On The Beach

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By the time you've worked in consulting for a few months, you'll be very familiar with the expression "on the beach." This simply means that you are not staffed on a client billable project. The more consultants a firm has on the beach, the lower the firm's utilization rate. In times when clients spend more on consultants, utilization rates can be in the 90% range; in economic downturns, the industry's average firm utilization rate can be as low as 50%.

Being on the beach offers a mixed blessing for consultants. On the plus side, it means you are not traveling, for once, and you can come into the office at nine and leave at five. On the negative side, it means that you are not gaining any project experience, and the less project experience you have, the less development as a consultant you get, the less likelihood you have of being staffed, and the higher chance you face of being let go by your firm. So while on the beach for a little while is a good thing; being on the beach for too long is something you want to avoid.

That said, there are some productive ways you can spend your beach time.

Play catch up

First, take some time to regroup. Catch up on your expenses and time tracking. Clean your desk. Take care of that health insurance paperwork with your HR folks. Answer those nagging emails from a month ago. Everyone needs downtime for such things, and everyone you work with will understand that you deserve it.

Don't feel bad about squeezing out a little personal time over a couple of days for errands. This is a good chance to get back to the dentist or do that physical you've been meaning to get out of the way. Also, you might as well schedule the cable guy to swing by to fix your cable box, so let someone know you're working from home on Tuesday. And you can finally get some lunch with your college roommate, since you're not traveling. Don't go overboard with the personal stuff-just realize that this is a good time to fit a few things in.

Network for new projects

Revisit the mental process you went through when you were staffed the last time. What did you get out of your last project? What are your current project goals? What industries would you be interested to work in next? What skills would you like to develop? Be sure to jot these down and keep them on the tip of your tongue, for you will need to start communicating these topics to others.

If you have someone assigned to staff you, let that person know you're available. You will need to start networking for a new project right away. Target a few partners and senior managers and leave them voice mails, letting them know that you are checking in and looking for a new project. If you're in the office, pop by a few desks and see if the partners you know are close to a sale of a new piece of work, and let them know you're available. Remember that your contacts (partners and senior managers) are busy, so you will need to keep following up with them to see if new opportunities have materialized.

Marketing work

When firms aren't working on consulting engagements, they are working on acquiring them. You can guarantee that the partners selling work will always want help doing so. Such help would usually be in the form of research. You might write up an industry overview and do a competitive assessment. You might create a deck of slides on a potential client and come up with possible issues they are facing that might require the help of a consultancy. Or you might be put to work on a draft of the actual proposal.

Be sure to ask your contacts above if they need help on sales and marketing and offer your assistance. While they may not always have a live project available for you, they very likely could use your help elsewhere. And, if you help a partner sell work, he or she will already know that you are familiar with the client and would be likely to staff you on the project.

Internal studies

Many consulting firms put out white papers and articles. Many efforts are the pet projects of just a few people, so opportunities to work on them are few and far between, but sometimes the writers need extra help with research and editing. Find out from your mentors in the firm who manages these efforts. Call up those contacts and ask how you can help. You will probably have some chasing around to do, so keep at it. With luck, you might find yourself working on the next Harvard Business Review article. Some larger consulting firms also have intranets where consultants are encouraged to post findings and articles. Why not do so? Partners looking for consultants with specific expertise may be moved to call you in.

Self-training
If you have looked for new projects, done all the available marketing work, and tried to find internal studies to work on, then you still need to keep yourself busy. This is a great time for self-training. Look over your development goals for the year and take the steps to pursue them. For example, is your goal to learn Visual Basic in Excel? Buy yourself a book and spend 6 hours a day reading the book and doing the exercises rigorously. In two weeks or less, you will be reasonably proficient at Visual Basic. (Keep the extra two hours to continue to network for other internal and external opportunities.) Do you want to gain expertise in the energy field? Spend the time reading the trade journals, taking notes, and scheduling time with your firm's energy experts to pick their brains.