

“Can I Borrow Your Watch?”

**A Beginner’s Guide to Succeeding in
a Professional Consulting Organization**

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AMERICAN COUNCIL OF ENGINEERING COMPANIES

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in a Professional Consulting Organization**

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DEDICATION

*To my sons Brendon and Bryan. For some 40 years this is what I did
when I left home each weekday, and some weekend, mornings.
This is also why I came home grumpy some of those same nights.*

Preface

The title of this book is taken from an old riddle about consultants:

“What is a consultant?”

“Oh, that’s the person who borrows your watch, tells you what time it is, and then forgets to return the watch.”

Frankly, there is some truth to this largely critical view of the profession. Consultants are often asked to help an organization become better, and one way they do that is to dig deep into the culture, process, and workings of an organization through interviews and data gathering (“borrowing the watch”). Yet, there is so, so much more to consulting. It’s not a profession for the faint of heart. There are both intellectual and relationship challenges that often require long hours under intense pressure. This small book attempts to explore what it’s like to survive, if not prosper, in that environment.

About the Author



LAWRENCE B. CAHILL has over 40 years of professional experience, all of it with consulting organizations, including Booz Allen Hamilton, Exxon Research and Engineering, and others. His roles have included junior consultant, project manager, technical director, managing principal, vice president, and chief operating officer. During his career, he has worked in 27 countries, equally distributed among the Americas, Asia-Pacific, and Europe/Africa.

Mr. Cahill has authored eight books or chapters in books, has over 80 journal publications to his credit, and has been quoted in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. He holds a B.S. in mechanical engineering from Northeastern University, where he was elected to Pi Tau Sigma, the International Mechanical Engineering Honor Society. He also holds an M.S. in environmental health engineering from the Robert R. McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Science of Northwestern University, and an MBA from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

Introduction

“Why do we need this book anyway?”

The US Census Bureau estimates that the US consulting industry generates roughly \$200 billion in annual revenues through 150,000 individual establishments employing almost a million people.¹ This industry is expected to grow substantially and likely will be the future home for thousands of today’s college undergraduate and graduate students.

An abundance of books describe in great detail what’s needed to be an independent, individual consultant. However, there are few books, if any, that focus on what it takes to be successful in a large consulting organization. And while the two experiences share many similarities, they are far from identical. This book attempts to explain what one might expect in working for a large consulting firm. Based on my personal experience, candidates should know exactly what they’re getting into before taking the leap. And that is the reason for this book.

My first experience as a consultant was with Exxon Research and Engineering, the in-house consulting arm of Exxon (actually, truth be told, it was Esso at the time). They made me an offer to join them while I was a senior in college. I never did respond to the offer, but nearing the end of my lost summer after graduation in 1970, received a telegram from George, the human resources director at the Florham Park, New Jersey, research center. It said simply, “Cahill, where the hell are you?”

Somehow George had tracked me down. His communication was direct, and given that I was basically homeless and destitute by that time, I took him up on his offer. All I had to my name at the time were my clothes and two penny rolls, which I used to take my girlfriend to the top of the Prudential Center in Boston the evening prior to my leaving the “Hub of the Universe.” The

1. US Census Bureau Economic Census of 2012, Statistics on Professional, Scientific, and Technical Consulting Services, NAICS Code 5416, Released January 9, 2015.

next day I flew to Newark, NJ, to start my career—but only after Esso had advanced me \$500 for the trip. Pretty auspicious start, don’t you think?

Since then, I have worked for four other consulting organizations during my 40-year career. The sizes of the firms have ranged from 200 to several thousand employees and my tenure has ranged from three years to almost 20 years. I’ve been a junior consultant, partner, technical director, and chief operating officer. Ownership of the companies I have worked for has varied from publicly held, to wholly-owned by the partners, to those with shared ownership between the partners and equity investors. I have been through explosive growth, downturns and layoffs, acquisitions, divestitures, and complete, dramatic changes in ownership. I won’t say I’ve seen it all, but I’ve come pretty darn close.

Looking back on the early stages of my career, I know it would have been nice to have had a guide prior to stepping into the world of consulting. I had absolutely no idea what to expect and was continuously surprised by events and people—and not always in a good way. For example, whenever I raised concerns about how staff were being treated to my first boss at Booz Allen Hamilton, his response was typically, “Hang in there, Larry, it’s just the nature of the business.” This, of course, upset me even more. Yet, upon reflection many years later, I realize that Alan was essentially correct in his assessment. It turned out that many, if not most, of the challenges I’ve faced over the years were common to all five of the consulting organizations for which I worked.

The guidance in this book is my attempt to help new consultants, whether they be recent college graduates or experienced industrial or government professionals seeking a career change, to better understand what working in a large consulting organization is all about. The book is not meant to be a scholarly treatise but a practical guide to the profession. It includes many personal experiences and provides some case studies designed to suggest typical on-the-job challenges.

For several of the core chapters in this book, such as project management and making presentations, I’ve included additional resources in the appendix that explore these topics in much more depth. The book is intentionally brief and, I hope, to the point, acknowledging the short attention spans of today’s readers who are used to the 140 characters of Twitter.



You'll notice various Key Points interspersed within the main text. These Key Points, written by James W. Blake, P.E., L.S., provide a consulting engineer's voice to the conversation.

James has worked in the consulting engineering field for the past 36 years. Prior to founding his own firm in 2013, he worked for small and mid-sized consulting engineering firms in the mid-Atlantic area. As a civil engineer, he has experience in all facets of the industry, including transportation, public sector building, and the private sector commercial/industrial and residential markets. He is well-versed in the planning, design, and construction administration phases of project delivery.

After the first 10 years of his career, his assignments have predominantly been in management roles, including the management of consulting offices, the strategic development of new service offerings, and the establishment of new consulting operations in various geographies.

He holds a B.S. degree in civil engineering and a B.S. degree in accounting/general business from the University of Maryland. A LEED Accredited Professional, he is a registered Professional Engineer and Professional Land Surveyor in several states, and is active in many professional organizations.

Now you see why I value his contribution—and so will you.

Good luck to those who have decided to make the leap into consulting as a profession. It can be a very rewarding career—at least it has been for me. I hope the guidance provided in this book will make your entry smoother and more successful.

Getting Oriented

“Why do I feel so all alone?”

The first couple of days with a consulting organization are the most stressful yet the most exciting days of the experience. On the one hand, you are being told that you will be a partner in two years, while on the other hand you are wondering whether you have the skills to even survive the first week. This orientation stage can range from comprehensive and comforting to alienating and isolating. Regardless of your personal experience, there are certain things you can focus on early to enhance the chances of long-term success.

HIT THE GROUND RUNNING

Consulting is unlike manufacturing or other non-service-related businesses in one important way: an hour lost is an hour lost. In manufacturing, you can continue to build the product even when the demand is not there and assume that products held in inventory will be sold eventually. In consulting, an hour that has passed and has not been billed to a client can never be recovered. And much like law firms, consulting firms make their money from client billable hours.

So, in your first days do what is necessary to find billable work. Is there a project that is just starting up that could use your research or analytical assistance? Do you have special skills, such as Microsoft Access or Excel®, that would enhance the outcome of a project? Do you have knowledge of a particular industry or functional area that could help in the development of a proposal? This would not likely result in immediate billable hours, but could be extremely valuable to your colleagues and would endear them to you long term. Get busy. Don't sit at your desk and wait for people to come to you.

Key Point 2.1. *Your billability is your immediate value to the company's "bottom line." Maximize it fully.*

LEARN YOUR BOSS’S *MODUS OPERANDI*

Everybody is busy in the consulting business and most people focus on what they like or what they are best at. Accordingly, the approach that managers use in leading their staff varies widely. Some are excellent mentors, supportive and available from the start. Others believe that consulting is a “survival of the fittest” environment and let the guppies fend for themselves among the sharks. Still others are so client-focused (a good thing) that they barely have the time to eat lunch with their staff—they are the rainmakers. And there are those who have good intentions but travel so much that the only way to communicate with them (or attempt to) is by phone or email.

So, your job in the first few days and even prior to coming on board is to find out how your boss operates. Which model does he or she subscribe to? Is this stated approach actually how he or she operates? Check with your new colleagues to get a full read on the boss’s MO. And don’t forget that in consulting, you might have multiple bosses, including your administrative supervisor, the managers of projects on which you serve as a team member, the manager of the office where you work, and the director of the technical or functional practice in which you participate. Try to get a basic understanding of each of these individuals early. It may be a challenge, but well worth the effort.

Key Point 2.2. *Be a sponge. Absorb everything there is to know about your company and your boss during your first months on the job.*

KNOW THE RULES AND THE PROTOCOLS

Some believe that bureaucracy is a characteristic unique to government organizations or the Fortune 500 companies. They would be sadly mistaken. Consulting organizations can be quite bureaucratic and the bureaucracy often is proportional to the size of the company. While in college, I worked as a co-op student for Nichols Dynamics, a very small consulting firm. When I started with the organization, the staff consisted of the president, Bob Nichols, an administrative assistant, and me. There was no bureaucracy in that organization; I did everything from changing light bulbs to visiting clients as a “consulting engineer.” Within a year or two, the firm became more successful and achieved “explosive growth,” adding two more employees by the time I graduated from college.

A Lesson Learned, Twice: Two Surprising First Week Experiences

Some years ago, I joined a consulting firm in mid-summer, but wanted to take a couple of weeks off before starting so I could be with my family on vacation; I was exhausted. The human resources director wanted me to formally join the firm prior to my vacation. He apparently was concerned that I would change my mind while away and reflecting on my life over a margarita. So, I agreed and worked for two days—which mostly involved orientation—and then took a two-week break. When I returned to work full time, energized and ready to go, one of my new colleagues came up to me and said sarcastically, “Must be nice to work for two days and then get two weeks off. I wish my life was that easy.” Wow, what a start!

During my first week on the job at yet another consulting firm, my five-year-old son developed a life-threatening staph infection that was not responding to the typical antibiotics. He was admitted to the hospital and on Wednesday of that first week I was planning to stay in the hospital room all night with him, sleeping on a cot. As I left the office at about 3 p.m., a staff member commented to me with a surly tone, “Must be nice to work only half days.” My son recovered fully, but to this day I don’t know what kept me from slugging that individual on the spot.

Lesson Learned: Don’t make nasty comments, particularly when you don’t know the other person or his or her situation very well.

I can tell you first hand that along with the explosive growth came a proportional increase in bureaucracy. I did not adjust well to the change. That’s not to say that bureaucracy is necessarily a bad thing; it’s quite necessary to maintain the viability of any organization. Along with bureaucracy comes rules and protocols that must be followed and it is in your best interest to know what these are. A few key areas to learn about early on (even prior to your first day) are:

- ♦ **Building and office entry.** Know how to enter both the building and the office on the first day. You don’t want to be standing on the street or in the parking lot waiting for someone to let you into the office. Also learn where the bathrooms are and, if they are outside the secured area, whether you need a key card for re-entry into the offices.
- ♦ **Dress code.** Dress codes vary widely in the consulting business. During my career, I have seen the dress code go from a tie and jacket, to a tie only, to

business casual, to downright shabby for technical consultants working at plant sites or site environmental remediation sites. Certain types of consulting (e.g., corporate organizational consulting at a client’s headquarters) still require formal business attire. I have been surprised by how much time management can spend on this issue alone. While serving as the manager for a 70-person office, I was asked to resolve a dispute raised by the male graphics technicians. They were miffed that the females in the office were allowed to wear skorts, a combination skirt and shorts first available in 1951. I thought the skorts worn by the female staff for the most part were a very polished look. Well, the male staff firmly believed that they should be allowed to wear shorts, otherwise the company was being sexist. As the manager, I relented and gave them permission. To no one’s surprise the shorts quickly became cut-off jeans that would look sloppy on a playground. Live and learn, I guess. The bottom line is this for men and women alike: Know the dress code prior to the first day and dress accordingly. Don’t overdress, don’t underdress, and always look professional, no matter what you wear.

- ◆ **Administrative procedures.** High-priority administrative procedures include how and when to fill out an electronic timesheet (first and foremost of course), how to complete an expense statement, and how to obtain and use electronic devices such as personal computers, office phones, and mobile phones. For the current generation, the latter should take about ten nanoseconds; for my generation, it took about two days with many false starts.
- ◆ **Corporate policies and procedures.** Every company has standards of practice that govern employee behavior in the workplace. For consultants, learning these is especially important because they are often in unfamiliar environments when traveling to client sites. Review the human resources manual early in your employment if not prior to your first day—it should outline policies and procedures for most of the following topics:
 - Business conduct and ethics
 - Business travel procedures
 - Harassment, bullying, and workplace violence
 - Substance abuse
 - Privacy
 - Confidentiality
 - Outside employment
 - Compensation and hours of work

- Employee development and performance
- Employee awards and recognition
- Employee benefits
- Health and safety

Fully understanding each of these topics is critical. For example, if you are at a client manufacturing site and observe an unsafe practice on the part of a client operator, will your company support you if you intervene directly? I know of one company that required you to intervene in this kind of a situation. “You see it, you own it” is the mantra.

BE READY FOR HOTELING

In most consulting environments, you can expect to travel extensively. In fact, for a ten-year period in my career I traveled domestically and internationally about 75% of the time. (Chapter 13 addresses the personal consequences of this extensive travel.) In light of this expectation, someone a few years ago posed the question, if consultants travel 50% of the time, why do we need to have permanent offices for them? Good question. The efficiency experts, also consultants no doubt, came up with the concept of “hoteling.” Hoteling essentially means that the consulting offices are designed with a footprint that holds only about 50% of the current staff at any given time. This assumes that the remaining staff are either on the road with clients or otherwise out of the office. Where do people sit when they are in the office? Also a good question. The office is designed with flexible work stations that include a desk, a chair (ergonomic of course), an office phone, and a computer monitor that can be connected to a laptop. What more could anyone want? Anyone can sign up for a particular work station on a given day. Just bring in a plant and call it home.

After having a dedicated office for the vast majority of my career, I started working in a hoteling environment a couple of years ago. I approached the concept with much trepidation, but my fears were largely misplaced. It is a much more open environment conducive to face-to-face communication and there are team rooms for private conversations, phone calls, and meetings.

I believe the hoteling concept is here to stay. It is compelling economically and there are few downsides, particularly once the dinosaurs like me retire. So be ready to join the commune if you sign up for a company that has adopted the approach.

GET TO KNOW YOUR COMPETITION

Consulting is a competitive business and not for the faint of heart. Not only do you compete with other consulting organizations, you also compete with your colleagues for promotions, raises, plum projects and proposals, recognition, and bonuses. In my experience, this internal competition is productive for the most part, pushing everyone to excel. It can have its downsides, though. When I worked at Booz Allen Hamilton back before the days of laptops, which allow much more mobility for the consulting staff, Saturdays in the office were not much different than any other weekday. Everyone was in the office putting in the extra time and effort to “be the best they could be.” It was a competition mostly among friends, but it was still a competition and no doubt took a toll on our families.

Recognize that there is internal competition in consulting firms. As you get to know your colleagues, you will find that most are mutually supportive, but there are exceptions. Try to identify these exceptions and get a handle on their hot buttons and what makes them tick. Most importantly, accept that consulting is competitive and do your best to excel personally and, at the same time, be a team player. If that’s something you struggle with, maybe consulting is not for you. It certainly isn’t for everyone.

A Case Study: An Absentee Boss

Tomorrow will be your first day on the job at a large consulting organization. Your cell phone rings and it’s your new boss, a partner in the firm. He was going to spend the better part of the day tomorrow getting you oriented, including discussing a billable project that he wants you to contribute to, but unfortunately his plans have changed and he is flying out this evening to visit a client for a couple of days to put out a fire. He won’t be in the office until your third day on the job and suggests that you do the best you can when you arrive tomorrow.

The office where you’ll be working has about 50 staff, including a human resources clerk who doubles as the receptionist. What can you do to make your first three days as productive as possible? Who should you talk to? What should you review? What kind of “outside the box” initiatives might you consider? Put together a checklist of tasks that will make you productive and effective.