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I want a job as a consultant: Skills and behaviours needed to work as a consultant occupational psychologist?

David Biggs

I want a job as a consultant

Getting a job in occupational psychology is tough as most of the people reading this article will know. It is a brilliant career and gives you privileged access to organizations large and small, public sector and private sector, profit or not for profit. And the list goes on. So why a job in consulting?

Before answering this question, I always like to draw up the distinction between internal and external consultancy. Many people do start their route as an occupational psychologist in an internal consultancy, which has its advantages and disadvantages (Biggs, 2010). Indeed, I was no exception to this, so post MSc I worked for an internal consultancy in 1994 with the MFI Furniture Group Ltd. I then moved on and worked in another similar role for Barclaycard in 1995. And then both of these companies became my clients when I worked as an external consultant for Paradise Computing Ltd.

This experience taught me that there was a definite difference between working as an internal and external consultant. However the skills learnt as an internal consultant can translate into the skills needed as an external consultant (Sturdy, Wylie, & Wright, 2013). Interestingly enough being a previous employee of both MFI and Barclaycard gave me a fantastic insight into how these organizations ran. This learning could also be applied to other organizations that were clients of mine. One of the main learning points here is that the client consultant relationship is key (Fincham, 2012). Even through meticulous planning and project management, lots of things can go wrong in a consultancy assignment. If things do go wrong then this

is where the client consultant relationship matters as everything can be sorted out (Biggs, 2016).

An example of a situation where the client consultant relationship led to improvements and increased sales comes from this period of time in my life. The consultancy I worked for ran an unpopular course on MS Project. Additionally it was not rated particularly high by those few delegates who attended the course. Utilising the client consultant relationship in building up rapport with some of my clients I could get to the bottom of this matter. On talking to my clients, it seemed the course was about how to use the software itself rather than why would you use the software in the first place. There is obviously a big difference. So the consultancy paid for me to embark on project management and planning training. This knowledge was then incorporated into the MS Project course. The course then became one of the consultancy's most popular courses going from being run once every two to three months to being run at least once a week. So having a good client consultant relationship, not only helps you solve any issues that may arise. It may also, as in this case, lead to increased sales. A win win for everyone involved.

The other way of getting into consulting is to set up your own consultancy. This is not an easy route by any means and is filled with difficulties. But selling your own expertise does not conform to the normal rules of production and can be done (O'Mahoney & Markham, 2012). Indeed, I am proud to have seen some of our own students at the University of Gloucestershire flourish setting themselves up in their own companies offering their expertise as consultants. Cash flow, directors reports, end of year accounts as well as building client rapport and legal concerns are all part and parcel of running your own firm. So it is challenging setting up your own consultancy but rewarding at the same time (Biggs, 2010).

Skills and behaviours needed to work as a consultant occupational psychologist

As occupational psychologists we are trained to be able to identify the skills and behaviours needed in a role for it to be performed effectively. The skills and behaviours needed for a consultancy role are also essential to know, acquire and then develop further to be effective as a consultant (Appelbaum, 2004; Biggs, 2010).

Skills can be taught and can range quite widely in consultancy practice also dependent on what type of role and work that a person wants to achieve. Identifying skills needed is essential in this process. This can be done fairly simply using a tool such as a Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats Analysis (SWOT) as Biggs (2010) suggested. This can be further augmented by learning more specific skills sets which may drive a person all the way through to qualifications in consultancy such as those by the Institute of Consulting. Indeed the CMI/Institute of Consulting has Level 7 qualifications, so at doctorate level, which progress areas of skills and competencies such as:

- managing consultancy interventions
- building and sustaining client consultant relationships
- effective project management
- tools and techniques for effective consulting

Behaviours are also essential in consultancy. There are a number of competency frameworks around. But it is always useful to stick with one and use it to explore your own behavioural repertoire. Two of the frameworks I would recommend include my own (Biggs, 2010) and the CMI/ Institute of Consulting's professional behaviours framework.

My own competency framework (Biggs, 2010) has been used for many years with MSc students at Gloucestershire to map their past achievements onto a behavioural framework. The framework uses unpublished job analyses performed in a large international consultancy and boutique firm and also considers a meta-analysis of competencies completed by Woehr and Arthur (2003) so it is comprehensive. It includes the following competencies: Communication, Influencing others, Organising and planning, Problem solving, Teamwork and consideration of others, Leadership, Drive, Tolerance for stress/uncertainty.

The CMI/Institute of Consulting also has a competency framework, which includes: Professionalism and Ethics; Analytical and Proactive Thinking; Complexity and Responsibility; Interpersonal Interaction; Delivery; Effectiveness; and finally Personal Growth (IBC, 2007). The CMI have a three level approach to their competencies rather than the normal 5 point assessment centre rating adopted by Biggs (2010), these levels are: development, independence, and mastery.

Either of these frameworks can be used to examine a potential consultants development needs. Biggs (2010) is probably more apt for entry level consultants and concentrates on issues such as building up resilience in its Tolerance for stress/uncertainty competency. However the CMI framework is good as it develops through stages all geared towards improving consultancy competence through initially developing a client focus, through to delivering achievable and sustainable results.

Conclusions

The world of consulting is a fascinating one and offers a stimulating career. There are skills and behaviours to learn and develop in this role. Identification of these is the first step to take. Once identified behaviours and skills can be developed leading to growth as a consultant. Hopefully in this short article, I have managed to demonstrate that work needs to go into developing these skills and behaviours. However, this work is not without reward. The reward of getting a challenging role in consulting is well worth the effort put in, especially for occupational psychologists.

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