

[Main menu](#)

Scaling Services Teams to Last: Avoiding Brain Drain and the Consultant Burnout Cycle

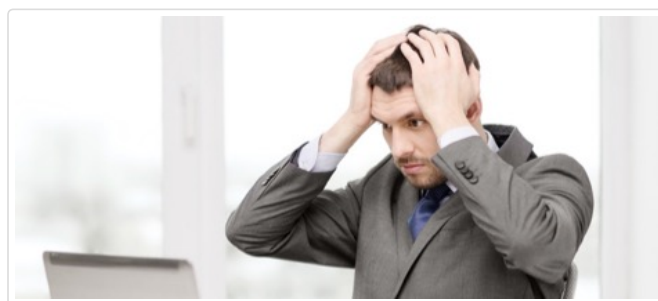
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Many years ago, hiring and retaining good talent was not my strength. My first attempt at building a services team was a disaster. Out of my first five hires, two of them were practically insane, one had to be removed for telling me that he wasn't afraid to use the gun he had in his briefcase and the next two secretly embroiled themselves into a sordid affair that finally erupted into a bloody brawl at the end of year Christmas party.

This rate of failure made growing the team quickly an impossibility. After six months of effort I was unable to reach my hiring target because I'd hired poorly and could not maintain a stable base to continue my growth. What I didn't completely understand at that time in my career, was the nuanced programs that needed to be in place to rapidly grow a consulting team. Achieving rapid growth is impossible if the new hire count is only backfilling those who unexpectedly left.

Thankfully, I have learned a lot since then. While there is a seemingly endless number of books on hiring and retaining great employees, I thought I'd focus on just a few concepts that have served me well over the years specifically when employing professional services consultants.



1. DON'T HIRE TOO MANY TECHNICIANS

One thing I've learned is that keeping highly technical people happy in a job that produces recurring and stressful customer interactions is very difficult. From what I have encountered, there are two reasons for this.

The first is that highly technical people love to be technical. For example, developers love to spend as much time as possible creating ways to achieve new outcomes with code. They would rather be left alone to concentrate on perfecting a new algorithm than to deal with a customer who just wants yet another version of the same old business process. Highly technical people are more likely to avoid customer interaction and hence not be present to catch the critical project misalignments that are going to eventually bring the project to halt. This behavior is perfectly understandable given the high functioning capabilities of the technician, but it puts a massive dent in the likelihood that a team of highly technical people will also be successful in the face of demanding customers.

This factor is then compounded by the fact that highly technical people are likely to get bored of working with demanding customers. They are likely to jump ship at the first chance of working for a product company who wants them to work in a like-minded team of technicians to find new ways of improving an existing product or even better developing a new one from scratch. If you have ever tried to rapidly build a team of consultants in the Bay Area, then you may know what I'm talking about. No sooner do you hire the brightest mind you can find, he or she receives an immediate increase at Google, Yahoo, Apple or any number of world class product organizations.

Now, I'm not saying, that it can't be done. I am saying that with these two factors working against you, you should consider not putting yourself at long-term risk by overinvesting in highly technical resources. There will always be a percentage of them that don't want to be there and another percentage that will get taken from you whether you like it or not. The aim of the game in a professional services environment has got to be tenure. The longer you keep resources, the better they become at making your customers happy and helping you create the body of knowledge you need to train your next wave of recruits.

2. HIRE BRILLIANT "PEOPLE" PEOPLE

Consultants have to deal directly with other people all the time. Hence when interviewing potential consultants, focus on those who have technical skills but also can empathize with others. This can be difficult to do effectively but finding a method that works for you will be invaluable. Due to my previous shortcomings, I have learned to look beyond the simple answers job candidates give in interviews and identify the kind of people I'm looking for. So much so, that I'm currently trialing a candidate review questionnaire that will hopefully help me shortlist them from a simple questionnaire. I firmly believe that if we can focus on those candidates that are both brilliant and possess the ability to connect with people, then we stand a greater chance of having them deliver in front of our customers. Not only that, they are going to enjoy what they do and be more likely to want to stay employed as a part of a consulting team.

3. PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONSTANT CAREER DEVELOPMENT

We all understand the importance of offering constant career development, but this is very hard to do in a business that relies solely on maximizing a person's billable time in the field. Put simply, sending consultants to training events just reduces the revenue they generate. While we know that career development is necessary, the reduction in revenue is also a difficult tradeoff when trying to hit the quarterly number.

There's no silver bullet for this conundrum but there are a couple of things that can really help. The first is finding ways to use your existing resources to create learning experiences. Shadowing other resources, spending time on the support helpdesk or small teams of lunch and learns are a great way to increase knowledge without spending too much time out of the field. I find this to be a helpful approach but it is only a small step towards solving the problem.

What can have a bigger impact on long-term retention of consultants is a consistent and career focused employee-manager meeting template. These meetings (often called 1:1's) are probably the least structured and least utilized tools we have in our arsenal. In the twenty years as an employee, I was never once presented with a consistent framework for discussing my career with my manager. Instead, these meetings were a mix of social and business conversations that infrequently resulted in something tangible for my career growth.

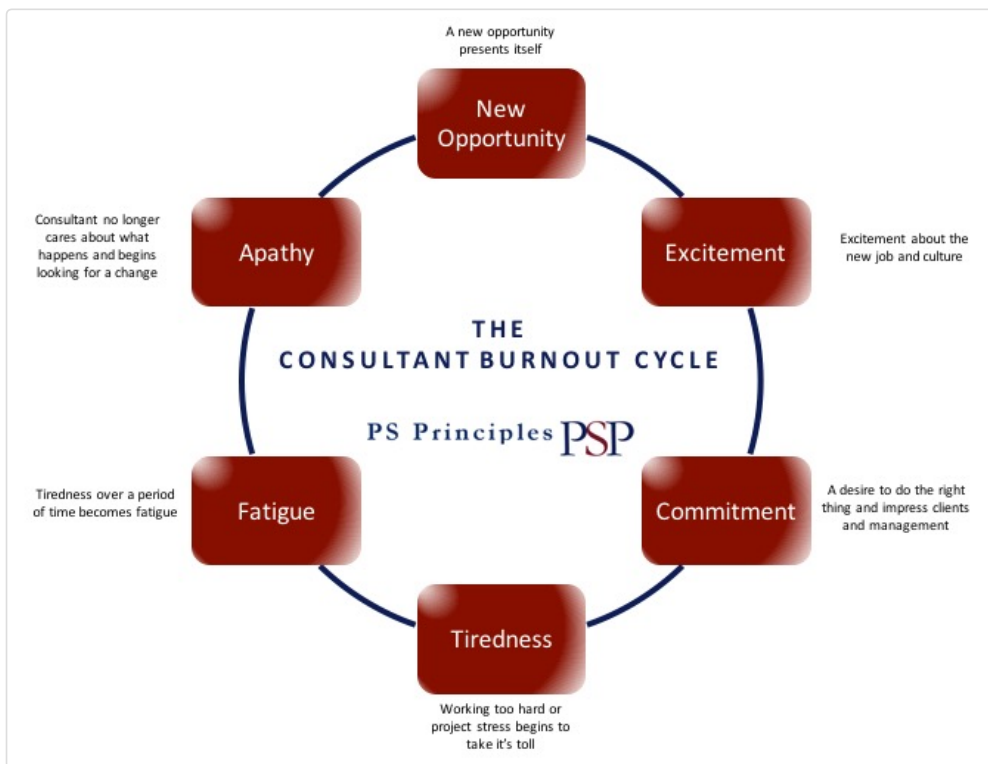
A 1:1 template that focuses on the consultant's commitments to the company *and* their desired career plan is something that demonstrates a real level of commitment from the manager to the employee. How often have you heard a consultant leave your employment saying that their main reason is the company's lack of focus on his or her career? Simply adopting such an approach makes it abundantly clear that career development is a focus. While this doesn't change the difficult dynamic of finding budget and free time for the consultants to be out of the field, it does give you a clear and documented plan for each employee which can be used to more effectively train the team as a whole and retain them longer.

4. PREVENT CONSULTANT BURNOUT

Consultant burnout is a real thing. If you've ever lost a great consultant because they have become fatigued, sick or apathetic to their job because of their workload then you'll know its true. While there are models for this occurrence from the employer's perspective known as the Employee Burnout Cycle (increased work leads to more stress, which leads to sickness or resignation, which leads to more work for those remaining and so on) there aren't many models that identify this kind of pattern from the employee's point of view.

As a part of writing the PS Principles (<http://www.psprinciples.com/>) training materials I thought about this issue from the consultant's perspective and came up with something I call the Consultant Burnout Cycle. This cycle focuses on the fact that many consultants who suffer consultant burnout tend to repeat the process at different employers. I know I did. At IBM however, I had the luxury of taking leave of absence which allowed me to take a long break and then return to work refreshed (and then of course repeat the cycle again). The fact is that a dedicated consultant loves to work hard. Just like a technician loves to be technical, a true consultant loves dedicating himself or herself to the customer's success. The intensity of delivering success via a budget constrained project also means that consultants can get so swept up in the project sprint to the finish that they don't spot the physical toll this dedication is having on their mental health.

In essence, consultants who commit themselves to working extremely hard to achieve customer success over long periods can find themselves in the following cycle.



Step 1. New Opportunity: A new opportunity presents itself for the consultant.

Step 2. Excitement: The consultant is excited to start a new job in a new role and enjoys the change in culture.

Step 3. Commitment: Consultant is eager to please and works hard to demonstrate commitment to customer success.

Step 4. Tiredness: A commitment to customer success, hard work, stress and difficult projects lead to tiredness. A long time offsite and away from the office can also distance consultants from the culture and environment they thought they were joining (or had become accustomed to enjoying).

Step 5. Fatigue. Prolonged tiredness leads to fatigue. Fatigue makes it easy for a consultant to feel as Tiredness: though the company doesn't focus on his or her needs anymore.

Step 6. Apathy. Fatigue leads to apathy. Apathy creates the feeling of "I don't care about this anymore" and as a result the consultant begins looking for a way out. This is often a subconscious decision. Their radar is now up for a new job. Ever heard this in an exit interview? "I wasn't even looking for a new job and a friend of a friend just introduced me."

Repeat. Return to Step 1

What's tough about intervening in this cycle is that once consultants reach the end of step 4, the physical signs of transitioning from fatigue into apathy are practically undetectable. Given the lack of physical evidence that intervention is needed, I've learned to look for something a little less tangible, but nonetheless is measurable enough to provide some insights as to when a consultant may be fatigued, and that is the consultant's level of engagement. There are plenty of books about *employee engagement* and they will all give you an idea of how you might be able to measure it. More important than how you measure employee engagement, is that you actually do measure it. By paying attention to consultant engagement you give yourself the best chance of interrupting the burnout cycle earlier. This doesn't however change the fact that once you have identified it that you will need to find a way to remove that person from the field in order to have them regain their energy. This is where having the consultant's career development plan at your fingertips can be useful.

In summary, when trying to build teams to handle rapid growth, there are many different areas that require your attention as a services executive. Hiring and retaining talent is just one of them, but without the ability to maintain a stable base of dedicated and tenured consultants, the other programs run a high chance of being hindered by a lack of available resources.