

# Consultants: What Do They Do?

## (And, if I knew, would I want to be one?)

By Bob Lurz

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### Why Consulting?

Today, many people are leaving the employed workforce and entering the world of independent consulting. Let's take a look at the pleasures and pitfalls of the one-person consulting business, and help you decide whether you want to explore further.

### What is a Consultant?

It's been jokingly said that a consultant is someone who borrows your watch and charges a fee for telling you the time. This is sometimes close to the truth. Many consultants "simply" help their clients to clarify problems that the clients are aware of, and help them decide on a course of action.

As defined by Peter Block in "Flawless Consulting": "A *consultant* is a person in a position to have some influence over an individual, a group, or an organization, but who has no direct power to make changes or implement programs. A *manager* is someone who has direct control over the action". Some consultants help implement solutions, but seldom have direct managerial power.

### How do Consultants Serve Clients?

They might **help them** to:

- Define Problems and Causes.
- Identify Potential Solutions.
- Make Decisions.
- Plan & Implement.
- Evaluate Results.

### What do Consultants Do?

Consultants might **apply their expertise** to:

- Give Advice.
- Express Opinions.
- Coach clients.
- Facilitate Discussion.
- Survey client employees/customers.
- Provide a Sounding Board.
- Conduct Training.
- Be a Trusted Confidant for leaders.

### Why do Clients Hire Consultants?

Consultants offer some combination of benefits to a client:

- Expertise the client doesn't have.
- Time to spend on the problem.
- Objective perspective.
- Fresh approach

### Expertise

A consultant's main contribution is bringing expertise to bear on the client's situation. Consultants come without the need to be trained, are able to explore (ask questions), understand (clarify) and unemotionally analyze the client's situation or problem. Then, they propose a course of action or a solution. The solution may or may not involve the consultant.

### Timeliness

Because of higher priorities, a client can't take the time to solve the problem. A consultant works the problem while the client "fights fires". The consultant can satisfy the client's needs without the client having to hire extra staff.

### Objectivity

The client often wants a trusted person with an objective perspective to work on the problem. The consultant won't be influenced by office politics, or parochial in choosing a solution.

### Effective Approach

The client may only have access to internal ineffectual methods. The consultant can bring in the most effective ways to solve the problem.

### Do I Want to be a Consultant-Entrepreneur?

The first question to ask is "Am I suited to running my own business?" Entrepreneurs must:

- Market and Price their services.
- Negotiate and Sell to Clients.
- Deliver Excellent Service.
- Be a Business Person: Plan, Budget, etc.

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## Do I Have What it Takes?

A popular misconception about consultants is that they are heroes called in by a client pleading for their help. Riding in on a white horse, they solve all problems with a single flash from their brilliant minds, and ride off with bags of money. This may be the case with established stars with far-reaching reputations, but most startup consulting is not that simple.

Until you have clients, your job is **100% Marketing**. And the first step in consulting marketing is ***building credibility and trust***. Starting with your first contact, you must build a trusting relationship while building your image as an expert. Some good ways to do this:

- Network with potential clients, and people who know them.
- Get testimonials from those who know your work.
- Write articles, books.
- Give presentations, seminars.

## Why Relationships?

Remember, consulting is ***you*** delivering ***your*** service, not someone selling a product. There is only ***you*** and the ***results*** of your efforts to satisfy the client's needs. Good results can speak for themselves but ***you*** must provide the relationship part of the equation. A good relationship motivates the client to:

- Engage and pay you for your services.
- Call you the next time they need help.
- Give you referrals to potential business.
- Recommend you to others.

## Characteristics of Consultants

Consultants need to be:

- Outgoing and assertive enough to approach or call strangers to find out if they can use your help (or refer you to someone who might).
- Able to develop a collaborative, trusting relationship with prospects and clients.
- Organized enough to keep schedules and records; do necessary paperwork.
- Willing to learn and keep learning.
- Persistent & Patient: To start your business; To develop prospects into clients; To become profitable.

## Avoid Pitfalls & Misconceptions

Don't believe it:

- "I just need to start up and advertise my credentials - Clients will flock to me for my services."
- "I'll impress them by talking about me." (You ***must ask*** and ***listen, listen, listen.***)
- "I'm independent. I don't need a strategy or business & marketing plan."
- It won't take much time or effort. (It's much different from being an employee. And, don't forget money to live on during start-up).

## Consulting can be Rewarding

- I did it my way (I'm the boss).
- Independence & flexibility of action.
- Pride of ownership.
- Paid what you're worth.
- No layoffs (But, you need new clients).
- Building a business, reputation.
- Helping others achieve their goals.
- **Be All You Can Be** (self-fulfillment).

## Resources for Learning

There are many books on Consulting. I recommend these as good places to start:

- An Insider's Guide to Building a Successful Consulting Practice (B. Katcher)
- How to Build a Successful Consulting Practice (J. Phillips)
- Getting Started in Consulting (A. Weiss)
- Million Dollar Consulting (A. Weiss)

## Networking with other Consultants

Whether starting up or experienced, you should "get out of the office" and build relationships with other consultants and experts. Sharing experiences, opinions and advice helps you continue learning. And, you help others in your situation. Take periodic breaks from your one-person business to keep healthy and sharp.

Consulting can be an exciting and challenging career. I wish you success.

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