

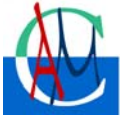
What does it take to be a consultant?

Consultants work in an ever changing and challenging business environment and they can get a great deal of satisfaction or misery from it, depending on perspective.

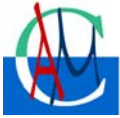
Clients pay more for your services than they pay for most of their own employees, so they expect more. When you arrive you don't have a lot of time to get oriented and organized. You are expected to hit the deck running – to add value right from the start. This expectation is somewhat unrealistic most of the time and leads to stress and excitement.

This little guide is written to help you decide if consulting is for you. It gives some insight into what you can expect and what people will expect of you. Consulting is not for everyone. It has a high “drop out” rate. Many get into it because they are stuck and need a job but they didn't really want to be there. They don't last long. Usually they find a “real job” as they put it, and bail out quickly. Others can't handle the stresses that come with the hours, extensive travel and the ever-constant pressure to perform. Others thrive in that environment and take great pleasure from it and pride in their accomplishments helping others. Here are some things to consider before you make the leap.

- Experience. You can't hit the deck running if you haven't seen the clients' problems or situation somewhere before. Clients often prefer experience from their industry and discount any other as irrelevant. And they are right some of the time, but often they won't see how your “other” experience can help them until they've seen you in action. Your knowledge and insight are what the client really wants. Lack of it, in any form, will be obvious to the client. Less experienced consultants can be highly successful working with and / or under the direction of a highly experienced one. Inexperience itself, rarely “cuts it” and it certainly doesn't sell well. Unless you have an advanced degree or some amazing credentials from a well recognized Ivy-league business school consulting may not be the place for you to get your start.
- Flexibility and comfort with change and uncertainty. Change is why you were brought to the client. They are undergoing some sort of change. You must be a master at handling change or you won't be a help to your clients. Your own life will be full of change – a steady diet of new clients, new industries, new challenges. Change is often difficult for people but it is exciting for many of us in the field and we thrive on it. The long lasting clients enjoy change and get a great deal of satisfaction from helping others through it.

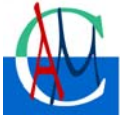


- Flexibility in your working habits. No client adapts to your way of working. If they start their normal day at 7 AM, then so do you. If their facility is a one hour drive out of town you get up early to be there with them. Unless your own “different” habits are something the client is trying to emulate you will usually be expected to conform to your clients’ norms of behaviour, dress code, etc. If you don’t “fit in” you may find yourself replaced, unless you are there to rock the boat (which may well be the case). Yes, some clients are more fun than others and you don’t always get to pick and choose, but you will always gain from the experience! Long hours can also come with the territory, especially when you are on the road. You can work a full day with your client only to find yourself catching up on your office email and business development work with other clients at night.
- Self-starter. As a consultant you will be teaching, advising and coaching your clients. You may be working on their teams as an “extra-hand”. You don’t take direction when it comes to what you’ve been brought in to deliver, you provide it. That doesn’t mean you run their show. You lead by example, by suggestion, by steering through questions and only very rarely by decree. If you are not a self-starter you’ll bomb out. Clients often see consultants as being the experts – you have the answers in their perception. Many a consultant has been sent home because of a lack of initiative that the client noticed. They don’t pay for you to sit around and watch the clock. However, if you are a self-starter you can really contribute to a shift in their results and their culture. You are unlikely to have a mandate to “lead” but you do lead by your example. High energy, pleasant to be with, quick to decide and act are traits that many clients pay a lot to learn. And it can be a lot of fun showing them how by simply doing. The time can pass very quickly, even on long engagements.
- Financial stability. Some firms will hire you as an employee but there’s an increasing trend these days towards contract employment. It’s how we operate. When there’s work there’s a job, otherwise you find yourself out looking for it. You need some level of financial stability to carry you over through the dry spells between client engagements and a level of comfort with the uncertainty about how long those dry spells can last. Many consultants can’t handle the stress that comes with “no steady pay check” so they opt out. The larger consulting firms generally hire their own stable of talent. Those jobs are seen as secure but in tough times when the industry is in a slump those with low billable hours (low utilization as we put it) can be let go. Like many firms, we are looking for creative and entrepreneurial minded consultants. We also want to keep our overhead costs low so we prefer to work with you on a contracted basis. We do commit to using you as much as we possibly can – after all, that’s good for both of us, but we can’t promise how many hours of work that will mean. You may still find yourself filling in gaps in your schedule with your own business

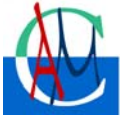


prospecting. The advantage of that is you do get better at prospecting for business and selling it –essential skills for success in this field. You learn that financial security is what you make it – the better you are at these skills, the more secure you are. Some consultants do not advertise for clients – they actually interview clients who want them to work with them.

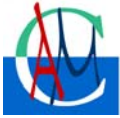
- **Mobility.** Depending on the field of endeavour you can expect to do a lot of travel. Our work in CAM is often done away from home. Successful consultants are often busy on client work for more than 60% of their time, some for much more, especially if they are involved in the implementation of new technologies. Often that will require you to travel. Expect to be away from home a lot and it depends entirely on where the client and their work is. You may not get home some weekends. Indeed, you may find that you prefer to skip a weekend home to avoid all the travel hassles that come with the trip itself. Travel in these post-9/11 days is not much fun. If your client is a day of travel away from your home and you need to be there more than one working week you may find yourself spending weekends away. That's not unusual and it isn't always bad. Clients don't want to pay a lot in airfares so they'll pay for weekend hotels and meals, but you don't have the added stress associated with the travel. Sometimes we get the client to pay for a trip for your spouse to join you rather than have you travel home. It works for you, your spouse often enjoys seeing where you are working and the client gets off with a slightly lighter expense bill. Of course if you've got a young family that may not be for you. A day of travel at each end of a client visit doesn't allow for many working days in a week so in some cases you may work long hours.
 - Your clients may be close to home but oft-times they are not. It's not unusual to have to travel for hours, or in some cases days, to reach your clients so that the work can begin. You can expect to suffer a bit of fatigue just from the travel experience. Air travel these days is not fun – long check-in lines, longer security lines, belligerent security screening personnel, over-priced but poor quality food in airline waiting areas, over-crowded executive lounges, long delays that don't get announced until the last minute and random events like weather all add to the stress. Driving is not much better. Poorly maintained roads, long drives, highly variable driving conditions, the other drivers, the unfamiliarity and surprises you always find in the rental car experience (not all bad), long waits at toll booths, etc. Expect to arrive stressed and tired just about wherever you go.
 - But you can enjoy seeing a lot of the country or the world that many never get to see. And, you don't have to pay for it! You bring home interesting stories and you always gain a great deal of understanding of people in other places, their cultures, traditions, etc. You may even pick up new languages.



- **Benefit packages.** Big firms have them, small ones don't usually offer these. You are on your own here. If you are on a contracted basis, that part of why we pay more for your services. There is no safety net unless you create your own. If you want employee benefits then find a job somewhere other than in contracted services. If you are an independently minded and confident individual this probably doesn't bother you. An advantage of this is that many of us get very good at taking care of our health. Hotels are often well equipped for business travellers to exercise. We learn what to do to avoid getting sick. We learn the tricks of experienced travellers so that we don't succumb to some exotic disease in a new locale. Your quality of life can actually be quite high from the health perspective despite all the stress your body will take due to travel.
- **Organized.** You need to be incredibly organized in your life. From how you pack to how you present your findings in a complex project to your clients' executives, you have demands on you that won't be satisfied if you are disorderly. Even packing for a business trip requires thought – if you can get it all in one small carry-on (remember the liquids restrictions at airports), then you save yourself an hour or sometimes more of travel time. That matters at the end of a long day or when you are headed home after a week away. Your thinking about the client situation must be clear and results must be presented concisely. A lack of organization with your client means lack of communication and clarity. That can spell disaster. And this can spill over into the rest of your life. For example, I'm a very fast packer because of the orderliness of the way I live on the road.
- **Get over your own ego.** Regardless of how much respect you got in your last full time position, no matter how senior you may have been, you are just another consultant to many clients. Expectations are high and you are a hired brain. There are only a rare few consultants who are well known enough often because of books they've written, or because of high profile positions they've held in public office (think ex-President or Prime Minister for example). They can command respect from the time they walk onsite at the client's offices or plant. But that only goes so far and it doesn't last if you don't earn its continuance. All of us truly earn respect one client at a time. If you are egotistical, overly proud, like to boast, talk about your higher education or your last brilliant client success, you'll likely bomb. As a rule people don't like to hear that, no matter how much of it they ask for in order for you to prove you are good enough to earn their business. You are well advised to get over yourself. Be humble – it's far more likable and you'll enjoy better relationships with those you work with (and others) as a result. You are there to add value, not usually star power.



- You get along with people. Your personal network of contacts might be a good indicator of how well you meet and get along with people. If it's large, truly all yours and you really know and get along with them all, then you probably do well with others. Regardless of your network or address book however, you must be a people person. Consulting, even if it's of a highly technical nature, is all about relationships. Successful consultants are also well liked people. They have good "bedside" manner, just like well liked doctors. Clients will ask for you back. Extroverts are not always the best – they can be abrasive unless they keep it in check, but they won't be shy, withdrawn and uncommunicative. They'll have an easier time delivering whatever message must be delivered in a meeting or a presentation setting. They may have trouble listening though. They'll have an easier time interviewing people, asking questions, probing. Introverts may also do well, but more likely in the role of analyst or report writing. There is a consulting role for all types – you will want to find the fit that works best for you.
- You can sell. The most successful consultants sell themselves, their work, their company. They bring in more work for themselves and others. The more they bring in the better they do. Even in conventional large firms it's the consultants who sell who rise to the ranks of partnership. Many of those firms have "up or out" policies. If you can't move up the ranks you languish and leave. Being smart will get you just so far. You can't sell if you are not much of a people person. You've got to be a real star with interpersonal relationships and learn the techniques for selling. Here's a clue: it's more about listening than talking.
- You are clear and realistic about your goals. You need to know what you want out of your arrangement with us so that you can state it up front. No beating around the bush. Please be direct – it's an indication of how you will deal with clients. If you are too expensive we'll say so. We can only get "so much" from a client and it doesn't all go into your pocket. The market will only bear so much and that can vary from locale to locale. If you are too cheap – we'll say so too. That's unusual but it does happen. We've actually paid consultants more than they asked for because they didn't have a good idea of what the market would bear. That's inexperience or possibly lack of confidence in a stressful situation. We believe in win-win so we begin with our relationship with you. We ask that you treat it the same. Know what you want and keep it realistic.
- You are "low maintenance". Your role with your clients is to help them. You can do that very effectively if you yourself are constantly in need of help yourself. A "high maintenance" consultant won't be asked back. Simply put, a high maintenance consultant isn't really a consultant at all. We all go through periods where we need help – we are human after all. But if it's a regular occurrence or its dominating your career, then it's time to consider another career where stresses



are low enough that you can function without a lifeline.

- A supportive home environment. Your life style at home is your own business but recognize that a choice to become a consultant will put stresses into your home life. Some bad, some good. You no longer work 9 to 5 and commute home every day. Your spouse will be home without you for most if not all of your business trips. That time apart is hard on any relationship. Both of you may find that difficult. Your children, if you have them at home, will miss you too. You'll miss them. Your schedule is not predictable, but you do have some control over it. Clients know you are a person too, so most of them are flexible. If they are not, and they won't listen to reasonable requests in favour of a decent work / life balance, then we don't want them as clients!
 - If an engagement requires regular travel we arrange it on weekdays so you get weekends at home. The trade off is that you may have long work days but most of us find that a good solution because we get more time for what really matters in our lives.
 - As a contract consultant you may also be working from your own home. That has tax advantages and the commute is really easy to take, but it also brings stress into the home situation. It can be difficult to put the work down and be a part of your family and vice versa when you have to work.

The challenges and personal costs of this career choice are significant to many, but the payback is also significant. Good consultants can earn a very good living for themselves and their families. They also enjoy a great deal of job satisfaction. One thing is for certain – those of us who last more than two or three years in the field do truly enjoy our work. I know many consultants who simply love what they do. I know far fewer “employees” in client companies that can say that. In fact, many employees of our clients at one point or another ask us if we have jobs for them! Of course our contracts will prohibit us from hiring them, but the message is clear. We often enjoy what we do and it shows. It is contagious.

This guide may be a bit blunt and hopefully not too negative. It is pretty accurate. It reflects our experience and insight. We hope you found reading it helpful.

James Reyes-Picknell