

THE 7 KEYS TO A

# Successful Consulting Career

by

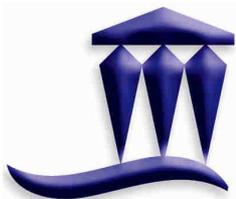
**Mark Law** MBA CEng FIMechE FCMC MCIM TVM

Certified Management Consultant

Consulting Career Mentor

London Business School

<http://uk.linkedin.com/in/marklaw>



Advanced  
Management  
Skills

<http://amskills.com/>

## Introduction

Consulting is a fascinating and rewarding career. Here are some unique insights on how to survive and thrive in this exciting and dynamic field.

I'm a professionally qualified management consultant. Following an initial career in oil and gas exploration, an MBA at London Business School and a five year career with a boutique strategy consultancy in the City of London I founded Advanced Management Skills in 1988. These days I work as a professional consultant with clients across the private, public and not-for-profit sectors, many of whom are household names. I also love helping others discover and realise their potential as professional consultants.

## What's So Great About Consulting?



Why am I so passionate about consulting? What is so appealing about this unique and unusual profession?

Simply put, consulting is a process of exploration and discovery. We help clients investigate intriguing problems concerned with the development of their organisations. We help them identify opportunities, assess strategic options and work out how best to implement our recommendations.

So how does one get started? Like many, as I was growing up, I yearned for a career that involved discovery, invention and creativity. I read about the great explorers, scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs and thought that I'd love to take part in this great adventure. I had a talent for understanding how things work and studied engineering at university. Quite early on in my subsequent engineering career I made a startling discovery...

... someone had got there first! Most of the world and the more accessible planets had been mapped. It takes vast teams and resources to make new scientific discoveries. Engineering developments require the colossal effort of major organisations often with government support. Even the idea of becoming an entrepreneur was fraught with difficulty because the chances of growing a successful business from scratch are in fact remarkably low.

So what does a modern day explorer do with his or her life? How does one satisfy the need for exciting challenges, epic discoveries and adventure in such a highly evolved world?

The answer is simple, become a professional consultant!

So how do you go about it? Consulting is a competitive field and like any other profession you need to invest in suitable development. Here are 'seven keys' to help you unlock the secrets of a successful consulting career.

## Key 1. Master the Art of Client Relationships



However complex the client's problem, however bright and skilled we are, we won't get anywhere as professional consultants without mastering the art of building great client relationships.

The good news is that even the most shy and socially inept people can master the art of building client relationships. Although this is a big topic here are three tips to help you get started:

- **Listening Skills:** Your client is the most important person in your universe when you are in conversation with them. The easiest way to mess up an embryonic consulting relationship is to talk too much. Clients have all sorts of interesting problems and challenges which the best consultants are brilliant at helping them articulate. Remember, if you find yourself doing most of the talking, chances are you're either boring them or they are picking your brains for free!
- **Personal Impact:** It's a tough thing to say but we won't get anywhere unless we 'bite the bullet' and make absolutely sure there's nothing about our physical presence that might turn off a potential client. Remember what was it like last time you worked in close proximity with a heavy smoker or perhaps someone who hadn't showered after a long cycle ride to the office? A good friend of mine (a McKinsey consultant) regularly vanishes with a toothbrush whenever he is working closely with a client or colleague. Oscar winning actors suck a 'Tic Tac' or 'Smint' before shooting a romantic scene. Not sure what to focus on? Just ask your nearest and dearest!
- **Professional Competence:** Like any other professional, consultants need to imbue their clients with a deep sense of confidence. Would you trust a dentist with poor eyesight and shaky hands? As consultants we need a deep understanding of how to help clients tackle problems and evidence that we are uniquely placed to help them do it. We achieve this through our questioning and diagnostic skills along with suitable client references, testimonials and case studies.

Remember, our objective as professional consultants is to become our client's trusted advisor. This is a wonderful position to be in as it means clients contact us 'out of the blue' with new engagements, they are less likely to subject our work to competitive tender and we build an enviable reputation in the industry. Get it wrong and the chances are that you won't notice it and it will cause you enormous grief, puzzlement and lost income over the years.

## Key 2. Master the Art of Problem Definition



I'm sure you've heard the retail mantra "the customer is always right". Why? Research has found that a satisfied customer typically tells 3 others to purchase, a dissatisfied customer tells 9 others not to purchase and it costs 12 times as much to win back a dissatisfied customer than to attract a new one. The cost of sorting out a retail customer i.e. "the customer is always right" is far less than the cost impact of a dissatisfied customer.

Yet in consulting this is absolutely **not** the case. The consulting version of the saying is that "the potential client is quite likely wrong in their initial assessment of the problem". Don't believe me? In the UK the Department of Health wasted £20 billion on the 'Connecting for Health' IT programme. They did this without investigating options or even whether they needed a national patient record database in the first place (some countries give patients memory sticks with their health records on them – a hugely cheaper option).

The key implication for us as professional consultants is that we must be extremely good at the art of client problem definition. Although this is an intricate professional process, much like medical diagnosis, here are three tips to help you get started:

- **Don't Jump to Conclusions:** Daniel Kahneman the Nobel Prize winning psychologist identified that we have a fast and slow brain. Our fast brain is a great tool for capturing first impressions and making rapid associations. Our slow brain excels at analysing complex problems. The problem is that our slow brain is lazy and we often use our fast brain on complex problems. This is often fatal in diagnosing clients' problems. Slow down and do some quality thinking about the client's problem.
- **Tackle the Cause, Not The Symptoms:** A major cause of failed consulting engagements is that clients tackle the symptoms of a problem and not its underlying cause. A good way to help a client understand the root cause of a problem is to politely and patiently ask them the question 'Why?' a number of times. For example:

**Client:** "We've got a real problem hiring enough people". **Consultant:** "Why do you think that is?". **Client:** "We have a high staff turnover". **Consultant:** "OK, so why do you think you have a high staff turnover?". **Client:** "Because staff morale is low". **Consultant:** "Why do you think morale is low?". **Client:** "Because managers don't make employees feel valued". **Consultant:** "Why do you think managers don't make employees feel valued?". **Client:** "Because they don't have the awareness or skills". **Consultant:** "Sounds like you need a management development programme rather than waste money on that new recruiting system we were originally talking about".

- **Acquire a World-class Professional Consulting Toolkit:** Here's a hypothetical question. A much loved member of your family is seriously unwell and needs surgery. Do you take pot luck at the nearest general hospital or do you carefully research the best in the field and find the most recommended senior doctor? Of course you would do the latter. Our clients face a similar problem and we need to position ourselves accordingly. This means acquiring a world-class professional consulting toolkit and developing a reputation as being best of class in the art of defining and solving client problems.

When a client attempts to solve the wrong problem they are taking a risk that could prematurely end their career. It is our duty as professional consultants to master the art of problem definition so we can help them avoid this. There's nothing more professionally rewarding than when a client recognises that you helped them avoid a 'near career death' situation.

### Key 3. Master the Art of Strategic Research



Consulting is all about helping clients develop actionable insights about their business and strategic research plays a central role in this. I regularly help London Business School MBA students land jobs with the big strategy consulting firms (e.g. BCG, McKinsey and Bain). One of the core things we work on is enhancing their strategic research and problem solving skills and their ability to convey this during interviews.

Why is this? Simply put, clients listen to consultants because everything we do, as far as possible, is evidence based. When we seek treatment from a doctor they use evidence based medicine to ensure that the drugs they prescribe are safe and likely to cure us (via clinical trials). The same is true in consulting where we need to gather evidence to support our recommendations. The big strategy consulting practices extensively use strategic research to underpin their client recommendations. So must we.

Although this is a big topic here are three tips to help you get started:

- **Start With Your Client:** This may sound obvious but you would be amazed. Large organisations are remarkably dysfunctional and are a treasure trove of information that can be used in your consulting engagement. For example they may have tackled a similar problem in another division or perhaps looked at the same issue a couple of years previously but failed to make progress. You won't get this information unless you ask your client politely and persistently for it!

- **Be Sceptical About Your Client's Data:** Large organisations spend a fortune on their accounting and management information systems yet the data these churn out is often rubbish. Don't believe me? Some of the smartest professional fund managers won't invest in banks because they think these financial institutions don't understand their exposure to risky loans. The moral, always be prepared to challenge your client's data and if necessary take steps to measure it.
- **Be Prepared to Get Your Hands Dirty:** Although the web is a great place to conduct research, as consultants we always need to be prepared to do appropriate focused field work. Examples of this include interviewing our clients' customers, suppliers, employees and visiting trade shows. A particularly useful research tool are 'day in the life of studies'. This is where the consultant spends a period of time embedded in the client organisation to see what actually goes on. Consultants also spend time researching a client's competitors.

I find strategic research one of the most fascinating parts of my role as a consultant. There's nothing I like better than the occasional road trip to investigate a client's business. Perhaps it goes back to the sense of being an explorer I mentioned earlier. I think creativity in research is paramount to adding value in consulting. There is something wonderful about a knotty client problem and the challenge of researching it to come up with a solution!

## Key 4. Master the Art of Problem Solving



At London Business School we spend a good deal of time developing our MBA students' consultancy problem solving skills. Why? Very simple. These are precisely the skills they need professionally and are probed during interviews by the big consulting firms. If you plan to work as an independent consultant you need to be especially good at this because you don't have experienced colleagues to fall back on if you get stuck.

There are many hundreds of analytical techniques used by consultants and we can't cover them here. However, here are three important principles worth considering when working with clients.

- **Avoid the Single Solution Trap:** Many consultants, even those working for the big strategy consulting firms, make the big mistake of coming up with just one solution to a client problem. Most real world client problems have multiple solutions and our clients really value a 'big picture' guided tour of their options as well as, of course, the analytics supporting the best solution.

- **Construct a 'War Room':** When working with clients I often encourage them to construct a 'war room' which performs a similar function to the maps and models military leaders use to make strategic and tactical military decisions. The discipline of laying out the 'battlefield' as clearly as possible really helps clients understand the opportunities and challenges facing their organisation. It also is a great way to facilitate team discussions and 'what if' scenarios.
- **Don't Bore the Client:** As consultants we need to come across to our clients as fresh, insightful and up-to-date. Nothing turns off a client and their team faster than the strategy consultant who saunters in and says 'OK guys now let's do a SWOT or BCG matrix'. These and many other consulting clichés are not only incredibly old hat, but in some cases are plain wrong, and signal to the client that you are not up-to-date.

The best consultants love problem solving and how better to do it than helping a client tackle an issue that has stumped them for years. The good news is that I hardly ever run into a problem that cannot be solved. It just takes the right skillset, a bit of creativity and sometimes a bit of plain old hard work! At the end of the day it's all worthwhile and extremely satisfying.

## Key 5. Master the Art of Facilitating Teams



The human brain is a remarkable piece of equipment yet it has severe limitations in terms of bandwidth, knowledge and the ability to see issues from diverse perspectives. This is the reason why most of the major achievements of civilization are the product of multiple individuals working in teams. This also holds true for most types of consulting engagement which is why we need to become expert facilitators.

Helping large teams tackle complex problems is one of my most challenging yet rewarding activities as a professional consultant. There's nothing quite like helping a team of 30 or 40 highly intelligent and motivated managers tackle what previously seemed to them to be an impossible challenge and after 3-5 days emerging with a solution and a practical way forward. The fees for this type of work are also jolly good! Although this is a big topic here are three tips to help you get started:

- **Prepare Thoroughly:** Team working is highly unpredictable. Careful planning means that we can focus on the work and not worry about things going wrong. Key points include: a great off-site location with high quality rooms and catering, all the equipment you need (screens, audio, flipcharts and lots of PostIt pads). You can't trust venues to supply flipchart markers so I always carry a good supply of these in my bag!

- **Get Participants Working:** Always remember that you are there to help others tackle the task. Don't take on the work of the whole group because they will get bored and you will exhaust yourself.
- **Ensure You Have Best of Class Skills:** Facilitation is a high risk high return consulting activity. Get it right and you're a hero (a marvellous feeling), get it wrong and you get fired. Remember, as a facilitator your client entrusts you with their reputation and potentially their career. It is only right that we make sure we're fully equipped to deserve their trust.

Bottom line, the facilitation of senior level management teams is the most exciting, challenging and enjoyable activity that we as professional consultants get involved in. Make a success of it and you will be invited back regularly.

## Key 6. Master the Art of Communications



However smart we are as consultants, the quality of our work is assessed by our written and verbal communications. Client communication skills are really important to master as they help us win business, manage client stakeholders and of course impress people with the quality of our work. Finally, a high quality report is a great reference for future work with that client and their colleagues. Here are three tips to help you with your client communications:

- **Respond Rapidly to a Client Request:** Woody Allen was right when he said "Eighty percent of success is showing up". In the case of consulting it is all about being available to respond rapidly to client requests. Although it may not happen that often, when it does you need to jump. So when a client needs a report or presentation for their boss at short notice you need to be able to respond efficiently and of course enthusiastically! If they have to wait they will go elsewhere.
- **Fit For Purpose:** Clients of the Moscow office of a prestigious consulting firm recently complained that their consultants' reports were much too long (in some cases over 300 pages!). Contrast this with the 12 slide PowerPoint deck I successfully used to explain a complex reorganisation to a client's board. Always be clear why the report is needed, what job it must do, the required format, and the minimum needed. Senior executives normally hate reading lengthy reports so focus on the essentials.
- **Eliminate Typos:** The perceived quality of our work and our credibility as consultants is seriously undermined if it contains spelling mistakes or poor grammar. Report writing is a craft which gets better with practice.

Delivering a client presentation at the end of a challenging engagement is enormous fun. All our hard work is approved and everyone gets hugely enthusiastic about implementation. Oh yes, of course, our fees also get paid!

## Key 7. Gain Professional Qualifications



Consulting is a huge industry with over £200 billion revenues globally. It is highly diverse with a large number of opportunities for people with a wide range of skills and specialisms. Although it is currently an unregulated industry (anyone can set up as a consultant) it is pretty competitive. Clients can choose the best consultants in their field and are looking for evidence of competence, a commitment to ethical values and that their consultants are at the cutting edge of developments within their industry.

Remember, we are professional consultants on £1,000 plus per day and professional qualifications are the best way to distance oneself from the thousands of unqualified freelancers working for £15 per hour.

The good news is that acquiring professional consulting qualifications is relatively straightforward, especially when compared with the years required in other professions. The main consulting qualifications are the Institute of Consulting's Levels 5 and 7:\*

- **Award in Professional Consulting:** You complete our face-to-face, online or blended learning course and tackle one assignment in your own time (no exam). This is marked and you get your certificate.
- **Certificate in Professional Consulting:** You complete our face-to-face, online or blended learning course and tackle two assignments in your own time (no exam). After marking you get your certificate.
- **Diploma in Professional Consulting:** You complete our face-to-face, online or blended learning courses and tackle seven assignments in your own time (no exam). After marking you get your diploma.

Would you go to a dentist who is not professionally qualified? I didn't think so. How about a doctor, lawyer or an accountant? So why would a client use a consultant without suitable professional qualifications?

\* Level 5 is undergraduate degree level and Level 7 is masters degree level

# The No. 1 Thing You Need to Know for Success in the Industry...



## Master the Art of Building Your Brand

The most important thing you need to get right for success in the consulting industry is your professional reputation. Get this right and you will never be short of interesting work at great fee rates. Clients will regularly seek you out for advice and they will be unlikely to subject your work to competitive tender. Sounds like the holy grail but is it mission impossible?

Not at all. I know many professional consultants who have mastered this. Here are three tips to get you started:

- **Choose Your Consulting Career Path:** It is extremely important that you develop a clear picture of where you would like to work in the industry. Consulting is a highly diverse field and you need a focus to differentiate yourself from others and, of course, find clients or consulting companies to engage you.
- **Build Your Professional Profile:** With your chosen career path in mind you need to build a great professional profile. LinkedIn is the preferred choice of professional consultants and has lots of great features to set out your skills and evidence them via recommendations. You will also need a separate MS Word document titled 'Professional Profile'. Please don't call it a CV unless you are looking for a job!
- **Build Your Network:** An extensive professional network is essential for your career as a professional consultant. There are many ways to build this if you are not well connected. For example you can join professional bodies such as the Institute of Consulting and attend various evening events. There are many such opportunities and it just takes a bit of creativity to identify the ones most relevant to your career.

Consulting is an exciting, interesting and rewarding career. Like any other career you need to invest in your skills to get started and stay up to date.

We would love to help you fast track your consulting career. For more information about our courses and programmes please contact:

**Laura Robertson, Programme Director**

**Advanced Management Skills**

**Email: [laura@amskills.com](mailto:laura@amskills.com)**

**Phone: 020 8883 1423 or +44 20 8883 1423 (international)**

**Web: [www.amskills.com](http://www.amskills.com)**