How to Build a Portfolio Career: Consultancy

An introductory guide to consulting as an alternative or complementary activity for early career
researchers.

A series of 'How To Guides' commissioned by **The Exchange**.

Supported using public funding by
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Part 1: Background and context

The current situation for early career researchers -

Embarking on an academic career is not for the faint-hearted. According to The Times Higher Education in the United Kingdom only one in 10 PhD graduates will end up working in academia long term. The Economist blames this on an over production of PhDs however this is only the first hurdle. Post-PhD, once a postdoctoral position has been attained, a report from Vitae found, a significant number of researchers had unrealistic expectations about the likelihood of their forging long-term careers in higher education. Realistically, landing a permanent job in academia can be a gruelling road emotionally, physically and especially financially. This has caused many to turn their backs on academics careers. Short of giving up on an academic career trajectory sometimes all that is needed is a little bit of breathing room as you negotiate the precarious waters leading up to a permanent position. This relief can be provided by consulting.

What is consulting?

Consulting can be defined as selling your knowledge and / or expertise. This guide is about how consulting in your chosen field can help smooth some of the bumpier moments in an academic career trajectory – especially at the very beginning. While consulting is not for everyone, this guide will attend to its benefits and provide an initial step by step guide intended for those only just starting.

Benefits of consulting

Aside from the fact that you can set your own day rates (within reason and tax thresholds), there are a host of appealing benefits that consultancy can provide as an early career researcher. Consultancy can enhance your research profile, it can expand your networks, it is difficult at first but once you have established clients it balances out and can be very steady work, depending on your field it can be done remotely. Probably the most attractive quality in choosing consulting as a career option is the control that it affords – it is essentially setting up yourself as a sole trader or business, and this can be a very attractive pull factor.

Drawbacks of consulting

Consulting, like everything else, has a few drawbacks. It can be difficult to get started. This is because in order to make consultancy work as a steady income generator you need repeat clients. Thus, the first and second clients are always the hardest ones to get. However once this hurdle is negotiated you should see a return on your time invested. It is important to ask yourself whether or not you are ready to put in the leg work – you are running in order to stand still in the initial stages, and the early stage might take a while depending on how much time you have to invest into your consultancy role.

Part 2: Important stages

Stage 1:

Identify your service. This is the most important stage, it is here that you decide you will become a consultant. But first, ask yourself, what can you actually offer? What is it that you do, and how can you turn your level of expertise into something that can be offered practically and to industry. Use the table provided in the Appendix as a tool to help you think through what it is that you might be able to offer.

Example: My research/academic background is Human and Economic Geography with a focus on Urbanism. This means offering up my services to organisations under the rubric of my field – but also expanding this umbrella. As a result I have consulted for municipal organisations, national governments, third sector organisations, local government including local councils, urban planning based organisations, housing associations, and urban art collectives.

Stage 2:

At this stage it is important to start disciplining yourself. Set out your work hours, arrange your desk space at home, update your software if need be, start populating your calendar and purchase any materials you might need – especially business cards. Business cards are very important so be picky when you design yours, also make sure you order enough that you can hand them out quite freely in the first instance. As you become more experienced you can be more discerning about who you give your card to. Importantly, once you outline a work schedule, try to stick to it as closely as possible. Sometimes working from home can be a distraction, an option can be sourcing a local co-working space or informal work space (like a café that has Wifi). This stage is all about setting up your work parameters. While the following link is tailored for digital work and marketing, anyone can see the usefulness of thinking about a calendar in this way.

Tip: If you are a PhD candidate (or not for that matter), you need to expand the types of events that you attend and this means including more than just conferences – leg work is important here. While conferences are hugely important, other events matter too. You should be exploring what large and small conferences as well as other types of meetings and/or events that you can attend in order to scan the landscape for where you can offer your services. This is actually how the industry finds consultants in many instances – through events. You then need to pencil in all of these events into your calendar and begin the registration process, then plan your work (and play) around these dates. A basic web trawl is good enough to scan the events horizon – then do some research.

Stage 3:

Determine your tax situation and whether or not you need to set yourself up as a registered company. This does not necessarily mean changing your tax situation right away, but it does mean that you need to start thinking about the practicalities of consulting and how it will affect your tax payments. Start looking into hiring an accountant – or at least set up an appointment with one to discuss your consultancy requirements regarding tax. Once you make a decision, it is important to let HMRC know as soon as possible especially if you become self-employed. A reputable accountant should be able to help you with all of this and should be able to show you exactly what you need to do and how to do it. See **Appendix** for useful links.

Stage 4:

Online presence: At this stage you want to set up a Linked In profile. It is very straightforward and will start allowing you to network by joining and following specific groups. Likewise, as you begin to network by adding people and potential clients your profile will grow. At best, most of your work could come through Linked In, at worst you have a profile that you can point potential

clients toward. Treat your profile like an online CV, but do not overdo it. It might actually be worth investing in getting a professional photograph taken for your profile – they stand out. I like this article by Forbes on how freelancers can work their profiles. It is important to stay active but not to bombard people with information. Regarding other types of online media, I would stay away from Facebook and Twitter as professional tools, and think about putting together your own webpage – not a blog, but an actual webpage. This can be done rather quickly and cheaply as well – see **Appendix** for a list of cheap webpage building sites. As a last point I would begin signing up to websites that advertise potential projects for potential clients. These sites are vital to the consulting community depending on your field. See **Appendix** for a few examples.

Stage 5:

Certification. I would consider taking some type of formal training in consulting if you have the time and the money to spare. These courses can be incredibly useful and if they are tied to a certification can enhance your profile significantly. Moreover, they will allow you to grow your network. The Institute of Consulting provides training and certification that could help you with this. This stage is for those who are thinking about becoming consultants as a profession, full time. It requires a significant contribution of your time (and in some instances your money), but is well worth it in the end. See **Appendix** for more information.

Stage 6:

Insurance: Many larger organisations will not take you on as a consultant if you do not have insurance cover. Types of insurance vary depending on your service however the most important is called Professional Indemnity Insurance. This type of insurance basically provides you with cover if the services that you provide cause professional or financial loss to your client. There are a

number of insurance companies who provide this. See Appendix for a list. Importantly, some smaller organisations may not require you to have this insurance so just make sure you tailor this need to what your client requires.

Stage 7:

Networking. This is critical. Get out there, start researching and then populating your calendar with events that might offer you the possibility of getting some work. Start going to every event that you can. Get your business cards ready and take them with you everywhere you go. Start meeting everyone you can. The most important aspect of gaining access to networks is showing up – this should be second nature.

Example: My very first contract came from attending a symposium that my academic supervisor suggested to me. I was able to use my supervisor's name as an endorsement which helped in securing the trust required for that highly important first business card swap. I was highly interested in the prospect of doing work for this client that I immediately contacted them the very next day. This then led to an email exchange and an eventual contract for work.

Stage 8:

Consultancy and your academic work: This is important for those of you who want to straddle academia and consultancy. Once you begin to get contracts and once you embark on and complete the work, remember to try and tie your consultancy work to your research outputs. In other words, try and publish your work if possible. While journal articles might be a possibility, your outputs would probably be more in the form of reports, essays and working papers. If you have an affiliation to a university department, get these outputs into the university repository as quickly as you can so that they can be picked up by Google Scholar. It's a new world out there, and publishing is changing. You need to start using what is

out there to bolster your profile. Try and make a plan to see how your work might fit into a publication strategy (see **Appendix**).

Example: As I have an affiliation with a university I often use this affiliation to upload research into the university repository. If this is possible for you then make sure you also identify some internal peer reviewers for your work. This helps me and the department in a number of ways. First it bolsters my research profile, second it helps the department's profile, and third it solidifies my relationship with senior academics in the department – which may lead to a joint publication or two.

Stage 9:

Get out there, get those contracts, and good luck.....................

Appendix:

Service table:

Field/ Discipline	Actual services to potential clients (such as research, evaluation, ideas, assistance)	Others in your field who you know that consult (list of professors and other researchers you may know)	Types of projects that exist (do some research on the types of projects that are out there)	Potential clients	Do these clients require certification	Where is the work (are you willing to travel)	What are the average Day rates	Other

Employment status:

https://www.gov.uk/employment-status/selfemployed-contractor

Find an accountant:

https://www.theguardian.com/money/2013/jan/12/find-accountant-tax-return-how-much-pay

Make your own webpage:

https://www.squarespace.com/

https://www.moonfruit.com/

https://www.sitebuilderreport.com/

Contract finding websites:

https://www.gov.uk/contracts-finder

https://www.competefor.com/

http://www.tendersdirect.co.uk/

https://www.upwork.com/o/jobs/browse/skill/startup-consulting/

Institute of Consulting:

http://www.iconsulting.org.uk/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institute_of_Consulting

Insurance:

http://www.simplybusiness.co.uk/insurance/professional-indemnity/

https://www.moneysupermarket.com/business-insurance/professional-indemnity/

https://www.confused.com/professional-indemnity-insurance

Publication plan:

Contract name/ type	Field of work	Type of research output	Permission required?	University Repository/ affiliation

Other Useful Links:

https://benrmatthews.com/freelance-consultant/

https://www.theguardian.com/small-business-network/2014/jan/24/become-home-freelance-consultant

https://www.thebalance.com/what-is-the-difference-between-consulting-and-freelancing-845836