11 Reasons To Walk Away From Consulting Opportunities
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For Boutique Consultancies And Solo Consultants
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Dynamic Innovations Squad
http://www.di-squad.com
And what the sausage is all about William Bullock, the American inventor of the rotary printing press?

Well, an interesting event took place in 1863. Bullock’s weird contraption revolutionised the printing industry by being able to print as many as 10,000 sheets per hour. But on an otherwise nice day, the shit seriously hit the fan for good ol’ William. While installing a new machine, he got frustrated because some details didn’t work out as he’d planned.

So, in frustration, he kicked a driving belt onto a pulley.
And then the real horror started.
As a result of the kick, his foot got caught in the pulley and was dragged inside the machine. It quickly turned his foot into mash beyond repair.
Then the wound got infected, developed gangrene, and William died in the middle of getting his foot amputated.

I mention this bizarre accident because if you jump on the wrong consulting engagement, you may end up with losing something.

Maybe not your life, but your money and sanity.
And while nasty engagements can look pretty exciting from a distance, when you go too close to investigate, they can drag you in and now you in deep trouble.

So, in this article we look at 11 reasons to walk away from consulting opportunities.

1. When You’re Not Allowed To Start The Project With A Thorough (And Paid) Diagnosis

Roy Williams, the author of The Wizard of Ads book series, once said...

“People in business are uniquely unqualified to see their own companies and products objectively.”

Some clients have the pervert idea of self-diagnosing their situations, and then hiring pairs of hands to do the nuts and bolts tactical implementation as dictated by clients.

As a result, based on a McKinsey study...

- 75% of solutions don’t return profits to sellers.
- 50% of solutions don’t deliver the value buyer expected, bought and paid for.

As you can see, in the case of 25% of the solutions, sellers deliver the contracted value, but still, end up without profit.

One big part of this problem is that buyers don’t allow sellers to diagnose buyers’ issues, so sellers develop solutions based on symptoms.

But think about it.
Let’s say you have back problems. A large percentage of back pain is caused tight hamstring muscles, and it shows up in the pack as referred pain.
But there is nothing a back doctor can do to solve the problem. You have to see a leg doctor.
Similarly, if you have a sales problem, it is hardly ever sales-related. It’s more likely lead generation-related.
Before you accept any work, insist on doing a thorough diagnosis, and since it has value, make sure you get paid for it.
Never agree to work on specs your buyer has worked out in isolation.
It can only drag you down, and when the project tanks, because it will, you get blamed for the failure.

2. When You Don’t Believe In The Product/Service Your Client Sells?

This conflict can be either belief-based or commerce-based.
The ideal engagement represents a commercially valuable product/service that you actually believe in.
There is no point in putting your heart and soul into something that has no commercial value.
Similarly, as a human being, you can’t put your heart and soul into something that you don’t believe in.
When both you and your client’s people believe in what the client sells, then it creates an upward spiral which increases the chances of completing projects with great success.
But when either you or your client’s people express doubt and scepticism about the client’s product/service, then that creates an equally big downward spiral.
You just pump in the hours, which might be all right if you charge – in my view unethical – hourly rates, but if you want to work with perfect clients on value-priced engagements, then this approach is a bit of a disaster.

3. When You’re Not Interested In The Type Of Work The Engagement Involves
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The engagement can be financially rewarding, the client company may be the perfect company and the buyer may be a perfect buyer, but the project itself doesn’t excite you.

So, instead of doing it grudgingly for the money alone, the best bet is just to tell the buyer that in your opinion you’re not the best person for this project, and for ethical reasons, you decline the engagement.

Yes, you lose some coins, but you grow pretty tall in your buyers’ eyes. You become a straight shooter, who is willing to forego money if the project can’t provide psychological and intellectual satisfaction.

What factors can make up your interest in a project. For me the factors are...

- Do I enjoy doing this kind of work?
- Am I highly skilled at doing this type of work?
- Can I learn a lot from doing this type of work?
- Is this work fairly labour-light with very high perceived value?

4. When You Smell The Rat In The Engagement

Chicagoan essayist, short story writer, editor, former editor of the Phi Beta Kappa Society's The American Scholar magazine, Joseph Epstein once said...

“Some shores are set aside for shipwreck”

Well, so are some consulting engagements.

They may have nice financial upsides, but the non-financial downsides far outweigh all the money it has to offer.

There are clients who expect too much. While that usually happens to resource-restricted (a.k.a. broke) buyers, it can happen to well-funded buyers too with attitude problems. They want you to bring them the sun, the moon and the stars, and they reserve the right to treat you like shit in the process.

They believe that for the good money they pay you\(^1\), you have to become their little errand boys or girls and blindly do what they demand of you.

They have the tendency to make last minute changes to predetermined action steps or they fail to review what you submit to them for approval.

While you can make good money on these projects, the psychological price, that you pay, can be far too high.

The rat may also be some ethical issues. It can be either an unethical industry or some unethical practices even in ethical industries.

\(^1\) In reality, they never pay more than average, let alone good pay.
5. When You Sense Too Much Organisational Politics As Part Of The Engagement

While company politics is not size-dependent, larger corporations tend to be more political than smaller entrepreneurial companies.

That’s why I have stopped consulting with large corporations. I had to deal with layers upon layers of flunkies and had a hard time to get to meet and interact with buyers.

Different people have different tolerance levels for politics. Mine is pretty low due to lack of interest.

Also, my observation is that when people resort to politics, they have something to hide from you.

You may also want to read The 48 Laws Of Power by Robert Greene. You could learn what sort of dirty games some people may play on you, and play it so subtly that you don’t even notice it, and in many cases, you may even aid their games.

6. When You’re Expected To Walk On Eggshells

Have you ever had this situation when one of the Big Cheese’s flunkies told you about the buyer’s pet peeves, and how you should behave not to upset him. In most cases it’s him.

Robert Sutton, the author of The No Asshole Rule: Building aCivilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't calls them BSDs, Big Swinging Dicks.

They expect the world to bend to their wills. They also expect people around them to be intimidated by them.

Yes, one option is to walk on eggshells for the engagement’s duration and cater for every whim and whish of petty tyrants, but the best bet is to walk away from them.

No amount of money is worth putting up with the stress and later the stress-induced illnesses that some moronic clients can cause.

And when some of your associates come to you and complain that some idiotic clients have mistreated them, save your people and dump your clients.

Good clients are easier to come by than good associates.

Some government agencies operate on the basis that an agent’s life is secondary to the mission’s success, but in consulting, the engagement’s success must be secondary to your people’s welfare.

If you stand up for your people against shitty clients, you will belong to a very small and prestigious group of smart entrepreneurs who understand what every farmer understands so well that happy cows give more milk.

Just read Contented Cows Give Better Milk: The Plain Truth About Employee Relations And Your Bottom Line by Bill Catlette and Richard Hadden
7. When You Smell Probable Late-, No- Or Underpayment In The Air

Just like so many consultants, I reckon, you too have an absolute minimum fee under which you don’t even entertain engagements.

Some people say, you should delay the talk about money as much as you can, but the danger in that approach is that tyre kickers can drag you along and exploit you.

But if you ask a question even before the engagement to clarify what sort of minimum budget the buyer has put aside to finance this consulting initiative, then you know where you stand.

“Have you budgeted funds for this project and is it at least $25,000? In my engagements, I shoot for at least 10:1 ROI for my clients. Therefore I want to make sure their businesses are significant enough to garner a minimum long-term payback of $250,000 from the successful completion of this engagement.”

The bad news is that you may get lots of “No”s. One of the reasons for that is the world of commerce is full of idiots who want the moon and the stars but willing to pay only legal minimum wage or even less.

The good news is that you get a few real “Yes”es from real smart buyers with real budgets. And they don’t drag you around and try to milk you for free information or even free work.

Don’t ever let your clients evaluate your performance against the passage of time, the pounds of deliverables or the number of your muscle movement (observable manual labour).

You’re a knowledge worker, and your most important traits can’t be measured using some random measuring sticks (time, etc.).

They must be judged and discerned.

Knowledge work is a non-linear process and can’t be subjected to the cadences and rhythms of an assembly line.

It’s an iterative and reiterative process of your mind.

Manual labour can be measured and any idiot can wield a measuring stick.

Knowledge work must be judged and discerned by other experts.

If your clients balk at your fee for facilitating a strategy formulation session, it’s not necessarily about you.

It may well be about your clients who, due to lack of expertise, don’t understand the value of a good strategy.

Then you should move on instead of trying to convince an idiot about something which he probably doesn’t have the intellectual horsepower to comprehend anyway.

8. When The Expected Outcomes Are Ill-Defined

No matter what sort of consulting services you sell, your clients seek two things: 1) Increase profits and 2) reduce costs. Look at a consulting engagement as a system
And in order to be successful with your engagements, your clients must tell you what exactly they want to achieve with a specific engagement.

And while your engagements have specific outputs (objectives), like “revamping executive compensations” or “Facilitating off-site strategy retreat”, the goals are always more meaningful than “mere” objectives.

So, make sure that in your discussions with buyers, you spend the most time on goals. The excitement of achieving them and the misery of missing them.

The goals set the context for the objectives.

If the goal is “increasing online sales by 25% by the end of 2014”, then one of the objectives is “optimising website for qualified traffic and conversion.” Another objective can be “fine-tuning sales funnel for early disqualification of inappropriate sales leads.”

You’re the expert and you know your methodologies. There is no need for clients to dictate them to you. So, don’t talk about methodologies.

Taxi drivers are not accountable to their passengers on how many times they change gear from hotels to airports. Passengers just want to catch their planes.
And when you notice that your buyer is cagey about goals but heavily grills you on how many hours a day he will see you work and how many pounds of deliverables you will produce, then you’d better run.

A few years ago I went to see a project opportunity, and I had the exact same problem. I discussed the project with the COO who seemed to be the real buyer. Towards the end of our discussion the CEO’s rather obnoxious assistant came in and started grilling me about what time I would start working, how many hours I would work and if I would work on weekends and evenings. She also told me that the company would pay me only for the work I perform in their offices and under the appointed project manager’s close supervision. She also told me that since everyone was rather busy, I shouldn’t “disturb” other people with my problems. And I could interact only with her, and she would relay my message to the appropriate people if you deem my messages worth relaying.

She even reprimanded the COO for not telling me the terms of my contract. And the COO was just standing there under the spell of this self-important admin goon.

Although she was pretty good at guarding the CEO from disturbances and lowlifes like consultant, I finally managed to get to him and told him that I would decline the work.

He asked me why and I told him what happened between the assistant and me.

We parted company, but he contacted me a few days later. He’d fired his assistant and wanted me to reconsider the engagement.

After that little incident, I had a blast of a project with the COO and his team.

Beware of low-level people and self-important flunkies. Since they don’t understand strategy, they get hopelessly lost in tactics and end up doing the wrong tactics that can only undermine the strategy.

9. When You Sense Adversity And Hidden Agendas

In this category, I put issues when buyers are unwilling to meet you and they send their flunkies in their stead.

These flunkies have neither budget nor decision power to accept your offers, so from your standpoint, they are as useful milk bucket under a bull.

Nevertheless, because many of these flunkies are corporate politicians who use politics (as opposed to competence) to advance in the ranks, they play sellers to serve their agendas. And they will do their best to keep your people away from meeting real buyers.

On a nice day in 1861, a lawyer called John A. McClellan, envious of his friend, Lincoln, a fellow lawyer, made a life-changing decision.

Becoming a general caught his fancy. He quit his position in Congress and got himself a commission as a brigadier general.

Actually, the Union Army was so desperate for leadership that even a politician could qualify.
But he had no intention to become a real soldier. The army was his springboard to presidency. He was placed under General Grant to learn the ropes. And he did. Within a year, he was a major general, demanding to step out of Grant’s shadow and have his own actions.

In the meantime, he was scheming, scamming and deceiving anyone to get what he wanted. But Grant found out about McClernand’s intentions, and took the soldiers that McClernand personally had recruited away from him. Now McClernand was without an army and had no chance of proving himself being worthy of higher offices.

While pretending to serve his country, McClernand was driven by serving himself. He had nothing to offer to the country. He used it as his cover agenda to advance his real agenda of plunking his petite little arse into the White House.

You too may have found that the world has a chronic overdose of John A. McClernand. Most of them are breathtakingly incompetent and use their political charms to get ahead in life.

The good news is that those people are so hellbent on getting what they want is that they throw subtlety aside, so they can be found out pretty quickly. Their hellbentness to get what they want is driven by their subconscious minds. Their subtlety is driven by their conscious minds.

And whenever there is a battle between the subconscious and the conscious minds, the conscious mind has no chance. Of course, McClernand didn’t know that.

And the lack of this knowledge cost him the presidency. Well, live and learn.

So, if you smell hidden agendas for the engagement, then you’d better run.

"You'd better run,
You'd better run,
You'd better run from the Devil's gun.
The race is on,
The race is on,
Now you'd better run from the Devil's gun."

**Gun: Race with the Devil**

### 10. When You Sense The Buyer May Try Hard To Micromanage You

When buyers indicate they plan to micromanage you or your people, you’d better leave.

I saw this example in operation in 2004 at a company I consulted with on business development. In another department, the client had hired a team of software developers to upgrade and improve the software that was controlling the production line’s computer system.

Although the developers had their own team leader, the client’s henchman, bypassing the team leader, kept going directly to the developers and pestering them about some nuts-and-bolts.
details like what sort of loop functions they should use in the software, why they should use “for” loops not “while” loops, where to use assembly language and where to use high-level language, and similar details.  
The goon also started reprimanding them for taking too long toilet breaks and wasting too much time on planning and strategising instead of hitting the keyboards.  
And the sad point was that the team leader’s boss told the team leader to put up with this behaviour because the software company really needed the money. Essentially he told the team leader that the client’s goon had all the rights in the world to do whatever he wanted to do to his team.  
And then shortly before completion, the team leader and three developers left for extended medical leave for 11 months. They never returned to that client. And they never returned to their employer. The project went way over deadline and budget, which their employer had to pay for.  
Sadly, many employers hang their people out to dry by handing them over to their clients for micromanagement.  
And since they are not the client’s own people, clients tend to use and abuse them since they are disposable items.  
This reminds me of a scene in the movie Ben Hur, when the new governor, Quintus Arrius goes down to the rowing deck of the galley and addresses the slaves, "You're all condemned men. We keep you alive to serve this ship. Row well and live."  
Sadly, most consulting firms repeat this message to their associates on a daily basis. “We send you out to earn money and make us (the partners) stinking rich. The client’s henchman is your master and commander, and we expect your blind obedience at all times. If you are mistreated, beaten or tortured, just suck it up and make us money.”

11. When The Opportunity Starts With An RFP  
This point is related to the previous point, because an RFP all by itself is a huge hidden agenda. There are multiple problems here.  
You almost never receive an RFP from real buyers. RFPs are compiled by flunkies and issued by procurement agents.  
You also have to recognise that the RFP is a buying process in which the deck is stacked against valuable sellers and the process caters for low-ballers.  
RFP issuers are looking for the lowest bidders and lowest bidders are looking for brainless ways of getting new engagements, even if those engagements come without profits.  
We know from an old McKinsey study that some 50% of engagements don’t deliver the value clients have bought and paid for, and some 75% of engagements don’t deliver the desired profits to consultants.  
Of course, there are many factors to blame, but, I believe, the biggest one is the RFP process.
The whole idea of the RFP is to beat all unique value out if your solutions, to commoditise them to the lowest value and to buy them by the pound like potatoes.

If you go along with the RFP process, you have a pretty fierce competition and some of the shittiest clients on the planet who treat your people like dirt. You also have to expect scope creep to the nth degree.

It may take a bit more thinking to land non-RFP clients, but those are real clients. You can discuss objectives and values with them.

**Summary**

Obviously there are more than these 11 reasons, and I want to encourage you to collect your own reasons.

And then in a latter article we discuss when to walk away from existing engagements that have turned unacceptable.

In the meantime, put together your own “walk away” list.

*With victory on high...*

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### Additional Knowledge Products to Build Your Consulting Firm

Here are some knowledge products on a broad range of areas as they apply to running a boutique consulting firms or solo consultancies. These products are sort of workbooks. They explain what is what, then walk you through the "how to..." part of the process. As you read the books, you do the exercises, and by the time you finish reading, all the relevant bits and bobs are in front of you on paper applied to your own unique situation.

I hope you find them valuable.

**Consulting Retainer Engagement Toolkit:** A comprehensive home study programme on the ins and outs of setting up consulting retainer engagements in which your clients receive great value and you are compensated for the value you bring to your clients' tables by making your brainpower available to your clients. For details see [Consulting Retainer Engagement Toolkit](http://www.di-squad.com).

**It's All About Your Value: Consultants' Guide to Setting, Raising and Safeguarding Fees:** How to price consulting engagements based on buyers' perception of the value the consultant...
brings to the table regardless of time, materials and other retarded but commonly used factors. This booklet covers a step-by-step process of establishing the value of your contribution and how to get paid for that value. For details see *It's All About Your Value*.

**Mastering the Consulting Proposal Process:** For many consultants proposal writing is a "hope-and-pray" game. They sit down with prospects, chat for a while and then volunteer to "submit a proposal" without knowing the full specifications of the intended project. But some, usually false, buyers are just collecting free information for in-house implementation. A proposal, just like a marriage certificate, is a short document, but it is silly to offer it unless the other party has already made a commitment to go ahead. This e-book walks you through the maze of developing your proposal and presenting it to buyers. [Mastering the Proposal Process](#).

**Dynamic Duo Mentor Programme:** If you're a solo consultant, my Dynamic Duo Mentor Programme may be a solution for you to have access to a second opinion on both strategic and tactical issues you’re about to put into action. For details see [Dynamic Duo Mentor Programme](#).