

## **To Train or Not to Train?**

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Many consulting companies, especially the smaller ones, face a conundrum when it comes to training: Is it better to offer formal training on particular skills or technologies, or allow new consultant hires to less formally acquire the skills they need as they become part of client engagements?

It should come as no surprise that consulting companies engage in a lot of on-the-job training, which is typically one of the chief complaints of clients. The answer to the question is not as obvious as it might appear, however, as there is an argument that the more informal approach actually produces better consultants in the long run.

Having worked for this software architecture consultancy of about 40 people for the past few years, I know the debate is an important one. A recent polling of the consultants at this firm produced an interesting, but not surprising result. Many people believed that they were lacking in the area formal job training. That's not to say that the consultants felt untrained, but in general, they felt no formal training is offered for certain technologies before a particular consultant is put onto a project and expected to deliver.

Like many consulting companies, employees are responsible for getting what needs to be done, done – training or not. That being said, everyone in the firm is happy to help new consultants if they need a crash course in a particular technology. In fact, employees are highly encouraged to ask questions if they do not understand something.

Interestingly, this model happens to be a key selling point for recruiting talented consultants. Since many of the newly hired consultants are already qualified and knowledgeable in their fields, too much formal training can turn into a cultural nightmare of micromanagement, something that will quickly scare good consultants away.

It is a bit of a balancing act, and not for everybody. This type of model requires levels of passion and commitment to one's craft and clients that are actively sought in all of the consultants interviewed and hired. Additionally, much of the work requires complex problem solving that requires a certain level of persistence, mixed with knowledge, experience and plain old tenacity.

These are professional and personal traits that are looked for in all applicants interested in working at this consultancy. Refreshingly, the leadership here has absolute confidence that the consultants, once vetted and hired, are more than capable of tackling almost any obstacles thrown at them.

As a result, consultants here can, from time to time, find themselves in a healthy “sink or swim” situation that most can successfully overcome. Ownership of deliverables and the work provides a sense of determination that becomes a personal achievement and reward when an obstacle is overcome.

The work performed here is very fast-paced, and the client environments can be very volatile regarding acceptance and cooperation. Due to the nature of the work, consultants can find themselves spread a bit thin, although most still find a way to continue advancing.

As a consulting company, there have been ample opportunities to observe the results of formal job training at many of our clients, particularly when employees who are taught to do only one thing really well are uneasy when they are faced with something new and different.

Here, consultants regularly switch context, whether they are working on multiple projects at once or changing assignments altogether. This is built into our consulting model, and it results in all consultants having very versatile skill sets that allow them to see problems from multiple angles, which is crucial for consulting architects.

It is also an essential skill that can be in short supply in a client's environment, and therefore, it has become a valued differentiator that this consulting company brings to the table. We have heard this again and again from clients. At its core, it is really the result of the leadership here encouraging consultants to become well-rounded and confident in their abilities. There is a direct line from that support and confidence to the consultant's ability to consistently bring different approaches and perspectives to client engagements.

But perhaps the biggest benefit from this type of non-formal training approach is that, in the end, it teaches one to be a problem solver. This is not a trivial matter. To come up with a solution that requires the least amount of effort, but provides the maximum impact, is not just a valued professional skill, it is also an invaluable personal skill.

From a professional standpoint, this is a big part of the value proposition of this consulting firm. It is essentially how we do what we do.

Instead of being trained to use a particular technology, we train our consultants to wrap their heads around a problem, understand the issue and propose a solution based on the facts and information on hand, irrespective of the technology, if any. (Sometimes the problem is people).

It has been my personal experience that this skill seamlessly transfers over to personal life, as it gives an appreciation for understanding situations and allowing one to cope with life as well, using the same problem solving skills – skills that are universally necessary.

Whether by design, or accident, there is a personal life component to good problem-solving skills. Those skills help one be organized and on top of things, which in turn helps prevent those overwhelming feelings that can occur as life comes at you. Even something as complicated as interpersonal relationships can benefit from problem-solving skills that help to keep all things in perspective.

In many respects, dealing with clients sometimes is almost as difficult as dealing with family and friends, and the skills developed while working with clients makes one far more diplomatic and reasonable with people in one's personal life.

As suggested earlier, it is not a model that works for everybody, but it does work well for our company and our clients. If there is a downside, it is the risk of spreading people too thin, too much context shifting or the constant pressure to perform and deliver that can lead to consultant burnout.

While lowering the bar on any of these fronts could help with any potential burnout and turnover, not to mention overall stress levels, it also opens the company up to a lower standard of performance across the board. In turn, that could hurt our competitive edge. It is a delicate balance to be sure, but at least for now, rather than allocating precious time and money for formal skills training, we are continuing on our journey of searching for new ways to maintain our current level of performance and success with clients.

