



INSIGHT · FRACTIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR SMES

What is a fractional operations director, and does your business need one?

Your business has outgrown the way it's run, but it hasn't outgrown its budget. Here's how to close that gap.



Mark Burton, Founder, LuminaHQ · 30 years in hospitality, retail and hire operations · Non-executive director

I've spent the best part of 30 years in operations, across hospitality, retail and hire. Those are three very different industries with one thing in common: something is always on fire, and it's usually 4.55pm on a Friday.

FROM THE FRONT LINE

My favourite example is from my time as head of operations for a pub group. One Christmas Day, a customer at one of our pubs took a photo of their Christmas lunch and posted it online. It was, without exaggeration, the worst-looking plate of food I have ever seen, and I've worked in hospitality for a very long time. The fallout was huge, and as you can imagine, we spent the weeks after on a full charm offensive.

The lesson stuck with me. One bad plate is rarely about one bad chef. It's about missing standards, missing checks and missing training: the boring operational stuff nobody notices until it ends up on the internet. Funnily enough, the boring stuff is what I do now.

I've been the person running the operation, the person fixing it and, these days, the person asking awkward questions from the other side of the boardroom table as a non-executive director. Across all of it, I keep seeing the same pattern in SMEs. The business has outgrown the way it's run, but it hasn't outgrown its budget.

That gap is exactly where a fractional operations director fits.

So what actually is one?

A fractional operations director gives you the experience of a full-time ops director for a fraction of the time and cost. You get someone who has done the job for real, working a set number of hours each month.

It's not a consultant who writes a 60-page report and leaves it on your desk, like a cat proudly presenting a dead mouse. It's someone who rolls their sleeves up, fixes things and stays accountable for the results.

Think of it like a personal trainer. You don't need one living in your spare room. You need one who turns up regularly, tells you the truth, and makes sure you actually do the reps.

Five signs your business needs one

- 1 **You're the MD, but most of your week goes on being the operations manager.** And the HR department. And, occasionally, the person who unblocks the toilet.
- 2 **You don't know your numbers until the accountant tells you.** Usually three months later, when it's too late to do anything about them.
- 3 **Sales are growing but profit isn't.** Busier than ever, and somehow no better off. That's not growth, it's a treadmill.
- 4 **Everything lives in somebody's head.** When Dave goes on holiday, the business goes on holiday too.
- 5 **You keep saying "when things calm down".** I hate to break it to you, but in 30 years I've never once seen things calm down on their own.

If you nodded at two or more, keep reading. If you nodded at all five, put the kettle on first.

Fractional, full-time, interim or consultant?

There's more than one way to get senior help. Here's how they compare.

Option	What you pay	Commitment	Best for
Full-time ops director	A senior salary plus on-costs	Permanent	Larger businesses that need someone in the building every day
Interim director	A day rate, full-time for a fixed period	Months, then they leave	Covering a gap or a crisis
Consultant	A project fee	One project, one report	A specific, one-off problem
Fractional director	A monthly retainer	Flexible, no fixed term	SMEs that need senior thinking regularly, without a senior salary

"One bad plate is rarely about one bad chef. **It's about the system behind it.**"

What it looks like at LuminaHQ

At LuminaHQ, I work on a simple model: a pool of 20 hours a month that you can use across four areas. A typical month might include:

Operations

An operational health check and a walk-through of how things really get done

Finance

A 13-week cashflow forecast, so there are no nasty surprises

Commercial

An hour a week on your social media and sales pipeline

HR

A compliance check on contracts, the handbook and right-to-work records

The important bit is that the hours move with your priorities. If cashflow needs attention this month and recruitment can wait, the time shifts. You get a monthly dashboard showing exactly where every hour went, and there's no fixed-term contract.

£1,000 / month

20 hours of board-level support, every month. Yes, I put the price on the website. I've never liked "POA". In my experience it usually stands for "Probably Overpriced, Actually".

What 30 years in operations has taught me

A few lessons I've learned the hard way, so you don't have to:

- **Most "people problems" are process problems in disguise.** Fix the process and the people usually look a lot better.
- **If you're not measuring it, you're guessing.** Guessing is expensive, and it's never on the profit and loss account as its own line.
- **Profit is an opinion. Cash is a fact.** I've seen profitable businesses go under because nobody was watching the bank balance.
- **The best fix is usually the boring one.** A weekly meeting that actually happens beats a shiny new system that nobody uses.

Sitting on boards as a NED has added another angle. I know what a board, a bank or a buyer wants to see. That's handy if you're planning to grow, raise money or one day sell.

Is it right for you?

I'll be honest: it's not for everyone. If you need someone in the building five days a week managing a team of 50, hire full-time. I'll even help you write the job spec.

But if you need senior experience, some structure and someone to hold you to account, without the six-figure salary, a fractional operations director is worth a conversation.

Where to start

Take the free LuminaHQ business health check. It's eight questions, it takes about two minutes, and it's far less painful than a 3am stocktake. Trust me, I've done both.

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