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Becoming an Arts & Culture Management Consultant: Know Yourself – Know Your Industry

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Professionals in the nonprofit, university, government, and corporate sectors may find times when they consider becoming a consultant in the arts and culture industry. Layoffs, organizational transitions, quality of life issues, and a desire to find a broader way to contribute to the cultural community can all be factors. As prospective consultants consider entering the field of arts and culture management consulting, there are many complex questions to be weighed carefully. Is commitment to and experience in the field enough to build a successful and sustainable consulting practice? Does one have the capabilities, connections, and capacity to enter the consulting market? Will the industry accept, value, and pay for these services when they may have been previously provided for free? As any entrepreneur can attest, the key to success is marketplace acceptance of the product or service.

In this issue of *Arts Insights*, we focus on the benefits and hurdles of becoming a successful and impactful arts and culture management consultant. We will look at the industry, the importance of a professional brand, and specific benefits and challenges that early, mid, and late career professionals may face when considering consulting as a career, whether on their own or as part of a firm.

Note: This article is the second in a two-part series. Part one from June 2016 highlighted the benefits and hurdles of selecting the right consultant to help organizations maximize the return on investment of time and money. It also looked at the importance of individual commitment and connection to the arts and culture sector as well as a consultant's capacity to meet specific project needs.

The Five Forces and the Four P's

An analysis of the arts and culture management consulting industry shows a very competitive market filled with a variety of solo consultants, boutique specialist firms, and generalist larger firms. Some have specific functional expertise, cultural discipline specialization, or presence in numerous locations. From a broader perspective, all of these competitors are impacted by one another as well as the power of suppliers, customers, and the threat of new entrants and substitutes.

The competitive forces model developed by noted author and professor at Harvard Business School Michael E. Porter can help potential consultants visualize the factors they should consider before entering this industry. It is important to have an idea of external resources needed to be an effective consultant (outside suppliers), potential cultural organizations with whom one will work (customers), alternate sources available to those organizations (substitutes), others who also want to become consultants (new entrants), and competitive services (industry rivalry). There are no specific



certifications to become a consultant in the arts and culture sector, so the barriers to entry are low and the competition is friendly but fierce.

With the above in mind, it is also important to perform a standard evaluation of the Four P's (product, price, placement, and promotion) of the consulting service that one intends to provide. This helps frame how effectively one can enter the marketplace—plus the implications of one recently discussed factors considered by many to be the Fifth P, people, which is a key pivot point for all aspects of service delivery. A prospective consultant may have clarity about the service they will offer, but not the price. Will it be packaged with other services? How will it be promoted through people and professional networks? All of the above factors need careful consideration before starting a consulting career.

Professional Branding – Internal Assessment and the Three C's

It is wise to consider the internal capabilities, connections, and capacity (the Three C's) that are required to become a consultant. While recognizing that one's own skills, experience, and educational competencies are important, consulting also requires one to market this information successfully to the field. A tremendous challenge for both new and existing consultants is understanding the field's perceptions of a consultant and a consultant's brand. Early career professionals may have baseline interest in arts and cultural organizations and a solid education but few demonstrable results or references when trying to secure clients. Midcareer professionals might have a reasonably established presence in a certain cultural discipline or functional area of expertise but may not be known outside that discipline or area of expertise. Late career professionals may have extensive experience working in numerous cities but may be branded as someone that works with only large institutions and is neither known outside their core cultural discipline nor interested in working within smaller organizations.

Professional consultants build their reputations on past success stories and demonstrable results, either as an employee or with other clients. Once that professional brand has been established, either in a cultural discipline or functional area of expertise, it must be leveraged and presented to the field in a way that will be readily accepted. Effective networks for all professionals, regardless of experience, are a central component to achieving a successful consultancy brand. One should consider the connections needed to become an effective consultant and whether or not the connections are willing to engage or refer one as a consultant. Consultants must convert past experiences into results that meet the organizational, project, timing, and financial goals of the clients.

Perhaps the most important factor to consider relates to one's capacity for the uncertain nature of the consulting field. As the economy changes, so does the demand for consulting services, even if the need for expertise still exists. Steady income, guaranteed benefits, personal assistants, and predictable routines are not always possible. A professional career in consulting should not be viewed as a temporary venture between jobs but rather as a new career that requires entrepreneurial thinking, unique approaches, and continuous learning. A consultant must be versatile, flexible, and able to multitask with a variety of clients in a responsive way. Every day involves looking for new connections and projects while simultaneously serving current clients at the highest professional level.

Solo Practitioner vs. The Team Approach

After considering the factors outlined above, prospective consultants should contemplate whether to pursue this career path alone or join others in the endeavor. There are benefits and hurdles to each approach. As with any endeavor, each person will perceive a different value proposition when determining what professional consulting structure is right for them. Therefore, it is critical to do effective research before making this decision.

Solo consultants have the benefits of ultimate flexibility and making all strategic, financial, and legal decisions freely. They often have a well-known professional brand and connections to secure new projects easily. They may be perceived as experts in a specific functional area or cultural discipline, allowing them to smoothly transition into new projects. A primary challenge is that solo consultants can feel very isolated without the camaraderie and support of their professional consulting colleagues. They also find time is limited, as working on current projects may prohibit meeting the requests made by potential clients. Solo consultants must also take on the legal and financial risks of proposal preparation, contracts, billing, collections, and any number administrative tasks.

A team approach to consulting allows one to strategize with colleagues, cross-sell services, and relieve the isolation that solo consultants sometimes feel. Joining a firm of like-minded arts and culture management professionals has value and benefit for both the firm and its clients. The strategic advantage of a firm's existing prestige, client success stories, and ongoing marketing efforts can be invaluable. Newsletters, job postings, and conference participation build the geographic reach of the firm and enhance the breadth and depth of services that it can provide. Also, employee benefits, file and information sharing, and human resources are typically available in a larger firm.

An additional advantage of being a member of a consulting team is that the experience, connections, and past client work are shared amongst the firm's consultants. Rather than focusing on individual achievements, a firm will highlight its collective client list and shared success stories. The best consultants understand that leveraging the brand and experience of every member of a firm allows for "rising tides to lift all boats." Team members can consistently develop relationships for projects on which they will work while simultaneously providing leads to their colleagues.

Conversely, most professional service firms have certain policies, procedures, and methodologies that must be followed to protect the brand and service quality. Not all prospective consultants seek that kind of structure in tracking time, billables, and business development opportunities. The team and organizational focal points are based on market analysis, competitive benchmarking, and careful approaches to minimizing risks and maximizing rewards. This creates tremendous economies of scale for consultants and clients, but may seem restrictive to consultants seeking complete professional independence.

Joining a firm requires a strong sense of commitment to the field of consulting, its clients, and the team. It is not a sideline job but rather a means to make a difference in the arts and culture sector. From a client's perspective, there is substantial value in knowing that they are getting the depth and resources of an entire firm while also gaining the exclusive skills and experience of a specific individual. A firm with a commitment to an entire field can have a much broader impact on the industry than an individual consultant alone.

Conclusion

Building the brand, visibility, and presence of a firm locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally is about growing institutions, advancing arts and culture, and enhancing communities. In addition to clarity about the product/service, its placement and promotion, the people, and the price, consultants need to have certain capabilities, connections, and capacity to work in this dynamic field. Overarching is perhaps a fourth C – commitment. Arts and cultural institutions are unique and have reverberating effects in the communities that they serve. Given the limited resources of the nonprofit, university, and government sectors in an erratic economic environment, working with these entities can be challenging. Any successful consultant needs a staunch commitment to help arts and culture institutions grow, the ability to provide a forum for them to advance, and the leadership experience to deliver tangible results that enable the broadest community impact for the clients that they serve.

Editor's Note: This article was inspired by an earlier version of this article published in February 2011.



Bruce D. Thibodeau founded ACG in 1997 and, as its president, he has been embedded in numerous projects in all practice areas to grow institutional sustainability, advance the arts and culture sector, and enhance the communities served by ACG's clients. His previous professional experience includes management roles at Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Boston Symphony, Hartford Symphony, and Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival. His previous consulting work includes the Boston Center for the Arts, Bravo! Vail, Carmel Bach Festival, Educational Theatre Association, Mesa Arts Center/City of Mesa, National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, and OPERA America. He holds a bachelor of music degree from The Hartt School at the University of Hartford and a master of business administration from the F.W. Olin Graduate School of Business at Babson College. He is a doctorate of business administration candidate at the Grenoble Ecole de Management (France) focused on how stakeholders influence, and are influenced by, the major ideas, projects, and strategic initiatives

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