Restoring Trust in the Consulting Industry

Martin Fracker, ANTH 205-905 Spring 2017

April 20, 2017

It is important to find ways to remain competitive competitive in the IT consulting industry, a business in which technical expertise has become more important than domain knowledge, technology rapidly becomes obselete, and buying engagements is common.

The IT consulting industry has certainly evolved over the years, from requiring specific domain knowledge in addition to technical expertise to only requiring techincal expertise and utilizing the client's onboarding process to become familiar with the specifics of their domain. In Mr. Perry's case, who wished to go into the business field as a software developer, he needed a business degree, because business only hired software developers from business schools. The idea was that if you wanted to build business software applications, you had to have a business degree. Business software was also simpler back then. In many cases, all they did was read and display information from a database and generate reports. Today, as far as domain knowledge goes, as long as you have someone who can explain the business rules, prior domain knowledge has become much less of a necessity. Mr. Perry's theory is that software has gotten more complicated. So much so, that computer science degrees and a good grasp on engineering practices are required when applying for many software development positions.

This means, a background in ethical problem solving is necessary in the IT consulting industry. Any engineering position, even if not public facing, would still carry with it consequences that

would affect the general public. For example, an engineer who designed the latest rocketship for SpaceX greatly affects the public when he decides to not pay as much attention as he should to the pollution that the ship causes at launch even though the rocketship was designed for use by a private company. Therefore, as the IT consulting industry has shifted from a business discipline towards an engineering one, then regardless of whether the client is public facing or not, it is important for consultants in the field to have a background in ethical problem solving.

As an employee in the current IT consulting industry I can confirm that my role is definitely one of engineering and it did not require prior domain knowledge. The client I work for is in the business of providing risk management solutions to agribusinesses. I knew nothing about the business before joining the project, but I learn something new about their business with every meeting. Communicating with the client on a frequent basis and gathering requirements from them is a huge part of the job. The communication skills of an engineer are highly valued as getting the client to voice their requirements is one thing, but translating them properly is a whole different story.

Staying on top of technology and best practices in an industry where technology rapidly becomes obselete is another challenge. Mr. Perry emphasized adopting an attitude of life-long learning as a necessity for anyone in the consulting industry. In the spirit of comitting to life-long learning Perry has always been an early adopter of technologies and software development best practices. He was, for example, an early adopter of the Agile approach to software development. A decade ago, it was common for businesses to employ the Waterfall method when designing and developing software, one that would ultimately result in wasted time and headaches due to the stakeholders not playing an active role in the development phase. Today much of the industry has shifted to a more Agile approach to software development, one in which stakeholders play a very active role in the development phase and provide a constant feedback loop for the developers.

Staying on top of technology and best practices does not have to be something only engineers in the IT consulting industry do. Other fields obviously experience change in technology as well. An engineer can be thought of as a mechanic who solves problem using the tools in his toolbox. Every couple of years new and better tools will become available, and the engineers who adopt them will be more effective than those who do not.

The IT Consulting Industry is a very competitive field, keeping up to date with best-practices and rapidly changing technology is just one way to make sure you stay competitive. Programming languages and methodologies are always changing. Languages are constantly being extended with new features that accelerate development, and methodologies are proposed that cope with the problems of those that came before it. Not staying up to date means that you will not be as efficient as the rest of the field and you will constantly be outbid by a consultant who can do it more efficiently and therefore more cheaply.

Perhaps one of the more shocking challenges Perry mentioned with regards to the competitive nature of the IT consulting industry was dealing with competitors who engage in the practice of buying engagements. That is they bribe potential clients to do business with them.