

Chair's Corner by Dr. Gary Blank



The 2009 Return of our Newsletter: I was the AICN Chair from 1999 to 2002. I have been recycled. Now that I am back as AICN Chair, I am re-awakening our AICN newsletter. Our enthusiastic 2009 Committee has some exciting plans and innovative ideas, which will be helpful to all IEEE members in these challenging times. I asked each of the members of the Committee (all practicing consultants) to write an article for this kick-off version of the new Newsletter. Here is my contribution. It is similar to an article that I wrote in an old AICN newsletter almost eight years ago. The information is still timely.

How to Find Clients: Finding clients is the most crucial aspect of being a consultant. When I decided to launch my consulting career, my mentor advised me to try a variety of methods for finding clients. I have been taught, and I have used, more than twenty methods — all of which I discuss in detail in my seminar on consulting. It is easy, comfortable, and it gets results.

Here is one of my favorite methods for finding clients:

I visit the universities and colleges in my area. The two people I seek on each campus are the Chair of the Electrical Engineering Department (or related area) and the IEEE Student Branch Faculty Advisor. I introduce myself as a consultant, and make two offers. I offer the Department Chair my availability as a speaker to talk to the students about industry, and what it is like to be an engineer. This offer is very valuable to the Chair, and I am often referred to another faculty member to implement it. It is important to make a good impression, to be sincere, to be generous with your time and offer, and to leave your business cards with everyone you talk to.

I also offer the Student Branch Advisor my availability as a speaker about many aspects of the engineering profession. IEEE's Student Branches are anxious to get speakers for their meetings.

How does speaking to students and student groups enhance your consulting business? Indirectly, the students may be helpful later — but they are not the principal target. The key person in this scenario is the Department Chair. When there is an engineering problem in industry, managers often call the nearby university to seek help. Most of the faculty members do not have the time or desire to accept consulting assignments. But the Department Chair who gets the call remembers the consultant who introduced himself and offered to speak to the students. This method has worked for me. It has resulted in many consulting assignments. It will work for you too. Try it.

How To Get Started In Consulting

by C.B. Johnson

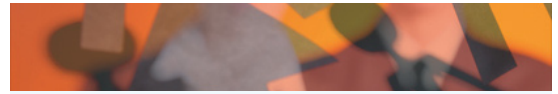
The first step is to gain skills that you can market. You accomplish this goal through education, experience and using your natural talents. Then, you either work for another company as an employee (think of yourself as an "in-house consultant"), or you establish your own company and work as a consultant (independent contractor).

For many reasons, taking the first big step to work on your own as a consultant is not easy. However, this first step is often made easier (in practice), if you are laid off. If you are laid off, instead of again looking for someone to hire you as an employee, why not market yourself as a consultant?

Lots of good references and information are available to help you successfully establish your consulting practice. You can

find a wealth of material on the IEEE-USA Web site. As bad as the general economy is at this time, it is actually a very good time to be a consultant.

Review some of the available information at www.ieeeusa.org/business/. Contact other IEEE consultants for free advice. In general, they will be very helpful. And attend a local IEEE Consultants Network meeting.



Clients and the Power of Sharing Contacts

by Paul Kostek

For anyone starting out as a consultant, the first challenge can be finding clients. And even if you get your first assignment, how do you find the second, third and other future assignments? Being a part of an IEEE Consultant Network provides two great advantages. First is the opportunity to meet with other consultants and second repeated exposure provides opportunities to develop those contacts to assist in helping you find clients. Look for consultants with similar backgrounds. See if you can assist them on projects. You may get the chance to take on assignments they are unable to.

Make sure you're in the Consultants Database [www.ieeeusa.org/consultants]. The database provides another opportunity to share work with others. You may see a project or assignment that interests you, but you can't do all of the work. Search the database to find others to partner with.

If you already have an on-going business, why would you want to share your clients or contracts with another consultant? Well, if you can't take on an assignment, but you find your client a person who can, they'll remember you for helping them out. The other consultant will appreciate the opportunity. And at some point, going the extra mile will bring you work from that client, or the other consultant.

The Consultants Network offers the power of a network, if you're willing to use it.

Considering Engineering Consulting as an Option

by R.H. Gauger, P.E.

If you are an IEEE member facing a cutback due to tight budgets, downsizing, or off-shoring, perhaps you should consider consulting as one of one your options. To make an immediate savings, companies frequently lay off specialized, experienced (and more highly-paid) employees that have skills a company continues to need, but only on a part-time basis. As an independent consultant, engineers can then offer their special skills to industry for a fee. This type of self-employment can be particularly attractive. From the company's viewpoint, it has realized an immediate dollar-savings. From the consultant's viewpoint, this arrangement allows an opportunity to serve more than one client.

To make the most of such opportunities, consultants need to have up-to-date, salable skills; a high-risk tolerance; and a special mix of personal characteristics needed for self-employment. Often, experienced engineers are more likely to have acquired such abilities. On the other hand, the demand for competitive computer skills means younger engineers can also do well in consulting.

For the consultant-to-be, the first evaluation should be whether consulting is the right option. Ask yourself:

- Are you a risk-taker?
- Can you work at home, with its many distractions?
- Can you solve new problems on your own?
- Are you organized? Can you handle multiple clients and multiple deadlines?
- Do you work well with people?
- Can you continually market your services? Some engineers find this one difficult.
- Can your finances support you during a start-up period of six months, or more?

The best time to consider consulting is while you are still employed, but you can see the handwriting on the wall. Join a local consultants network, and talk to the members about their experiences. Read all you can about consulting and the fields that you plan to enter. Network and meet potential clients. Use your vacation or free time to do some moonlighting for a short consulting assignment. If you like what you are doing, you are on track.

Consider your financial resources. Consulting requires a much smaller cash outlay than other areas of self-employment, but you will need several thousand dollars to equip your office — more if you also need a lab, or special equipment.

Much more important: planning your living and marketing expenses for the first six months, or until your first contract is completed and paid. Today, many companies are not paying invoices as promptly as they were in the past. Realize that you are entering a new field. Be aware that it may take several years before your new consulting practice is providing an income comparable to your previous salary.

How to Get Started as an Engineering Consultant

by William R. Kassebaum, P.E.

I started my small consulting business more than 10 years ago with a small group of skilled engineers. At the time, we had only limited experience with how to run a company or market ourselves to potential customers. Over time, I have learned a number of secrets key to starting or growing a consulting practice. Succinctly put: you must identify your strengths; improve your credentials; and farm your professional network. These strategies are powerful, yet simple concepts that should guide you and foster your practice as you grow.

First of all, you need to know yourself, and identify your strengths and weaknesses. What skills do you have that set you apart from other consultants? In what areas do you perform the best? Make sure you highlight these skills and communicate these abilities to your potential clients.

Second, do you have good credentials? You can always improve your credentials, even if you have a Master's or Ph.D. You can get your Professional Engineering License (PE). And you can get other credentials in your field that may help you identify yourself as an expert in your chosen industry. Also, consider writing articles or publishing white papers on topics of interest to you. Such publications become credentials you can refer to.

Third, grow your professional network! It just doesn't matter how awesome you are if no one knows you. In consulting, people work with those they know and like. Consider volunteering with the IEEE to meet others in your field. Find and attend meetings associated with your industry and with executives and directors who may be potential customers. Introduce yourself confidently and repeatedly. Take time to grow a relationship over months and years. A carefully cultivated relationship can lead to other contracts and referrals! Also, the old adage holds that you get more work while you are working than when you are not working. That is because you are meeting people in the industry that you are working in. Those meetings and referrals are powerful. So, get out there and socialize!

In summary, you need to learn many aspects of business to help you succeed. But, the keys to getting started as an engineering consultant by getting and growing your workload is simple:

- Identify your strengths and key service offerings; highlight them when you introduce yourself
- Improve your credentials by getting your P.E. or other certifications; write articles on topics of interest to you
- Get out and meet people to grow your network; volunteer in the IEEE; become acquainted with those in your target industry
- Take time to farm — plant seeds of relationships with your professional network; water those seeds; ask for referrals