

Spring 2013

# The proficient I.T. consultant: A study of the professional

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The Proficient I.T. Consultant:

A Study of the Professional

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A Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate

College of Business

James Madison University

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Bachelor of Business Administration

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by Sina Chidi Joseph-Ojeniyi

May 2013

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Computer Information Systems, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Business Administration.

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*I would like to dedicate my thesis to the living memory of my father and my mother,*

*Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors; adversity introduces a man to himself.*

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## **Acknowledgements**

First, I would like to thank my loving mother and father who saw me through my years.

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Thomas Dillon for his invaluable contributions to this project and my career. Karen Allison and the entire JMU Honors program staff for their guidance in this project and my honors curriculum. Dr. Richard Mathieu for believing in me and giving me a chance at one of the most prestigious CIS/MIS programs in the nation. Dr. Diane Lending, who's lectures gave me the invaluable knowledge that I will carry with me throughout my career. Dr. Michel Mitri, for putting the "C" in CIS and for ensuring that I was prepared to enter the I.T. consulting field. Professors Carey Cole and Jim Jewett whose unparalleled teaching approach and styles ensured the absorption and application of object oriented programming and telecommunications. A final thank you to the many of those that I could not mention individually but whose contributions are greatly appreciated.

## **Abstract**

Information Technology Consulting is an exciting and fast paced field where teams of professionals combine their expertise to help businesses reach their goals by improving their information systems. An information system is a combination of hardware, software, infrastructure and trained personnel organized to facilitate planning, control, coordination, and decision making in an organization. Consultants in this field employ a composite skillset consisting of business and technology proficiency in order to solve complex business problems.

Many students are interested in entering the I.T. consulting field but do not know where to begin or what they need to focus on in order to succeed. Students find themselves asking: “What do I need to be able to do?” This question is a difficult one as the answer typically has not been a simple or concise one. While there is no definitive “list” of these skills, the goal of this thesis is to provide a transferable, general skillset that is required in order to distinguish oneself as an excellent I.T. consultant. This research will focus mainly on the breadth of the subject while highlighting a few key areas of depth.

## Preface

Ever since the establishment of McKinsey and Booz & Co in the early 1900's, the word consultant has been associated with and regarded as synonymous with "expert". Information Technology (I.T.) consulting is an exciting field where firms such as Deloitte or Accenture give expert advice, solutions, and implementation assistance to businesses and government agencies in order to solve a problem. Typical situations where I.T. consulting firms would be brought in include improving current processes, creating new processes, minimizing cost, assurance, I.T. project planning, I.T. infrastructure, implementing **ERP** or **CRM** software, and I.T. security.

For example;

Picture a Fortune 500 company that has just acquired a smaller company in order to extend its market-share in its respective line of business. As with all mergers and acquisitions, there will be standard considerations when it comes to the integration process. These standards consist of unification of payroll, accounting, inventory, human resources, and other departments pivotal to a business's successful operation. What do all these considerations have in common? They all rely heavily on Information Technology. The issue is that daily tasks such as logging hours, billing clients, and procurement are done using different software solutions and methods at both companies. The discrepancies between these two companies in respect to software and processes will need to be addressed and re-worked into company-wide standards. This is just one example of the many potential types of projects that require expertise and project management. This is when Information Technology consultants would be brought in for a solution. They will work with the company and its employees in order to ensure the success and smoothness of the re-structuring process. This is just one example of the many different types of projects that

consultants engage in. Now that it's been established what an I.T. consultant does, what skills are necessary in order to succeed and excel as a consultant? In this project I plan to seek out and find the perceived and required skill-set of the proficient I.T. consultant.

I.T. Consultants can be thought as a cross between a traditional Management consultant and an I.T. professional. In order to formulate enterprise solutions an I.T. consultant needs to understand how a company works at not only at the business level, but at the technological level as well. This level of competency requires a specific skill-set consisting of a combination of soft-skills and hard-skills ranging from organizational skills, presentation skills, I.T. proficiency, and I.T. project management. This is where the issue rises of, which skills are required and or most important?

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Purpose of the Research**

Many students are fascinated by the I.T. consulting field and wish to begin their careers in this area. The majority of these students are unsure of what they should focus on in addition to their rigorous CIS/MIS curriculums. This thesis of this study attempts to prove that: *A proficient I.T. consultant possesses a composite skillset consisting of both functional and technical skills.* While there is no definitive “list” of these skills, the goal of this thesis is to provide a transferable, general skillset that is required in order to distinguish oneself as an excellent I.T. consultant. This research will focus mainly on the breadth of the subject while highlighting a few key areas of depth. For this research, I have gathered practitioners from I.T. consulting firms and COB students in an effort to find these critical skills.

This thesis project consists of:

1. Surveying CIS/MIS students
2. Formulating questions and interview specifics
3. Interviewing within different ranges of seniority in each respective firm, noting the skill expectancy differences between management and less senior employees
4. Review of job descriptions
5. Analyze the responses and data
6. Formulate a weighted compilation of the perceived required skills
7. Compose a detailed post-project overview and summary

## **1.2 Scope and Objectives of the Research**

The coverage of this study focuses mainly on the I.T. consulting field overall. It includes a macro-level view of the field while touching upon key areas of interest. In attempt to broaden its application and usability, this study does not include in-depth discussion on low-level technology practices.

The first goal of this research is to identify the technical and functional skills required to succeed in I.T. consulting. The research will highlight these skills from a high level and also demonstrate the value of these skills and how to apply them for success.

The second goal of this research is to give the reader an overview of the I.T. consulting field from perspectives they may not have yet experienced. The first perspective is that of the entry-level hire which includes students and professionals with 0-4 years of experience. The second perspective is from the experienced consultant with 4-12+ years, which includes senior consultants up to director level professionals.

The third goal of this research is to explain the complexity of consultants and their dynamic skills. Using the responses from experts and industry data, I will explain the change in desired skillset and proficiency as consultants transition from entry-level to experienced level positions. It is important to understand the rationale behind the shift as these consultants assume more project management and strategic responsibilities.

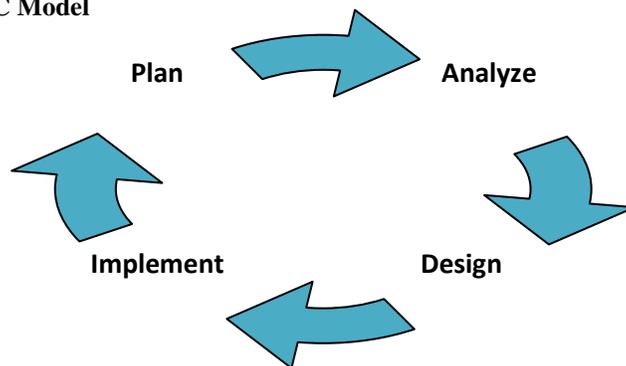
## 2. What is I.T. Consulting?

### 2.1 I.T. Consulting Explained

Information Technology Consulting is the process of providing professional advice and expertise to a business, organization, or a government agency via a project. These projects use technology to solve business problems and vary in complexity ranging from purely strategic advice to full lifecycle SDLC implementation. The System Development Life Cycle is a series of steps, or phases, that provide a model for the development and lifecycle management of a system. The SDLC is used to solve business problems typically including; process and efficiency improvement, cost cutting, and improved **inter-silo communication** and execution.

For example, an auto parts distributor is outgrowing its traditional method of keeping inventory on paper and relying on employees to document transactions by hand. This system poses many potential flaws like human error and destruction of records, which may slow down or even prevent a business from carrying out its operations. An I.T. consulting team would be hired to solve this problem and most likely would employ the use of an Inventory Management System or IMS. This IMS would phase out the legacy system and integrate a newer more efficient and effective system complete with relational database. This would solve the problems that the auto parts distributor is facing and add value to the company. While the projects may vary, the end goal is always the same; to provide a business with a competitive advantage.

**Figure 1 - SDLC Model**



## 2.2 Why an External Agent?

Some businesses, especially large ones, have their own in-house technology divisions. The majority of businesses elect to hire outside consultants to implement their systems for two major reasons: resources and **consultant credibility**. The firms that do not have large technology divisions lack the resources required to peruse an undertaking as elaborate and difficult as implement a system. While there are many to name, the main resources are typically money, workforce and experience. The second reason is the issue of consultant credibility. Humans by nature are not typically critical when giving self-assessments and businesses are the same, especially when it means delivering bad news to upper management. An outside agent would provide an unbiased evaluation and solution, which ultimately is better for the growth and future of the business. This is a very high-level explanation of this topic; further reading will provide a more in-depth rationale.

## 2.3 I.T. Functional and Technical Proficiency Requirements

I.T. consulting requires professionals to possess a composite skillset consisting of business and technology proficiency, one by itself is ineffective. A consultant must to be able to understand traditional business functions if they expect to use their technical skills to design and implement business solutions. Examples of business skills are an understanding of finance, operations, or accounting. Example of technical skills are proficiency in the various tactical activities in the SDLC like requirement gathering, programming, and modeling. In addition, consultants use a combination of soft skills, hard skills, and data in their work. Words to describe soft skills are interpersonal or organizational skills. These are skills that typically are not taught, but they are learned through experiences and working in teams. Hard skills describe skills that are more concrete like programming languages or database administration.

### **3. Variations and Critical Skills for I.T. Consultants**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

I.T. Consulting is a fast paced and highly competitive career which requires individuals to possess well-rounded skill-sets. Future consultants begin strengthening their skills long before they even accept positions with firms. They start sharpening their analytical, technical, and interpersonal skills as early as intermediate school and progress through undergraduate studies. Here students may choose to pursue studies in one or more of these areas: business, technology, engineering, or mathematics. In this environment students take their experiences in their individual and team based coursework and build upon the aforementioned analytical, technical, and interpersonal skills.

To date there is no universally accepted compilation of “ideal” skills that may be evaluated in order to predict and ensure thriving career success. The research in this thesis aims to prove that the ideal consultant is identified by evaluating the composite background and proficiency in functional, technical, and interpersonal skills. It is also important to note there is a great deal of overlap between these two types of consultants and many times this distinction may not even be formally recognized titles in human resources.

#### **3.2 Generalist Consultants**

When new consultants embark on their journey into client services consulting, they typically have two potential career paths: the generalist and the specialist. Most entry-level consultants will mandatorily begin on the generalist path. The rationale behind this is that the generalist track allows entry-level consultants to immerse themselves into the field while gaining experience in a variety of areas and specializations. This allows them to build a broad knowledge base that may be applied to a variety of different engagements as they move from project to

project. After a few years, generalists then typically narrow their fieldwork to a more focused area and become experts in one or more areas.

### 3.3 Specialist Consultants

In contrast, a minority of consultants begin their careers as specialists. These entry-level hires typically possess an advanced degree or years of specialized non-consulting industry experience. These consultants differ from the generalist in that they have a narrower skillset or they are absolute subject matter experts in the specific area. They typically focus more on tactical tasks as opposed to strategic ones. Figure 2 below highlights the differences between the generalists and specialists.

**Figure 2 – Generalist and Specialists Compared**

Generalist	Specialist
Strategic mindset: a focus on <u>doing</u>	Tactical mindset: a focus on <u>dealing</u>
Focus on context	Focus on task
Focus on deployment of resources (i.e., arrangements)	Focus on the employment of resources (i.e., actions)
Manages work through expertise in business, people, and politics	Manages work through expertise in Science and Technology

### 3.4 Career Progression

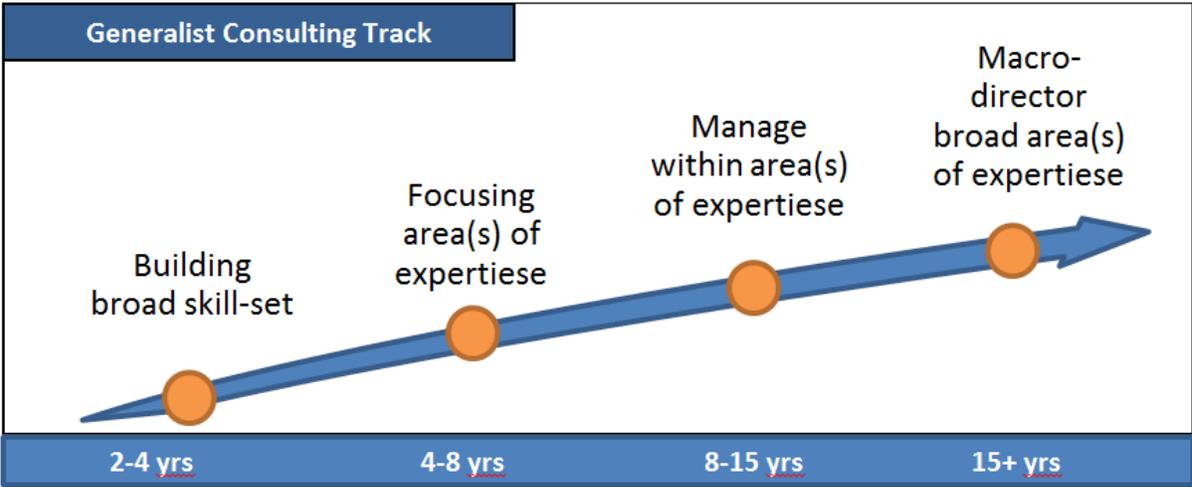
While these two consultants have apparent differences, they commonly work alongside each other. Within these distinctions, a consultant may be categorized even further with titles such as Systems Analyst or Business analyst, they are placed in cereal categories. When it comes to generalists and specialists their respective career progression are also different.

Generalists are typically undergraduate hires with limited experience and likely a lack of a specific area of expertise. In order to acclimate these new employees into the fast-paced environment, they are placed general categories and sub categories that allow them to gain broad

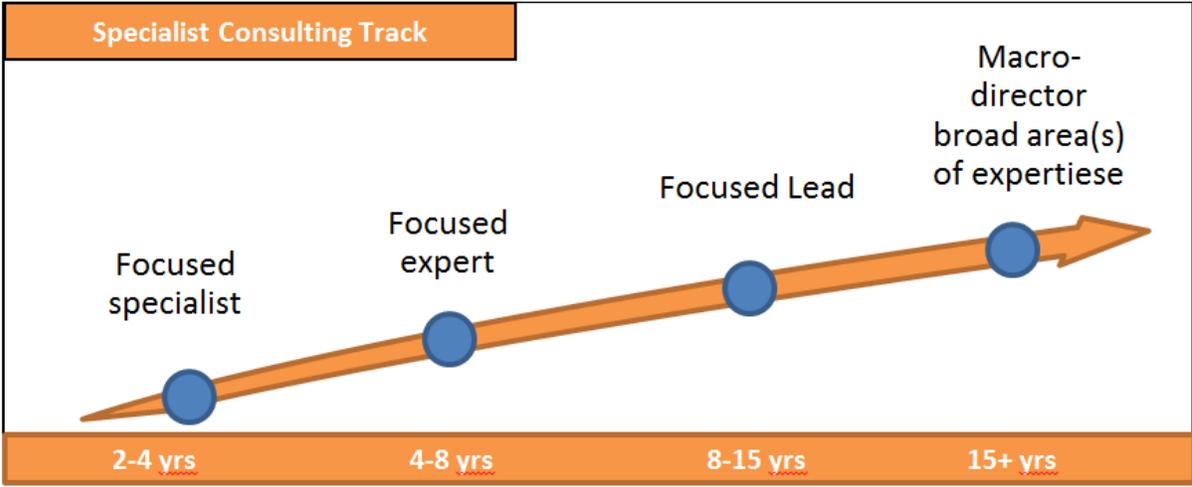
experience in different areas while building a strong skillset. For example, a generalist consultant may be staffed under a **Systems Integration** distinction, as an **ASP.NET** programmer (technical) consultant working on the design of a inventory management system. Later this same employee may be staffed as an Oracle database specialist working on creating or modifying a relational database in a CRM system. As these employees progress they begin to narrow their expertise into a smaller set of areas. This maximizes the value and productivity of the employee as they excel in multiple areas. As they progress into management level positions these employees draw from their years of tactical work in order to apply project manage skills broadly. The reason this is critical is that it is very unreasonable be expected to manage with no applied experience in the tactical areas that are intended to be strategically managed.

Specialists are typically but not always either graduate or experienced hires with years of expertise in a narrower area and are hired as subject matter experts. They also follow a similar breadth and depth structure when it comes to staffing. The main difference in the structure is that these consultants still have the same wide variety in context and strategy but are usually designated to a narrower variety of tactical work. When a specialist moves into a management position, they do so in a similar manner as generalists. The main difference is that they typically do not manage overall project strategy, they manage strategy and execution within their tactical area. Figure 3 on the next page depicts both career progressions visually:

Figure 3 – Consulting Career Tracks



*\*Average years of experience for each level (based on survey)*



*\*Average years of experience for each level (based on survey)*

## **4. Research Structure**

### **4.1 Overview**

In order to determine what skillset is necessary to be a proficient consultant, it was necessary to gather sample data from both the academic and industry populations. Surveys and interviews were conducted with 52 students and 13 industry professionals (75% and 25% of subject population respectively). It is important to note that due to the extreme difficulty of acquiring an even number of industry professionals, their responses were given a coefficient multiplier to even the weight of their responses. The subjects all retain anonymity as identifying would add no value nor would it affect the research or outcome. Combinations of both open and closed-ended questions were asked.

### **4.2 Subject Identification and Interview Process**

The subjects were selected using the following methods:

- Students: College of Business – Computer Information Systems majors and minors were selected at random in Zane Showker Hall and asked to participate.
- Industry Professionals: College of Business alumni were contacted via phone or email and asked to participate. The first 13 to reply were selected. The names of the participating firms are intentionally omitted from the research.

### 4.3 Interview Format

The subjects were given a sheet of paper with nine fields where they may enter and describe each attribute they feel is essential. The list below depicts the format of this:

1. Successful attribute 1:
  - 1.1. Description and rationale:
2. Successful attribute 2:
  - 2.1. Description and rationale:
3. Successful attribute n...:
  - 3.1. Description and rationale:

### 4.4 Interview Examples

1. Successful attribute 1: *“Possesses both presentation and sales expertise”*
  - 1.1. Description and rationale: *“At some point [a consultant] will need to pitch an idea or present a case in from of [their] colleagues and clients”*
2. Successful attribute 2: *“Have a holistic understanding”*
  - 2.1. Description and rationale: *“A business solution must be viewed as a whole not a collection of parts”*
3. Successful attribute 3: *“Have a desire to learn continuously and adapt”*
  - 3.1. Description and rationale: *“[The] IT industry is constantly evolving, [consultants] should always be up to date on IT topics”*

### 4.5 Guidelines

Subjects participated under their own free will and received no compensation or incentive. Deception was not used in this study. Time limits or scoring were not used in this study.

## **5. Research and Findings**

### **5.1 Overview**

After administering the interviews, the data was then compiled and prepared for thorough analysis. The first objective was to gather responses and sort them into categories and sub categories for example:

Category: Technical Skill

Subcategory: Database Management

This allowed for more usable data that could be analyzed further in order to locate additional trends and findings.

### **5.2 Most Occurring Skills Listed by Frequency**

Out of the 585 individual line responses, it was important to create a “master list” of the skills that subjects most frequently included in their responses. The key finding from this specific measurement were that the majority of the skills listed were functional or more soft-skill based. Figure 4 below and continued on the next page displays this finding.

**Figure 4 - Most Occurring Skills**

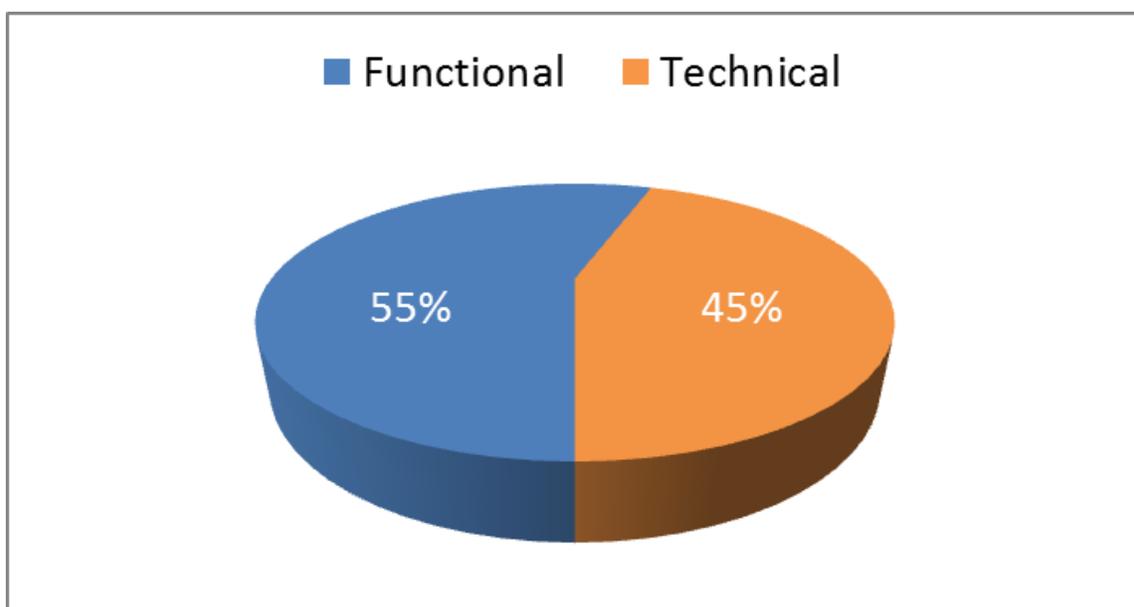


Figure 4 continued - Most Occurring Skills

Most Occurring Skills Listed by Frequency
1. <b>Interpersonal and Communication Skills</b>
2. <b>Systems thinking</b>
3. <b>Flexibility &amp; adaptability</b>
4. General (current) I.T. proficiency
5. <b>Organization and teamwork</b>
6. Database management skills
7. Programming skills
8. <b>Systems Development Life Cycle</b>
9. Design and Modeling skills
10. <b>Ability to network internally and externally</b>
11. I.T. security experience
12. <b>Understanding of organizational politics</b>
13. Mobile application development
14. <b>Be proactive/show initiative</b>
15. <b>Public speaking and presentation skills</b>
16. Critical thinking
17. Big data experience
18. <b>Progressive improvement</b>
19. Cloud computing
20. <b>Creativity</b>

*\*Functional or soft skills are bolded*

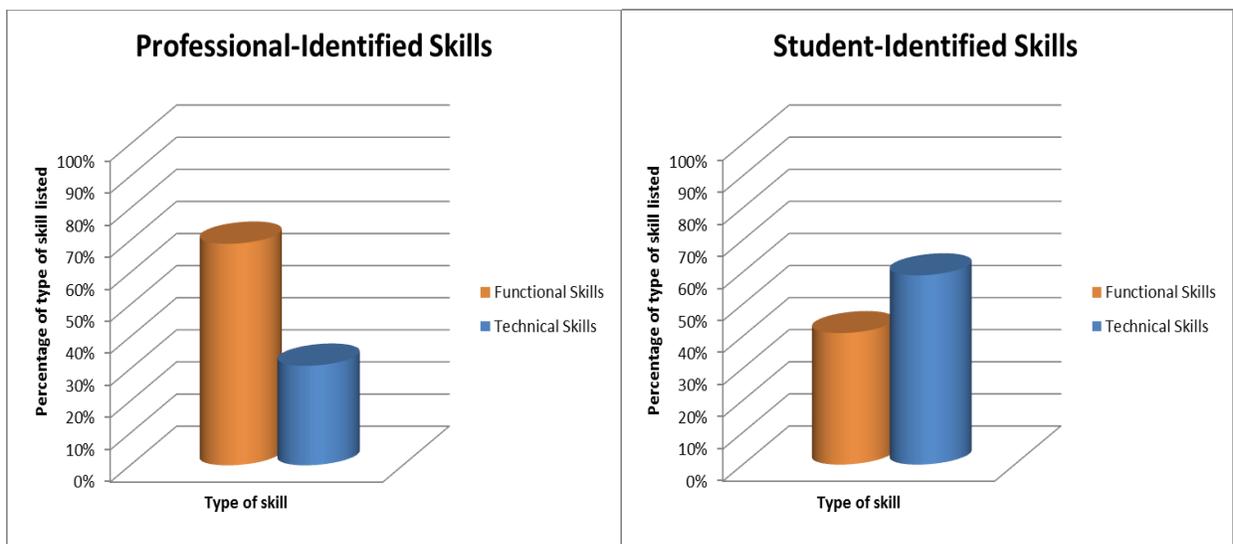
One senior consultant attempted to explain the rationale for the majority of skills having a soft-skill or functional distinction.

*“When you first walk in through the door, with little to zero first-hand consulting experience, most new-hires believe the **only** way to add value is by applying their technical skills. This is not necessarily [incorrect] , but it is very beneficial to stand out from your peers by speaking up in meetings, having a holistic understanding, and taking part in strategic planning as much as possible no matter how small. You need to be dynamic; this is what sets apart an I.T. guy from a consultant.”* Senior Consultant – Large Consulting Firm

### 5.3 Responses

Breaking down the previous data into student-identified and professional-identified responses, we can begin to look at the expectancy differences as ones career progresses. Out of the 52 student respondents, 58% identified technical skills while 42% were functional responses. From the 13 experienced professionals, just 31% identified technical skills while the majority of the responses (69%) were functional skills. Figure 5 below depicts this finding.

Figure 5 – Identified Skills



As a consultant's career progresses, they assume more responsibility and managerial duties. This calls for supervising small teams of 3-5 initially to larger projects where managerial duties are shared with a much larger number supervisees. This means that manager-level consultants are expected and ensure project execution as well as mentor junior staff. This mentoring is key because it not only aids the staff in succeeding within their current junior expectations, but it also grooms them for future success in managerial duties which is critical to any firms ongoing success.

#### 5.4 Notable Response Quotes

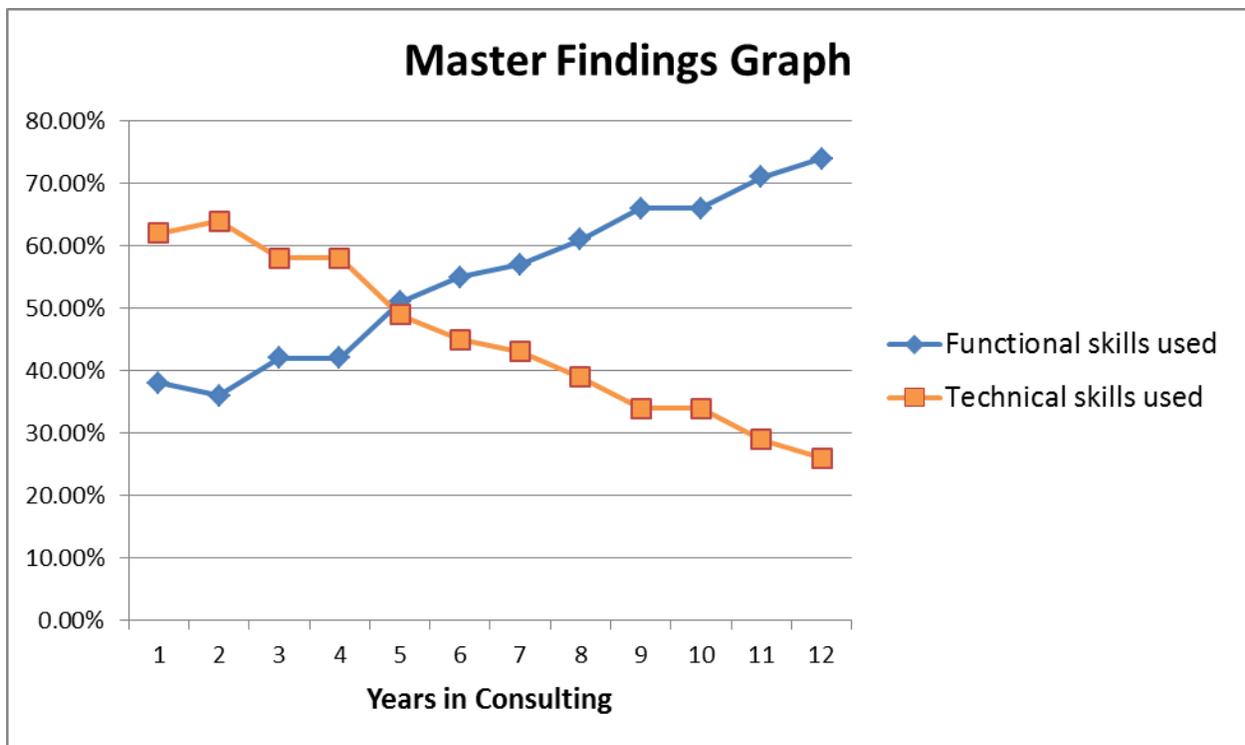
Below are a few notable quotes extracted from the research responses. The titles/levels noted in these responses have all been altered for consistency according to this standard: Junior Consultant, Consultant, Senior Consultant, Manager, and Senior Manager.

- *“Excellent technology skills are a must have in this field, and business skills are equally as important. An I.T. consultant isn't of much value without any business knowledge, but they need to have an understanding and experience in the do as well.”* – Consultant
- *“You really use things you learn in school, take full advantage.”* –Senior Consultant
- *“Programming and SQL skills are critical in day-to-day tasks.”* – Junior Consultant
- *“Organization and planning will take you a long way.”* – Manager
- *“Speak up in meetings and client conversation even when you're new. It shows understanding not only to your client but also to your [superiors].”* – Senior Manager

## 5.5 Summary of Findings

The last and arguably one of the most important finding in this research answers this question: When does a consultant transition into a senior or managerial level consultant? In the research, the raw data was compiled into one final graph. The data was categorized in terms of the current point in the career of the subject on the x-axis while the type of skills they relied on was positioned on the y-axis. Figure 6 below displays this finding.

Figure 6 – Master Findings Graph



This data was organized and then tested against 12 job postings for each of the consulting firms represented in this research. The postings consisted of entry-level to senior managers or director level positions from various firms. The areas that were focused on in these postings were proficiency requirements and experience minimums. Junior level positions required 0-2 years of experience with the majority of skills being technical. Non-managerial experienced hire positions required 3-5 years of experience with an almost even number of desired technical and functional

skills with some positions requiring associate managerial skills. Manager and director-level job postings desired 6-12 years of experience with the majority of skills being functional and sales oriented.

This data was highly consistent with the findings in this study across the board with only a deviation of either +1 or -1 on the x-axis (years). The point of intersection, where consultants transition into managerial positions that require a majority of functional skills, was around 5-7 years with midpoint (according to postings) being 6 years.

## **6. The Proficient I.T. Consultant**

### **6.1 Significant Inputs**

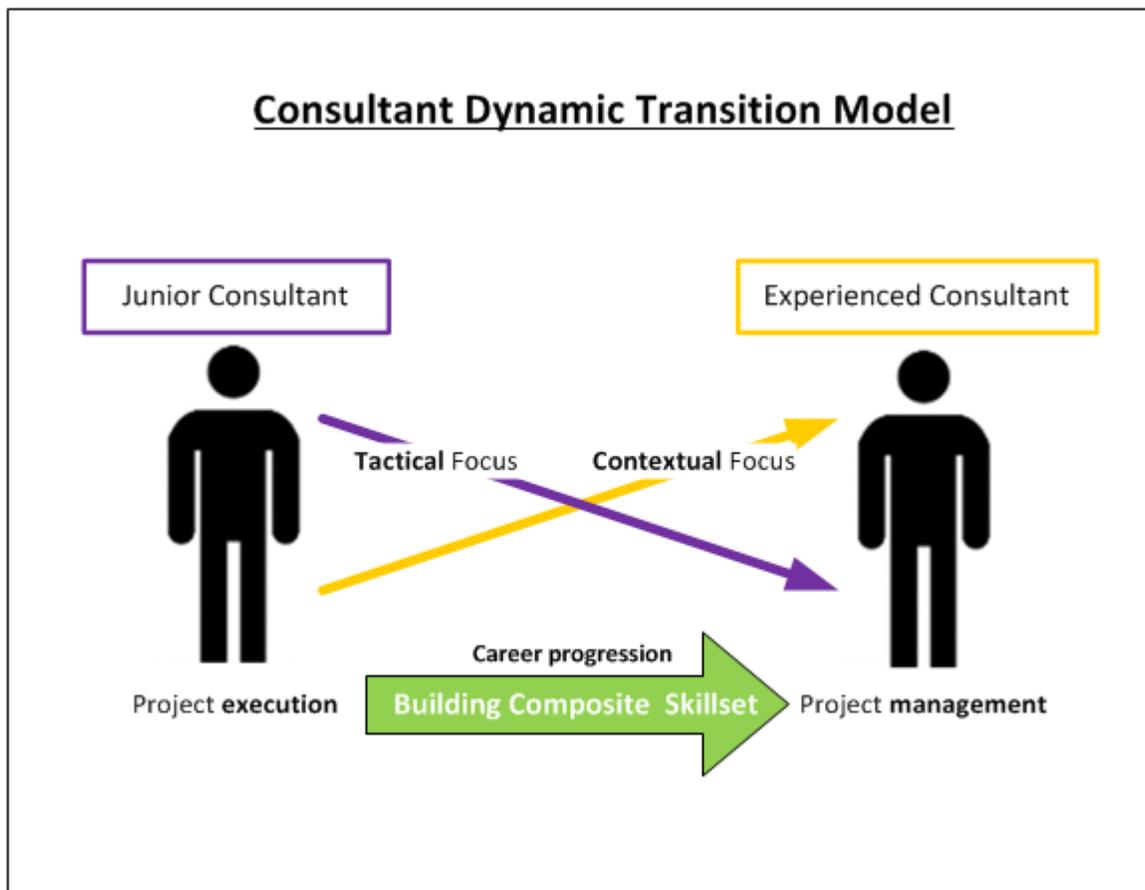
From the number of findings in this research, there of these of these are identified below to support and prove the thesis: The research in this thesis aims to prove that the ideal consultant is identified by evaluating the composite background and proficiency in functional, technical, and interpersonal skills.

1. The ideal consultant has a composite skillset consisting of functional and technical skills.
2. There are formally or informally 2 kinds of consultant career paths which effect the desired skillset.
  - a. The generalist consultant: Consultants with a broad range of expertise with a contextual focus as well as technical proficiency.
  - b. The specialist consultant: Consultants with a narrower niche area of expertise with a task-driven tactical focus.
3. The skillset of the ideal consultant changes during the progression from junior –level to senior/managerial positions.
  - a. Junior-level consultants possess a balance of technical and functional skills with the majority being technical.
  - b. Managerial-level consultants have a more lopsided skillset with the majority being functional.
  - c. The common time of this change at around year 6 in a consultants career

## 6.2 Consultant Dynamic Transition Model

The analysis of both the subject data and industry data has allowed for the conclusion that more closely identifies the proficient consultant. This research proves that there is no **fixed** ideal skillset required in order to be classified as a proficient consultant. The proficient I.T. consultant has a composite skillset consisting of functional and technical skills. These skills are generally highly variable and one's expectations shift as their career progresses. Compiling the post-analysis findings as well as the weight of manager-level subjects has inspired the creation of the Consultant Dynamic Transition Model. This model visually displays the evolution of a consultant's skills and expectations as they transition from entry-level positions into senior or management-level positions. Figure 7 below displays this model:

Figure 7 – Consultant Dynamic Transition Model



### 6.3 Core Skillset

Below is a list of the five most valuable skills that the proficient I.T. consultant possesses. This conclusion came from analysis of the research data, professional testimony, and industry research. The proficient consultant is not limited to these skills alone. This list is intended to be seen as a base or core list of skills that are required in order to excel in one's consulting career.

**Figure 8 – The Proficient I.T. Consultant**

<b>The Proficient I.T. Consultant</b>
1. Composite and transferable skillset consisting of functional and technical skills
2. Ability to learn new technologies and eventually lead within the area
3. Flexibility & adaptability
4. Teamwork and interpersonal skills
5. Systems thinking and business knowledge

## **7. Conclusion**

### **7.1 Summary**

The purpose of this research was to provide students and aspiring consultants with a core skillset to build upon as they progress through their careers. In this research, I defined and elaborated on the meaning and purpose of I.T. consulting. I furthered this elaboration by discussing sub-categories and distinctions in consultants and practices. I gathered responses and data from students, professionals, and industry in order to determine these desired skills. I used this raw data and formulated tests and graphs, which were analyzed in order to produce a common desired skillset. This resulting skillset was tested against various job descriptions and proved to be an effective combination.

### **7.2 Evaluation**

In this research, there were three primary objectives that were significant in proving the thesis: *A proficient I.T. consultant possesses a composite skillset consisting of both functional and technical skills.* These objectives were:

1. Identify the technical and functional skills required to succeed in I.T. consulting.
2. Provide an overview of the I.T. consulting field from perspectives they may not have yet experienced.
3. Explain the complexity of consultants and their dynamic skills.

The first objective was addressed by gathering data and responses from professionals. These responses were submitted from various experience levels in an attempt to provide a more complete and higher quality sample. This data was gathered by interview and questionnaire as well as available industry information.

The second objective was addressed by defining and giving examples of the I.T. consulting field and professionals within that field. I explained that there is no “cookie cutter” consultant and that while there are different areas of focus, a consultant cannot rely solely on either technical or functional skills alone. This proved to be true among consultants with 0-2 years of experience through professionals with over 12 years of experience.

The third objective was addressed by explaining the breadth and depth of the I.T. consulting field and the abundance of areas of expertise within it. These skills are not fixed, they change as a consultant progresses through his or her career. This objective was proven through evaluating the responses, industry data, and consulting firm proficiency desires.

## Glossary

### **ASP.NET** page - 10

a server-side Web application framework designed for Web development to produce dynamic Web pages.

### **Consultant Credibility** page- 13

consultants under pressure, withdraw into their expertise and regress interpersonally.

### **Customer relationship management (CRM)** page - 5

a model for managing a company's interactions with current and future customers using technology to organize, automate, and synchronize sales, marketing, customer service, and technical support.

### **Enterprise resource planning (ERP)** page - 5

a cross-functional enterprise system driven by an integrated suite of software modules that supports the basic internal business processes of a company.

### **Inter-Silo Communication** page - 12

is defined as Interactions and communication between different business units (billing, procurement, sales).

### **Systems Integration** page - 10

is defined as the process of bringing together the component subsystems into one system and ensuring that the subsystems function together as a system.

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