

The Consulting Hourglass

Idea In Short

Shape your consulting career like an hourglass: learn broadly as a junior, specialize deliberately as a senior manager, then broaden again as a partner solving diverse client problems. Consistency beats creativity early; positioning beats breadth mid-career.

Consulting Is Broad

Management consulting is a disparate field with more than 700,000 Americans describing themselves as consultants. That number includes project managers, contractors, subject matter experts, and trainers. The combinations between functions like finance, strategy, operations, and marketing, and industries like oil and gas, pharmaceuticals, and education are endless.

The good news is that junior consultants at any firm, function, or industry need some of the same foundational skills. No matter what kind of chef de cuisine you plan to become, you better have basic knife skills. The consulting career follows an hourglass path: generalist, specialist, generalist 1. Understanding this shape helps you make deliberate choices about when to broaden and when to narrow.

Get Valuable Skills

Junior consultants should be smart, self-aware, and coachable. Geek out on Excel models and build PowerPoint decks that need only limited editing. Build rapport quickly with clients and rock client interviews. Research thoroughly, get inside the mind of your project manager, and do not reinvent the wheel. At first, you have limited positional or expertise power, so develop effective relationships instead.

This phase is about building the foundation. Every skill you acquire, from financial modeling to stakeholder management, compounds over the years. The consultants who rush through fundamentals to chase glamorous strategy work often stumble later. Master the basics,

because they are the scaffolding for everything that follows.

Be Flexible

A managing director recently noted that the consulting world is a different place from when he was a senior consultant in 2006. Another observed that much of the work is performance-based, with clients expecting more. The world is changing rapidly. Fabiola Gianotti, director-general of CERN, explained at Davos that people should get the skills to be able to change their skills 2.

Gianotti argued that a good education gives young people general tools: critical thinking, understanding the scientific method, and evidence-based assessment. The pandemic forced clients and consultants to work differently. It was awkward and inconvenient, yet still effective. Consulting attracts people who like to learn, challenge themselves, solve new problems, and make clients successful. Flexibility is not optional. It is the core competency.

Develop Your Craft

There is a lot to learn, and it comes slowly through practice and continuous feedback from managers and clients. Client service is as difficult as it is fun. Consultants must balance the needs of the client, the consulting firm, the team, and themselves. There are ebbs and flows during a career, and you need to pick and choose what is important and when.

Clients and projects differ. They are idiosyncratic, and when you have seen one client, you have seen one client. You need to see lots of examples before you can reasonably have a general theory of client service. It is not textbook learning. The craft develops through repetition, reflection, and the accumulation of pattern recognition that only time provides.

Be Humble and Do Good Work

Anthony Bourdain's Kitchen Confidential offers a striking parallel to junior consulting. He describes line cooking as being about consistency, about mindless unvarying repetition, the same series of tasks performed over and over in exactly the same way 3. The last thing a chef wants in a line cook is an innovator with ideas of their own. Chefs require blind, near fanatical loyalty, strong backs, and automaton-like consistency of execution under battlefield conditions.

This might seem hyperbolic, but it translates directly. Are you keeping the kitchen clean and sanitary? Are you washing the vegetables thoroughly? Are you learning from your last set of mistakes? As a senior manager, consistency beats creativity from junior consultants. If you get two or three good projects under your belt, you will quickly be given more responsibility and stretch roles. Enjoy these early days of limited responsibility and sufficient oxygen. Take this time to get good at what you do and pick up speed. You will have no work-life balance if you are slow.

Think Hourglass

Think of your consulting career like an hourglass. It is broad and stable at the bottom, narrows in the middle, and broadens again at the top. As a junior consultant or analyst, your reputation for being consistent, coachable, and smart is priceless. Project-based professional-services work is a free labor market. You roll on and off projects and develop a brand quickly. Either people fight for you to be on their project, or they are indifferent.

The hourglass metaphor is not just descriptive. It is prescriptive. It tells you when to say yes and when to say no. At the bottom, say yes to everything to build breadth. In the middle, say no to anything outside your specialization. At the top, say yes again because your role is to solve problems, not execute a single function.

Analyst Means Learn Aggressively and Say Yes

There is a lot to learn. What you learn applies across all kinds of projects: short due diligence versus long-term implementation, large transformations with dozens of workstreams versus three-person case teams, finance versus supply chain versus human capital versus technology versus operations versus strategy. This can feel disorienting.

You are often the least experienced person on the project, in a new industry, at a new client, in a new function. Follow your team lead. Follow the process. Think of yourself like Tarzan, swinging from one vine to another. The breadth you build now becomes the raw material for your later specialization. Say yes to projects that scare you, because discomfort signals growth.

Senior Manager Means Specialize and Say No

As a senior manager, you have done the work. You are an excellent minder who can manage teams. Clients like you. You have the beginnings of a tribe. Now it is time for positioning. What are you uniquely good at? It is time to say no to things that do not fit your emerging specialization.

When should you start specializing? A few questions clarify: Is this an area you would like to be famous for? Do you have a support network of partners, clients, and junior consultants? Do you have a sustainable competitive advantage and can you sell work? If yes, fast-track your career. Specialization does not mean narrowness. It means becoming the person clients and partners think of first when a specific type of problem arises.

Partner Means Solve Client Problems and Say Yes

As a partner, you are going broad again. You are in business development, and you take care of clients. They have a problem, and while you yourself might not be the right person, you can connect them with the right people. You can sell many different services. You solve client problems.

Sometimes this requires creativity and mixing capabilities with other vendors and customers. Sometimes it means providing advice without implementation. Sometimes it means doing things for free. The partner phase is about judgment, relationships, and the ability to see the whole board. Your specialization gave you credibility. Your breadth gives you range.

Are There Exceptions?

Of course. The outline above applies to those going into a generalist consulting path, recruited from campus into the Big 4 or Big 3 firms. There are just as many specialist paths to follow: digital marketing, accounting forensics, environmental compliance, and more. People who go into healthcare consulting, for example, can specialize and get famous for something faster.

The caveat is that specialists still need to learn the basic consulting fundamentals. No cutting corners. Whether you follow the generalist hourglass or a specialist track, the foundations remain the same. The hourglass is a framework, not a rule. Use it to think deliberately about your career trajectory and make choices that align with your goals at each

stage.

- 1Consulting Career Path: Analyst to Partner
- 2Fabiola Gianotti: CERN Director-General
- 3Kitchen Confidential by Anthony Bourdain

Summary

The consulting hourglass means broad beginnings, narrow specialization, and broad leadership. Junior consultants say yes and learn aggressively. Senior managers say no and position themselves. Partners say yes again and solve client problems. Consistency, flexibility, and humility anchor each phase.