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Title:

So, You Want To Be A Consultant! 4 Steps To Take On The Pathway To Success.

Word Count:

1001

Summary:

If you�ve ever fancied getting into the consultancy profession, Bob Selden, who has been a successful consultant since 1987, suggests four steps to take.

Keywords:

Consulting, consultancy, leadership, management, consulting for new managers

Article Body:

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During my career as a manager and since I myself became a consultant in 1987, I have had many colleagues and acquaintances move into the consultancy profession. Sometimes this move was by choice as a genuine career move. In the late 90s however, the proliferation of consultants was exacerbated by the downsizing of organisations and so, people who had been �cut� and who were unable to find a similar role in another organisation tried the consulting path � often with little success and a great deal of pain.

The following suggestions on becoming a consultant have been developed as a result of my own experience, my advice sessions with colleagues starting out on their consultancy career journey and the lessons I have learned from watching people either succeed or fail to make the grade as a consultant. My belief is that there are at least four things that one must do to develop a successful career as a consultant:

Firstly, decide on an area of expertise and "research it to death!". Become a real "expert" in your chosen field. Organisations are looking for people as consultants to fill a gap in their skill base, knowledge, expertise etc and that's why they go to a consultant (otherwise they would find the expertise internally).

When starting out as a consultant, it's tempting to be able to say "Yep, I can do that" when a prospective client asks for help, even though you may not have a great deal of expertise in that area. Sometimes the need to keep an income coming in can be a very tempting reason to take these type of jobs. I have a colleague who eventually became quite successful, but in her early consultancy career took these type of assignments because �There must be a book published on that � I�ll read up on it�. My observations were that she was in fact already an expert in a particular field, but at the time was not aware of it. Her area of expertise? Process management, and so, reading up on a book merely gave her the context for her area of expertise.

However, over the long term for most of us it does no good to take on assignments where we are not the true �expert� as the client will most likely not be entirely happy with the outcome (even though you may learn a lot in the process). In the consultancy business, you are only as good as your last job.

Some suggestions for developing your area of expertise? Write articles on your area of expertise, speak at conferences, seminars etc, and join professional organisations that focus on your area of expertise. If you are that way inclined, join the committees of these organisations. You can always start your own website or blog on your area of expertise as well.

My own area of expertise is management training, and in particular "hands on tools for new managers", so you can see the results at �Tips for New Managers� (www.nationallearninginstitute.com/index\_files/Leadersandmanagestipsforsuccess.htm)

Secondly, find a mentor who can assist with your development over the longer term. These people are not so easy to find, so be patient. They must be experts in your chosen field of expertise and be willing to pass on their knowledge and experience freely to you. You also need to develop a good personal relationship with them. I've been lucky enough to work for one many years ago (Dennis Pratt author of "Aspiring to Greatness � Above and Beyond TQM", Business & Professional Publishing, Sydney, 1994) who became my mentor and who has remained a mentor for me ever since.

Thirdly, find a coach. This type of person is quite different to your mentor. Your coach is someone who will be able to help you in developing your skills as a consultant (as opposed to developing your area of expertise). These people you must find very early on in your career as a consultant, because they are very good "process" managers (as opposed to "content" managers, content being your area of expertise).

They can often be bosses you work for (so choose wisely) or business partners with more consultancy expertise than yourself. Sometimes your mentor and coach can be one and the same person, but this is rare. One of the differences for spotting a coach from a mentor is that your coach will have a commercial interest in your success (boss, partner, business associate), so he or she is committed to you for the short term. Your mentor on the other hand, will not necessarily have the same commercial and vested interest and will become your mentor because of his or her willingness to share their knowledge and the extent to which you build the relationship with them, and so will be committed to you for the long term.

Finally, gain experience. This generally only comes with time. When I say experience, I am not so much referring to your experience as a consultant (although this will come), but your experience IN your chosen area of expertise. For example, let's say in my case it's "hands on tools for new managers" - I really do need to be a new manager before I can offer other people advice on their own development. This will be particularly important to your client prospects. Sometimes experience is hard to get and as I said before, takes time. But you can speed the process for example, by taking part time jobs (or full time if you have the opportunity) or by volunteering to work in your chosen field, or working with another consultant who is considered an expert in your chosen field.

Keep in mind, your client will be employing you for your expertise and will want to see evidence of that expertise.

In writing this article for aspiring consultants, my hope is that the four steps I have outlined will help lead you to a very successful and rewarding career as a consultant. Enjoy!