

SO YOU WANT TO BE A CONSULTANT!

I am often asked how to become a consultant to take advantage of the “big money” and “easy hours” of the profession - and my first response is to say, “When you find out, please let me know!”

As part of my “homework” prior to meeting with a prospective new consultant several years ago, I sat down and went through my library of books that I have found to be useful over the past 8 - 10 years as I made the transition from company executive to consultant - a traumatic experience, by the way - and then to profitable consultant (an even more traumatic experience since it meant that I had to “discard” many of my old thinking patterns).

What my review of my own experience and my library brought to mind as a rule of thumb is the truth that you cannot be a good consultant unless you have been a good “something” in the real world of business or academia. The problem is that once you become good at “something” in business or academia (which establishes your “subject matter” credibility), you then have to learn a whole new set of rules about how to survive as a consultant in putting your “something” to work productively for others.

That’s why I always advise people who come to me about becoming a consultant to read a couple of books that were written as “out-placement” resources for fired/retired managers who had to survive in a new and sometimes hostile world. Truly, self-assessment comes first if you are going to try to help others (not just make a bunch of money and run as the popular notion goes). It is only when you understand what makes your own self “tick” that you have the professional courage to say “no” to inappropriate assignments - the universal kiss of death for a consultant - and to begin developing your own consulting specialty - the sign of consulting success that results in the holy grail of **referrals**.

In general professional terms, my guru and benchmark is Alan Weiss, *The Million Dollar Consultant* (<http://summitconmsulting.com>). I was a charter subscriber to his "What's Working in Consulting" newsletter for years and years. He was bought out by Kennedy Information, Inc. (One Kennedy Place, Fitzwilliam, NH 03447, PH: 1-603-585-6544, for subscriptions at \$197/yr) and I gradually noticed a lot of repetition of earlier subjects and a constant return to the money theme for judging a consultant's success and I dropped out of that subscription.

If you haven't been exposed to Alan yet, it's probably a good investment to subscribe for at least a couple of years. Be aware that he is a financially driven consultant and I don't agree with some of his “motivated by billings” theories. But as far as the “mechanics” of consulting go and as far as being a leader in the “profession” of consulting, he is top drawer professional - and a wonderful speaker to boot.

In an address to the local Philadelphia IMC (Institute of Management Consultants) chapter meeting, Alan made the following points in a talk he entitled: “How to consult in any industry”.

1. Frame the issue (i.e. keep it simple and focused).
2. Question the Clients assumptions (i.e. don't let the Client guide the Consultant).

3. Force the Client to actually "say" what will constitute success for the project.
4. Embrace (figuratively) the Client and his/her business as if it were your own.
5. Resist adopting the Client's "answer" or "solution" (i.e. if he/she knows what to do, why are you needed?).
6. Focus on output (results) not input (deliverables or reports).
7. Do not use every possible tool at your disposal (i.e. consulting overkill) - just solve the problem!
8. Educate the buyer on how to effectively use a consultant.
9. Develop your consulting process skills.
10. Grow professionally by building on your strengths, not by improving or curing your weaknesses.

Now to get down to the subject of reading material for prospective Consultants. These are books that I have found to be personally helpful or which have generated enthusiastic responses from those who have read them.

My first choice is the classic **“What Color Is Your Parachute?”** It is revised and updated every couple of years and is as relevant now as it was when it was first written thirty some years ago. Now, here is the catch - it is just entertainment unless you buy and USE the workbook that goes with it. If you honestly and seriously work your way through the whole book and workbook, you will have enough personal revelations to last an entire lifetime of careers. It is hard work, but well worth it - how can you help others if you don't know yourself?

A similar book (but much more expensive and detailed) is the classic outplacement bible, **“Parting Company,”** by W. J. Morin and J. C. Cabrera, Chairman and President (respectively) of Drake Beam Morin, Inc, the worldwide leader in career-management consulting. Published by Harcourt & Brace & Company, San Diego/New York/London; ISBN 0-15-671047-1 If you are having “career change” or career self-doubts, this is an excellent directional book that will force you into an honest self-assessment and then provide you with the tools to take advantage of your insights. This book was extraordinarily helpful to me during the first several years that I was struggling to “quit looking for a job” and adopt the mental attitude that “I want to be a consultant.”

A second favorite of mine, not necessarily related to consulting career decision making but nevertheless a classic and useful, is: **“Sweaty Palms, the Neglected Art of Being Interviewed”** by H. Anthony Medley, Ten Speed Press, Berkley, CA. This is a funny but painful book that can either save you a lot of sad experiences or will explain to you what happened if it is already too late. Since so much of being a sole practitioner consultant revolves around being interviewed, this is like money in the bank.

The first “real consulting book” that I read was; **“How to Start and Run a Successful Consulting Business”** by Gregory & Patricia Kishel, John Wiley & Sons. This is (literally) a step-by-step “how to” manual on every aspect of beginning and running a consulting practice. Unfortunately, I didn’t discover this resource until I had done almost everything wrong the first time through. But it has been very helpful and I actually go back and read it every year or so just to make sure that I stay off the “stupid road.”

Another popular book, but not my favorite, is: **“The Overnight Consultant”** by Marsha D.

Lewin, John Wiley & Sons. I've read it and it is very good and other consultants swear by it but I find it de-motivating. Perhaps it is because it focuses on the financial success part of consulting more than the professional success side - which I believe is a one-sided and shallow approach to life. That's also probably why I'm not a rich consultant.

A very old classic is "**The Consultant's Calling - Bringing Who Your Are to What You Do**" by Geoffrey M. Bellman, Jossey-Bass Publishers. This is my philosophical favorite and I can honestly say that it has been the single greatest influence on my consulting approach and philosophy. It is specifically directed to the premise that "consulting is integrity in the long run and honesty in the short run" and the financial success will ultimately come to the patient and persistent practitioner. I truly believe that and have seen it happen in my own life. Many of my peers blew by me financially years ago, but they hit a major "speed bump" in the loss of a major client or being over-extended or in negative cash flow and many of them are gone - disillusioned, not rich, and in some kind of corporate job taking orders from someone or grossly underemployed. Truly, persistence, patience, honesty, and integrity are necessary and irreplaceable ingredients of a consultant's life. Of all the books that I recommend, this book (along with the "Sweaty Palms" book) is the one that people call me to discuss. It goes right to the soul of our profession.

Finally, a very helpful book (but you have to season it with a grain of common sense and a sense of honesty) is "**How to Get Clients**" by Jeff Slutsky (who also authored "Street Smart Marketing"). He is a bit too smart and cynical for my taste, but his stuff works and if you pick and choose the ideas that don't offend your sense of whatever it is that you are about, it can be very helpful.

There, you are set for a number of long plane rides or lost weekends of reading. Anyone wanting to send me comments or questions, pro or con, is welcome to do so. I always enjoy hearing from others who practice the consultant's art.

Martin E. Gilligan, Jr.