



# 50 Things You Need to Know to Be a Top IT Pro

Prepared by TechRepublic exclusively for

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CONTENTS:

Introduction ..... 3

10 things you should know about being a great IT manager ..... 4

10 things you should know about developing soft skills to advance your IT career ..... 6

10 things you can do to turn useless meetings into productive ones ..... 9

10 things you can do to get a promotion ..... 11

10 things you should know about starting an IT consulting business ..... 13

Conclusion ..... 17

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## INTRODUCTION

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Information technology is evolving at a blistering rate. Skills IT professionals learned in college, certificate programs, and on the job even 18 months ago are often barely relevant today. Trends like IT consumerization, Bring Your Own Device (BYOD), globalization, mobility, and a struggling economy mean that traditional approaches to IT management need to be set aside as quickly as we can devise new models to meet demands for ultimate flexibility and agility.

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In fact, for IT pros, learning new hard skills (a particular programming language, a new project management approach, new systems, new interfaces, and new applications) are simply a matter of course. It's no longer enough to be a rock star programmer in Java (or any language for that matter) or to have a certification in a specific set of technologies because you can be guaranteed that those technologies will be significantly different in a year. Unfortunately, the economy also dictates that the job you had around those technologies may not exist six months from now.

IT staff can't even count on two- to three-year software release cycles to manage their training and career development needs. Software as a Service (SaaS) delivery models and open source communities enable rapid-fire releases, making it difficult to keep up.

This isn't a bad thing. Customers benefit, businesses see shorter times to market for their products, and extraordinary competition from a global marketplace means that there are new and exciting opportunities to be had at every turn.

To leverage those opportunities and take their careers to ever higher levels, IT professionals need to have a well-stocked tool kit of interpersonal and management skills that are far more timeless than the latest software. New tools are emerging all the time that enable collaboration and creativity on a global scale, and those who wish to succeed need to be far more comfortable with working together effectively than they do with the latest hardware or software widget.

This guide is a collection of 50 of the best tips for making the leap from technical worker to business IT leader, focusing on specific recommendations that will make you stand out from the crowd and be ready to jump into not just management roles, but leadership roles. The suggestions outlined here are timeless and will help you shape and guide organizations that must succeed in today's information technology environment.

**Make you stand out from the crowd and be ready to jump into not just management roles, but leadership roles.**

# 10 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT BEING AN EPIC IT MANAGER

IT managers can easily get caught up in day-to-day operations and activities and lose sight of important management behaviors. Whether you're a new or seasoned manager, the following suggestions can help you become a great IT manager.

### 1. Spend time (and money) developing your people.

IT is a constantly changing field and many IT workers love to learn about new and improving technologies. For many, learning is not just enjoyable, but necessary to do the best job possible. IT managers should budget for training and development and encourage staff to participate in events whenever possible. If your budget is tight, explore free regional presentations and workshops, set-up in-house training and get creative with your development dollars. Don't forget about cross-training exercises as well. Even in a large IT group there are jobs which only one person does routinely. Make sure others know what to do if that person were suddenly gone for an extended period.

### 2. Get to know what your staff really does.

Although you don't need to master every task your staff handles (see No. 3 below), you should understand your staff's normal work routine. If you aren't already, familiarize yourself with each person's responsibilities. Ask team members to explain and demonstrate important tasks, such as data backups. I once had an existing IT employee transferred to my sub-group. Immediately after the transfer, I began working with the individual to learn their job role. One month after the transfer, during a key production period, the employee suffered simultaneous tragedies--a parent died and the employee developed pneumonia. With no direct backup, I jump in and accomplished the job with the knowledge I had learned during the first month and a great deal of help from others. As a result, I gained a great deal of respect from the employee who had previously suffered negative experiences with management. Understanding what your staff does not only increases their level of respect for you, but it also makes you more credible as a manager when faced with difficult situations or decisions.

### 3. Don't do it for them.

If you move from an "in the trenches" IT worker to a management role, avoid the tendency to take the reins too quickly. Your knowledge and skill level may exceed your employees', but you must help your staff learn and grow. There is a fine line between coaching and doing. A good manager will know the difference. While there may be an initial training period where you are more involved in doing the day-to-day work, use appropriate delegation and training strategies to move the work into your staff's capable hands.

### 4. Know the business and make sure they know you.

All IT managers must understand the business they support and use this understanding to build services and infrastructure that support business goals. You should also demonstrate to your direct reports how their work impacts overall business goals. Ensure that business administrators understand what IT does for them as well. Showcase your department's activities through annual reports, regular communications and frequent project updates.

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## 5. Treat communication as a two-way street.

Information is not a limited commodity to hold. Information should flow freely and easily between management and workers. If you sense that you are not getting important information, carefully consider ways to increase communication. Likewise, don't hoard information unless it is absolutely confidential. What seems irrelevant to you may be highly relevant for someone else. Reward information sharing between your direct reports.

## 6. Encourage everyone to work as a team.

The whole really is greater than the sum of its parts. Encouraging collaboration and teamwork helps remove silo-like isolation that often occurs in technical organizations. Cross-functional teams are extremely important because small changes in one area can have significant ripple impact across other IT units. Reward efforts that enable collaboration and develop an environment where workers can feel comfortable asking for and giving assistance to one another. Frustrations often result when one team member knows something that others spend hours working to resolve. Teamwork will fuel your communications.

## 7. Provide feedback regularly and let employees know what you want.

Some IT jobs make people feel like islands. They work on a project or assignment independently and may not regularly interact with their manager or co-workers. Be sure your staff knows what they are doing well and what needs improvement. These can be casual conversations, formal performance reviews or public praise events.

If someone isn't living up to expectations, be sure they know what those expectations are. Staff members may not realize that the assignment you gave them last week was a priority item for a high profile project. Be clear and direct when making assignments. When an employee finishes a job, make sure they know how pleased you are with the work they did. Geeks need love too!

## 8. Hire well.

If you have never hired before, ask for assistance and do your homework. Hiring poorly can be more costly than not hiring at all. Technical skills are only a small piece of the puzzle. You should know if a person will adequately integrate with the existing team. It may also help to get your team involved in the hiring process when appropriate and allowed. Your staff can help you determine if the applicant relates well to others and has the appropriate soft skills.

## 9. Understand best IT practices and act on them.

ITIL? Disaster Recovery? Service Oriented Architecture? Security? If you don't have a technical background, these terms may be unfamiliar. Learn and understand the best practices that apply to your environment and measure yourself and your department against them. Explore ITIL and determine whether you should implement at least portions of it in your department. Ensure your disaster recovery plan is up-to-date and ready for action. Perform regular security assessments.

## 10. Be a good project manager.

Did your last project suffer scope creep? Most projects, particularly IT ones, don't fail because the project itself was bad. Most failures are a result of weak project management. If you haven't had any formal project management training, find and invest in a good program.

**Reward efforts that enable collaboration and develop an environment where workers can feel comfortable asking for and giving assistance to one another.**



Don't assume that by simply having regular meetings that you are managing the project. Since IT usually has more projects than people, be sure to train lead workers with basic project management skills so you can delegate specific aspects of the project or even entire projects to their control.

### 10 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS TO ADVANCE YOUR IT CAREER

Most IT support professionals know that the development of technical skills is fundamental to their careers. However, learning about the subject matter is only one of the necessary talents every IT pro should cultivate. The human component to excel at your work requires good communication, leadership and relationship skills, otherwise known as “soft skills.”

#### 1. Actively listen.

Most IT pros tend to be analytical by nature, so when a customer or coworker approaches with a problem, they're likely to hear only the literal statements. Being an active listener requires more focus and sometimes more patience. You need to wait for your turn to speak, ask for clarification and pay attention rather than thinking ahead to your response.

It's easy to treat a frustrated customer like a technical issue, but empathizing with the person with the problem can help build a stronger relationship with your client. Try paraphrasing the other person's words and repeating them to ensure you understood their concerns. They'll feel as though you're truly listening to their problems, and you'll find out whether you've received all the facts. If you have the time, consider enrolling in an active listening course, many of which are offered by community or technical colleges.

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#### 2. Communicate clearly and simply.

Many customers will become confused—or worse yet, defensive—the moment you start talking acronyms like DHCP, SQL, DNS, and OBDC. A nontechnical person's eyes may glaze over after just 10 seconds of jargon, and it's a guaranteed method of alienating your client. Choosing common terms or illustrations to demonstrate your point will help facilitate communication. Sometimes a simple analogy can help you explain a technical concept. For example, you might compare an IP address to a phone number and explain that the DNS “looks up the phone number” for websites.

Avoid simply throwing buzz words around; it won't gain you any clout. You need to understand the ideas, their application to your environment.

## 3. Take the lead.

More IT pros are taking on the role of leader, particularly in smaller departments. Even if you're heading up a minor initiative, developing leadership skills will pay off for you. Take the time to observe some of the successful leaders within your company and note their actions and management style. If possible, choose diverse assignments or enroll in team-building classes to increase your knowledge about employee motivation.

## 4. Nurture your inner writer.

Many IT pros need to write and respond to clients and prospects and create system documentation, but their only exposure to drafting text was writing high school term papers. The secret is to write the technical material in non-technical terms. You may also need to rely on visuals, charts, and diagrams to illustrate important points.

The best way to develop this skill is simple: Practice. Each day, choose a problem you've encountered and write the solution with a nontechnical person as your audience. Give it to a friend or family member to review. You might also benefit from taking a business writing course or checking out the Society for Technical Communication ([www.stc.org](http://www.stc.org)), which offers training, information and resources geared toward developing effective technical communication skills.

## 5. Step out of the box, physically and mentally.

It's easy to spend an entire day in your cubicle or office, but it's not the best career move. You should have a broader view of the company goals and how your contributions fit into the big picture. Sign up for some office committees or meet colleagues for lunch to expand your working relationships and understanding of the company's mission. To help cultivate relationships with clients, stay up to date on world business news. Subscribe to one or more general business magazines so you'll be prepared to speak with any client about current trends and industries.

## 6. Become a mentor.

One of the best ways to practice your communication skills and reinforce your own understanding of technical issues is to provide guidance to a less-experienced colleague. You'll find yourself doing a lot of explaining, demonstrating, and teaching, and in the process, your ability to convey complex information will improve. You'll also develop a reputation as accessible and knowledgeable, which will benefit you now and in the future. And of course, you'll also be providing your protégé with valuable experience and guidance.

## 7. Learn to inspire and motivate your coworkers.

Your attitude has a big impact on how much you accomplish and on the overall dynamics of your work group or department. It may take some effort, but try to cultivate a positive outlook even when you're facing a troubled project or cantankerous coworker. Become known as someone who doesn't complain or denigrate others' work, but who instead takes ownership where necessary and strives to improve the process rather than enumerate its shortcomings.

**Choose a problem you've encountered and write the solution with a nontechnical person as your audience. Give it to a friend or family member to review.**

## 8. Develop the habit of consistent follow-through.

IT departments are full of hard-working, diligent tech professionals who plan and launch initiatives or take on responsibilities for particular tasks and then move on to something else without completing the work. Juggling projects and commitments, often under pressure and within shifting timeframes, is certainly demanding. It's easy to let things slide or lose track of a promise you've made. But successful IT pros learn early that finishing what you start—even if that means handing a job off to another team or escalating a help desk ticket—is essential to a smooth-running IT operation.

## 9. Don't shy away from compromise.

You've probably worked with peers and managers who never give an inch on any substantive issue (or even on trivial issues). They're always convinced they're right, and they're locked into pursuing their own agenda, on their own terms, no matter what. That type of narrow-minded conviction may come from insecurity or immaturity, or it may simply reflect an individual's ingrained behavior or personality. But you'll be more successful if you approach your job with reasonable assurance rather than an uncompromising refusal to consider other viewpoints and strategies. Learn when to take a stand and when to let go. By staying flexible, you'll discover alternative ways to resolve various issues, making you a more versatile and astute problem-solver. And by showing confidence in the decisions of others, you'll establish yourself as a team player who is worthy of their confidence as well.

## 10. Cultivate strong organizational skills.

Not everybody needs a system to stay on top of shifting priorities and mile-long lists of tasks and responsibilities. Some IT pros just fly by the seat of their pants and manage to deal effectively with scheduled work, meetings, e-mails, client issues, and emergencies. But if that doesn't describe you, it's definitely worth developing some habits to help you stay organized. You might want to invest in some time management training, adopt the practices of the highly organized colleague down the hall, or hone your skills on your favorite personal information manager, whether that's Outlook, Lotus Organizer, Mozilla Calendar, or some other information management solution.

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# 10 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO TURN USELESS MEETINGS INTO PRODUCTIVE ONES

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We've all had to sit through meetings that were nothing but a waste of our time. Here are some tactics you can use to salvage something productive from the ones that drag on forever or go completely off the rails.

A quick survey of Amazon.com revealed hundreds of books purporting to help manage meetings. The vast majority do, in fact, contain good ideas if you initiated the meeting, have the ability to set its agenda, and possess the social skills to keep all of the attendees focused. However, we all must occasionally attend meetings we do not control. What do we do in those meetings, especially when they go awry? The following tips will help you make each meeting an effective, interesting experience.

**Do not wait for an agenda. Instead, take a moment to contact the meeting organizer before the meeting. Ask him to explain to you, in 10 words or less, what he wants from the meeting.**

### 1. Know why the organizer called the meeting.

The idea of a meeting agenda seems almost quaint in this era of too much e-mail and not enough time. When an actual agenda makes an appearance, it quickly breaks down as participants meander in a variety of unplanned directions.

Do not wait for an agenda. Instead, take a moment to contact the meeting organizer before the meeting. Ask him to explain to you, in 10 words or less, what he wants from the meeting. Once you know what he wants, you can help him achieve it. In this case, forewarned is forearmed.

### 2. Know what you want from the meeting.

Finding out what the meeting organizer wants allows you to help him; knowing what you want from the meeting allows you to help yourself. So before the meeting begins, set yourself one action item you absolutely need to accomplish with this group of people at this time.

Select an action item compatible with the meeting organizer's goal if you want the meeting to succeed. Otherwise, you could end up with a reputation for disrupting meetings. Whether that's bad depends on your point of view.

### 3. List what you need to say.

Meetings never start on time. Someone always needs a cup of coffee or has to answer a cell phone call about an unforeseen disaster. These idle moments make an ideal time for firing out instant messages to friends, family, and co-workers.

You can also use this time to make the meeting more productive. Jot down a list containing five things related to the action item you want to share. The act of writing helps focus your thoughts, even if you don't use the list at all.

### 4. Take the meeting minutes.

Meetings come, meetings go. Their details vanish into a haze of similar events because no one bothered to write them down. Then the next meeting rolls around, and you spend the first 10 minutes trying to remember what happened last time.

Break this cycle by taking the meeting minutes. You don't have to record everything everyone says. Instead, focus on recording assigned action items, decisions made, and key information or questions revealed during the discussion. These minutes then become the meeting's artifact, the record of what happened and what decisions came about. This record guides whatever actions take place after the meeting ends. As the writer, you make most of the judgment calls about what was important.

### 5. Keep to the rules of order.

All meetings, large or small, involve people interacting to achieve one or more goals. In a perfect world, these interactions would spontaneously organize themselves. Everyone would respect one another's time. Comments would emerge in an organized fashion. Action items would appear and be agreed on, and the group would move to the next point.

Back in the real world, we need ways to stay organized and on track. You should know the ground rules by which the meeting will run. If your organization does not have rules of order, make some. Share them with others and follow them. Chaos happens, but you do not have to let it ruin an otherwise productive meeting.

### 6. Reflectively listen during information meetings.

There exists a breed of meetings seemingly designed to frustrate the attendees. These meetings "provide information" about a topic or update the attendees about the status of things they do not care about. In the breed's most extreme forms, no one at the meeting can do anything with the information provided.

That does not excuse you from finding something useful to do. The meeting organizer obviously needs to communicate this information. Take the opportunity to practice your reflective listening skills. You get some practice, and the organizer will feel like he positively connected with someone. It's a win/win, or as close as you can get in this situation.

### 7. Set things aside.

It never fails. In every meeting, someone derails the discussion with a host of interesting tangents. Sometimes these tangents relate to the topic at hand. More often, though, they affect it only indirectly. In either case, the time spent on them detracts from the meeting's real goal.

Do not be this person. Ask yourself the following question before you interject a new idea or question: Is this really the right venue? If the meeting focuses on brainstorming, go ahead. If not, and if the question/idea does not directly relate to the meeting's goal, set it aside for later conversations. Make it an action item so you do not forget it. Everything connects to everything else in business, but that doesn't mean you have to bring it up in a focused session.

### 8. Ask for action items.

The meeting ends, and...then what? Ask the meeting organizer for action items as the meeting starts to wind down. If need be, prompt him by asking if he wants you to take care of one or more items you noted during the meeting. Alternately, you can make some up if you have a good idea of what needs to be done.

Action items speak louder than words when it comes to ending meetings.

**If your organization does not have rules of order, make some. Share them with others and follow them. Chaos happens, but you do not have to let it ruin an otherwise productive meeting.**

## 9. End the meeting when it's done.

Meetings, with or without agendas, often drag on long past their useful lifespan. People get lost in quagmires or the meeting organizer forgets what he's there for. Nothing useful gets done, but no one can escape without offending the powers that be.

Fortunately, you have a 10-words-or-less description of the meeting's goal from your previous research. Ask the meeting organizer if he has achieved his goal. If not, help him get to it. If yes, mercifully end the meeting.

## 10. Ask questions afterward.

Meetings gather informed, active people into one place to address an established list of topics. Why not take advantage of the opportunity? If you have questions for someone who will attend the meeting, make a list of them before you arrive. Then, during the after-meeting meeting, whip out the list and get your questions answered. Asking unrelated questions in the after-meeting meeting means you do not have to disrupt the meeting with them.

With these 10 tips you can participate in the meeting rather than just attending. Actively participating reduces your stress levels during the meeting. It also gives you some control over what happens next.

## 10 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO GET A PROMOTION

**Tell your boss you're ready to take on more responsibilities, and it will show that you're prepared to tackle a larger or more complicated workload and aren't just looking for a bigger office and fatter paycheck.**

Very few people hire on with any company or organization with the intention of remaining indefinitely at the position for which they were hired. Just because you started as the grunt who had to fix the copy machines doesn't mean you don't someday want to be CIO. At most companies, this could entail half a lifetime of climbing the corporate ladder. Each step up that ladder is generally going to involve asking for and receiving a promotion. The thought of asking for advancement is usually pretty frightening, but these tips will help you be more prepared.

### 1. Show them the numbers.

When you make your pitch about what a great job you've been doing and your value to the company, it will help your case if you can show your employer or supervisor specific results. Prepare documentation showing how and how much your brilliant ideas have helped them. This can be especially useful in the common scenario in which the person you're dealing with doesn't have the power to grant you a promotion. If that person has to fight on your behalf with his or her boss, you had better provide the best ammunition you can.

### 2. Ask for more responsibilities.

When asking for a promotion, it's best to avoid that "P" word. Instead, tell your boss you're ready to take on more responsibilities, and it will show that you're prepared to tackle a larger or more complicated workload and aren't just looking for a bigger

office and fatter paycheck. It also gives your boss the option of gradually giving you the more important duties rather than just dumping you in a new position. Just make sure that if, after a few months, your tasks no longer resemble your job description, you bring that up and (with luck) get the new job title and paycheck.

## 3. Invent a new position.

If you feel that your skills are best suited to a position that doesn't exist at your current organization, and you think you can make a strong argument for a need for that position, by all means, do so. Even if they won't (or can't) make the new position happen, you will have earned points for creativity while at the same time making it clear you are looking to advance.

## 4. Bring up the topic in an informal setting.

If you have the opportunity to meet with your boss outside the workplace, this can be a good way to make use of the occasion. Whether it's at the bar for a drink after work, a big conference, or the company picnic, people will naturally be in a more receptive mood when they aren't busy busy busy. But be careful in these settings. If you press too hard and your approach falls flat, you could be left in an awkward place for a couple hours with no easy means of escape. Phrase things lightly and back off if you don't make any headway.

## 5. Schedule a private meeting.

Obviously, the alternative approach to having the promotion talk is to ask during regular work hours. Since during this time your boss is generally going to be busy, it's a bad idea to just ask for a couple of minutes of his or her time. If you try to talk about a promotion like that, you could get shot down without your boss even looking up. Instead, schedule an appointment so that a block of time is set aside specifically for listening to you. Also, if possible, try to avoid revealing the specific topic of the meeting beforehand. Don't go too far with this; you don't want to annoy your boss by making the purpose of the meeting too mysterious. It's just a bit harder to articulate a reason to say no to you when you're in the room.

## 6. Don't be afraid to toot your own horn.

Just make sure to play the right notes. It's okay to brag a little — as long as it doesn't sound like bragging. There is nothing wrong with reminding your boss of your accomplishments, since even if they were great, he or she might have forgotten about them. Mentioning that you've done this, this, and this, and that there are 15% fewer incidents in your department since you have started the job is great. Saying you're the best system admin in the company is much less persuasive. Also, don't forget that this is about you, so concentrate on all of your positive aspects and not on anybody else's negative ones.

## 7. Don't make threats or demands.

Be careful not to make your request for a promotion sound like a demand. Don't threaten to leave if you don't get what you want (especially if you don't intend to follow through on it). If you have been offered a new job somewhere else, you shouldn't throw it in anyone's face or try to use that offer to leverage a better deal where you are now. Doing so can potentially damage your reputation with both places. Remember to stay calm. Even if you really are fed up with your current position, try not to show it.

**Try to avoid revealing the specific topic of the meeting beforehand. Don't go too far with this; you don't want to annoy your boss by making the purpose of the meeting too mysterious.**

## 8. Make friends in higher places.

Before you actually ask about advancement, it's a good idea to find somebody in the position you're aiming for who is willing to take you under his or her wing. This offers four benefits:

1. Prior to making your pitch for promotion, it will give you the opportunity to see what's in store and make sure that it's what you want.
2. It will show your boss that you've taken the initiative to learn the ropes already.
3. It will give you a buddy on the inside — one who may have some influence in deciding whether you get the position.
4. After you get the promotion, it will give you a friendly ear you can go to for advice if things get hard.

## 9. Learn new skills.

It should go without saying that any time you have the opportunity to learn something new, you should take it. In particular, when you're seeking a promotion, you'll impress your boss if you can show that you've learned new skills that go beyond your current position. You might consider earning additional industry certifications or maybe go back to school for a higher degree. Taking on these things while working full time can be quite taxing, but with the ever-increasing availability of night classes and self-study materials, it's definitely possible.

## 10. Excel at your current position.

Sometimes, actions speak louder than words. The best way to show that you deserve advancement is to simply shine where you are now. Go above and beyond the call of duty. Get to work early every day and stay a few minutes late. Try to come up with solutions to problems that haven't been addressed yet. If your deadline is Friday, try to have everything done by Thursday. Finally, remember to be a team player. Make sure that you aren't irreplaceable. If you're at the top among your peers, take the time to ensure that you aren't the only one who can keep things running. This will show your superiors that you can be a proper leader, and it will help curtail the disastrous response to a request for promotion: "I'm sorry, but you're doing such a great job, we just can't afford to lose you where you are now."

**Can you handle long hours? You need to seriously consider the hours a consulting business involves, especially at the outset.**

## 10 THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT STARTING AN IT CONSULTING BUSINESS

It takes more than a business card and some organizational ability to start your own consulting business. It requires a host of skills, from accounting to time management, and you can expect more than a few hurdles in your path. The key items in this list will help you determine whether you're ready to take on the challenge.



## 1. Begin with a gut check.

Before leaving your job or shelling out bucks for business cards, you need to ask yourself several questions:

- What skills do you plan to consult with? Deciding what skills you're going to market is key to being a successful consultant. Presumably, you have some type of programming or networking skill that someone else needs—otherwise you won't be able to step into the market with ease. There are a wide variety of skill niches, from VB programmer to e-commerce site designer, that are in demand by clients who don't have the staff skills or time to train employees.
- Can you handle long hours? You need to seriously consider the hours a consulting business involves, especially at the outset. If you've done any consulting on the side, you already know about long hours—but running your own business ups the ante.
- Do you know basic accounting? Every consultant needs to be able to do basic accounting—to document project work, track and keep tabs on work time, and monitor expenses and client billing. You don't need a full-time accountant, but you do have to be able to stay on top of things.
- Do you dread collecting on unpaid bills? As a consultant, you have to accept the role of bill collector. You'll need to set up one day a month to generate bills and track those individuals who haven't cut you checks. This is your accounts receivable. It's essential because some of your best clients can be the worst when it comes to remitting payment. Late payments by clients can kill a business before it gets up and running.
- Do you mind doing your own marketing? Every business needs marketing to get exposure and clients, and you have to be willing to sell yourself. This nontechnical aspect of being a consultant is one of the top issues that can kill a business if not handled right. You will always need to be making contacts to get more business. It's imperative that you constantly ask current clients for more work and also ask them if they know of other similar businesses that can use your skills. This is an ongoing networking process that you need to develop to establish a long-term business.

**A calendar year has 2,000 billable hours, based on a 40-hour week and an eight-hour billable day. This also takes into consideration a two-week vacation. So if you bill \$30 an hour for 2,000 hours, in a year you would make \$60K gross income.**

## 2. Determine your expected income.

The best way to start your consulting business is to get a client prior to starting out on your own. It's easy to get part-time work to see whether it will be viable before you go full time. This will also give you an idea of what kind of income you can expect when you go out on your own. The key figure you need to determine is what dollar amount you are worth to a client on the open market. Let's say you decide to bill a client to work on their computer system. You decide to charge \$30 per hour for your services. This gives you a target figure to go after.

Consulting is built upon billable hours. A calendar year has 2,000 billable hours, based on a 40-hour week and an eight-hour billable day. This also takes into consideration a two-week vacation. So if you bill \$30 an hour for 2,000 hours, in a year you would make \$60K gross income. This type of calculation will give you an idea of what your revenue will be.

### 3. Develop a business plan.

Some consultants spend quite a bit of time developing a great business plan, but never get any billable income. So you might want to hold off on drafting that plan until you get some revenue started. In fact, the best time to write a business plan may be when you're getting the feeling that you have too much work to do and are beginning to turn away business. At this point, take a weekend, sit down for a few hours, and develop a basic business plan for the next three months. By starting after you get billing income, you can accurately create your business plan, instead of developing it from what you think might happen. This will give you a plan that is actually a valuable tool for running your business.

### 4. Set up your business housekeeping.

Once revenue begins to come in, it's time to set up basic business housekeeping. There are multiple business types: a sole proprietorship, a partnership, a limited corporation, and a corporation. Most people in this business start as a sole proprietorship and then change business entities as they grow. You will next need a business name and at least a few minimum business basics:

- A business phone number and/or a cell phone with voice mail
- Business licenses
- Errors and omissions insurance
- Business letterhead and branded invoicing statements (these can simply be templates in Word or can be automated in accounting software)
- A business e-mail address
- A Web site
- Business cards with your contact information
- A nice brochure that details your business focus and skills
- A social media presence (pages on Facebook and Google+ and a Twitter account at a minimum, all of which need to be actively maintained)
- Of all of these, the brochure is the least important in today's environment; master social media and you'll master marketing (see #5)

**Your presence in social media needs to be personal, authentic, and conversational. Engaging an audience of potential clients is an art rather than a science, but it is one that takes time and practice.**

### 5. Market your business effectively.

The easiest way to promote yourself is by word of mouth. But in today's market, that isn't enough. The best way for a full-time consultant to market the business is to attend business conferences and meetings to meet potential clients. It's also a good idea to set up a booth at local business expos and hand out business cards with social and email contact information. You can even do a giveaway, such as five free hours of consulting services. Have everyone fill out a form and drop it in a box. If you get 50 responses, you have 50 potential customers you can call to drum up business.

The importance of social media in all of this absolutely cannot be underestimated. More importantly, it isn't enough to simply have a Facebook page or send out the occasional tweet. Rather, your presence in social media needs to be personal, authentic, and conversational. Engaging an audience of potential clients is an art rather than a science, but it is one that takes time and practice.

## 6. Deal professionally with the billing process.

Most consultants hate to deal with billing paperwork, but you need to handle it diligently and professionally. Every hour you work, you must get a signed statement from the clients verifying that you billed those hours and then, once a month, send invoices to your clients requesting payment. By doing this up front, you will be sure that you get paid, and you can also cut off any client who has a problem with your work before you roll up a big invoice. It's unfortunate, but a lot of clients have no problem trying to put off paying you if they think they can get away with it. By establishing your professionalism at the outset and by billing monthly or weekly, your client will know that you mean business and that your work does have value.

All of this needs to be backed up with a clear contract, agreed upon and signed at the outset of any project. Scope of work, precise deliverables, and realistic timelines all need to be completely understood by both you and the client.

## 7. What if you can't meet deadlines?

If you realize that you can't provide a deliverable on time for some reason or another, you must tell your client as soon as possible. You may even have to negotiate free work or a reduction in fees to accommodate the customer. This happens to everyone sometimes. It isn't always your fault, but it is something you will have to learn to handle. It is also a contingency that needs to be outlined in your contract.

## 8. Be realistic about your cash flow.

You have to know how much cash you need to keep your business going. Most businesses fail because they don't have enough cash to fund daily operations. Some business experts say you need at least three months of funds to get a business going; others say you need six months of cash in the bank. Everyone's situation varies, but it generally makes sense for new consultants to start while they still have a full-time job. That way, they won't have the cash flow pressures they'd have if they went out on their own immediately. After you get a feel for what you can make, you can decide how much cash you need in the bank before you break out on your own.

## 9. Set up a routine to help avoid pitfalls.

Consulting can be a lucrative business. It's definitely a way to become self-employed and make a good income, but it does have its pitfalls. The best way to avoid them is to set aside time weekly to review what you have planned for the next week:

- Are there any problems that I need to address with my current clients?
- Do I need to make any marketing meetings or calls this week?
- Are there any critical lunch meetings I need for the following week?
- How is my cash flow looking for this week and for the next four weeks?
- What deliverables do I need to make for the next week?

## 10. Solicit feedback from your clients.

Even though you've completed a project, your work isn't quite done. Follow up with clients to ensure that they're satisfied with the job you did. Asking for feedback also demonstrates that you value their business. You might want to ask them to complete an evaluation form, so that you can learn how they perceive your work and what areas you might need to improve upon.

**Some business experts say you need at least three months of funds to get a business going; others say you need six months of cash in the bank.**

### CONCLUSION

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Do you want to be a leader within your organization? Would you like to climb the corporate ladder or leave it entirely and jump into the lucrative world of IT consulting?

Or do you want to be left behind when a particular skill or certification no longer has a market? What happens when the highly technical work for which you used to be well-paid can now be done overseas or via outsourced cloud providers?

It's at this point that your interpersonal and leadership skills will be absolutely critical. These aren't skills that can be learned in a class, by reading a book, or by adding another certification to your resume. They're skills that must be practiced, used, implemented, and woven into everything you do. A leader on a project should also be leading an organization towards improved business practices or increasingly competitive business models. That same leader should know how to drive and manage a meeting or bring technology solutions to bear that improve collaboration and productivity.

The name of the game in business IT isn't any particular technology, but rather technologies that let people work together better, as well as the right leaders who can facilitate real global communication. Just reading this guide won't make IT professionals' leaders overnight. However, they provide a powerful starting point for the sort of leadership required to push businesses into the 21st century, as well as to drive your career forward in meaningful (and lucrative) ways.

For more ways to advance your IT career and support your organization, please visit [www.citrixonline.com](http://www.citrixonline.com).

## About Tech Republic

TechRepublic is a ZDNet/CBS Interactive property that provides news, editorial content, and a wide variety of resources for IT professionals and businesses. TechRepublic frequently contracts with businesses and organizations to create custom content, webcasts, and other broadcasts of value to the larger IT community.

## About Citrix

Citrix transforms how businesses and IT work and people collaborate in the cloud era. With market-leading cloud, collaboration, networking and virtualization technologies, Citrix powers mobile workstyles and cloud services, making complex enterprise IT simpler and more accessible for 260,000 organizations. Citrix products touch 75 percent of Internet users each day and it partners with more than 10,000 companies in 100 countries. Annual revenue in 2011 was \$2.21 billion. Learn more at [www.citrix.com](http://www.citrix.com) and [www.citrixonline.com](http://www.citrixonline.com).

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