

CRAFT OF CONSULTING PODCAST

EPISODE 1: Craft of Consulting Podcast Introduction—with Deb Zahn

Hi. I want to welcome everybody to the very first episode of The Craft of Consulting podcast. I'm your host Deb Zahn and in this episode, I'm going to describe what this podcast is all about and how it can help you become a successful in-demand consultant while making sure that you have the life you want while you're being a consultant.

So who's this podcast for it? This podcast is for accomplished professionals who are transitioning into being a consultant or folks that have been a consultant for a while. So if you're just starting out, this podcast can help you figure out how it all works and how to get your business going. If you've been doing it awhile, this podcast can help you learn new skills and strategies to grow your business or to solve some of the pesky problems that you might be having as a consultant.

And if you're not consultant yet, but you're thinking about it, this podcast is definitely for you because it can help you make your decision and it can help you how to figure out how to get started. This podcast is for any type of consultant, so you don't have to be in a particular field. We're going to be talking about topics that apply to all types of consultants.

There's going to be some things that might be more relevant to consultants who are either independent or folks who are working at small or mid-size firms. And that's mainly because those folks tend to have more freedom and flexibility to make choices, much more so than some of the big firms have that tend to have a way that they do things. Now that said, there's still going to be a lot of great content for everybody, no matter what type of consultant they are or how they work.

So who's going to be on? So on these podcasts, sometimes it's going to be me, but most of the time I'm going to be interviewing guests and we're going to talk about those things that I wish someone had told me when I was starting out. Now when it's me, I'm going to talk about what I did to become a successful consultant and had to make sure that I did that by building the life that I wanted and making sure the consulting was part of that. We're going to talk about particular topics like how to get business, how to get repeat business and how to manage difficult client conversations.

I'm also going to bring on other consultants who are going to talk about the skills and strategies they use to be successful consultants and to have a life. And we're going to talk to them about how they started and how they grew their business. And there's going to be a ton of insider tips with consultants telling us what they wish they had done at the beginning and throughout their process as a consultant and especially those things that they would avoid if they could do it all over again.

We're also going to talk to clients. This is going to be an important reality check because they're going to talk to us about what they like and they don't like about consultants. And hearing what they don't like is particularly important because you definitely want to hear that on a podcast instead of hear about it when you're working with them. We're also going to talk to them about things like when they're working with a particular consultant, what makes them want to go back to that consultant again and again and what is it that you can learn about that to help you in your consulting business.

Now, we're also sometimes, just occasionally, we're going to nerd out a little bit and we're going to talk with folks who understand the science behind what consultants do. Things like understanding how humans and organizations make choices or change what they do. Because one of the keys to being an excellent consultant is really understanding how do people in organizations tick. What I found is that it's easier to get business, it's easier to help your clients, it's easier to have a life if you know how those things work. So we are going to have folks on that can talk to us about that.

Now I do want to say what this podcast is not about. It's not just about making a ton of money. Now that said, you can make a great living as a consultant and you can actually make a ton of money, but that's not the focus of this podcast.

This podcast is about honing your craft as a consultant and helping clients get what they need by being absolutely excellent at what you do. And doing that while you also are building the life that you want.

Now, being an excellent consultant and making money are obviously not mutually exclusive. I've definitely found that money follows value. I routinely bring in sort of mid to high six figures, sometimes seven figures worth of business to my firm from every single year. And it's because I focus on value and we're going to talk a whole lot about that in many, many podcasts.

Now if you're more interested in the money part, there's nothing wrong with that, but there are other podcasts and courses out there that probably would be more helpful for you. If on the other hand, you're truly interested in figuring out how to excel at being a consultant and enjoy your life while you're doing it, then this is definitely the podcast for you.

Let me tell you a little bit about myself. I have been in the field that I work in for about 25 years and I've been a consultant for about a decade. There was some overlap between those because I did some independent work while I was still working for organizations. And then I switched to working for a national firm and when we started we had about 60 people and then that firm over time grew to about 250 people. It started at a relatively small firm and then it's gotten a lot bigger over time.

Now, the trick was when I showed up and I worked in the New York City office, that office was still pretty small. It's still relatively new. I think I was like the seventh person in the office and the firm also didn't do a lot of the work that I did, didn't really work with the clients that I knew

and I was familiar with. So what I had to do was I had to build business in a market that didn't know our firm and I had to build business in an area of work where we were not known and other firms were known for that type of work. So over time I figured out how to do that and I figured out how to be successful as a consultant.

So now the good news is that our firm is really well known, not just in New York but other surrounding markets. We've now grown so that we're actually across the whole country. And the work that I now do, the work that I do is now a big piece of business for the firm. So much so that they actually hire other people that know how to do it.

Personally, I'm now in really high demand. I don't have to do much to get business. In fact, sometimes I actually avoid conferences or social situations in my field so I don't have to say no to people. And I do actually say no, which is an essential skill that we're going to talk about on this podcast.

I also have a lot of repeat clients, which is really key to being a successful consultant. I also do work that's really meaningful to me, work that I am happy to get out of bed in the morning and do. And I also do work that I'm really proud of, work that I think is good and I think is really helping people. Because that's really what it's all about for me. I'm a consultant because I like to help people.

I also like to help other consultants. Throughout my process as I learned how to be successful, I turned around and coached other consultants as they made the transition because it was a really tough time. It can be really disorienting to suddenly be a consultant, which is really different than how a lot of us lived in our work world before. You went to work, you knew what you were doing, you knew what your job was. Being a consultant is really different than that and there's a lot of common mistakes and common anxieties that new consultants experience or even consultants who've been doing it a little while. And I wanted to help them make that easier for them.

Now, the good news is I also have a life. I actually have a great life. I rarely work on the weekends. I take most Fridays off. That means that I have time with my family. I've got this ridiculously large garden or mini farm depending on who you ask. And I grow my own vegetables and fruit. I bring it inside and I cook. Every single year I make this fabulous peach hot sauce. And I do things like I rescue cats. Now, for all the dog people out there. Don't worry. I've also rescued a dog before. I also actually rescued a goose once, which was very strange and much harder than it sounds. And I also have downtime. I have time where I can just sit and do nothing or sit and read a book.

Now that's not all the time. I have to be perfectly honest with you and tell you that I do get busy and sometimes it gets harder to do the things that I just talked about and sometimes it's harder to keep my life in the proportions that I want it in. I'm definitely not 100%. But I've been working on this for a while so I'm probably at about 75% where I have figured out how to actually do that. And those are some of the things that I want to share with you.

Ultimately, what I think is that being a great consultant matters. People really need our help. We have an opportunity as consultants to make other people's lives easier, to make them less stressful, to help them accomplish things that they need help doing. And to me that is really a calling.

My life is also really important and I know that I can have both. And I have figured out a lot of ways to be able to make that happen. When I started, that was definitely not true. When I started it was a real struggle. Even though in my previous work life, I had had a lot of success. I did a really good job. I got rewarded for it. I got praised for it. I accomplished things that were really important to me.

Suddenly, I'm a consultant. It's a whole different world. And I was suddenly in a position where I didn't even know how to describe what I do. I actually had a colleague who used to run this big organization, lots of success, and she said I feel like I'm just walking around telling people well, I do stuff. I know how to do stuff, but didn't know how to actually put that into words.

I had the same problem when I started. I didn't know how to reach out to potential clients. So one of the most obvious things to do was well, let me reach out to the people that know me and worked with me before and know that I can be really helpful and I can do things for them. But it was really strange because now I'm going to talk to them, but I'm going to ask them for money to do the things that we used to do together where we didn't have that transactional part of it. And it was really odd. I didn't know necessarily how to do it.

I didn't know how to close a deal. I didn't know how to write a proposal. It didn't really know how to price things right. And once you got a gig, I didn't know how to make sure that the work got done on the budget that we had.

So lots of struggles when I first started. And these are very common things that I've seen a lot of other consultants experience. Fast forward, I now have a steady business as a consultant and for the most part my clients come to me. So there's still stressful sometimes but a lot of those problems are in my past, which make my day to day life a lot easier.

Now, once I figured out sort of the business side of consulting, then I had the other problem. It took over my life and I had wanted to be a consultant to help people, but I also wanted to have what I thought could be great about a consultant's life. I wanted that freedom and flexibility and I wanted more time in my life because every job I had before that work took over my life. I had already done that. And the whole point to being a consultant was to not do that again. But there I was doing it again and frustrated and not knowing why.

Before I was a consultant, I always thought well, it's the work. It's the deadlines, it's my boss. It was something other than me that was making my life difficult and making it into proportions that I didn't really want to have. And in many cases, those things were true. Those were actually things that were part of why my life looked like it did. But it definitely wasn't the whole story.

And, in fact, until I was a consultant, I didn't even know how much I was actually contributing to not having the life that I wanted.

Over time I had to learn that it was the choices I make that actually accounted for most of that. And I had to learn how to make different choices. I had to figure out well, why am I doing that and why do I keep doing it? I had to learn how to get back on track when I relapsed because it was pretty amazing how easily I could fall back into it. In fact, my husband likes to tease me, as any good husband does. When I first started, I would say to him, "I have no idea how I'm going to get work." And then over time that shifted. And then I was like "I have no idea why I have so much work." And, of course, he loves to tease me about that to this day.

And he was right. I had to figure out how to make that different so I wasn't just now complaining about a different problem. So I figured out tricks and I figured out tools to use that would actually help me manage it better. And more than anything else, I learned how to practice the habits that I wanted to have as a consultant that would make me an excellent consultant and also have that balance in my life that I wanted to have.

Let me give you an example. I learned that the choices you make as a consultant really makes or breaks your choices about the life that you have. So critical operating principle of a consultant is to maximize your income in the time you spend working. That means you have to consider things like how much do you charge for what you do.

Now, if you're an independent consultant, you set your price. If you're at a firm, typically the price is set for you, although a lot of times I see firms let consultants decide if they're going to give a discount. But for this example, let's say you're an independent consultant. You've got to set your price. You have to consider what your market is and what people are willing to pay you for what you do. But that's not the only part of the equation. You also have to consider the value of what you do when you're setting your price.

Now, if you underprice yourself or if you look at the range of what people are paying for it and you put yourself at the bottom, which I see a lot of folks do because they think, oh well, that will give me a competitive advantage, or if you discount what you do a lot, what that means is that you will have to work more to make the income you want or you're going to have to decide to make less money. And I've seen that happen over and over again with all kinds of different consultants.

The tendency I've seen is often to underprice yourself. And what that means is, as I said, you're going to have to work a lot more, which means it's going to be harder to balance it with other things that are important to you in your life.

One of the other examples is you'll have the same problem is if you don't bill for all the work that you do. Now that seems kind of obvious. You're like well, I'm a consultant. Obviously, I'm going to bill for all the work I do. But, again, very common. I've seen consultants either round down their time, so maybe they're not going to charge for that 15 minutes and that 15 minutes

and that half an hour, but that builds up over time and that becomes many hours. Or they're not going to charge for some work, especially if the scope of the project starts to creep up just a little bit at a time. They think, oh well that's no big deal. That's no big deal. But again, over time that becomes a lot of money.

If you end up under billing for what you actually do, your back to the same place, which is you're going to have to work more to make the income you want or you're going to have to make less money.

The other way that I see this happening is how much time consultants spend doing things that they cannot bill for. This is, by the way, one of the reasons repeat business is so important. This is my favorite example because I've seen this a lot, is that if you spend big chunks of your time always having to cultivate new clients are always having to write proposals, you will again have to work more to get the income you want or you're going to have to make less. Because you're going to have to carve that time out of your work time. And, generally, if you want to make the same income, you've got to work the amount of time you expected to so that time starts to come out of other areas of your life.

One of the tricks that I've learned over time is it's really important to build a client base that values you and that you do really good things for them and they come back to you over and over again because that minimizes the need to do that new cultivation or writing proposals or the other work that you need to do to bring business in.

Along the way, as I figured out things like this, and this wasn't something that I learned overnight, it's something I learned over several years, I helped other consultants figure it out too because what I saw is that a lot of folks were coming in, they were struggling with the same stuff that I did and they were struggling over and over again. And I loved helping them because I didn't want to see them struggle in the way that I did and I wanted to see them be as successful as they could as quickly as possible.

So that became my inspiration for The Craft of Consulting. And my goal is to help you get there as quickly as possible and to take as many shortcuts as you can along the way till you get to the place you want to with your consulting business. And this podcast is one of the ways that I want to do that.

But if you need more, I've got other things that can help you. If you go to my website, **www.craftofconsulting.com**, I have a whole bunch of other things there that can actually be very helpful. I've got free content. You'll see blogs where I dive into very specific topics that can help you as a consultant. Things like how to get people who already know you and already adore you to help you get your first client. How do you write a contract scope, not just so that you get the gig, but so you can manage client expectations? And that means that you can avoid those really awkward client conversations where you have to ask them for more money or you can avoid actually losing money if you're not willing to have those conversations.

I also have tools that can help you. I have things like tools that can help you figure out what can you offer to clients and how do you actually articulate that in a way that's going to be meaningful to a client. I also have something like tips and scripts for tricky client conversations. This was actually something that came about because I had a colleague who was in a tough spot with a client. There was a client who she really liked, but they kept increasing the scope and every time they did, they didn't talk about the budget. And she thought that well, they probably think I can just keep absorbing it in the budget that I have. And that's extremely common. I've seen that happen a lot. It's happened to me over and over again. And she wasn't sure how to start that conversation with them and not sound like a consultant who only cares about money, which clients can't stand by the way and they tell me that all the time.

What I did is I gave her some tips and I said, here's how you can start the conversation, if they say this, here's some of the things that you can actually reply. And at the end of it she said, this is great stuff. I wish you could just write me a script. So that's what I did. And that's available on the website for all kinds of tricky client conversations to help you navigate those so that you maintain really good feelings with your client or really good relationship. But you also make sure that you get what you need as a consultant.

I'm going to be adding content to the website every week. I'm going to be adding new podcasts every week with new topics and new guests. So please subscribe to the podcast. Please go to craftofconsulting.com if you want to get more. And let me also know if you have any burning questions or problems you'd like me to address, either on a podcast or on the website or both, because I am here to help.

I'm really excited to be working with you on your consulting journey and I want to thank you very much for listening to this podcast and I will see you on the next one. Thank you.