

LESSON 1 HOW TO BE A CONSULTANT

What do we mean by being a consultant? Essentially, a consultant is someone with expertise in a particular area who offers advice to others.



A consultant may be regarded as having expert knowledge because what they specialise in is beyond the scope of most people's awareness. Usually, a consultant is employed on a temporary basis until a particular task has been completed. They are needed because there is no-one within a company or institution with the type of knowledge which is sought. In business, a consultant may be hired to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of a business. In landscaping, a consultant may be hired because they have an extensive knowledge of the symptoms of plant nutrient deficiencies. In mental health, a psychologist may act as a

consultant with regards to a particular group of mental health disorders, for instance, autism spectrum disorders.

There are therefore consultants who represent a broad range of professions and industries. A consultant is basically someone that other people will turn to for their knowledge, expertise and ideas. People with expertise in several different areas, for instance in a number of different facets of business management, may work as consultants in several different capacities or roles. Since there is a wide range of types of consultant, we shall just consider just some in detail here.

Suggested Tasks: ▼

Throughout this course you will be provided with suggested tasks and reading to aid with your understanding. These will appear in the right hand column. Remember: these tasks are optional. The more you complete, the more you will learn, but in order to complete the course in 20 hours you will need to manage your time well. We suggest you spend about 10 minutes on each task you attempt, and no more than 20 minutes.

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Suggested Tasks

Take a few moments to think what YOU understand by a consultant. Make some notes.

It is important to clarify exactly what we mean by consultancy work.

AREAS OF OPERATION

As already outlined, consultants may operate in many different industries. Examples include:

- Engineering
- Management
- Human resources
- Marketing
- Information technology
- Strategic planning
- Real estate/estate agency
- Architecture
- Corporate finance
- Financial advice
- Politics
- Public sector
- Legal
- Business start up
- Education
- Media
- Public relations
- Employment
- Environmental issues
- Psychology
- Social work
- Building
- Planning
- Health
- Medical
- Pharmaceutical

From this list you can see that there are potential consultancy roles in just about every employment sector. If you think of a job, you can probably think of a possible consultancy role for someone with specialist knowledge within that area of work.



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Suggested Tasks

As you are presumably studying this course because you are interested in being a consultant, make a list of the areas of consultancy that you are interested in.

OR

If you are already a consultant, make a list of areas into which you could expand your consultancy work.

WHO EMPLOYS CONSULTANTS?

A consultant may be employed by an individual, or directly by a company, government department, or individual, or they may be employed indirectly through an agency, to fulfil a short-term role.

Consultants may be required by a variety of employers. Sometimes they may be consulted regularly by the same employer for varying lengths of employment, at other times it may be a one-off contract.

Individuals

Certain types of consultants are more likely to be engaged by individuals. For example, Martina runs her own care agency offering care packages for people with disabilities. Occasionally, social services ask her to carry out assessments on clients to establish their care requirements. When this is needed, Martina will employ a consultant social worker, or independent social worker, to carry out the assessment on an ad hoc basis.



In another situation you might have a horticulturalist who offers private consultancy to individuals in relation to plant pests and diseases. An individual may appoint the consultant to visit their property so that they can offer advice about a particular problem which is affecting a plant or group of plants in their garden.

Government Agencies and Departments

Government agencies and departments may also use consultants. For example, with changes to the health and safety laws, a government agency may bring in legal consultants to advise them on their own policies and procedures in relation to health and safety.

Small Companies

Small companies may also make use of consultants. This can be a cost effective way of gaining expert advice without having to permanently employ a specialist. For example, a small company may employ a human resources consultant to help them develop a plan for recruitment and interview new staff.

Large Corporations

Some consultants may be employed by larger corporations to be available to provide their expertise to a wide range of individuals or groups employed by that organisation. In some cases these may be full-time consultants; or they may be paid to do consulting work when required. They are therefore employed fulltime by that organisation and work 'in house'. In other cases, larger businesses may again bring in consultants from outside the business for certain areas of expertise.

Employment Agencies

Employment agencies may offer work for consultants by matching the needs for consultants requested by companies, individuals, and so forth to the consultancy work offered by clients registered with them.

CONSULTANCY OFFSHOOTS

Sometimes being a consultant can lead to other work opportunities associated with consulting.

Interim Managers

Sometimes businesses and agencies may need to appoint a manager on a temporary basis. Often this is in a higher management role such as an executive, and may be regarded as somewhere between a manager and a consultant.

Project Managers

A consultant who becomes involved in the early stages of a project (eg. by doing a feasibility study) will sometimes be an attractive candidate to manage the project in future. Their familiarity with the project specifics, is a distinct advantage, and if they have broader skills needed for the task at hand, they may be an obvious candidate.

Expert Witnesses

Anyone with expert knowledge in a given area or industry could act as an expert witness in court, in recent years there has been a trend towards establishing registries of expert witnesses who are willing to

make themselves available to provide information in court cases.

Trainers, Researchers, Writers

Working as a consultant involves delivering advice or information that is deficient in an organisation. Providing teaching services to deliver that information or advice, undertaking further research into a subject, or writing about it can all, at times, be a natural progression for the consultant.

As we have discussed, the key role of a consultant is to provide advice and information but not to manage.



CONSULTANT RESOURCES

Some consultants may work continuously as consultants by joining employment agencies specialising in the provision of consultants, through setting up their own consultancy practice, or joining someone else's consultancy practice. For example, a business consultant may offer their services to a range of businesses when required. Others may mix consultancy work with other forms of employment or self-employment. Regardless, a consultant will need to ensure that they have appropriate resources.

Before starting consulting work, a consultant should ensure that they have sufficient resources to be able to carry out this work. Of course this will include financial resources, but finances are not the only resources required by the consultant.



Financial

If a consultant is employed by a larger organisation, then their pay and employment is relatively safe. But for self-employed consultants, their work and income may not be so secure. A consultant who does not have continuous work must therefore guard against the ebb and flow of contracts and financial income. They may need to establish own retirement fund, holiday pay, sick pay, indemnity insurance etc. They may also need to ensure that they charge sufficient fees to remain in business, but also to cover themselves during periods when they may not have other work. No business can survive if it operates at a loss for too long so it may be necessary to have sufficient resources in place to allow for lean times - particularly when first setting up.

Health

A consultant who is self-employed also needs to ensure that they have good physical and mental health. If firms employ a consultant on a set term and the consultant is then ill and unable to do the work, this will have implications for the consultant:

- They may lose their good reputation – word of mouth can mean that other people find out that they did not keep to the contract regarding their work.
- They will lose money as they will not be paid for work not completed.
- They may lose future work if they lose their good reputation.

It is therefore important that a consultant ensures that they maintain