

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Playing Well With Others

By Douglas E. Welch

With more and more companies reducing high-tech staff, the use of consultants continues to grow. This has led to an interesting, if somewhat disconcerting, reality where you must work closely with other high-tech consultants, almost as if you were all employees of the company. Unfortunately, this can lead to situations where you might find yourself stepping on each other's toes, with few methods of resolving conflicts when they arise.

Happenstance

As employee headcounts are reduced, high-tech consultants are often brought in to perform particular projects as necessary. Perhaps a database or Web site needs to be developed. Maybe a new network system is to be installed. Whatever the reason, projects often start with fairly well defined duties and deliverables. The reality of working in a consultant-heavy environment is different, though. As projects are added, proceed and alter, the needs of one consultant can quickly come to depend on the action of some other consultant or employee. This is where the friction often arises.

One personal example arose out of the need to install new computer systems for some employees so that their current PCs could be freed for use in a new database system. The database consultant was awaiting these machines, but as only one person, my hours were limited and the switch-over took longer than planned. In order to free up the needed machines, the other consultant took it upon himself to proceed with the installation of the new computers without me. This person didn't even want to perform the work, but thought it necessary in order to move forward with a part of the project.

While I must praise this person for his initiative, I also felt that perhaps this was the beginning of a bad situation. While I could certainly not perform this consultant's database work, he had the ability to perform tasks for which I had been hired. At the least, we were in danger of getting in each other's way. At the most extreme, there was a possibility that the client would begin to question the need for my services when others could provide them. In this particular case, there was no malice intended, only the driving force of project deadlines. A bit of discussion

between us quickly remedied any misunderstanding. Still, it is best to be aware of situations such as this, as they can be manufactured as a way to gain advantage with a client.

Serving Many Masters

The truth is, in any consultant-heavy environment, you quickly become subject to the wishes and whims of many masters. Your client will be pushing you in one direction, while the realities of another consultant's project will be pushing you in another. Your job, and your career, depends on your ability to manage these demands in the best way possible.

In some cases, I find this balance by communicating with other consultants directly, outside the earshot of our common client. In this way, we can freely discuss needs and issues, without the client becoming unduly concerned or involved. I regularly "meet" via instant messaging with one fellow consultant, as we are rarely at the client site during the same work hours. Even when we are in the same office, other duties require our attention and we don't get the chance to discuss issues as clearly as necessary. These IM meetings allow us to coordinate our efforts, clarify the client's overall needs, and develop ways of meeting these needs.

Such communication can also avoid problems of the client acting as a middleman. Like a game of "telephone" at a party, messages can get distorted when passed through too many people. The client's own priorities, or a simple lack of understanding, can quickly drive a project off course. If you are unclear on the needs of another consultant, speak to them directly. This is the only way to insure that you truly understand their needs and they, yours.

It is a simple reality of a high-tech career that, at most companies, you will be working with fewer employees and more consultants. Working with a set of consulting peers is much different than working together as fellow employees. You must develop relationships with each person and work diligently to insure that you understand each other's needs so that you can best serve the client, together. When consultant relationships break down, everyone suffers, as does your high-tech career. □

Douglas E. Welch is a freelance writer from Van Nuys, California, and can be reached by e-mail at douglas@welchwrite.com or on the Web at www.welchwrite.com.