

A Time to Consult: Strategies for Expanding Your Strategic Consulting Career

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Consulting is an equal opportunities employer and an option that virtually every professional has considered at one time or another. Combining the right blend of experience, skill, and interest helps one move to the next level in their consulting career. Today, the demand is for *strategic consultants* who bring a cutting-edge quality of leadership to what they do. This article explores the broad scope of what it takes to be a consultant and offers some basic advice on effective consulting.

Consultancy is a unique professional service that has not been sufficiently explored and investigated as a means of critical leadership development. All over the globe, consultants interface with cutting-edge organizations. These professionals are involved in engagements where the change strategy may be unclear. They help to provide services that are missing or weakly represented within the organization. Consultants bid or apply for consultancies based on available options in the market and let the TOR (Terms of Reference) determine their work choice and work profile. In the initial stages of the profession, there may be a need to accept a few “income-generating consultancies” that may not fit the area of growth one seeks. However, this need not be the case if one takes the time to plan strategically.

Consultants have growth and development needs. They are not merely high-tech, high-cost service providers. While many types of consulting provide opportunities for earning significant fees, this is not the ultimate purpose of consulting. In many ways, the job provides opportunities for consultants to experience compressed, high-speed learning in a short period of time. It provides opportunities for individuals to work in multiple country contexts, varied situations, and on high-impact issues where results can be seen immediately.

Since consultancies typically cost organizations a great deal, clients usually ensure that their staff is made available to the consultant. In an ideal situation, the engagement will also provide contact with the highest level of leadership and access to critical documents. As an illustration, when facilitating strategic planning for government departments, bi-lateral organizations or INGOs (International Non Government Organizations), a short-term consultancy can provide as much senior-level management experience and perspective expansion to a consultant that would have come from working for an organization for 2 years. The work of

the consultant is normally concentrated and intense, requiring a degree of diligence and hard work in the form of reading, research, discussions, and interaction at various levels.

Vital Elements of a Strategic Consulting Career

Listed here are vital elements that every consultant should take into account when planning their strategic consulting career:

1. Timing

There is an appropriate time for launching out as a consultant. The decision requires a lot of advanced planning and relationship building with individuals and organizations. An important thing to bear in mind is that many contacts within organizations are unlikely to be in that position for longer than 2-3 years. That is the typical shelf life of a contact. Armed with this knowledge as a prospective consultant, you should begin developing contacts at least 2 years before you plan to start consulting. Also, be aware that the bulk of consulting requests tend to come in the third and fourth quarters of the fiscal year.

Knowing the right time or the appropriate stage in your career to launch out as a consultant is very important. The best stage is probably after you have at least 8-10 years of experience in the field in which you wish to consult. This means you should be somewhere around upper middle management or senior management. Launching out at this stage will enable you to secure the more important consultancies, where you will not merely be putting together predetermined research data or collecting it. Starting out too early in your career will usually result in low paying, high labor intensive, and usually thankless consultancies where you are likely to get pushed around.

2. Interest and Expertise

It is important to be involved in consultancies that are directly related to your field of interest and expertise. After working for several years, you should be aware of your interests and the dimensions of development that are most interesting to you. It is important to realize that “expertise” does not necessarily relate to academic training or educational preparation. Over the course of my career, I met and interacted with an expert in participatory development, a subject that was far removed from the areas in which I received my technical training. Today, I am passionate about participatory development and most of my work remains related to this aspect of development.

Consultancies provide the opportunity for focus and attendance to critical issues. This can make a consulting engagement enjoyable, interesting, and deeply satisfying. As every consultant will know (or eventually discover), finding that perfect organization—one that is consistent with the individual’s long term goal and vision, that has a regional or global perspective—can be a real challenge. The reality is that the opportunity will usually occur but once in a lifetime. Being a consultant provides you with the unique luxury of waiting, learning, and gaining experience (and hopefully being handsomely compensated) while you wait. At the same time, do not wait forever. When the opportunity comes to make the transition into the “dream dimension” of that perfectly aligned organization—take it.

3. *Range and Scope*

In selecting the type of consulting assignments to accept, search for a wide range of issues within your area of interest. Try not to get locked into doing the same thing over and over. Besides experiencing boredom, this is likely to lead to a “type casting” of your services in the eyes of potential clients. Before long, similar offers will follow, which the hungry consultant always accepts. However, the consultant soon finds it difficult to break out of a pre-cast mold. It is important to recognize that each organization has its own work culture and working pattern.

Exposure to a wide range of organizations inculcates flexibility and adaptability, and generates maturity. Attempts should also be made to consult at different levels of development (micro-meso-macro). Over time, this has the effect of widening one’s perspective: enabling the consultant to get a better handle on macro development issues. Figure 1 offers a visual representation of the diverse micro-meso-macro consulting opportunities.

In Figure 1, each concentric circle represents a higher level of development starting within the context of community development where interactions are with individuals, families, or mini-communities (sub-groups). At a wider or higher level, this then moves into the realm of community development; the next level moves to macro development. As the circle widens, determining issues become those of macroeconomics, politics, and understanding of the role of worldview, ideology, and values dimensions in development. Beginning with community development, as one backs up into the ever-widening concentric circles (see Figure 1), one sees the link that each of these has to issues that determine facilitators and retarders to progress in development.

4. *Income Management*

While consulting, it is necessary to be in a position to say ‘no’ to consultancies that do not fit into your plans for growth and development. This means you will need to have at least some backup resources to see you through the lean years when you are responsible for all expenditures and income is limited or non-existent. Basic expenditures usually involve the cost of running a small office with up-to-date technology for communication and documentation. If a spouse is working, this can be a great help. Every time you are paid for consulting work, set aside some “rainy day” funds to see you through times when you have to turn down work that is not aligned to your personal growth strategy.

This also calls for some degree of rationalizing on fees. Do a little research in your context to see what other consultants are charging for their service and then you can establish the optimum rate to charge. While it is important to not be prohibitive in charging, do not cheapen yourself by charging too little. You will discover that undercharging is counterproductive. If you do want to give an organization a special rate, go ahead and charge at your normal rate, but give the organization a special discount on the total. They then become aware of what you are doing for them. I have always made it a point to provide free consultancy services for some organizations that I know will never be able to afford a consultant. In many instances, a string of paying consultancies has followed this free work. (However, never let this be your motivation for providing free consultancies!)

The Expanding Horizons of Development:

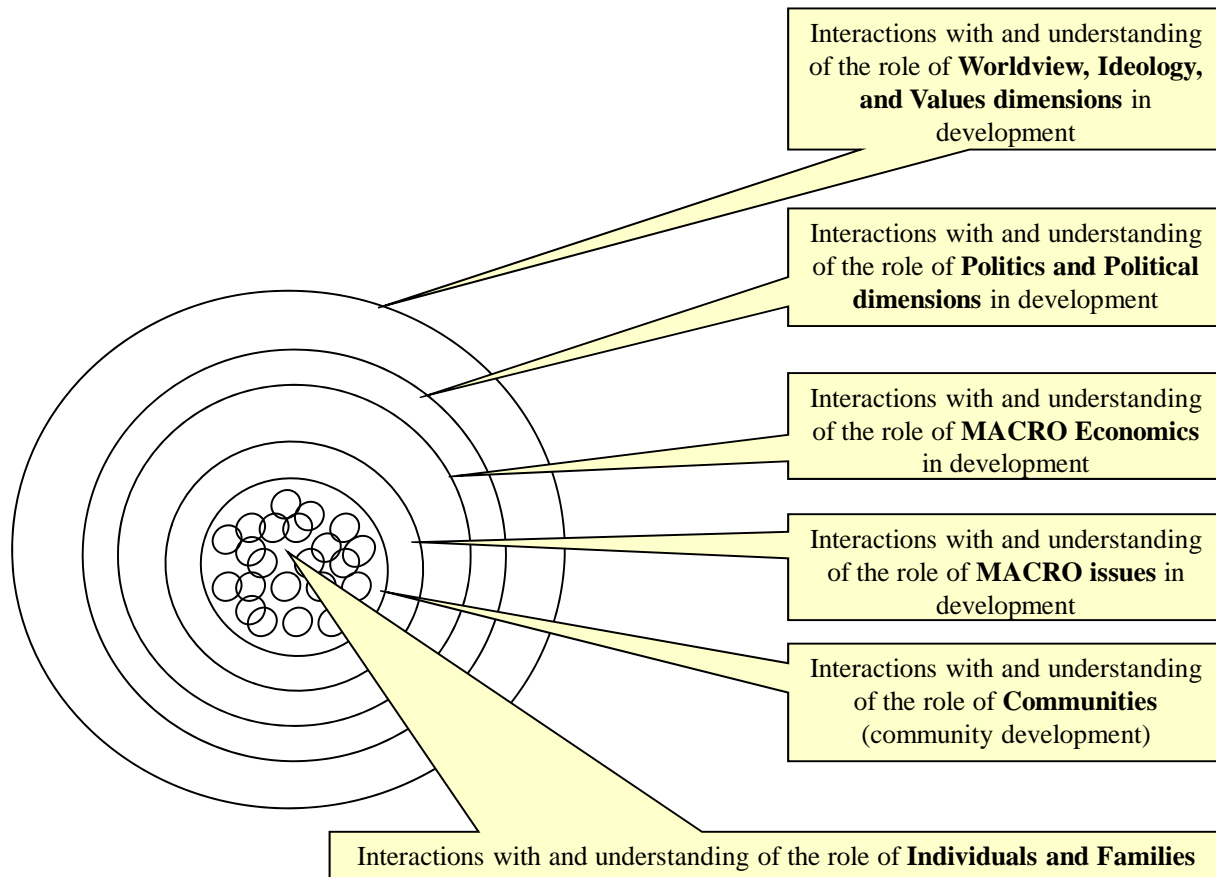


Figure 1. The link between Micro-Meso-Mega issues in development.

5. Reflection

While working on intensive consultancies, you will sometimes be working 16 to 18 hours a day. Toward the end of the consultancy, this time will largely be devoted to a lot of analysis and report writing. The momentum of this “fast-forward mode” can be maintained, even after the consultancy, and harnessed for getting some of that long-pending writing work completed. Allow for gaps between consultancies to do this reflection, analysis, and writing work. Initially, some of this may only be in the form of doodling or “saying in your own words” what you have read or learned from the consultancy. Gradually, try to use these thoughts to write articles and expand your own development framework.

6. Rest and Renewal

Plan for and organize your consultancy calendar carefully. Allocate a maximum of 60-70% of the time in a year for actually being involved in consulting. An important thing to remember is to make time for rest in between consultancies. This can be achieved by blocking off vacation time on an annual calendar before it begins to get clogged up with assignments. Work around these blocked dates and tell those who ask that you are already committed to other plans.

Important Reminders

1. The client is the ultimate stakeholder. Basically, it is not about you, but about them.
2. Take advantage of every “hands-on” consulting opportunity, even at a late stage in your career.
3. Do not be lured by the client or handsome remuneration to neglect that you have a life outside of consulting. Consulting can easily lead to exhaustion and burn out, so do not do it all your life!
4. Consider these steps to plan your next strategic consulting move.

About the Author

Ravi Jayakaran, Ph.D. has written several books on integrated development programs and the use of participatory methodology. Several of these have been completed in instalments between consultancies, including his latest book entitled *Facilitating Child Participation in the Development Process*. Besides working long term for several international NGOs, Dr. Jayakaran has also consulted for the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the UNDP, and several Global organizations. Dr. Jayakaran is passionate about issues of participatory development, rapid assessment, and research. He has recently developed a tool called the OQ2AE Summary (Overall Qualitative and Quantitative Assessment and Evaluation summary). This is a methodology that brings both the qualitative assessment and quantitative evaluations into one common summary that can be depicted in the form of a graph and is used for the assessment and evaluation of the HIV/AIDS awareness program of the MoEYS (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports) in Cambodia. Dr. Jayakaran is based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia where his wife Vimla is a teacher at the International School of Phnom Penh.

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