

# Career Expectations for the GIS Professional: Consulting



This is the second in a series of three articles pertaining to what you can expect as a GIS Professional on a chosen career path. This part refers specifically to the world of consulting, one which can be defined in three ways. Firstly, if you seek job security, then do not consider a career in this field; secondly, if you wish to forever tackle high-angle professional challenges, then consulting is meant for

you; thirdly, if you wish to do what GIS'ers like to refer to as "real GIS", then be wary as there are many flavours of consulting.

## The Bane of the Billable Hour

It is important to always remember that consultants are in the business of making money. This pursuit of profit is mainly achieved through the billable hour. In this field, every minute of every hour spent on project or task work will be billed to the client at a standard rate set by the company you work for. This is accounted for in your timesheet which is carefully scrutinised down to the last penny by the project manager.

So 'what does this mean for GIS?' you may ask. Well, unless the consulting firm is providing a specific GIS software application or services for a specific business process that will generate or save money for the client, GIS does not make money but rather takes money to operate and run. For anyone who is exploring career opportunities in the field of consulting, it is critical to understand this concept, since the 'billable hour' often tends to be the bane of the GIS Professional in the consulting world.

Billable hours are what 'grease the wheels' of the consulting world. Time is money, and unless you are lucky enough to be managed by GIS Professionals or work for a firm that is run by GIS Professionals, few project managers will understand the time and effort involved in building and maintaining a robust GIS. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for GIS professionals to be on the receiving end of misinformed questions from Project Managers: "Why did you spend four hours making a map?", or "I only wanted a graphic, why did it take two hours to finish?" Naturally, this confusion about the 'map-maker's' role can lead to endless frustration for the GIS Professional.

## Flavours of Consulting

Just like ice cream, there are many flavours of consulting. Here the GIS Professional is at an advantage as most use GIS in one form or another. For the purposes of this article, I shall focus on three areas: Engineering/Environmental Consultants, GIS Consulting, and Location Analytics.

Within the world of engineering/environmental consultants, expect to be part of the "engineer's world". Unfortunately, few of your non-GIS colleagues will understand what you do and/or the effort it takes to do it. Most will mistake GIS for CAD, or, worse, as "pretty" graphics simply needed to fill in a report to a client. You will also be faced with co-workers who took that one GIS class and consider themselves equally, or more, qualified as you, the one who has a GISP or GIS Certificate or both.

In addition, another not-uncommon situation you can expect to face is being viewed as the usurper by the resident graphic artists, landscape architects, and CAD technicians who also make "nice pictures". Then, be prepared for the possibility of getting frowns from the IT staff that may also do database work just like you, but on a whole different level. In a project, you, the GIS Professional, will very likely be relegated to the low or lowest status. You will simply be viewed as the person who made the "cool graphics". If you can maintain your confidence level among this onslaught then you will have a reasonable chance of survival.

There are many engineering/environmental consulting firms, and if one does not suit you, then you must realise that it is up to you to effect change (i.e. "move on"), as the organisation you work for will not change. My advice is to look for an engineering/environmental consulting firm that actually markets a GIS product or process. It is these types of firms, thanks to their supportive atmosphere for all things geospatial, that will allow for a greater amount of professional growth. In terms of identifying these firms, it is important to conduct research on them based on the job description which outlines the function of GIS within the organisation.

GIS consulting is a product and/or process-centric world which is run by GIS Professionals. It is important to appreciate that not all GIS Professionals are prepared or suited to this competitive field. Unfortunately, very few, if any, academic GIS programs prepare the GIS Professional with the necessary skills to succeed in this flavour of consulting. Skills in diverse fields such as marketing, sales, project management, coding, public speaking, enterprise database management/manipulation, scheduling, and teamwork are necessary in this world. Given this fact, it is up to you to best prepare yourself by learning and mastering these skills, so that you can choose from some of

the most common roles which are available to the GIS Professional, including sales and marketing, training, technical support, or application development. Depending on the company, you could be involved in systems integration. This includes building/designing elaborate enterprise GIS databases and integrating GIS into business processes, for example, asset management and, Computerised Maintenance Management Systems. In my opinion, however, the most important skill to master in the GIS consulting world is the art of public speaking, including communication and conflict resolution skills. This is important since you will often be required to work directly with clients, on the 'front line', rather than being relegated to back-office support (as often happens in most engineering/environmental consulting firms).

Another consulting world which is run by GIS Professionals is Location Analytics, which, although similar to GIS consulting, is actually tied to a specific purpose. Location analysts work with businesses in order to analyse geographic data for the purpose of determining optimal retail locations and/or spatial-centric sales/marketing forecasts. GIS professionals who choose a career in this field can expect to work with extensive geographic datasets containing a plethora of demographic elements. Knowledge and understanding of geostatistics is a necessary part of the equation, and you will be required to develop reports which will be critical in terms of informing the operations and strategy of business clients. As in the world of GIS consulting, public speaking is important in this field, especially since you will be working directly with a variety of clients. The ability to justify your findings in a clear, concise, and non-technical manner is extremely important. Consulting does, after all, involve one for-profit organisation speaking to another for-profit organisation.

## Conclusion

Consulting, like other areas of GIS, has its pros and cons. If you are suited to the fast pace and 'live or die' attitude of the business world, and the challenge of dealing with a range of demanding clients, then you can expect a rewarding career in this field. If, on the other hand, you prefer, steady pace, routine, and predictability, then you should probably stay away from consulting. To sum up, the common denominators across the different consulting areas, (engineering, environmental, GIS, and Location Analytics) are: learn that it is up to you to develop the skills that will make you most useful to the firm you choose to work for, master the art of public speaking, and if one firm does not suit your fancy do not hesitate to work for another. In order to avoid being labelled as a maker of 'pretty' maps, it is up to you to take your career into your own hands, to develop your soft and hard skillsets, and to find a firm that fits best and maximises your career advantage. As per the popular maxim in the business world, 'if you fail, try, and try again.'

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