

What Makes a Good Consultant?

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A book currently is being written about the evolution of the acoustical consulting profession, beginning with the history of Bolt Beranek and Newman, Inc. (BBN). As one of the old-timers, having worked at BBN for thirty-seven years, I was asked to contribute one of several appendixes intended to give sage advice to aspiring consultants. Here is a preview of my appendix.

Psalm 23¹

1. *My consultant is my shepherd; I shall not fail.*
2. *He enableth me to dream of green pastures, to be calm like still waters.*
3. *He restoreth my faith; he leadeth me in the paths of efficiency, for my project's sake.*
4. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of doubt, I will fear no failure for he adviseth me; his help and his staff's, they comfort me.*
5. *He prepareth tables before me in the presence of mine personnel, he anointeth my head with ideas; my cup runneth over.*
6. *Surely success and progress shall follow me all the days of my work and I will dwell in debt to my consultant forever.*

This parody summarizes how I believe a client ideally should feel about a consultant. How can we make it happen?

In a small repair shop in rural Pennsylvania I saw a sign that read: "We can do your job well, fast and cheap – pick any two." This is a pretty clever statement concerning the realities of repair work, but a consultant rarely has the op-

portunity to give his² client this choice. A consultant's primary role is to provide advice – and this advice has to be correct, realistic, timely and cost-efficient.

In order to provide correct advice, a consultant must be well versed in the relevant technical areas on the basis of both practical experience and academic training. He needs to have a good intuitive understanding of the pertinent physical phenomena and needs to be able to estimate their effects. He should be able to devise and exercise mathematical models that represent the salient features of the problem of concern as simply as possible. He should understand measurements and their limitations and pitfalls. Furthermore, he should be aware of the hardware that is available to address the client's problem.

Will Rogers is said to have suggested a good way to get rid of enemy submarines – simply, boil the ocean. When he was asked how this might be done, he answered, "I just figure out the principles, someone else can work out the details." A consultant cannot be quite so cavalier. The solutions he proposes must be realistic in that they have the potential for solving the client's problem within his performance, schedule and cost requirements. Because it is important that a consultant understands all relevant aspects of a client's problems, a consultant must be both a good listener and a "quick study." But even then one rarely has all necessary information available, and I am convinced that one of the greatest assets an effective consultant may have is the ability to use his experience-honed intuition to

jump to the right conclusions.

But all of a consultant's technical know-how is useless if he cannot communicate it to the client clearly and accurately. A consultant must be able to write clearly and precisely, free of technical jargon, in a way that permits the client to understand him without the possibility of misinterpretation. He also should be able to present his recommendations orally in a precise and convincing manner, so as to inspire the client's confidence.

One of the exciting aspects of consulting life is that a consultant gets to see a great many things – many different technologies, machines, instruments, industrial plants, etc. – and to interact with many people. He thus gets to learn a little about many things, usually on the edge of emerging technologies. On the negative side, working on many projects during a series of relatively short periods requires a consultant to keep several balls in the air simultaneously, and he typically does not learn very much about the aspects of his projects that fall outside of his area of specialization. Fortunately, he does not continue to learn less and less about more and more, to the limit of knowing nothing about everything – on the contrary, he keeps amassing further insights and thus continues to become a better consultant.

1. With apologies to the King James translation.
2. Please note that 'he' and 'his' here are intended to be gender-neutral. Using "he/she" and "his/hers" repeatedly is just too cumbersome. **SV**

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