

AICN Newsletter

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AICN Chair Report: Improving Service to Local Networks and Independent Consultants

By William Kassebaum, Chair, Alliance of IEEE Consultants Networks Coordinating Committee



Your Alliance of IEEE Consultants Networks Coordinating Committee (AICNCC/AICN) is always looking for ways to assist local IEEE Consultants Networks in serving their membership. As you know, the AICN has been meeting twice a year for the past few years. Committee members come together to map out ways to serve local networks, thereby improving service to the consultant community at large. For a listing of the AICN committee, please go to the [consultant services webpage](#) at the [IEEE-USA website](#).

We held the most recent AICN meeting during the IEEE Board Series in November 2010. The primary purpose of this AICN meeting was for the committee to set priorities for the upcoming year. The outcome of that meeting was a framework for several initiatives the committee believes will help local networks and individual consultants to be successful in 2011.

The first of these initiatives is to update the *Best of TE: On Consultants* E-Book. This great E-Book was first published in 2005, and now it's time to refresh this publication. *Today's Engineer* has published some great pieces on consulting lately, and we expect the updated E-Book will be a great one-stop resource for many independent consultants.

The AICN would also like to increase its direct contact with local network members. This idea dominated a large part of the fall meeting. The committee really respects the work that local networks are doing to provide services to independent engineering consultants. In fact, local networks are really the life blood of IEEE services to independent consultants.

However, our current set-up does not allow for AICN's direct access to local network members, and we would really like some direct access, so we can provide local network members with a double-dose of service.

We discussed many ideas, and some long-term plans are in genesis to increase our contact with local network members and consultants who have no local networks. In the short-term, the committee has settled on developing a listserv, so the AICN can send consultants this newsletter, promotion about webinars, and other newsworthy announcements.

The Committee would also like to solicit ideas for webinars from consultants. We would like to put on two or three informational webinars, but we would like to know what topics consultants would like to hear about. Send recommendations to d.r.griffin@ieee.org.

The Committee would again like to encourage local networks to recognize achievements of their local network members by having them submit applications for IEEE-USA Awards. We hope local networks really take advantage of these awards to honor the hard work of some of their members.

Other issues discussed at the meeting ranged wildly. The Committee will look into the possibility of increasing its committee membership by pursuing one or two new members from non-represented regions. The committee also discussed the upcoming *2011 Salary and Consultants Fee Survey*, and what we can do to increase consultants' participation in the survey. Increased participation will lead to a better sample size for information that will go into the follow-up publication *Profiles of IEEE Consultants*. The committee discussed ways to improve marketing of the Consultants Database to consultants and businesses that need consultants. The committee also discussed ways to bring together independent consultants for a one- or two-day conference. The Committee outlined its major goals for 2011. We believe following up with these issues will lead to better service overall that we can provide to local networks and independent IEEE consultants.

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Facebook

The AICN is now on Facebook. Check us out at: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/IEEE-Consultants-Network/116356868419773>

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Finding Success in Consulting: Niche and Reputation Are Both Key

By Peggy Albright

At some point in their careers, many computing professionals consider establishing a consulting business. Consulting offers an opportunity to leave the traditional workplace, work independently, and become your own boss. Specialists in the computing profession are fortunate that the skills they use in their jobs often have real value in a consulting context. And in tough economic times, when employment-based jobs aren't always available or considered secure, it's nice to have the flexibility to pursue a consulting option.

Steve Epner, innovator-in-residence at Saint Louis University, and founder of the Independent Computer Consultants Association; and Duane Strong, a member of the board of directors of the IEEE Consultants' Network of Silicon Valley, and an IEEE Senior Member who holds a Computer Society Certified Software Development Professional (CSDP) certificate, offer these tips on how to be a successful consultant:

Tip 1: Decide what type of consultant you want to be

There are many types of consultants. At one end of the spectrum is a consultant who provides a high-level advisory role to a company; and at the other end, is a consultant who provides very specific technology expertise. And there's a range of other consulting roles in between. Decide where in this context you want to fit. The type of role you pursue will influence the number of opportunities available to you; the nature of the relationships you'll have with your clients; and how much you'll get paid, among other things.

Tip 2: Find your niche

It's generally not practical to be a generalist, because it won't help you compete against those with specific knowledge. Establish yourself as an expert in a particular niche, and make yourself known in that field. If your skills are diverse and you can select from a variety of niche specialties, pick one that has personal meaning to you. "People like to pick a consultant who's passionate about their specialty," Epner advises. "Pick the thing you are most passionate about, and unless it is something really esoteric, there will be an audience for it."

Tip 3: Establish and maintain a professional profile

Even if you've found your niche, you still need to differentiate yourself, and become known and respected for what you do.

Both Epner and Strong emphasize the need to establish your professional identity. Join professional organizations and start attending meetings, so that people become familiar with you and your work. Publish articles on matters of interest to the industry and potential clients, and find speaking opportunities at conferences. Keep your name out there. The venues don't have to be top tier. Even if you're speaking at a local meeting, Epner advises, "It means that someone is holding you up as a recognized expert," he says. This type of recognition makes it easier for potential clients to justify hiring you.

Another way to go about this, Strong suggests, is to write a white paper on a topic you have expertise in and hand it to potential clients when you meet with them. Make sure the paper is well-written, and that you have an "editorial board" of experts review it before you finalize it. List the names and affiliations of the editorial board members on the cover sheet. The paper will give you "instant credibility" when you hand it to your potential client, Strong says.

Tip 4: Invest in your professional identity

Strong believes a common mistake consultants make when establishing their professional identities is trying to do it alone. They don't think it's worth the money to hire someone to perform a service they need, and with the convenience of computer applications and do-it-yourself Web design tools, many consultants think they don't have to bring in experts for these and other services.

"Yet, that's exactly what you want your clients to do," Strong says. He insists that you get a specialist to design your Web site and your business cards. Make sure your website and your e-mail address are from the same domain, to further establish your professional presence and your brand.

Tip 5: Establish appropriate fees

New consultants always find it difficult to settle on the best billing rate, especially in the computing field, because rates vary widely. The first thing to consider is what the market will bear for the services you perform. Strong recommends consulting the IEEE-USA Web site (www.ieeeusa.org). The organization routinely conducts national fee studies and publishes the findings. One caveat: due to the economy, today's rates are not what they were two years ago, Strong

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says. Almost all consultants have had to compromise on their fees, and even negotiate, to get projects.

In general, consultants tend to use two business models: a fixed-fee or time-and-materials. Strong warns that software consultants find it almost impossible to work on a fixed-fee basis, due to the iterative nature of the work. Do not agree to a fixed-fee structure, unless your contract includes a clause requiring a fee review, if the scope or nature of the work changes, he advises. On the other hand, as soon as that change-order clause is employed, the project essentially becomes a time-and-materials project. One way to deal with the uncertainty in these types of projects if a fixed-fee is necessary, Strong suggests, is to charge per iteration.

A consultant also needs to consider how much money they need to live on, and charge a rate that will supply that income. Epner offers several tips for doing this: First, figure out how many weeks per year you can work. Cap that number at 45 weeks to allow time for business development, vacation, and other non-billable time. If you're starting out as a consultant, however, do not expect to work more than 30 weeks. "You won't be that busy in the first year or so," he cautions.

Assuming you'll be able to generate 30 weeks of work at 40 hours per week, you'll have 1,200 billable hours. Don't expect more than that. Consider the income you need to live on and divide it by 1,200 to establish the minimum hourly rate you need.

Tip 6: Manage your money

Set money aside to cover those periods of time when you won't be making any money. If you're planning to begin consulting at some point in the future, try to save enough money to cover your bills and your business startup costs for a year. If you've lost your job and need income now, begin looking for clients immediately.

Epner suggests that you expect to wait at least five months before you receive any income from your consulting business. That's because it will take two to three months at least to find your first consulting job, another month before you submit your first invoice, and another month before you get paid.

Once you have an income, be sure that you understand and observe what Epner calls "the consultant's paradox." The paradox is that when you're working, you're not selling your business. And when you're selling your business, you're not working. It means that no matter how busy you are during productive periods, you can't let up on your marketing efforts. "If you're willing to market when you're busy, you can eliminate the famine period," Epner promises.

Tip 7: Stay relevant

It's not enough to just establish the business and serve your clients. You need to stay current with the industry and your profession. "You have to keep at it, invest in yourself, and go to classes," Strong insists. "Our business is changing every hour. What is a marketable skill now won't be in a couple years."

Tip 8: Learn how to accept rejection

One of the hardest things for engineers to deal with is rejection. They are used to controlling the outcome of their work. But consulting is not that controllable. Some people are lucky and find clients right away, and other people have to work harder to break in.

"You've got to accept rejection, or you won't last," Epner says. His advice: Accept the fact that rejection will come, and find a way to use it in a positive way. Assume that you will get turned down 15 times (or another number you want to use) before you land a consulting job. Create a metric around it. For each rejection you receive, mark it off that list. "Just remember, every no brings you closer to a yes," Epner says.

Tip 9: Don't get caught with more work than you can handle.

There often comes the day when you have too much work to handle. To prepare for that possibility, ally yourself with others in your field you know and respect who can provide you with additional support or backup, if needed. Partner with others who have complementary skills that you might need from time to time. They'll do the same for you.

Tip 10: Expect new regulatory requirements

In addition to routine regulatory issues consultants must address, like getting a business license, or deciding if they should form an LLC, software consultants will be facing new regulatory requirements within five years, when all states will begin requiring software engineers to be licensed, Strong warns.

If you're a traditional employee for a company, you will be exempt from this requirement. But if you're a consultant, you will come under the new, nationwide requirements. "The handwriting is on the wall," Strong advises. "If you want to call yourself a consultant and get jobs that have any regulatory bent, start looking into it." **CW** (16 August, 2010)

This article was reprinted from the IEEE Computer Society's Build Your Career website [<http://www.computer.org/byc>].

Which Niche?

By Kathy Fediw, LEED AP, CLP, CLT

Whom do you want to do business with? How do you choose which market(s) you'll serve? We don't choose our market—our market chooses us!

After losing two jobs within a year, I decided to start my own business nine years ago doing training and consulting work. I tried to be all things to all people, and I failed miserably! I managed to get a couple of small contracts, collected my unemployment in between, and kept telling myself "If this doesn't work out, I can always go work for Wal-Mart."

Each month I looked at where the money was coming from. What were customers buying? What were they willing to pay me to do? Who was willing to spend money with me and what did I know about them?

It quickly became apparent to me that the majority of my clients were interior plantscape companies, the people who take care of indoor plants in shopping malls and office buildings. I had worked in this industry for more than 20 years. It was the kind of work that I did best. These were people I knew well, whom I had networked with for many years.

I listened closely to what they were talking about, what challenges they were facing, what they needed, and what they wanted. I checked the online message boards, sent surveys, and listened closely whenever I saw them face-to-face.

What they wanted most was help that was designed just for them and their unique problems. They wanted to work with someone who knew their daily struggles, someone who knew the business, and understood where they were coming from. I kept hearing over and over again that they wanted stuff that was "just for them."

So I gave them what they wanted.

I decided to "grow where I was planted," and devote my business to working exclusively within the industry I knew best, doing what I do best -- where I could truly excel and succeed.

Growing in a Small Niche

Since this was a very small niche market, and most of my clients were small business owners with limited budgets, I knew I would need to offer a variety of products and services at different price points to capture more of the market. My business has grown to where we now offer everything from books and teleseminars to workshops and multi-year consulting contracts. We now have around 250 customers, with a core of about 40 companies and associations all over the world who do business with us on a repeated and regular basis. Each product and service feeds into another, and leads to more and more sales from the same customers, forming a self-sustaining business model that works quite well.

Defining Your Niche

You may not think you serve a niche market, but if you analyze the customers you already have (not who you'd like to be your customers), you'll probably discover that most of them share a few similar characteristics. Look at the businesses, the people who actually hire you and the people you directly interact and work with. If you're just getting started and don't have any customers yet, look at the people you have business relationships with; who needs and can afford your services; people who will be excited when you call; those who want to see you, and find out what you have to offer.

Your niche market may be defined by a combination of characteristics, such as industry, geographic location, gender, age, profession, level of education, revenue or socio-economic level, marital status, or other factors, depending on your practice. But you do NOT serve everyone. There are businesses and individuals who you will best serve, depending on your background, interests, contacts, knowledge, skills and personality.

Focusing on a niche market has helped me focus my business, and be more efficient in my marketing efforts and developing my expertise. It gained me "rock star" status, where I can go to a conference and know almost everyone I see in the hallways. I no longer have to be everything to everyone. I just have to be an expert for one group of businesses and individuals. And that, I can do.

Kathy Fediw, LEED AP, CLP, CLT is a consultant, trainer, author and speaker. She is no longer interested in working at Wal-Mart. She is a member of Institute of Management Consultants USA. She can be reached at Kathy@JFAConsultingBiz.com or through her website www.JFAConsultingBiz.com.

IEEE-USA Consultants Database: Keep Your Consultant Profile Fresh

If you have a listing, you want to keep it up-to-date. Why? Because IEEE-USA has completed *major upgrades* to its [Consultants Database](#) and these upgrades have improved the usefulness of this service to our users (members and visitors).

The major new feature of this upgrade is making the member database profiles accessible to web crawlers, like Google, and other search engines. The updated online application will also now perform the following tasks:

- Update a consultant's web listing, when changes are made to the listing
- Make the e-mail links on the web page that brings up separate a form that sends e-mails to the consultant. This feature keeps e-mails from being harvested for spam

Another upgrade is a feature that includes statistical collection of database member hits, per consultant. This feature will:

- Record the number of times a consultant's listing is displayed as a table of contents link
- Record the number of times a consultant's listing is displayed in full
- Record the number of times the system runs a search
- Collect monthly stats and save them, per consultant
- Display the stats for a consultant in tabular form

The advantage of having these features will allow database members to track how many times their profile is being viewed and may even help some consultants determine how much their consultant expertise is in demand.

Other upgraded features include adding the *reCAPTCHA* feature that will require a human being to submit all searches, once the search criterion has been set. This feature will protect against data harvesting.

We believe these enhancements will increase the usage of this database by those seeking services from independent engineering consultants. We're also hoping that members review their profile and make any necessary changes, so they can take advantage of these upgrades.

The best news is that we have upgraded and increased functionality of the Consultants Database, but we are not increasing the annual subscription fee of \$79. To subscribe, go to the IEEE-USA Web site, and click [Consultant Services](#).



ieee-usa today's engineer

Employment Networks Can Enhance Your Job Search

By IEEE-USA Staff

Employment networks (also known as job clubs or job networks) are small groups of individuals who come together in face-to-face meetings or electronically to help each other's employment search. Ideally, an employment network allows participants to talk candidly about job searching and career advancement with the shared goal of supporting the success of all members. Typical activities include networking, information-sharing, coaching, training and cheerleading.

The concept of a job club is usually attributed to Dr. Nathan Azrin, a clinical psychologist, who co-authored a book entitled *Job Club Counselor's Manual: A Behavioral Approach to Vocational Counseling*, published in 1981. Azrin studied various groups that existed, assessed how they worked and what made them successful, and then captured the results and his recommendations in the form of a how-to manual for job club counselors.

Read the rest of the article in the December 2010 issue of IEEE-USA Today's Engineer at: <http://www.todaysengineer.org/2011/Feb/employment-networks.asp>



AICN Welcomes a New Network in Jamaica

The Alliance of IEEE Consultants Networks Coordinating Committee congratulates Halden Morris and the IEEE Jamaica Section Consultants Network on the formation of an Affinity Group. This newest Consultants Network became official on 30 December 2010. If you want to welcome them, check IEEE-USA's Web site for contact information for the Jamaica Section Consultants Network.



If other groups want to form a consultants network, IEEE-USA's Web site also contains step-by-step instructions about how to become a formal network. We encourage new consultants networks to register as Affinity Groups. After groups form a network, they can take advantage of IEEE's branding and resources, and also qualify for funding through IEEE Section rebates.

If you don't see contact information listed on our Web site for your consultants network, contact Daryll Griffin at d.r.griffin@ieee.org.



IEEE Consultants Networks Now Have a Place on Facebook

The popular social networking site, Facebook, now has a fan page for IEEE Consultants Networks. Dr. Wole Akpose of the Baltimore Section Consultants Network took the initiative to start the page, and he has opened it up for all local networks and their members to use. It's a great place to come and interact with your fellow consultants. AICN will assist by posting relevant information useful to local networks. But we all know that what makes a great Facebook fan page is people joining it. Participate by "Like"ing that page, and posting or discussing daily topics. Come and join us on our new IEEE Consultants Network Facebook fan page. <http://www.facebook.com/pages/IEEE-Consultants-Network/116356868419773>

2010 Profile of IEEE Consultants

IEEE-USA has released its *2010 Profile of IEEE Consultants*. This annual e-book has been hailed as a great resource for independent consultants — to help them decide how much to charge when they are preparing proposals, or negotiate contracts. Past readers have shared that they believe this publication helps them establish a fixed price or fee that is both competitive and fair, because the up-to-date data provides consultants with need-to-know information about what other consultants working in similar fields are charging. The data contained in this e-book comes from a national fee survey of IEEE members. This survey was conducted in the early summer of 2010, so the data is the most recent information you'll be able to find regarding consultants' fees. To purchase, go to: www.ieeeusa.org/communications/ebooks/.



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The fourth issue of IEEE-USA's interactive online publication, *IEEE-USA in ACTION*, is now available online. Made possible by the U.S. dues assessment, this new publication is free to all IEEE members. *IEEE-USA in ACTION* is your source for learning about the programs, products, services and activities that IEEE-USA has to offer, and to find out what IEEE-USA is doing on behalf of U.S. IEEE members. View the new issue at: http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/ieeeusa/ieeeusa_1210

