

The Five Fundamentals of IT Consulting

The life of an IT consultant presents a plethora of daily challenges: keeping up with the latest technology, choosing the right products for a job, managing complex projects, and networking with associates to find the next contract. Along with these tasks, a consultant must focus a lot of attention on the client relationship. Rick Freedman, author of [The IT Consultant: A Commonsense Framework for Managing the Client Relationship](#), believes the IT advisory process is based on five fundamental concepts. He shares them here.

The profession of IT consulting

It's widely acknowledged that doctors, lawyers, engineers, and architects are professionals. Their certifications by government and trade organizations proclaim it. The respect and admiration they receive from their communities demonstrates it. The pay scales they command confirm it. What is it about the work they do that characterizes these experts as professionals? It is their mastery of a specialized discipline, their role as personal advisors, their duty to the client, and the requirement to follow a set of professional standards that define these fields as professional callings.

Is IT consulting a profession? IT consultants also draw from a highly specialized body of knowledge that is sufficiently obscure so as to be understood only by a small cadre of specialists. Like doctors, lawyers, and engineers, we spend a significant part of our working lives explaining complex technical subject matter to clients. Our clients rely on the advice we give to be successful in their careers or businesses. We also have a responsibility to provide complete and correct advice. Yet the IT consultant is rarely thought of in the same context as the doctor or architect. Nor do most IT consultants think of themselves that way. The process of applying professional standards to the advising of clients is rarely the key skill IT workers think of when they consider becoming a consultant. We consider ourselves consultants because of our technical skills.

Clients also focus on the technical, rather than the advisory, aspects of a prospective consultant's skills. They often ask a consulting candidate, "Do you know UNIX?" or "Are you a Certified NetWare Engineer?" but rarely, "How do you overcome resistance to a new data system?" or "How do you ensure that the systems you design remain secure and operational after they are installed?"

Be an advisor, not just a technician

Yet we know, from working with auto mechanics and plumbers, dentists, and tax advisors, that technical expertise alone doesn't make one a good and trusted advisor. We've all had experiences with good and poor consultants. I've had doctors who walked in the room staring at a clipboard, asked a couple of questions in a mechanical tone, ticked off a checklist, and only then glanced up to see who the subject of the interview was. I often wonder whether these advisors cared whether I was a man, a woman, or a horse. I've also had experience with doctors who took the time to know me, my preferences and personality, and the way I feel about my medical condition, and then prescribed therapies that I might actually implement. Good and poor advisors may be equally competent in their subject matter. It's their ability to give personalized advice that influences the client's perception of the experience and the ultimate success of the relationship.

All professionals, whether lawyer, doctor, or architect, must use some process of interviewing, documenting, analyzing, recommending, and communicating to be an effective advisor. Many professionals have learned this process through trial and error, as it is not typically a subject covered in depth as part of their training and certification. For the skilled practitioner, advising becomes an ingrained and instinctual skill that is rarely thought of as a separate process.

For the less skilled, it is a hit-or-miss process that often leaves crucial factors undiscovered, or critical decision criteria poorly understood by the client. I see in my practice as an advisor to IT consulting firms an epidemic of unstructured, inconsistent, uncoordinated activities that are called IT consulting. Both the IT professionals and their clients are often left wondering how a simple technical project could get so fouled up. Everyone understood the technology, but nobody managed the relationship or the delivery process.

In this report, I am focused on setting forth the general principles of advising, which can then be expanded into the specific practices that constitute an IT consulting framework. Just as the difficult game of chess has some simple rules such as “develop the pieces early” or “don’t attack without a plan,” the complex enterprise of advising clients on technology can also be better understood by reviewing a few guiding principles.

The five fundamentals

I believe there are five basic concepts that can serve as a foundation for the IT advisory process:

- **Focus on the relationship:** Identifying who the client is, and understanding the motivations, culture, history, fears, and goals of both the human being and the organization he or she represents, is one of the most difficult tasks in consulting. Your success in this task has much more bearing on the success or failure of your engagements than the technical discipline involved.
- **Clearly define your role:** Setting the expectation with the client regarding exactly what you are there to accomplish, what tasks you are making a commitment to perform, what tasks you expect the client to perform, and where the boundaries of the relationship lie, is a key success factor for consultants.
- **Visualize success:** It is the consultant’s central role to help the client draw a mental picture of the desired result of the engagement. Failure to do so results in the dreaded scope creep, in which the engagement never concludes because the expectations keep changing. Visualizing a successful result creates a common goal that all participants can agree upon and strive for together. Like the championship ring for a sports team, it is an unambiguous and motivational endpoint that clarifies the effort and helps clear away extraneous issues and barriers.
- **You advise; they decide:** One of the most difficult tasks for consultants is to cast aside emotional attachment to their own advice. Many technicians fall in love with a particular solution or technology, and then lose interest in, or respect for, the client if he decides to take another approach. We must always remember that the client understands the complexities of his own environment, and that he lives with the result of his decision, while we move on to the next assignment.
- **Be oriented toward results:** Consulting is more than advising, it is assisting clients to reach a goal. While some advisory relationships are strictly informational, most clients want us to not only recommend solutions, they want us to help implement them. Politics is often described as “the art of the possible,” a good definition for results-oriented consulting as well. By considering implementation issues throughout the engagement, such as corporate culture, readiness to change, training requirements, and corporate communications channels, we keep our eye on the realm of possibility,

avoid getting sidetracked into the theoretical, and prepare the client for the real-world issues of implementation and system operation.

Focus on the relationship

Like the impersonal doctor described above, some advisors believe that parachuting into a client situation, peeking around, making some profound pronouncements, and sending a bill constitutes an advisory relationship. This has been called the “oracle” approach to consulting. As with the Oracle of Delphi in ancient Greece, oracle consultants deliver obscure and mysterious declarations, which may or may not be pertinent to the subject at hand, and then leave it to the client to interpret and implement the advice. But success as a consultant is based on the ability to apply your technical specialty to the client’s unique situation. Without focusing on the human relationship, and developing the trust and confidence that enable the client to reveal his or her problem, this is impossible to achieve.

The relationship with the client determines both the content of the advice and the manner in which it is given. The client will tell you how to successfully advise him, if you are alert enough to listen and observe. Obviously the client knows his own environment and corporate culture. He knows the history and the personalities that have gotten the organization to the state it’s in, and he probably has an idea of where he wants to end up. He knows his priorities: in this particular engagement, is schedule, cost, performance, ease of implementation, lack of disruption, data safety, or personal prestige top-of-the-list? Get to know your client, because there will be many points in the engagement where you’ll need to make a judgment about what your client will prefer, how he will react, and how to present him with problems or alternatives.

The successful advisor also alters the method of advising to fit the client. Many clients have constraints on the amount of time they can devote to meetings, interviews, and data-gathering tasks. Some clients may prefer a blunt, take-no-prisoners approach to the consulting relationship, while others may be extremely sensitive to their team’s reaction to your advice. Some clients or stakeholders may be threatened or distracted by the consulting process. You may need to spend a significant amount of time educating the client in the consulting process, to set expectations, and to build in the assurance factors.

Clients who are experienced in the use of consultants may be ready to engage fully in the process, prepared to give trust freely and to disclose fully the information required. For these clients, a monthly progress report may be sufficient to ensure that you are on track. For clients who are inexperienced in the consulting process, frequent assurances that you are remaining “on task” and producing the expected deliverables may be required. Weekly progress meetings and complete status reports may be necessary to continually reassure these clients that they are getting value for money. As an advisor, you must be mature enough to understand the client’s need for assurance, and not to interpret it as “the client breathing down my neck.”

Focusing on the relationship aspect of advising will also help clarify one of the most problematical aspects of consulting, namely, “Who is my client?” IT consultants are frequently engaged by managers to create systems for the departments they lead. Who is the client in these cases—the manager who hired you, or the clerk or telemarketer who is the ultimate user of the system? In most cases, the answer is: both. The manager’s requirements for schedule, budget, and reporting are driving factors that must be accounted for in the result, yet the user’s need for functionality and convenience must be considered or the system will end up unused. All consultants should step back when entering into an engagement and ask themselves who the client is, who determines whether or not the engagement was a success, and who will pay the bill. The ability to keep multiple, and often conflicting, success criteria in mind is one of the hallmarks of the professional consultant.

As in any relationship, it is critical to take the “measure of the man.” What is the personality of the individuals with whom you will be engaged? Some folks are naturally quiet, others are talkative. Some are

slow to trust and reticent to reveal. Others will tell you more than you ever wanted to know. Some will act like you're an intruder in their private domain, while others will treat you like a long-lost friend. Human diversity is what makes the relationship aspect of consulting so challenging, and ultimately so rewarding. The most successful consultants develop strategies for dealing with both the reluctant and the cooperative client.

Clearly define your role

A clear understanding of the role of both the client and the consultant serves as a guide through the advisory process. It focuses the efforts of the consultant and the client. I've seen many relationships that could have been mutually beneficial go off the rails for lack of this role definition. The client may believe, for instance, that, as a paid advisor, the consultant will be available for emergencies in his area of expertise. If a consultant is advising a client on a network design, does that mean the consultant will answer the phone in the middle of the night when the current network goes down? If that is not the expectation, client and consultant had better define that up front. If it is part of the consultant's role, he needs to ensure that the client can get in touch with him when required, and that he's negotiated a pay scale for that 3:00 A.M. call.

Clients' expectations of what you will deliver as an IT consultant are wide open to misinterpretation. Does the agreement to consult on the selection of new computer equipment imply assistance in procuring that gear? Does it imply installation? Does it imply ongoing support once implemented? Many clients assume that recommendation means implementation. "Why would I want you to recommend something if you're not going to install it?" In my work with system resellers, I've seen many cases of implied expectations that have poisoned otherwise healthy relationships. Some customers believe that if you recommend a \$99 software package, you're committed to rectifying any bugs that arise for the rest of the customer's life! While this is an extreme case, it's clear that, when recommending and implementing complex technology, the client is justified in expecting some level of ongoing assistance. What is the appropriate expectation? It's the consultant's role to define that.

You need to clearly determine the client's availability to work on the project. It's obviously going to be very difficult to make recommendations if the client and his representatives are unavailable for work sessions to define their goals and objectives. Clients will often state in the negotiation phase that their internal team will take on a multitude of tasks to save money. Then, when the project is underway, these staffers are unavailable, and the assumption is that you will take on their commitments. The consultant must carefully consider, and document, any assumptions about client participation.

It may be clear to you, as a practicing consultant, what the roles and responsibilities of client and consultant are. The customer, however, may be a novice to the consulting process, or may have had advisory relationships with very different ground rules. Especially with new clients, the negotiation of roles, availability, access, and disclosure should be negotiated with the same diligence as contracts and fees. Due to the importance of this part of the process, I've devoted an entire chapter to negotiating the relationship.

Visualize success

The visualization of a successful result is a technique that is frequently used in the world of sports. Many Olympic athletes and coaches believe that imagining themselves performing their event flawlessly, walking through the entire process in their minds, is a key factor in their success.

Like a good coach, a consultant must help the client see the end at the beginning. This technique is valuable for more than the confidence it inspires that the engagement can be successful, as important as that is. It also can be a method for controlling expectations, for ensuring that secondary, "wouldn't-it-be-

nice-if” goals don’t complicate and confuse the primary objectives of an engagement. In any project, the fear of scope creep should concern the consultant. Anyone who has attended a project management seminar has seen the statistics regarding the number of projects that fail to deliver their expected result. The blame for these failures is often placed on creeping specifications, the “moving target” of client expectations.

Working with clients to visualize success is the primary technique I recommend for managing scope and expectations. By creating a clear vision of what the client will have when the engagement is done, consultants can help focus the client’s mind on the critical success factors. I often try to create a “tag line” for a project, a single sentence that characterizes the goal of the engagement. In Hollywood, it’s often said that a screenwriter who can’t create a tag line for his script hasn’t thought it through sufficiently. This is also true of consulting projects. Projects that require a two-page mission statement may be in need of refining, or may need to be divided into multiple projects.

A vision of success is also critical for communication. Most engagements require the participation of many representatives of the client organization, and often of many consultants or subcontractors. The clear and simple visualization of success creates a goal that concentrates the efforts of all involved. This is not a new-age meditation technique, but a process of mutual agreement on a clearly stated end point, so that all can agree when the engagement is complete.

You advise; they decide

There is an old saying, “When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” In IT consulting, this can be restated as, “When all you have is NetWare, everything looks like a server.”

One of the most prevalent problems I’ve encountered in my efforts to mentor consultants is the problem of the “technology bigot.” I can’t count the number of times I’ve heard rookie consultants, and sometimes even veterans, proclaim that “the customer is too stubborn to admit that if they migrated to NetWare all their problems will be solved.” In my experience, the consultants who make these statements just happen to be experts in the technologies they are touting. The predisposition to a specific solution is a real issue in our industry. I wonder how a firm can be, for instance, a Microsoft-centered reseller, and also claim to be an independent consultant. Client-focused consulting requires vendor and solution neutrality. All problems do not have the same solution, for which we should be glad, because if they did, IT consultants would not be needed.

Apart from the natural tendency to recommend a solution with which we have experience, there is also the entanglement of emotion to complicate the issue. Many consultants feel slighted if the recommendation they make is discounted or ignored. The ability to look beyond our own emotional need for status and validation, and to focus on the cultural, political, and prestige needs of the client, differentiates between the professional and the amateur in consulting.

Be oriented toward results

There are many advisory relationships where all the customer is buying is advice or research. I’ve been engaged many times in creating a “white paper” report that outlines various options and the pros and cons of each. When I delivered that paper, my task was done. I had no role in the ultimate decision or the implementation of the system, and often had no idea if my work was utilized or stuck in a drawer and forgotten.

In the vast majority of engagements, however, the client wants more than advice. He wants a result. And, while it’s critical to keep an open mind and not pre-decide the solution before performing the analysis, there are certain techniques that pave the way for a successful implementation.

I'm constantly amazed at how often consulting projects are done in complete isolation from the intended recipients of the new system. It's not an uncommon experience for many system users to first be exposed to the new system when an installer shows up at their desk. This can be an outcome of some corporate cultures, where decisions are made by managers in closed sessions, and then sprung on the user community by management proclamation. In many cases, managers just aren't used to considering the reaction of the troops when making technology deployment decisions. I believe it is in the best interest of the enterprise for the consultant to insist (diplomatically, of course) on communication with the user community. When users are sold on the benefits of the new technology, when they understand how it affects their duties, when they are involved in scheduling the rollout, the odds for success are enhanced tremendously.

Results-orientation also means designing training, support, and maintenance into your solutions from the beginning. When we talk about operational issues from the start, users are reassured that they won't be left "twisting in the wind." When we advise clients to announce the training program at the same time as they announce the creation of a new system, users feel that their welfare, effectiveness, and productivity matter to the organization, and so are less inclined to resist or snipe at the new technology. By advising the client to consider these issues, consultants add value far above the purely technical. They help clients create an environment that is primed for success, and they demonstrate that they can participate at a strategic level, thus elevating their stature as a business advisor.

These five rules of advising will provide the foundation for the framework that will be presented throughout this series. These fundamental "good manners" of the advisory relationship prepare us to engage with our clients in a way that engenders trust and mutual respect, and that minimizes the chances for misunderstanding and unrealized expectations.

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