



Career Path Counselling

How to become a billing Consultant

Probably the most common career pathway out of research is towards becoming a Consultant. Many firms have the role of Associate Consultant as a step in-between.

Consultants are commercially-minded, responsible for bringing in new business and developing strong lasting relationships with clients. They are the main point of contact with the client throughout the search process, are trusted by them and able to troubleshoot any problems that arise.

A good Consultant mediates between the client and the search team, whilst keeping both on side.

1. Excel at research

Don't turn your back on research if you want to be a fee-earner. Good research is the cornerstone of a successful search, and good Consultants understand the importance of data-backed decision making. If your team's research throws up something that might change the brief, then the Consultant needs to be able to explain this clearly to the client, and provide evidence.

As a Consultant you will steer your research team, and retaining an understanding of what they are experiencing is crucial to this. Many Consultants are great at the client part, not so great at the managing part, but both are equally important.

2. Know your client

Ask your current manager if you can be involved with the client at every stage of the search process. Spend time getting to know them and how they work, get immersed in their business model and decision-making processes. Listen carefully to what they are asking of you and ensure that you meet their expectations. Be honest with them – it's amazing how many Consultants are not – and they will appreciate this, even if you are not always giving them good news.

3. Know your industry

Clients will only want to work with you if you demonstrate broad industry expertise. They are not just paying for your ability to execute a search, they are also paying for your knowledge and connections. Read trade journals and relevant publications, keep up with sector news, and demonstrate to your managers that you are always looking to learn about your industry.

You need to network constantly - get to know all the key people in your sector, attend pivotal conferences and events. Be systematic and keep a record of who you have spoken to, you never know when this will come in handy.

4. Know your numbers

Understand as much as you can of the detail in your clients' contracts, and how the fee structure works. This needs to be crystal-clear to all parties throughout the process – and is especially important if your search hits a problem and requires renegotiating.

On the other side of the fence, you also need to understand salary expectations for your candidates, and be prepared to negotiate on their behalf when you get to offer stage. Many a good search has fallen apart at the last minute over a price misunderstanding.

5. Learn about business development

How does your firm connect to potential new clients? Find the best person in the company at doing this and ask to spend some time shadowing them. Take them out for lunch and pick their brains.

This area responds especially well to initiative. Just like Francesca (see the '2 Minute Expert Interview' and her case study below), do some research in your industry and work out which firms are likely to need you soon, then reach out and connect with key people in them. This simple approach need not be too time-consuming.

6. Make your intentions clear

Finally, you can't get promoted if no-one knows that you want it. Make it clear during your annual review and on other relevant occasions. Ask how your firm can support you in your ambition, and how long they think it might take. Can they outline some potential future steps? Not all firms want to promote researchers, especially if they are good, so you may need to consider moving companies for your next foothold on the career ladder.

Case Study: *Francesca Lahiguera, Lancor (also see our '2 Minute Expert Interview')*

This is how I was promoted to a fee-earning role in a large firm: I read a New York Times article about which were the up-and-coming companies in our sector. I looked up the CEO of each one then emailed them directly, showing that I understood the problems they were facing. Then I followed-up with a call asking for a face-to-face meeting. This was highly targeted - I only approached around half a dozen firms, but a couple of these then turned into new clients who brought good ongoing business in for my company.

One of my firm's senior consultants literally couldn't believe that I, a complete fee-earning novice, had done this!

Contact carolyn@careerpathcounselling.co.uk to arrange to discuss any of the above in complete confidence.