

**Publication Date: 11 August 2021**  
**YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 274. Building a Successful Offshore Team - with  
Strata Staff**

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**Intro:** Welcome to Your Strata Property, the podcast for property owners looking for reliable, accurate and bite-sized information from an experienced and authoritative source.

**Amanda Farmer:** Hello and welcome. I'm Amanda Farmer and my guest today is Shawn Brown. Discovering the competitive advantage outsourcing delivers businesses and their people several years ago, Shawn Brown and his co-founders launched Strata Staff to provide specialist business outsourcing solutions to the Australian strata industry. After growing up within the family business Shawn graduated from the University of New South Wales with a bachelor of laws and a bachelor of jurisprudence. Shawn has worked in the law for over 20 years and in 2009 commenced practice as a barrister at the Victorian Bar. Since 2019, Shawn has based himself in Angeles City, Philippines, actively growing Strata Staff and also continuing to serve his legal clients remotely. I'll take you over now to my chat with Shawn Brown. Shawn Brown, welcome to the show.

**Shawn Brown:** Thanks, Amanda. Good morning.

**Amanda Farmer:** Good morning to you, it is a pleasure to have you here with me. Now Shawn, people in our strata sector, whether they are managers or suppliers as we call those who service our owners, I find come from far and wide different professions, different backgrounds. I'd like to start with your background, tell us a little about you and how you came to be in this wonderful strata world.

**Shawn Brown:** Thanks, Amanda. Firstly, thank you very much for inviting me onto your podcast. We share a common background Amanda, like you I'm a lawyer by trade I'd say, I graduated from the University of New South Wales and pursued a career in the law, went to the bar in Victoria, then I took a position with the Queensland government and then I went back into private practice as a solicitor, so that's, if you like, in a nut shell my background. When I went back into private practice as a solicitor, I developed an interest in work being done offshore and specifically I got interested in why it could be very successful or equally so could be a bit of a train wreck for the business owner and it was that dichotomy, it was very little room in the middle, it was that dichotomy that got me interested into why was that.

And essentially that led me to join the industry I'm in now which is outsourcing if you like, I don't like that term but it's commonly used to describe the industry I'm in. So fast forward on now co-founder and CEO of Strata Staff and we run a specialist offshore capacity solution for strata managers in Australia and I hope to be able to offer other jurisdictions what we do for our Australian managers in the future.

**Amanda Farmer:** Shawn you are a lawyer by profession, did you have a practice as a strata lawyer? When did you first have your introduction to strata? Or if it was simply this idea of providing offshore services to strata, why this industry?

**Shawn Brown:** Why the industry. Well, essentially a very good friend of mine is a strata manager and I also was interested in, if you like, gaps in the industry I'm in now in doing work here for Australian businesses in the Philippines. And one of the areas I could see that wasn't being properly serviced or wasn't really being serviced at all was offshore solution for strata managers. So it was a clear gap in the marketplace and it was a clear gap in the skills necessary to be able to do that well here and because of that opportunity that was the area that I looked at and wanted to penetrate, if you like, in terms of being a centre of excellence and then doing something really well, rather than trying to do everything for everyone initially, I've thought the view, it's better to specialise in something.

And to be completely honest and candid with you, it was probably a little bit of a toss of a coin between legal or strata and went to strata and I'm really pleased we did because now, I would argue, we're the number one option for an offshore solution for strata managers, that's not to say we're the only company doing it but I would certainly say that we're certainly in front in terms of skill and quality in what we're doing here.

**Amanda Farmer:** Now let's talk about the train wreck experience first and then maybe we'll talk about some positive experiences.

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Why is it that some people delve into the world of outsourcing or sourcing their staff or their team offshore and they have this train wreck experience, what's going wrong?

**Shawn Brown:** Well, I think there's a wide range of issues that can occur and things that can go wrong, and now that's a very general remark to make but it's the truth. And at one end of the scale, you might have cultural issues or misunderstandings in communication and if you're not aware of those issues you can really sour a working relationship. Right up to issues that centre around the welfare of the people that are working for you, are they being properly compensated? And this also I would argue goes to an element of risk for people that are sending work offshore to who are you doing business with? And are they compliant in the country, in the jurisdiction that you're sending work offshore to? Because like any other industry, there is a lot of fly by nighters, backyard operations.

And it's something I get quite upset about is when I see, for example, an Australian saying, I run a BPO, a business processing outsourcing business, and if you start taking the layers off the onion about what their operation really is, it becomes quite apparent quite early that their staff aren't being paid, their social security they're not being paid, their PhilHealth they're not being paid, what's called their Pag-IBIG, so they're not being properly supported. And what that means is that it's not sustainable so the staff member will probably be looking elsewhere which is completely understandable, you'd be doing the same if you're an employee and you're not being properly compensated and they'll move on. Now, if setting up work being done remotely offshore hasn't been done and managed correctly, what tends to happen is there are no process manuals, the training has been ad hoc at best, there are no plans around continuity of business.

So if your staff member offshore leaves or as it happened to me once, just simply disappears, you're starting again from zero and the time investment for you Amanda as a business owner, that's huge, that's a massive disruption, it's like you've essentially lost an employee, so I mean, they're just some examples of what can happen. So as you know, there are a lot of options available to people in business to send work offshore and it ranges from essentially doing it yourself so using one of the online platforms that are out there that people use and that's what I use to begin with and it's hit and miss, right up to retaining a company like mine which specialises in setting up systems, doing work offshore and specialise in a particular area of expertise and then I guess you've got everything in the middle. And quite often, if you try to do something yourself that you're not an expert at it, you mark it up. So it's through several years of testing and doing work here and learning about the culture here in the Philippines.

And I'll be honest, the Philippines, I also noticed the difference between countries so the quality of work being, there's a strata, if you like, in terms of where the work was being done and by whom and I found that Philippines was a standout in terms of the quality, similar work ethics and things like that, which were a good fit for what I could see future clients, so that's why the Philippines. And secondly, where we're located here in Angeles City, you've got one of the largest concentrations of offshoring companies in the world and that means we've got a tremendous talent pool of highly educated, really talented, really valuable people that we can source and bring them into our company and train them and then they can assist our clients back in Australia.

**Amanda Farmer:** So we have a lot of strata managers tuning in Shawn and thinking, I might like to try this offshoring thing, what is it exactly that your staff do for strata managers and their businesses?

**Shawn Brown:** We essentially, in a nutshell, what we do here is we do a lot of the back office strata administrative tasks that you would see a strata manager or a strata assistant doing in a strata management agency in Australia. So everything ranging from coding of invoices so processing through the software that a strata manager might use. So for example, it might be Strata Master or File Smart or PropertyIQ or one of the other platforms that are out there right up to high-level level tasks where, for example, we're processing Section 184 Certificates for our clients owners corporations certificates. And there's a gamut of tasks in between so owner updates, Section 22 updates, mortgage updates, maintaining the role, all the routine administrative tasks that you'd expect to see a strata manager or an assistant doing in Australia, we can do it here and we do it well.

Now since starting we're now processing on average about 40,000 individual strata administration tasks a month across that gamut and to be completely transparent often it's the clients who come to me and say, hey Shawn, what do you think about doing this?

**Publication Date: 11 August 2021**  
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And that's how the offering of the tasks that we can do here and do well if you like, growing. It's grown through collaboration with other strata managers that are our clients and we see opportunity to do something else for them and we test it and we do it and then we can onboard it here. What we do and what that means for strata managers we're empowering them to focus on what matters most.

And I would argue that's better outcomes, better service to their clients because if they're not having to be bogged down with what could be hours and hours of processing administrative tasks and if that can be done offshore competitively and done at, I would say even high quality of what you might expect to see in an office in Australia because my people that's all they're doing, the phone isn't ringing, they're not distracted, all they're doing is processing those tasks. So your strata manager and their staff in Australia are free to focus on what matters most which is better business outcomes, growing their portfolio but also providing better service to their clients and the committee members and the owners of the buildings that they manage.

**Amanda Farmer:** You've mentioned there Shawn high quality, I imagine business owners, as a business owner myself, that's key for me and I do work with staff who are offshore and have been very lucky in that experience, I think I have to say that I have a wonderful team that I've been able to set up. But that quality control checking, making sure there is no reduction in standards and we do, our clients expect these high standards. When your team is possibly on the other side of the world, how do you make sure that that quality is there without having to check in constantly, having to feel like you're monitoring, supervising because-

**Shawn Brown:** Micromanaging.

**Amanda Farmer:** ... you're just not in the same room? Micromanaging, yes, how do you do that?

**Shawn Brown:** Yes. Which is then counterintuitive because that leads down to the path of the train wreck I mentioned earlier because you lose the advantage of somebody assisting you to do that work. If you're having to essentially watch it closely and be a hands-on yourself as a business owner or have one of your other onshore team members micromanage it, you're not getting a return on your investment and in fact, it's probably more costly for you. Again, there's a range of things that a business owner can do but I would start with this, just because the person is off shore doesn't mean they're really any different than an onshore employee. They have the same needs, they have the same needs as an individual, they need to grow in their career, they've got career aspirations, they need to be, as I said earlier, properly compensated, their IT needs to be a 100% which is very important, all those sorts of issues.

And again, some local awareness in terms of the challenges they might face for example, one of the problems in the Philippines is the power and internet can be unreliable, so what are we going to do about that? And what would happen if say Amanda's team member was unable to work for 3 days, what plan do we have in place to deal with that? But so I should get back to your original question, it starts with the training and the onboarding process and making sure things are documented, making sure that the person that you've got assisting you offshore has been properly, I guess, supported, properly trained, knows what they're doing and is developed into that role. And what tends to happen and I've seen it occur and in fact, I've been guilty of this myself is that your offshore team member can be a little bit out of sight out of mind.

You just send the work over them and haven't really thought about, have they been properly equipped to do this work for you? And if I haven't, it's going to be a bad outcome as it would be if say you employed a person that was say worked as a dental receptionist and suddenly expected her to become a paralegal or a solicitor, it's not going to work, so it's the same here with leading a team of remote staff so there's some things. But from my perspective, probably the most important thing is properly training and supporting your people and making sure that they know what they're doing before they're allowed to essentially work on a client's work. And so what we do here is before someone is allowed to actually process tasks, they're trained for up to several weeks, sitting side by side with one of our more experienced team members, one of our team leaders and we endorsed them on the tasks that they'd be working on for a client and so that when we do onboard a new client we know the staff members that's going to be working on their account is efficiently experienced.

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**Amanda Farmer:** And at this stage Shawn are you talking about purely back office administrative tasks or have you thought about or are you even entering that world of licensed professionals providing strata management services?

**Shawn Brown:** No, we're not interested in that, our role is to support strata managers in the strata industry, if you like, in Australia. So not to offer in our offshore licensed option for owners of buildings, I see what I do as a specialty and likewise, I see what strata managers do as a specialty. And I think where we can be really successful is assisting strata managers in their business and providing them with support so they can provide better service to their clients.

**Amanda Farmer:** Support and better support is definitely something I hear strata managers crying out for. Can you share a client story Shawn, a win that one of your clients has been having or how they are successfully working with you?

**Shawn Brown:** In terms of just generally speaking, we haven't lost a client yet which is wonderful, some of our clients have been with us now since we launched. So we had launched the business in April, 2019, some of our clients have now 3 staff, 3 team members here processing their work so that's a significant saving in terms of financial impact that has on their business. But also importantly, the existing team in Australia now has so much more time to better service their clients and their staff are less stressed out and things are just getting done well here for them. The success stories I think we have is that I can't pick out one individual case study for you to say, oh, this particular agency had a higher client satisfaction result before and after us or something like that, I can't do that.

But what I can point to is the volume of work we're doing, the financial saving that has resolved to our clients and that generally speaking, the volume of work we do here increases for clients. So they're coming to us, they start out doing one or two tasks over a period of time but in a long time we're doing more and more for them and they're taking on more people. So the flip side of that is their agency has grown and obviously growth. Also, one thing on monitor is people advertising for strata managers and strata assistance and I've noticed some of our clients after sending work here have in fact employed more staff so their practice is growing. So the evidence is there that if that business is growing, well, it must've grown through providing better service to its clients and we're part of that success, so. But really our role is, I guess we're in the back office where we're getting the work done and we're not at the front end of things and we're in that supportive role.

**Amanda Farmer:** And I would really love to see more strata management companies, strata managers, taking up this opportunity to explore offshore options. Some businesses might find it's not for them but I think there'll be plenty of businesses out there who will find that it is for them. I've already said I have a virtual team I call them in the Philippines and they are well known to many of our listeners, Pia and Richelle who help me out here. And a lawyer you would think, Shawn, may be the last person who would successfully have a virtual team but I certainly couldn't live without them, they've been serving me very well for the last few years. And I do endorse 100% everything you've said about having procedures in place, having those strong connections, treating your virtual team just like you do your onshore team as you call it, whether it's your Sydney team or your Melbourne team and making sure that they are a part of your business in the same way all of your people are.

**Shawn Brown:** Yes, absolutely. And I think that's probably the key takeaway I would offer anyone considering sending work offshore is that, at the end of the day they become part of your team. One of the phrases I don't like Amanda is VA and I don't mean to offend you because you'd probably use it as well. But actually it's been around for a long time but people use VA and I say, there's nothing virtual about my people, they're all very real. But also I would argue now, we're all VA's, we're all doing work remotely, right? And this idea that the VA is a person that is somewhere else and that's who and what they are in my opinion is very limiting. And now really we're all in some way, to some extent, certainly in business type roles that you and I work in, we're all in that category now. So.

**Amanda Farmer:** It's so true.

**Shawn Brown:** If you haven't gone and done it yourself, gone in that pathway, if you've actually got someone that is helping you with this, you need to do some due diligence and also look at where's the management team located. So I live in the Philippines,

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I'm sitting in our office here in the old CBD area of Angeles City and I think that's a significant point of difference and the number of CEOs or senior management for outsourcing businesses that actually have their management in country, there's not many. So I think that sort of goes to the integrity of the operation, is it being properly managed? Are there people being properly supported? They're the things that I would certainly argue someone should look at. And they're simple things, right? But they occur in an office onshore but because you've got a remote team member who doesn't have the financial capacity to solve just, Amanda, my computer broke so I went out and bought another one, you'd go, yes, that's cool, because you don't want your business interrupted but they can't do that, they need to be supported.

So those little things are really important particularly for you Amanda in your industry, in your brand, that you're doing business for someone that's socially responsible because there are cases of that not being done here. I interview people all the time, they've worked for BPOs, an outsourcing company, whatever, and they haven't been paid their social security, they haven't been paid their PhilHealth. Now for them that's really important because here unlike us if we get sick Medicare, the door's always open, it doesn't matter for anything. Here if your employer isn't making the PhilHealth contributions, they're not covered, zero and it's huge. So if you're an Australian business and you care about your brand, you should care about your offshore people being properly looked after, I'd put it that way, last thing you want is to be associated with something that's less than responsible particularly in today's world of social media and the rest of it, so yes.

**Amanda Farmer:** All right Shawn, well, how do our listeners find out more about you and Strata Staff? Where should they go to reach out?

**Shawn Brown:** Very simple. So you can email me directly so Shawn, S-H-A-W-N, @stratastaff.com.au. Alternatively you could call us on our Australian phone number which is, Victoria's is 03 9133 3255, and certainly I'll be able to speak to you. Alternatively, you can jump in our website, stratastaff.com.au.

**Amanda Farmer:** Fantastic. And you are serving strata management companies right around Australia?

**Shawn Brown:** Yes, we can do it Australia wide, however, if you like we've grown our footprint incrementally and like other businesses COVID was a big issue for us here particularly in the Philippines it's been very challenging, so we had to sort of slow down our growth because training staff was very difficult, recruiting was very difficult. So we haven't grown as quickly I would have liked us to have grown since April, 2019 and so most of our clients are currently based in New South Wales. We've just taken on another client in Victoria but I'm certainly keen to assist strata managers throughout Australia and whilst the legislation has its differences, I would argue many of the processes we do here are similar between jurisdictions. So for example, if we're not doing that particular task in a particular jurisdiction, it's probably very similar to what we're currently doing in New South Wales and other places. So.

**Amanda Farmer:** Fantastic similar processes, similar problems, we have right across our strata jurisdictions. Well, it's been fabulous chatting to you today Shawn, thank you so much for your time and I wish you all the best.

**Shawn Brown:** Thank you very much Amanda, it's been a real pleasure. Thank you.

**Outro:** Thank you for listening to Your Strata Property, the podcast which consistently delivers to property owners, reliable and accurate information about their strata property. You can access all the information below this episode via the show notes at [www.yourstrataproperty.com.au](http://www.yourstrataproperty.com.au). You can also ask questions in the comments section which Amanda will answer in her upcoming episodes. How can Amanda help you today?