

The (Almost) Indispensable Consultant

You might say that, by definition, consultants are not indispensable. Otherwise they wouldn't be consultants, right? Still, in today's business environment, consultants are increasingly important to the success of their clients. Therefore, the more value a consultant adds, the less dispensable they are.

What characteristics make consultants most valuable to their clients? In my travels I've discovered four key traits, which, by an astonishing coincidence, all begin with the letter P. The Almost Indispensable Consultant is productive, proficient, professional, and positive.

Productive

This is obvious. The best consultants do the maximum amount of useful, useable work in the minimum amount of time. It's not easy for a consultant to come in cold to a new assignment and be productive right away. But the longer the client has to wait for you to learn your way around the office, the less value you offer. And if you're not highly productive after a reasonable period, you're sliding fast toward dispensability.

Proficient

The most valuable consultants know a lot about the tools, products, and trends of their profession. They are equally adept at creating Winhelp or training (or perhaps marketing literature or multimedia) as they are at writing manuals. They can analyze a technical communications problem and know if it is best solved by a new help topic, a note on a quick reference card, or perhaps a change to the product design.

Professional

By professional here I mean savvy to the business goals and constraints of the client. This is trickier. You can be good at "your job" and expert at the tools and techniques of technical communications, but still lacking in true professionalism. Do all your efforts contribute positively to the client's bottom line? Do you even know there is a bottom line? Too often I hear that technical communicators are "prima donnas." Good at writing Help, but don't fit in well with the development team. Or they have an inflated sense of the importance of their work. Or no sense of deadline.

True professionals recognize that business is a cooperative effort, and that every situation is full of trade-offs and constraints. They see the big picture, and can make the judgments necessary to produce the best possible work with the time and resources available.

Positive

Finally, the most valuable consultants are positive. They bring a "can do" attitude to every challenge, an openness to other's ideas, and a willingness to cooperate. They're don't waste energy pointing fingers or complaining. Never underestimate the importance of bringing a positive attitude to your business dealings. Check your face in the mirror. Do you look like you're happy to be working with that client, or that the whole deal is drudgery? No enterprise ever has too much enthusiasm or good will. What could be more indispensable than that?

Reprinted from CommLink, the Newsletter of the Atlanta Chapter of the Society for Technical Communications.