How To Survive Your First Team Assignment

Vault.com

Dan McHugh
Vault Staff

Consultants are famous for their teamwork. If you're planning to join the consulting field - or if you want to learn more about being a good team player - this article is for you.

You're a team

The first few weeks at a consulting firm are a crash course in teamwork, and job seekers often underestimate the extent to which collaboration determines a project's success. A common misperception is that consultants sit down with corporate vice presidents, tell them what to do, and watch the client's metamorphosis from their lofty perch. The truth is that nothing gets accomplished without extensive discussion, countless status meetings, and plenty of ad-hoc brainstorming sessions where everyone involved works feverishly to build a consensus.

Over the course of your career in consulting, you will be a member of many teams, often simultaneously. At a client site, for example, you may be working on an implementation team while also sitting down with a proposal team to generate new work. Additionally, you might be working on an "internal" team to think of new community service programs for your own firm. In the course of your workday, you could interact with as many as six different teams, all with different objectives and time commitments. If you have an aversion to meetings, or if you envision a career defined by isolated thinking and long stretches of time without any human interaction, consulting probably isn't the right choice for you.

^ Close quarters, high pressure

Since you'll depend on your client for your office space, be prepared to work in non-lavish conditions. At one client site your project team may have limited access to conference rooms, and be forced to hold meetings in a cubicle. At another client site, your team may be sharing a single office with one small window and very little space. Part of your job will be to learn to be productive with frequent interruptions. More often than not, you will share limited technical resources such as printers, copy and fax machines, and LAN lines.

It all comes with the nature of the job. Consultants are high-priced migrant workers; they must know how to pack their bags, move to another location and set up shop, all in the blink of an eye and with little choice in the matter. But whether they are working in a crowded office space, a hotel suite late at night, or on an flight home, good consultants develop a set of behaviors that makes their jobs much easier.

Some coping tips: Take personal calls on your cell phone, away from the project team. If you are frustrated with a software program, take a walk and come back with a positive outlook. Speak only when necessary in order to keep the noise down in the project room. Keep your work space unclutered. These simple rules can improve a project's efficiency and the quality of life for your fellow consultants.

Know the objectives

Most productive meetings address a set of objectives, assign individual tasks to support the objectives, and set timelines for completion. While this process is fairly routine in a consultant's workweek, the abundance of meetings can have a deadening affect; consultants can spend more time thinking about their mountain of pending work than the actual meeting they are attending.

Walking away from a meeting with only a vague idea of its objectives can lead to a variety of problems, not the least of which is having to meet all over again. Consulting firms operate on tight schedules, and every team needs to milk every single discussion for all it's worth. Project managers generally do not tolerate having to repeat critical directives, because they are pressed for time and need each component of the team to produce solid results.

Once a meeting is brought to a close, you should walk away with a notepad filled with key points from the discussion and a specific list of your own "to do" items. If you are unclear about a certain portion of the meeting, you should raise the issue immediately, rather than spend your time guessing how to proceed. For each and every meeting, no matter how irrelevant it seems, your attention to detail can make or break your performance on the project team. Don't expect anyone to keep you awake. Fellow consultants are bogged down with their own assignments, and even though they may engage you in small talk, the expectation is that you will deliver results - on time, and consistent with the original objectives.

Whatever it takes

If consulting firms seem demanding when trying to meet deadlines, the clients can be downright unforgiving. At the start of every
project, the thought of missing deadlines simply does not occur to consultants, nor does the prospect of creating anything but high-quality deliverables. The ugly reality is that executives do not always budget enough time or allot enough resources to meet the client's expectations. The result is that consultants must bring a "whatever it takes" attitude to work every day.

If a sixty hour workweek doesn't appear to be enough to get your required work done, then you add on more hours. If a printer breaks down on the night before a big presentation, then you have to find one, even if it means a late night drive to Kinko's. Sometimes, during the end of projects, you will squeeze massive amounts of work into small timeframes, and you may have to pull an all-nighter or two. These things happen in consulting, and consulting firms expect that you will take it all in stride. You do have some latitude with regard to personal time, but when important deadlines approach, getting out of an assignment is nearly impossible. Short of being terribly sick or bed-ridden, your requests for personal time will go unnoticed.

The good news is that never-say-die attitudes are contagious, and the more you work in a consulting firm, the more you begin to appreciate spending time with people who value results so highly. People who leave the consulting profession often are disappointed to learn that their new company employs a more laissez-faire approach to everything it does. The consulting industry's sharp attention to deadlines is both its curse and its strength. Consultants initially bemoan the fact that their job is so demanding, but they grow to love that very facet of it, and in some cases, see it as justification for never switching careers.