guys closes a deal and I see the impact it has on his family. That's the kind of thing that inspires me. We're doing things very differently to most of the old firms. When they pay their recruiters, they think, "How little can we pay them and still keep them around?" That doesn't work for me. I prefer "How much can I pay them and still have a profitable company?" And if I get that right and can help enough people achieve what they want, then I'll get what I want. If I can help people succeed, I, too, will ultimately succeed.

