

# Information Overload

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## Welcome:

To the latest edition of Information Overload. This month we take a look at the life of a consultant. Do you have what it takes to become one? Have you ever aspired to being a consultant? If you read the September edition of the Registrant Resources edition of Overload, you will know we spoke about being the best in your field. Well being a consultant is not only being the best in your field, but at the same time, being able to pass on your knowledge in a way so that other people understand what it is you are trying to tell them and be willing to act on the suggestions and recommendation that you make. For those of you who have had dealings with consultants in the past, sometimes it is not the amount of information that someone possesses or imparts to others, but the way that information has been passed on that really makes a difference to your customers and clients.

We would like to thank you in advance for forwarding this edition onto friends, colleagues and other interested readers. Please note that all back issues of this edition, as well as our registrant resources edition can be read and/or downloaded from our web site – <http://www.iea.com.au> should any of the topics be of interest and use.

**Lorraine Bradshaw**  
**Marketing Coordinator and Projects Officer**

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## In this Issue we will be looking at:

- Don't consultants borrow your watch to tell you the time? What is a consultant anyway?
- What you need to do before you hire a consultant
- Do you have what it takes to become a consultant?
- What are the benefits of being a consultant?
- What are the downsides to being a consultant?
- Do you go it alone or join another organisation?
- News from the office
- A Thought to ponder.

## Don't consultants borrow your watch to tell you the time? What is a consultant anyway?

"Most of us make our money from thin air, we produce nothing that can be weighed, touched or easily measured. Our output is not stockpiled at harbours, stored in warehouses or shipped in railway cars. Most of us earn our livings providing service, judgement, information and analysis"

*Charles Leadbeater*

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As Charles alluded to, most of us work in the information industry. We are in fact “knowledge” workers. We leverage what we know to benefit ourselves, the people we work with and the people we work for. But what happens if you don’t have the knowledge that you or your organisation needs? Do you try and find out what you need to know by yourself which can take time and in some cases a lot of money through mistakes, wrong decisions and may result in lost opportunities. Or can you find someone who already has the knowledge that you need?

Where some people and some organisations fall down is that they don’t recognise they don’t know, so don’t try and look beyond their own level of expertise (or in some cases – ego’s and ignorance) to solve the current level of problems that they face. They are “happy” where they are, doing what they are doing. After all it worked once, therefore if they continue to do the same, then surely they will get the same result. Well yes, but surely if you are in business then you want to do better than you did yesterday. How can you do that if you keep returning to the same point? And sometimes it takes a person or group of persons from outside your organisation (situation) that can make the biggest difference.

The term “consultant” comes from the Latin “Consultus” meaning “Legal Expert”. However the term has been broadened to mean a “professional person who provides expert advice in a particular domain or area of expertise”. (*Definition taken from the dictionary on my desk!!*)

It is interesting to note that we are all “experts” in our own fields, so what makes an outside “expert” more “expert” than we are?

The main difference between an “expert” and a “consultant” is that most consultants are not employed by the client directly, but work either for him/herself or for a consulting firm and brings a wealth of knowledge from a wide variety of situations that may not be obtained from working from a traditional linear employment perspective.

No two organisations are the same, they may employ similar people, run similar systems and work in a similar industry to other organisations, but each organisation will have its own particular problems that it needs answers to. And internal experts, manuals and other published material can only go so far. Where an outside “expert” comes into their own is the “it depends” factor. The consultant can sift through their personal banks of information and knowledge gained by working for a wide variety of clients in a wide variety of situations to explain “why” faster. They can tailor their answers depending on the “it depends” factor of your own particular organisation and the problems or situations faced.

A skilled consultant will ask questions, and lots of them. But a skilled consultant will also see beyond the questions being asked of them and be able to provide answers and solutions to questions the organisation hadn’t asked.

Why is that important?

Well most of the time, an individual or organisation may not know they needed to know the answer to a particular question, because they didn’t know they didn’t know. It is these skills that makes the difference between an expert and a good consultant from an average consultant.

So whilst it may seem like an expense an organisation can do without, a consultant can save you time and money and offer solutions you didn’t even know existed.

## **What you need to do before you hire a consultant:**

Before you hire a consultant there are some things you need to know, and no – price may not be the most important deciding factor in the decision as to who you hire:

- What have you tried to do in the past and failed?

- Was it the process or the people that was the reason?
- Do you know what you already know? Knowledge management means knowing who knows what in your organisation already. Can you co-opt the knowledge resource bank before bringing in the “big guns”. Remember that everyone in your organisation will bring a different set of perspectives, experiences and knowledge to an organisation. So why not use it.
- Do you know what questions you need to know the answers to? Or if not ALL the questions, do you have a good idea? Hint – you will save time and money if you do.
- Do you need to audit your systems and your organisation first to see what is working and what isn't, or would you prefer an outside person/organisation to tell the dead wood from the living?
- Are you willing to be truly open-minded to the process and the solutions of what a consultant can do for your organisation? If you aren't then you will not make the changes that you need to and you will find yourself still doing the same things in the same way with the same people months if not years down the track.
- Who do you know has used a consultant in the past AND used the information they were given to make a difference to the way they conducted their business? Note: the second half of that question is THE MOST IMPORTANT part. The shelves of every public library has a section dedicated to biographies and autobiographies of those people who have made a difference to themselves and their lives and the lives of the people around them. What you won't find in that section is a book by the “average” person. Why? Because people don't want to read books about the “average” person. Those people and organisations who hire a consultant and then don't make the necessary changes are settling for average, they weren't open minded enough to accept they needed to change, so will continue to do what they've always done and consequently will get the same kind of results they've always got.

## Do you have what it takes to become a consultant?

- You should be able to **hit the ground running**. Now that doesn't mean that you should steam roller over anyone and everyone, especially those who don't agree with you. But you are paid (usually by the hour) on your performance. If you had to account for your day today, how much should you have been paid for the job that you were doing?
- You should know more than your client (or appear to know more at any rate). People don't want off the shelf solutions to problems, they can find those out themselves.
- You should know the **latest developments** in your direct field of expertise. But you should also know of developments in related fields for example we are impacted by HR, Storage (digital and offline), IT, Legislation, Business Management and a whole host of other fields as well. If you are not reading the literature, going to events and learning as much as you can from the people around you, then you are not serious about the consulting world. Now some would argue that they don't have time to do all that. I would suggest that if you're not doing that, you will soon find yourself falling behind those other consultants who do.
- **Excellent communication skills:** This one shouldn't even need stating, but just for the sake of completeness I will mention it. If you cannot put across your suggestions and recommendations clearly, concisely and in a way that the “lowest

common denominator” can understand you need to get your head out of the jargon bucket. People are more likely to take on board the suggestions and recommendations if they know what you are talking about.

As you will also be asking a lot of questions it is important to be able **to listen as well as speak**. Sometimes it is the evasive answers that can speak volumes rather than the direct answers you receive.

- People don't like change, so being skilled in communication can also assist with **change management**. Change can be hard, some people don't know why they need to do something differently, the old adage is still true “if it ain't broke, don't fix it” syndrome. However, a consultant who is a skilled orator can make change seem like the best thing that ever happened to them. Buy-in from everyone in the organisation is vital for the success of a project.
- **Excellent time management and project management skills:** People need to know what you are going to do and by when. That way other members of the project team, your client and the employees who will be directly impacted by the work that you are doing know exactly where they stand. No one likes being kept in the dark, so going back to the previous point – let your client and the project management team know where you are in the process.
- **Be known** in your field of expertise – for the right reasons. No one appreciates an egocentric.
- Be willing to commit to the art of **personal and professional development**, as we mentioned before, if you aren't learning then you are not changing, if you're not changing then you shouldn't be in the consulting business.
- **Be “professional”** at all times. Do not compromise one client's proprietary information by giving it to another.

## What are the benefits of being a consultant?

- There are many benefits to being a consultant, not least of which is the money. If you are known in your field as THE expert to have on board, then you will be able to charge accordingly for your time and your knowledge.
- You can choose what projects you work on, and what you are not willing to do. Whilst some people will undertake work for anyone at the right price, if you have a value and ethics system that you are not willing to compromise, then you may want to turn work down.
- You may be able to choose the days/hours that you are willing to work.

## What are the downsides to being a consultant?

- **Compromising values:** What are you willing to give up in order to be a consultant? “What do you mean “give up”? I thought you said I could earn lots of money, work on the jobs that I wanted to work on and only do the hours that I want?” In reality consultants are expected to work long hours and travel to where the work is. Yes the money may be good, but you do have to weigh up the true cost.

Do you have a young family?

Do you have a partner who expects to see you from time to time?

Do you need to sleep?

Do you like living out of suitcases?

Whilst these may seem like flippant comments, ask those people who spend all their time moving from hotel to hotel, eating hotel food whether they still enjoy certain aspects of their jobs. You may be surprised at the comments you receive.

- **Uncertainty** about where the next job will come from. Today's consultant needs to spend a great deal of time writing expressions of interest and responses to tender documents and requests for quotation. Some of which may not result in work.
- **Lead time** and time taken to do a job: Sometimes a decision may not be given for a particular job for months after the closure of the tender process. In which case you may have started other work whilst waiting. Therefore you need to add the skill of negotiation to your repertoire.
- **Incorrect pricing** of services based on the uncertainty or complexity of the job, or the clients expectations: do you go for a fixed fee and hope the job doesn't blow out, or do you charge a per hour fee up to a certain number of hours. Both have their benefits and downsides. But if the decision to go with a particular consulting firm is based on the dollar amount for the worst case scenario then you may find yourself losing out to one of your competitors.
- **Illness:** If you or a member of your family happen to fall sick, what happens to your business and your clients? Can you cope financially with the down time and the added medical expenses?
- And talking of money, can you cope with the periods when you are not working?
- **Too many clients:** Taking on too many clients may mean that you are unable to give them the level of service that they were expecting.

## How do you build your client base?

How long is a piece of string. Marketing of any service takes a lot of time and effort. But there are some things that all consultants should do as a matter of course.

- **Reputation:** Ensure your reputation in your area of expertise is for the right reasons. If you are known as a person of integrity, if you are an authority on your subject matter then you should expect to receive invitations to respond to requests. However, conversely the opposite may also be true.
- **Quality Service:** Be known as person who delivers a quality service and quality in customer service. It is important to make sure you return phone calls, letters and everything else you say you are going to, when you say you are going to.
- **Value for money:** Whilst I said that if you can offer quality service you should be able to charge accordingly for your service, clients are the same the world over, they do expect value for money.

## Do you go it alone or join another organisation?

As with all things "it depends" on what you want to get out of the work that you are doing. If you are starting out on the road from employee to consulting, chances are you have already been approached by at least one consulting firm to do some work for them. If that is the case, and the organisation that approached you is the kind of organisation that you wouldn't mind dealing with, then there are some benefits to joining them. Not least of which:

- **Support and Mentoring:** The people who you will be working with have already established their reputation in the field. They know what is expected of trainee

consultants and can guide you through the projects that you will be undertaking. And if there are any "problems" you have someone to fall back on should you need a sounding board or advice on what to do next.

- **Administration:** This is usually taken care of by the parent organisation. They should pay your tax and superannuation contributions and chase the client if they fail to pay their bills when they say they are going to. However, you may decide to join the parent organisation as a sub-contractor in which case you will need to invoice the parent organisation for your time and then you will need to make your own tax and superannuation payments.
- **Projects:** If you don't know where to look for consulting opportunities, or don't yet know how to respond to a tender document then it pays to work for an organisation that can do that side of things for you.

However there are some down sides:

- **Choice:** You may not be given the variety of work that you were hoping for.
- **Moving on:** You may decide that after a while of working for someone else, on someone else's project(s) that you might like to broaden your horizons and strike out on your own, or with another organisation. Please note any clauses in your contract for professional integrity and not divulging any client confidential information when you move on. Again – be remembered for the right reasons.

If you do decide to move on, be aware that some people, organisations may be wary of giving you advice as they may feel that you will be poaching their client base at some point down the track. After all "information is power".

#### **Further Reading:**

Andrew, Kate; Knowledge DNA: from dna @ work (2006), John Wiley and Sons Pp 19-38

## News from the office:

#### **Moving on:**

IEA's training and administration assistant, Andrew Moylan will be leaving us to take a position with 3CM, a Registered Training Organisation specialising in Training and Assessment and Frontline Management. We will miss Andrew's energy and enthusiasm, but wish him well with his future endeavours.

#### **New Training Opportunities:**

IEA presents the first in its "Let's Talk Over Breakfast Series" on Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> October 2006 on the subject of "Implementing EDRMS Training".

*Our presenters Ms Carol Dasey and Mr Simon Wahl will explain the importance of Customised Training to Incorporate Change.*

- Well planned, organised training customised for users enhances EDRMS implementation projects.

- It needs to incorporate a focus on anticipated business improvements and changes to work practices, which will undoubtedly happen, as well as the chosen system's functionality.
- Investing in training rewards your organisation with a positive and successful impact.

Customised training requires many issues to be addressed and decisions to be made and documented. Here are just a few of the many considerations:

- How will the training be customised to include all our essential components?
- Who is going to do it and what other resources will be needed?
- When will training occur, for how many people, how many sessions will each person need?
- What about training post-implementation?
- Where do you start?

### **Make a Start - With a Plan**

A Training Plan is vital and it's never too soon to start planning. Here we can help you. If you would like to get the ball rolling and think about how you will develop and implement training for EDRMS in your organisation; then we would like to share with you an approach that has been successful.

**To join us, visit the training pages of our web site – <http://www.iea.com.au> and download a copy of the registration form. Alternatively email me at [training@iea.com.au](mailto:training@iea.com.au) and I will send you a copy.**

## A Thought to Ponder:

"Without access to information there is no transparency;  
without transparency there is no accountability;  
and without transparency and accountability there is no democracy."  
Dr. Harrison Mwakyembe, Senior Lecturer in Law, University of Dar es Salaam

Your comments and suggestions on the subject of this newsletter are most welcome. Or if you would like to see other issues covered in future editions, please email me at [training@iea.com.au](mailto:training@iea.com.au). Please feel free to pass on this newsletter to your colleagues' friends and associates. To subscribe they should send an e-mail to [training@iea.com.au](mailto:training@iea.com.au) with "subscribe newsletter" in the subject line.

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