

Consulting (in Project Management), is that a profession? ¹

Angelica Larios, MBA, PMP

Despite having spent the last twenty-one years of my life living in the consulting business, I still have trouble explaining what I do for a living. Weirdly, so many companies and professionals worldwide exist and make a living based on their knowledge and professional services, best known as consulting. Still, when you try to find schools teaching, classes, courses about what consulting is, job offering and vacancies, or even to explain to your family, friends or convince a customer, it becomes challenging.

But what is consulting?

The consulting practice is sometimes hard to understand as a profession, and preparing resources for this job becomes thought-provoking. Consulting's "ultimate goal is to solve the client's business problems" (Stroh, 2007). According to Stroh (2007), a consultant is "someone who either advises a client on the desirability of taking some action or assists the client in making a decision and then helps the client plan or implement action as determined by the client." It becomes relevant to understand that consultants can act either internally or externally to the client of the consulting process. In either case, consultants are either perceived as "experts" or "facilitators."

According to Block (2011), a consultant is a "person in a position to have some influence over an individual, a group, or an organizational but has no direct power to make changes or implement programs." For a consultant, it is relevant **to develop specific technical, interpersonal, and consulting** per se to become professional in this business area. Block identifies a five phases consulting process that occurs in a sequential way, such as:

- Entry and Contracting
- Discovery and Dialogue
- Analysis and the Decision to Act
- Engagement and Implementation
- Extension, Recycle, or Termination

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Up to here, consulting (besides being a way of living or developing a career path) is offering professional services in a field in which you are an expert. You can solve your customers' problems, evaluate their situation, and give recommendations for improving their current status. However, one relevant aspect is to be professional, and here there is a path to go.

Professionalism

During my experience as a project manager working in different companies and now as an entrepreneur with my own company, professionalism with the employees is vital. It is tough to develop and generate; however, it is crucial for any organization dedicated to offering professional services to achieve this goal.

According to Greiner & Poulfelt (2010), "professionalism implies that you do not focus only on the immediate transaction, but you care about your relationship with the person with whom you are working." (p.38). "Professional is not a title you claim for yourself; it is an adjective you hope other people apply to you. You have to earn it." (p.38).

According to Furusten (2013), during the last two decades, there has been an increase in external providers of various forms of managerial. Consequently, there is a huge need for professionalism in the "deliver services in areas such as I.T., investment banking, risk analysis, business intelligence, project management, law, auditing, management consulting, human resources, recruiting, P.R., ethics, social responsibility, sustainable development, etcetera." Despite the considerable demand for these services, they also represent areas of expertise difficult to define and measure.

"Although the meaning of the concepts professionalism, professional, experts and expertise can be debated," in practice, it seems that when a person is convinced that he is an expert, this person will legitimize his role as an expert in his context. "This suggests that how they are perceived is important in the construction of management consultants as professionals." (Furusten & Werr, 2005, 2009).

According to Greiner & Poulfelt (2010), "professionalism is an ambiguous concept that refers to a wide range of attitudes, skills, values, and behaviors. A professional consultant should:

- Get involved
- Do not just stick to the assigned role
- Reach out for responsibility
- Do whatever it takes to get the job done
- Be a team player
- Be observant

- Be honest
- Be loyal
- Listen to the clients' needs
- Take pride in their work
- Show commitment to quality
- Show initiative."

As can be appreciated, most of these qualities are hard to observe and measure since most of them are subjective. To become a better professional in consulting, besides having the right organizational policies, proper recruiting and selection of resources process implemented, and an excellent training program, the inclusion of organizations that rule the consulting activity will help. The creation, adoption, and inclusion of organizations or institutions that govern the activity of consulting professionals in different aspects would tremendously benefit the profession.

Professional services or consulting services constitute a great pillar in today's knowledge economy (Drucker, 1969), because of their vast contribution to the economy and because of their fast pace of growth, for example, "Professional Service Operations Management" (Lewis et al., 2013). Managing professional services is becoming increasingly difficult due to the rapid changes in today's business and technology environment. It might be complicated to look for the correct type of consultants and certificate their level of services. (Lawrence et al., 2016).

Carr-Saunders & Wilson (1933) defined "professions as occupational groupings of experts who apply specialized knowledge to solving unique problems." Work is generally defined as activities involving mental or physical effort performed to achieve a purpose or result. (Lawrence et al., 2016).

According to Estrada (2016), a professional consultant is a person who solves a customer's problems during his intervention. For that purpose, the consultant integrates knowledge, competencies, skills for various models or courses of action, configuring from praxis, research, theoretical aspects related to the subject to be solved.

Ethical and cultural aspects

Ethical challenges are present in professional services. It has become mandatory to establish "a trusted advisor-client relationship" and a "stronger entrepreneurial perspective to understand clients' issues, needs better, and approaches to build the best solutions." Ethical issues have shown problems related to values, principles, and virtues where consulting firms must be aware of "1. Lack of transparency, 2. Misguided professionalism, and 3. Misconceived goals and objectives." (Greiner & Poulfelt, 2010),

Although there is more conscience on behaving ethically, there are situations when actions are a shade of gray, not entirely right or wrong. The decision about what should be done is enforced by different degrees of righteousness. Moreover, when fulfilling ethical responsibilities, businesses should consider the economic and competitive pressures simultaneously. It becomes the dilemma of profit versus ethics. (Vatamanescu et al., 2014).

As Visser (2011, 2012) pointed out, things evolved in terms of business standards from the 1970's focus on making a profit and serving shareholders' interests to the early 2000's concern for quality and environmental management, health and safety, stakeholders' engagement, and corporate accountability. Until the nowadays "age of responsibility" that increases the business ethics impact business sustainability, responsible competitiveness, and sustainable markets.

On the other hand, multiculturalism comes into play when consulting has a multi-country or multi-regional presence. Awareness of these aspects helps the development of professional consulting practice. Cabrera (2012) stated that "the world needs leaders to capture global opportunities and solve global problems." It is mandatory in our contemporary world to have global leaders engage in business, governments, non-governmental organizations" to contribute to increasing prosperity and sustainability to the world.

And Project Management?

Well, if you are a Project Manager, you can be a consultant as well, and most probably you are. Think about it, you offer your professional services internally or externally, your knowledge, know-how, best practices to help projects run under the triple restriction, and much more. You probably have taught others what project management is and what is not; there are plenty of chances that you are certified with one or more certifications, with one or more frames and methodologies. You are an expert!

The thing is, are you professional? Are you behaving and giving the solutions according to what is expected for your level? Are you acting consequently to the code of ethics? Do you understand what the expectation your customer and the stakeholders have for you is?

As I mentioned before, for a consultant, it is relevant **to develop specific skills such as technical, interpersonal, and consulting** per se to become professional in this area of business (project management). The technical (hard skills) and the interpersonal (soft skills) focus on your preparation; the consulting abilities can make you stand from others, make you different, and most probably help you develop a career.

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About the Author



Angelica Larios, MBA, PMP

Mexico City, Mexico



Angelica Larios, MBA, PMP, is a project manager with more than 20 years of experience in implementing software projects related to business intelligence, planning and budgeting, and financial consolidation solutions based on software applications to support the business decision process. She is the owner of ALACONTEC, an I.T. consulting company founded in Latin America. She has held several professional positions in private and public organizations, such as the Health Ministry in Mexico as an I.T. director and a business manager for several Mexican firms.

She holds a master's degree in business administration and a bachelor's degree in computer science from the National University of Mexico (UNAM) in addition to her studies in project management and her Project Management Professional (PMP)® certification, which have helped her to consolidate her career and have a better understanding of what businesses and projects need nowadays. She is a doctoral candidate in strategic leadership at Regent University, VA; she is a volunteer since 2007, starting in the local Mexico chapter, being Past President and in several positions within PMI (CMAG, BVAC), and currently serves on the Ethics Member Advisory Group (EMAG) that supports the PMI Global Operations (2018–2020). Angelica has been elected as member of BOD of the ILA (International Leadership Association) (2021-2024).

Angelica can be contacted at angelica.larios@gmail.com

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