

Becoming a Consultant

KEYS TO CONSULTING

- Interview expert consultants because the more you learn, the more you earn.
- Comprehend your client's problems.
- Make your own market, and become visible.
- Balance boring aspects of business with fantastic work in physics.

For some areas of business, you can count on advisers: an accountant, a lawyer, possibly, a computer expert. Getting good advice—especially when you are new in business—can save you a bundle of money, as well as daily headaches and sleepless nights. Think of yourself as an expert who hires other

Then, as Stephen Covey advises in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, sharpen the saw: Make a plan for continuing the never-ending process of staying on the cutting edge of your speciality. You can do this by reading and attending meetings in your field. Regardless of how busy you get, do not stop learning.

Once you get your first client, your so-called process consulting skills will be tested. These skills are often called the soft side of consulting, because they do not involve your expertise as a physicist. Nevertheless, process consulting skills can make or break your reputation and your bank account. You must know how to collect client data, write a proposal, prepare a contract, handle resistance, and say no to clients who suddenly want to add to your agreed-upon statement of work.

PROBE FOR PROBLEMS

"Invest time in getting to know the people, the problems and the industries in your target market," advises Jerry Torrance, a condensed matter physicist. He decided to leave IBM more than two years ago when he saw that priorities were changing there. Torrance wanted to work in the Silicon Valley area. As he looked for a job, he discovered that the best way was to concentrate on uncovering what are the key technical problems that companies face. That led him to his first consulting job, and he has been overloaded ever since.

experts so you will have time to do what you do best.

Stay on the edge

"Deal from your strengths," says Ed Goldin, manager of the American Institute of Physics' career planning and placement programs. Identify your unique selling proposition, your special niche that makes you different from every other consultant. Be able to say, "I'm the only one who. . ."

FEATURE FLEXIBILITY

"I like to have flexible arrangements with other physicists," says Bob Burmeister, "so I have sort of a virtual organization that can grow or shrink as my projects demand." Until five years ago Burmeister was head of Hewlett Packard's materials research laboratory in Palo Alto, California. He left to start Saratoga Technology Associates, and he also teaches at Stanford University. "The writing was on the wall. Far less money was going to my particular area of research, and although I'd been with HP for 22 years, I told myself to accept change and make a positive move."

With the diminished security of corporate employment, many industrial physicists are willing to trade their parking privileges for the rewards of independent contracting. They are capitalizing on their expertise and years of experience to become consultants. If you choose this second career path, your ability to thrive will be tested daily. Nevertheless, you can make this path easier and more rewarding not only for you but also your clients by concentrating on three essential activities.

Build business acumen

First, learn how to start and manage the business side of consulting. "Understand how to run a small business—how to project expenses and income, run balance sheets, write a business plan," recommends California-based Bob Burmeister, whose consulting business, Saratoga Technology Associates, took off five years ago. "At the large company I used to work for, most of this was taken care of by others. So, to get up to speed on basic business systems, I listened to tapes, read books and took short courses."

Vie for visibility

Your success depends on “creating a world in which your knowledge of the marketplace and its knowledge of you brings appropriate clients to you,” says Geoffrey Bellman, author of *The Consultant’s Calling*. Since most of your clients will come from people who know you, business development depends—first and foremost—on getting known. Position yourself by writing, speaking, mentoring, networking and teaching—doing all that you can to establish your visibility and credibility.

Learn to explain what you do in a way that starts conversations with potential clients and teaches the people in your professional and personal circles what kind of business to send your way. “It’s a statistical process,” says consultant Jerry Torrance. “When you need more clients, you have to increase the number of people you talk to.” Torrance is a member of the Professional and Technical Consultants Association ((415) 903-8305), where some of the best conversations focus on how to market. He suggests targeting several companies that

you think need your services. Then you should contact the physicists in those companies and look for problems you can solve.

The Internet provides a great networking resource for both setting up as a consultant and running your business. Check out CommerceNet (on the World Wide Web at <http://www.commerce.net>), which serves as a meeting place for people from every aspect of business. In addition, AIP runs a Physics Careers Bulletin Board. To access it, telnet to pinet.aip.org and log in with the ID and password “Careers.” The bulletin board sponsors and profiles six different on-line mentors each month. They will answer your questions about careers, consulting, and industry applications.

If you do become a consultant, keep honing your skills: business, state-of-the-art capabilities and marketing.

Recommended Reading

Anne Baber and Lynne Waymon. *Great Connections: No-Nonsense Networking for Business & Career Success*. Manassas, Va. Impact Publications, 1996 (in press).


Anne Baber and Lynne Waymon. How to fireproof your career, *The Industrial Physicist*, vol.1 (July 1995), p. 26.

George Bellman. *The Consultant’s Calling*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990.

P. Block. *Flawless Consulting: A Guide to Getting Your Expertise Used*. San Diego: University Associates, 1981.

Stephen R. Covey. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989.

R. Tepper. *Become a Top Consultant*. New York: John Wiley, 1985.

G. Weinberg. *The Secrets of Consulting: A Guide to Giving & Getting Advice Successfully*. New York: Dorset House, 1985. 

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