Bench Time

Idea In Short

Bench time happens to most consultants at some point. Whether caused by a delayed project or a cancelled engagement, how you use that time shapes your reputation and career trajectory.

Sometimes, as a junior consultant, you may end up on the bench. In sports as in consulting, bench is associated with a negative connotation. You may end up on the bench for reasons beyond your control. The client might not have signed the engagement. Or, the client hasn't agreed to a project start date. Or, in worst cases, the client cancelled the project. Particularly, bench time is both, frustrating and annoying, when you are accustomed to the fast-paced consulting lifestyle. It's also vexing when you are benched because the client has run out of budget, but there's a ton of work you could still do for them. The problem with being on the bench is you don't know how long you are going to be there. And, this uncertainty is unsettling. If you're in such a situation, be active and demonstrate that you are productively using your time. Here are some ideas to make the most of your bench time.

Be visible

Even though you're on the bench, be sure to come into the office every day. Introduce yourself to any Senior Managers or Partners that work in your local office. Let them know that you are available for any work they may have. You could work on finding any open bids, writing proposal, visual and design work, editing PowerPoint slides, etc. Be sure to be quick and thorough with anything you do. Anything that will help you showcase your skills will be beneficial to your career in the long run. This is an excellent way to not only expand your network but can lead to better project opportunities in the future.

Reach out

If you''re working at a large consulting firm, send out some emails to any Senior Managers or Partners working in a field you''re interested in. Make yourself available as a resource.

Most consulting firms have a staffing team that tracks and manages the bench. Proactively reach out to them and share your CV with them. Your name will end up circulating and do some good. In my own experience creating a well-designed, but, brief PowerPoint slide deck about myself, my skill set, and work experiences has proved extremely beneficial. If you don't have such collaterals, use the bench time to update your CV and create a 1-page PowerPoint CV that you can share, both internally and to prospective clients. Just remember, the three R''s of business: relationships, relationships, relationships.

Business development

Business development work is your opportunity to learn about sales without a lot of pressure. If you are solo in your area, start building templates and material to increase your company's Intellectual Property in that area. Think back to all those engagement when you wished you had a template for X or a tool for Y. Now is the time to develop all those tools. Of course, you''ll have to put up with some grunt work that you would usually delegate to the Interns. You''ll probably be doing all sorts of assorted work that you might think is beneath you. But, this is also your chance to impress some big wigs, get your name out there, and help the company a little.

Learning & Development

Consulting is a knowledge-business. Consulting firms are in the business of renting brains for money. Most consulting companies will either offer either in-house training or possibly sponsor professional certifications to grow their people and increase their billing rates. Often, it''s cheaper for the firm to offer these sorts of courses than to lose consultants. It''s all about keeping people engaged in a knowledge business. Sign up for anything you can get your name on.

Non-billable work

Though not billable to clients, you can pick up valuable skills, such as invoicing, client relations work, publications, sending follow-up emails, etc. through non-billable work. Again, not the most glamorous work out there, but important stuff that makes consulting work and could benefit you. You could also check out the pro bono and Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives your firm supports. You''ll get a chance to deploy your skills to help non-profits and charitable causes. In exchange, you'll gather connections and critical

experience, just to name two!

Knowledge management

At the end of the day, consulting is fundamentally a people-oriented business. It depends on consultants' experience and expertise. You can''t build on the wealth of completed projects if you don''t know what happened in the past. This is is where the corporate intranet or shared folder comes in super-handy. Your work doesn''t have to be original or ground-breaking. As a matter of fact, if you solved a problem the same way as someone else, that''s the beginning of validating an approach. In consulting, this is called a best practise and is extremely valuable. In many consulting engagements, reinventing the wheel is sometimes inevitable. But, you should do what you can to learn from the experience. Use your bench time to put your name out there as an expert.

Relax a bit

Most consultants are motivated, driven individuals that make the most of their time. Projects come and go depending on the time of year. So, take a step back and relax. In fact, taking breaks has been shown to be an integral component of success. You don't just work an 8 hour day when you are billable. You'll do a full day for the client. Then, you have all the internal activities, such as telcos, HR work, internal training, expense reports, time tracking, etc. As a result, when you are on the bench, there is this unwritten rule that you are entitled to some down time and recovery. So, if you have done your professional development, then use the down time go focus on your personal stuff.

- Focus on your fitness - get your strength and general fitness back. Many of us drop fitness when work gets busy
- Diet - take the time to learn to prepare healthier meals and remove a few inches of your waistline
- Sleep - it's catch up time if you've come of a busy client. But not too much sleep
- Establish a routine - you need to fill your days in so you don't feel unproductive
- Hobby - Get a hobby or develop it further
- Network - Get out and see people, be it work colleagues or friends. Get networking and keep communications open
- Make an effort with your family - your partner or kids or whoever. Make up for any time away from the family

- Vacation - Plan a holiday somewhere and get some proper downtime

Summary

Bench time does not have to be wasted time. A proactive approach to networking, skill-building, and business development can turn a slow period into a meaningful career investment.