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BY GINA GOTSILL, *Member*

Six Tips

for Consulting Success

After thirteen years in recruiting, Lynette Phillips still remembers the consultant who waited a year for the right project to come along.

“He was patient, kept in touch with me, and stayed busy with other freelance projects,” says Phillips, a resource manager at TechProse, a firm based in Lafayette, California, that engages hundreds of consultants on high-tech and corporate communications projects each year. “Blame it on timing, blame it on the market, but once I found him a project, everything just clicked and I was able to keep him busy for years.”

Staying in touch is just one way to forge relationships with consulting firms or staffing agencies, and—for many consultants—persistence pays. Working with an agency should reduce some consulting headaches, especially marketing, problem resolution, and bill collection. Getting a foot in the door can take time, but consultants who persevere of-

ten build relationships that span years and multiple, long-term engagements. Consultants are not the only ones who benefit; consulting agencies and their clients also receive value from long-term relationships.

“I hear about an opportunity, and I know exactly who to call,” Phillips says. “I consider rate, workload, skills, project location, personality ... I know who will best meet the client’s needs as a result of building a relationship with a particular consultant over time.”

It helps to think of agencies and consultants as two interdependent groups. Consultants rely on agencies to represent them and find them work when they need it, and agencies rely on good consultants to support their clients and

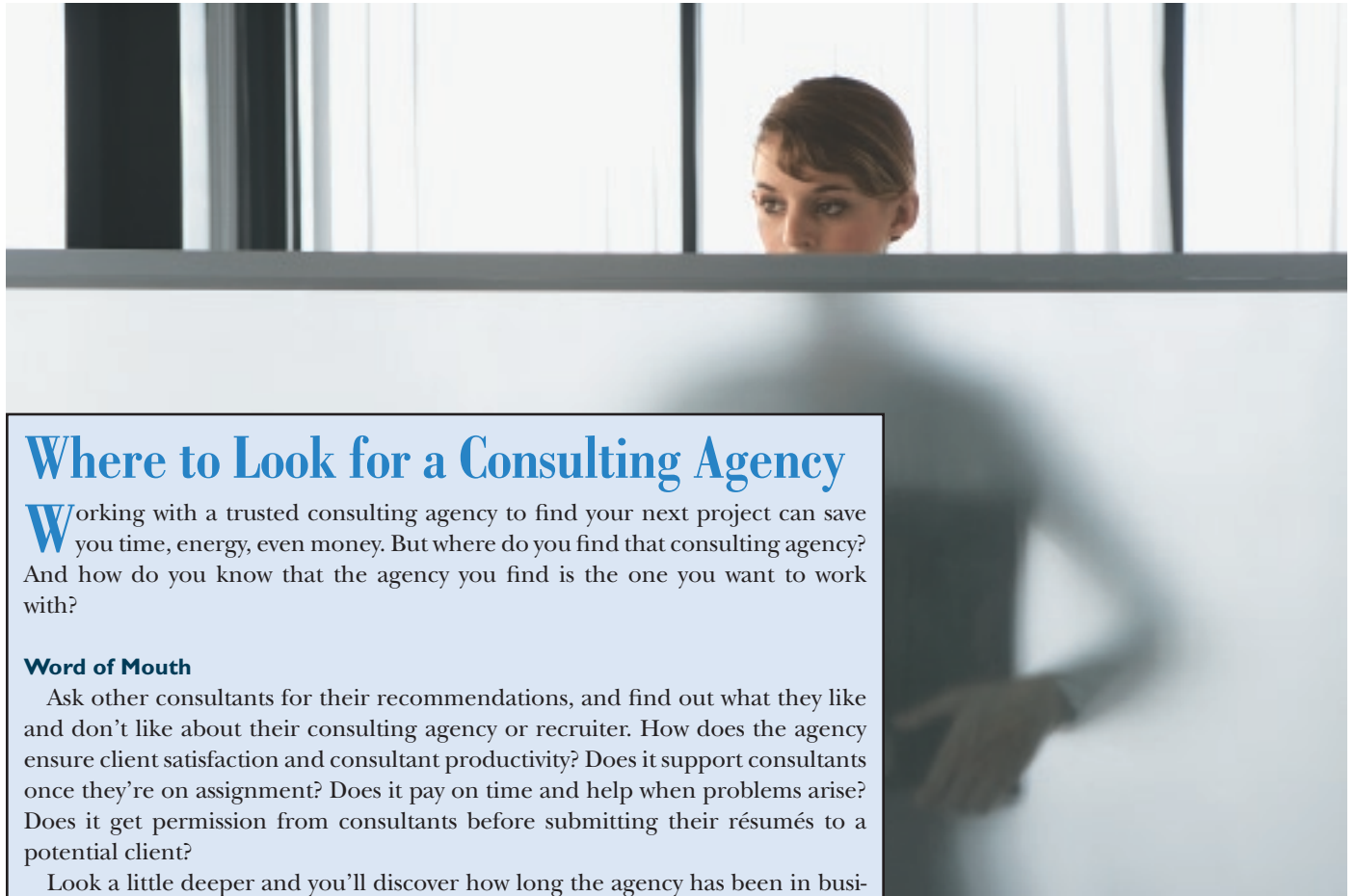
enhance their brand in their clients’ eyes. Agencies work hard to keep top consultants engaged in projects that help build their careers.

So how do you get on a consulting agency’s “call-me-first” list? The following tips are a good place to start.

Be Flexible

Recruiters expect consultants to have rate and commute-length preferences. But the more flexible a consultant can be, the easier it is to assign a project.

Consultants should always be willing to assist with business development up front, Phillips says. That means helping the agency respond to requests for proposals (RFPs), or providing estimates on projects that may not be a sure thing.



Where to Look for a Consulting Agency

Working with a trusted consulting agency to find your next project can save you time, energy, even money. But where do you find that consulting agency? And how do you know that the agency you find is the one you want to work with?

Word of Mouth

Ask other consultants for their recommendations, and find out what they like and don't like about their consulting agency or recruiter. How does the agency ensure client satisfaction and consultant productivity? Does it support consultants once they're on assignment? Does it pay on time and help when problems arise? Does it get permission from consultants before submitting their résumés to a potential client?

Look a little deeper and you'll discover how long the agency has been in business and how it contributes to the community. What does the agency do that makes it special?


You will also find that some agencies and recruiters are generalists, and place consultants on a wide range of projects. Others cater to a niche market.

Take Your Time and Shop Around

Representatives from consulting agencies often network at industry association meetings and are generally open to answering questions about upcoming projects. Agencies should also be able to provide references from existing clients and consultants to substantiate their reputation. When you receive references, set time aside to call and find out more. The National Association of Computer Consultant Businesses (NACCB, www.naccb.org) is a national organization of consulting firms and contracting agencies whose members subscribe to a logical set of business ethics targeted to their industry. An NACCB consulting agency can be a good place to begin your search.

Comb Internet Job Boards

This method may be more impersonal than meeting a recruiter at a networking event, but it provides insight into the kinds of projects various consulting agencies post. Job postings also include contact and Web site information. Visit the agency's Web site and find out how consultants become part of the team. Some have a résumé entry page, but it is a good idea to follow up with a phone call to a recruiter to make a more personal contact.

Web sites can be a good place to research agencies' industry niche and volume of business, but that's just the beginning. You may need more information before you decide which companies you'll choose to partner with. 

When consultants provide their expertise and insight during the bidding process, they secure their place on the project team. They are already building rapport and trust—elements of a good working relationship.

"Consultants can view this as unpaid time, or they can view it as an investment in business development," Phillips says. "If they are willing to look at an RFP to help us craft our response, they are the first ones we call when we get the project. If we don't get the project, they are still at the top of our list for the next opportunity."

Follow Up

Picture this: A consulting agency has a project and your résumé fits the bill. A recruiter calls you into the office for an interview, and you spend about an hour discussing your qualifications and how they relate to the requirements. When the interview is over, you and the recruiter shake hands and go your separate ways. Now what should you do?

Be easy to do business with; make sure the consulting agency has all your numbers.

Give it a day and follow up with an e-mail. This small gesture proves your interest in the engagement and keeps you on the recruiter's short list. Take a moment to include a specific comment about an aspect of the meeting. Provide an additional example of how your experience relates to the project discussed. Demonstrate that you were paying attention and provide the recruiter with useful information that he or she can then incorporate into a presentation to the client.

The same rule applies after an agency sends you to meet its client. When you leave the meeting, immediately phone your contact at the agency. Talk about what went well and what didn't, and discuss anything you learned about the client's requirements. This helps ensure your participation in the project and prepares the agency for its follow-up conversation with the client. Even if an aspect of your client interview was not perfect, the agency can overcome reasonable objections if it knows what to expect.

Be Persistent, Not a Pest

There are different ways to be persistent. You can call every day, forcing people to avoid your calls, or you can call every so often. The goal is to stay on the recruiter's mind, not get on his or her nerves. The agency should be keeping you up-to-date, but the process takes time. Ask when you can expect to hear back, or ask if you can call in a week. The agency knows what a reasonable waiting period is, and it should consider the market and your interest in getting work.

Be mindful of the volume of calls a recruiter handles in a day. Phillips suggests that consultants follow up their calls with an e-mail. Often, e-mails are easier to acknowledge when incoming calls prevent a recruiter from responding by phone.

Keeping in touch by e-mail on a weekly basis is also a good idea. Often, the recruiter is as frustrated as the consultant if a client is slow to respond; good recruiters will keep you in the loop when they get information. Your reminder helps them do this.

Be Honest about Your Availability

For consulting agencies, timing is everything. Recruiters assemble a consulting team based on a project's schedule and duration, so it's vital that each person be clear about his or her availability. Some consultants hesitate to tell recruiters the whole truth about their availability. This may not be the best way to build rapport. Most successful consultants mention vacations, weddings, honeymoons, and future projects they are considering—anything that could potentially take them away from the project or delay a start date. Details about availability are valuable information, Phillips says, especially when projects extend past their original end date.

Once a consultant has agreed to let an agency represent him or her, it is important to let the agency know the best way to get in touch on short notice, says Rose Healy, a resource manager at TechProse. Often, clients schedule interviews on short notice, and if the agency can't get in touch with the consultant, it may have to present someone else. Be easy to do business with; make sure the consulting agency has all your numbers.

Be Honest about Your Skills


Consulting agencies must be honest about their projects and the skills required to complete all deliverables. In turn, consultants should be honest about their skills and level of expertise. In fact, consultants build trust with recruiters when they are willing to bow out of a potential project because of the skill level or experience required. Recruiters also want to know when consultants acquire new skills that make them more marketable or suitable for projects. For IT consultants, this means telling recruiters about new certifications and experience with software programs and methodologies.

Be a Good Communicator

Phillips is the first to admit she is not always able to be as responsive as she'd like to be. But she works hard to be prompt with consultants, whether in the interview stage or on a project, and her work is more effective—for the client and consultant—when consultants are prompt as well. Good communication inspires confidence, keeping all parties on the same page before, during, and after an engagement, Phillips says.

Problems are a potential part of all human interaction. Don't wait to discuss issues; pick up the phone or write a quick e-mail to the consulting agency. Consultants should not feel alone when they are on a project. When a consultant communicates potential problems immediately, the agency is often able to resolve the issue before it impacts the project.

Consulting agencies also want to know about project success, as well as future opportunities the consultant may hear about during the engagement. And agencies are always looking for new talent—referrals from trusted consultants are appreciated and often work out well.

"Think of the consulting agency as a value-added business partner, and they will think of you in the same way," Healy says. "Take the time to develop trustworthy relationships with the type of people and the type of companies that you want representing you in the business world." 

SUGGESTED READING

Natchez, Meryl. *Best Practices in the IT Consulting Industry*. 1999. Published by TechProse, Lafayette, California.

(Natchez is the CEO of TechProse.)

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