

Working with a Professional Career Consultant

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published on BNET.com 5/02/2007

While many people today are happy to manage their career progression themselves, on some occasions the most effective way of reaching your goals is to call in some professional help. Professional career consultants can help you determine what kind of career you should be in, set career goals for yourself, and prepare for a job or promotion campaign. To find the right career consultant for you, be sure to do your homework. Not all career consultants are created equal, and not all will be the right fit for your situation and personality. Not only will you want someone with good credentials, you will also want someone with whom you feel a sense of compatibility and trust. And considering that they are not inexpensive, you want to make sure that you get the most for your money.

What You Need to Know

What are the key questions to ask as we set out to work with a career consultant?

You should consider the following:

- What is your goal in working with a professional career consultant?
- What are some of the services typically offered by career consultants?
- How do you find the right person?
- How do you manage the relationship effectively?
- How do you know when your goal has been achieved?

When is a professional career consultant most useful?

Career consultants are most commonly called up on when someone is looking for a new position or considering changing careers. However, career consultants can also prove useful for anyone seeking advice about their current role, and they can be an objective and impartial sounding board. And some people use career consultants once or twice a year for career “tune-ups.”

Is there a typical fee for a professional career consultant?

Career consultants usually charge by the hour, and their fees generally range from \$70 to \$200 per hour. Occasionally you may be asked to pay a large fee up front. Before you agree to do that, you should interview several career consultants and find out what their fees are. Some career consultants can offer you a battery of tests to help you understand your skills and your personality style. They may also conduct a self-assessment that can guide you in deciding what kind of career you will be successful in. Such a package may cost over \$500. Such extensive testing will not be right or necessary for everyone, but in cases where a person is really floundering in his or her career, it may prove helpful.

What is the best way of finding a career consultant?

Personal referral is by far the best method of finding a career consultant. If you know someone who has successfully used a career consultant, you can ask them to give you the person's name and number. Without a personal referral, you will have to do the research on your own. Use the Internet or your telephone directory to search for career consultants (also called career coaches or career counselors). Ask the consultant about his or her background, methods, fees and references to be sure you find the right person for you.

What to Do

Set Some Goals

To get the best from working with a consultant, you need to have some concrete goals to work toward. Define these in results-oriented language, being as specific as possible so that you will know when you've reached your target. For example, you might want to:

- to find a new job;
- to obtain a promotion and a raise;
- to change careers to something more fulfilling.

Be Skeptical about Big Promises

Career issues are complex and often take time to work through. Be skeptical of career consultants who promise a quick fix, easy money, résumés that get speedy results, or other come-ons. Professional career consultants require extensive training and education.

Make a List of Potential Career Consultants and Research Their Qualifications

Using the Internet or your telephone directory, make a list of career consultants who specialize in your field. Narrow down your list by checking the qualifications of each of the potential consultants. In the United States, Career Consultants are certified by the National Board for Certified Counselors and the National Career Development Association (addresses below). You also may call potential consultants and inquire about their training and experience.

Choose a Consultant from Your List

Once you have developed a list of candidates, it is time to narrow that list down to the one career consultant best for you. Begin by conducting a telephone interview with each person on your list. Introduce yourself and explain your goal to them. Ask them about their methodology, what their costs are, and how their background will help them to help you. In addition to the qualifications and methodology of your career consultant, you will want to pay attention to your comfort level with each person and to what your instincts or intuition tell you. You want to select someone that you can trust and who will challenge you to reach your full potential. When you have narrowed your list to two or three potential career consultants, make a face-to-face appointment with each in order to make your final decision. Most professional career consultants will not charge you for an exploratory meeting.

Clarify Your Goals and Expectations

Explain your goals to your career consultant, and make your expectations clear right from the start. Your career consultant will also explain what is expected of you, for example, what you are to do between sessions. Be sure you understand the payment schedule and amounts. Will you pay by session, or will you be billed at the end of each month, for example? Most career consultants expect you to pay something before the sessions commence as a sign of your commitment, and many will ask you to sign a contract. Only sign the contract if you are completely comfortable with all elements of it, though, and be sure to question any items that you do not understand or like.

Think About How Your Professional Engagement Will End

Because you set a list of clear and specific goals when you started working with your career consultant, it should be pretty clear when your work has been completed. If, however, new goals arise as you work through that to do list, you may want to sign up for a new contract. Or you may decide that you want to meet maybe twice a year or on an “as needed” basis. Because the relationship with a professional career consultant can be very personal and rewarding, it’s always nice to end with a little celebration or with a small gift to mark your appreciation.

What to Avoid

You Don’t Set Specific Goals

Some people go into this relationship because they have been laid off or dismissed and the company pays for a career consultant as part of the severance package. The result can be that you meet with your consultant regularly but without any direction, and nothing gets done. A good career consultant should guide you into setting goals right at the beginning. If you find yourself meeting for over a month without seeing any progress, it’s probably time to move on and find someone else who can help you more effectively.

You Can’t Let Go

If the relationship has been really successful, you will have developed a powerful bond with your career consultant, and it may be difficult to terminate the relationship when your goal is met. But it is important to recognize when it is time to move on and to begin to apply what you have learned. Having a celebration dinner is a nice way to symbolize the ending of your working together, and you can always schedule career “tune-ups” if you need them.

You’re Not Committed to Making Progress

You meet weekly with your consultant and you agree to take certain actions such as working on your résumé or making five phone calls. But the following week when you meet again you have not done the things that you promised you would do. If this happens regularly, you must take a serious look at your goal. You may have set a goal that is not realistic or is not really what you want to do. If you feel this is the case, when you next meet your consultant, ask him or her to advise you on how best to re-evaluate what you are doing and how appropriate your efforts are.

Where to Learn More

Web Sites:

National Board for Certified Counselors: www.nbcc.org

National Career Development Association: www.ncda.org

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