Solve Problems Like Puzzles

Idea In Short

Treat consulting engagements like jigsaw puzzles: start with edges, sort into buckets, find patterns early, work in teams, and pace yourself through the long middle.

Start With Easy Problems

Puzzles come in many sizes and difficulty levels. Knock out a few straightforward ones with distinct lines and colors before graduating to 2,000-piece impressionist sets. The same principle applies to consulting engagements. Set yourself up for success by asking thorough client-discovery questions up front. Get help when needed, because there is no glory in struggling alone and producing average work. Consider whether the project needs scoping down. An assessment phase for less money may precede a full implementation.

The temptation to tackle everything at once is strong. Resist it. Build confidence and momentum through early wins. This approach mirrors the hypothesis-driven methodology where consultants form educated guesses, test them against available evidence, and refine their thinking iteratively 1. Starting small reduces risk and calibrates expectations for both the team and the client.

Look at the Box

What problem are you trying to solve? Can you imagine assembling a 1,000-piece puzzle without any clear notion of the picture? Is it a dog, a landscape, or a television show? What is the end goal? In consulting, the box cover is the statement of work. Read it carefully to understand what you promised. Speak with the client about what success looks like. Review similar client deliverables to calibrate your vision.

Without a shared picture of the destination, the team drifts. Misalignment between the consulting team and the client about the desired outcome is a leading cause of project

failure. The statement of work anchors everyone to the same reference point and prevents scope from creeping unintentionally 2. Return to the box cover throughout the engagement when decisions about direction arise.

Start With the Edges

Every puzzler knows this instinct. There are only so many pieces with a flat side, and each immediately tells you where it belongs: top, bottom, left, or right. The same logic governs project scoping. Determine how big and broad the problem is. Identify what is included in scope. Will the engagement cover all business units, processes, customers, and products? Is the deliverable a 10-page executive summary or a live dashboard application programming interface?

Defining the edges early prevents two common failures. First, it stops the project from ballooning into unmanageable breadth. Second, it gives the team a structural skeleton to fill in. Every subsequent decision can be tested against the question of whether it fits within the established boundaries. This discipline is what separates well-scoped engagements from chaotic ones.

Put Things in Buckets

Group colored puzzle pieces together to make searching easier. Yellow goes here, red goes there. Organize your station so everything is easy to find. In consulting, this means dividing the problem into workstreams. Decide which team member will own which piece. Identify what data and insights you already possess versus what you still need. Determine the economic drivers of the problem and what will move the needle.

The most powerful tool for bucketing is the Mutually Exclusive, Collectively Exhaustive principle, commonly known as MECE. This framework ensures that your categories overlap neither with each other nor leave gaps 3. A well-structured MECE breakdown allows the team to work in parallel without redundancy and gives the client confidence that the analysis is comprehensive.

Look for Patterns

What do you see in the data? Are there obvious things to fix now? Do the easy parts first.

This approach has two benefits: it builds momentum and reduces the number of remaining pieces to handle. Consultants excel at uncovering patterns within messy client data and finding the correlations that matter. Start client conversations to understand the as-is situation. Ask what has worked and what is broken.

Be willing to re-sort, regroup, and reorganize the data. Your first grouping is not necessarily correct. Patterns emerge through iteration. Has a similar project been completed by the client and failed? What other initiatives, both larger and smaller, might affect this project scope? These questions help you see connections that raw data alone will not reveal.

Search for Specific Pieces

Depending on the difficulty of the puzzle, find the distinct lines and hints that send you on a curiosity-filled hunt. Expect good days and bad ones. Good days bring useful insights. Bad days leave you without the data you need. Use hypotheses, which are educated guesses based on available information, to clarify your thinking. Ask what the answers could be and how you can prove or disprove them.

Sometimes you need to create data through surveys, proprietary research, or modeling. Get creative, because the client did not hire you to run a simple search query they could have done themselves. Dig deep. This would not be a strategic initiative if it were easy or obvious. The value consultants bring lies in the persistence to find the pieces others overlook.

Be Open-Minded

When searching for pieces in one area, you often scoop up pieces that belong elsewhere. Remember that strategy equals good decisions plus luck. There is definitely some luck in puzzling and in consulting. Your interviews, surveys, benchmarking, and research may send you in new and different directions. Share your findings with the client and with sister project workstreams. Do not be an island.

Be cross-functional. Rarely do enterprise-sized problems sit in a single function. Look upstream, because this process is likely affected by two or three other processes. Think through implementation and what is needed to make potential recommendations stick. Serendipity rewards the prepared mind, and consultants who remain open to unexpected connections often find the most compelling insights.

Have Fun

Dopamine is a happiness chemical that kicks in when you see progress. One more piece fitted. Pride in your work. Demonstrate progress through interim deliverables, analyses, and status updates. Celebrate small wins. Take care of your team. Engage your client afresh. Do not make the work boring. Learn something new, apprentice a teammate, or sharpen your client skills.

Be a leader. Take more of the blame and give away more of the credit. Compliment a client in front of their boss. Take pride in your work, because consultants are practitioners who need to practice. The energy you bring to the engagement is contagious, and a motivated team consistently outperforms a disengaged one.

Work in Teams

This may be the most important point. The hardest puzzles, the ones that are most challenging, most fun, and most engaging, are more than one person's burden. Unless you are a one-person subject matter expert writing a report, most consulting work is cross-functional. Ask yourself daily how you can help someone else's work and how they can help you. Ask your team every day what they need from you.

Use your client's brain. They are smart in ways you are not, and they know the organization better than you do. Think about how to stitch together the final deliverable. Consider how all the pieces come together into a compelling story. The best consulting deliverables feel seamless, as if one mind produced them, even when a dozen people contributed.

Pace Yourself

Rarely is a puzzle finished in one weekend. Stand up, do something else, then come back. Put the puzzle in a public place where you can drop in, fit a few pieces, then walk away. Projects can be a slog. There is a long middle when it sometimes feels like you are not making progress. Work backwards from the answer. Determine what is needed by when and what success looks like this week.

Start socializing your results early. Do not wait for a big reveal at the end of the project. Start getting client votes now. Incremental validation keeps the client engaged and prevents last-

minute surprises. The long middle is where projects lose momentum, so discipline around pacing and communication is what separates successful engagements from stalled ones.

Where the Metaphor Breaks Down

Puzzles are recreation. Management consulting is not. Clients pay significant sums for highly effective and efficient work. Several differences make consulting harder than puzzling. Clients do not always agree on what the picture should be. The chief financial officer, chief marketing officer, and chief human resources officer each have different visions of success. There are missing pieces, meaning incomplete data sets, all the time. There are also extra pieces: random, useless, uncorrelated data that confuse the analysis.

The data does not always fit together nicely. Tons of cleansing and cross-walking are required. Projects have deadlines, so you cannot finish at your leisure. Clients often work on the same puzzle in parallel, which can disrupt your flow. Sometimes you join when the puzzle is half done or messed up, inheriting another firm's mess. Clients want you to teach them how to puzzle in the future without you. During assessment projects, you do not get to touch the puzzle, meaning you do not implement the solution. And sometimes, you simply do not like the picture you were handed.

- 1The Hypothesis-Driven Approach And Why It Works
- 2Consulting SOW Template: Scope, Deliverables, KPIs, And Exit Criteria
- 3What Is The MECE Framework

Summary

Problem solving mirrors jigsaw puzzling. Start easy, frame the edges, sort pieces into buckets, hunt for patterns, collaborate, and pace the effort. The metaphor breaks down because clients disagree on the picture, pieces go missing, and deadlines loom. Adapt the discipline, not the leisure.