



# Consultants: What Do They Do?

(And, if I knew, would I want to be one?)  
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## Why Independent 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 to tell you the time. This is sometimes close to the truth. Many consultants "simply" help clients analyze their known problems 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 Find Causes.
- Identify Potential Solutions.
- Make Decisions.
- Plan & Implement.
- Evaluate Results.

## What do Consultants Do?

Consultants might **apply their expertise** to:

- Analyze Situations.
- Give Advice.
- Express Opinions.
- Coach or Advise.
- Facilitate Discussion.
- Survey Client Employees or Customers.
- Be a Sounding Board & Confidant.
- Conduct Training.

## Why do Clients Hire Consultants?

Consultants offer some combination of benefits to a client:

- Expertise the client needs.
- Time to spend on the problem.
- Objective perspective.
- Fresh approach

## Expertise

A consultant's main contribution is bringing his/her expertise to bear on a client's situation. They can unemotionally ask the tough questions to clarify and understand a client's problem or situation. They analyze problems and propose solutions or courses of action which may or may not involve the consultant.

## Timeliness

Due to higher priorities, a client often can't take the time to solve a problem. Consultants can work on a problem while the client "fights fires". A consultant can satisfy a client's needs without the client hiring or training 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 be parochial in proposing a solution.

## Effective Approach

The client may only have access to internal, ineffective methods. The consultant can bring in effective & efficient 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 misconception about consultants is that they are heroes called in by clients begging for their help: Astride a white horse, they solve all problems with a flash from their brilliant minds (and ride off with bags of money). This may be the case for established superstars, but most startup consulting isn't that simple.

Until you have clients, your job is **100% Marketing**. And the first step in consultant marketing is to *identify your clients and understand the value you bring to them*. Starting with your first contact, you must build credibility and image as an expert, plus a trusting relationship. Some good ways to do this:

- Interview potential clients about the value of your consulting service.
- Network with potential clients, and people who know them.
- Get testimonials from those who know your work.
- Write articles. Train. Give presentations.

### Why are Relationships so Important?

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. Your expertise & 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 Solo Consultants

Independent 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 collaborative, trusting relationships with prospects and clients.
- Organized & disciplined enough to: Deliver on time; Maintain records; Do necessary paperwork; Keep promises.
- 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 list my credentials on LinkedIn, my website, & social media. Clients will flock to me."
- "I'll impress by talking about my skills." (*Ask* about their needs, then *Listen*)
- "I'm independent. I don't need a strategy or startup plan or marketing plan."
- It won't take much time or effort. (It requires much more than being an employee. And, don't forget money to live on during start-up).

### Consulting can be Rewarding

- "I'm my own boss. I did it my way"
- Independence & flexibility of action.
- Pride of ownership.
- Paid what you're worth.
- No layoffs (But, you need new clients).
- Build a business & reputation.
- Help 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 Consultants & Associates

Whether starting up or experienced, you should "get out of the office" and build relationships with other consultants and experts. RPCN is a good place to start.

Sharing experiences, opinions and advice keeps you learning (And, helps combat isolation). Take periodic breaks from your one-person business to keep healthy and sharp.

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

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