Life After Consulting

Idea In Short

Read exit-opportunity postings like a consultant: parse the glamour from the fine print. Corporate strategy, private equity operations and general management tracks all recruit heavily from consulting, and every posting hides scope questions worth asking. Consulting remains a cheap call option on career optionality.

A Recruiter Worth Reading

Charles Aris, a North Carolina recruiting firm, specializes in placing former strategy consultants, and its newsletter and job board amount to free market intelligence on consulting exits.1 Reading actual postings teaches more about the post-consulting landscape than any career panel, because the language rewards the same skeptical parsing consultants apply to client data. Five representative postings show the pattern.

The Strategy Chief With an Asterisk

One posting seeks an executive vice president of strategy and corporate development for a private equity-backed medical device company in Boston, leading the entire mergers and acquisitions lifecycle from market analysis to post-merger integration, reporting directly to the chief executive officer and working with the board. That sounds outstanding: map corporate strategy, decide where to compete, screen acquisitions and work alongside investment bankers. Then the fine print arrives. The role also works in a program management office capacity, managing multiple corporate initiatives, which starts sounding like strategic planning administration. A smart candidate immediately asks the scope questions. How big is this company? How many direct reports come with the title? What is the acquisition track record? And what happened to the last person who held the role? Glamorous titles deserve the same diligence as glamorous investment theses.

The Path to General Management

A Chicago posting from a publicly traded industrial manufacturer offers a director of strategy seat on a corporate team reporting to the chief commercial officer, the company's second-ranking executive, with regular exposure to the chief executive and board. The team manages organic and inorganic growth plus the annual planning process, and one line matters most: the team has a history of promoting strategy members into general management roles. For many consultants this is the dream sequence, consultant to director of strategy to general manager. The Achilles' heel of management consultants is the sour fact that we rarely hold profit-and-loss (P&L) experience, giving advice without implementing it. A posting that advertises the bridge across that gap is advertising the scarcest thing in the exit market.

Private Equity Operations

A San Francisco posting seeks a vice president of portfolio operations for a middle-market growth private equity firm, working directly with founders, chief executives, management teams and investors to build and scale portfolio companies, participating in everything from selection to value creation.2 Private equity is booming as an exit destination, with eight of 48 postings on the board at one count sitting inside PE firms. The portfolio operations role holds particular appeal because the work spans the fund and its individual companies at once. Power plus variety plus money plus measurable results is a rare combination, and this posting offers all four.

Scale and Innovation Roles

Two more postings round out the map. A Fortune 100 retailer in the Northeast seeks a senior director of promotions to lead a multibillion-dollar promotions business, developing strategy, effectiveness, design and execution. Read that second sentence again: multibillion-dollar promotions budget. For context, one billion seconds is more than 31 years, which is the kind of arithmetic that makes budget scale tangible. Meanwhile a Fortune 500 food and beverage company in Pennsylvania seeks a senior manager of business model innovation to lead a new unit extending the brand into experiences, including a quarterly Shark Tank-style initiative generating creative business ideas. Business model innovation already sounds appealing, and running an internal idea competition on top makes the role genuinely distinctive. Both postings ask for two to five years at a top consulting firm, confirming where these pipelines draw from.

Timing the Exit

The postings also imply a timing lesson. Most of the roles specify two to five years of top-firm experience, which marks the window when consulting credentials convert most cleanly into industry seniority. Leave earlier and the brand has not fully attached; stay far longer and compensation plus partnership tracks raise the switching cost while industry operators question the missing line experience. None of this argues for a forced exit, since plenty of careers flourish inside firms. It argues for intentionality: know which window you are in, keep the recruiter relationships warm before you need them and build the operational exposure, secondments, implementation phases and profit-and-loss adjacency, that the best postings quietly demand.

Reading a Posting Like a Consultant

The postings also teach a transferable skill: interrogating a role description the way you would interrogate a client's problem statement. Glamorous verbs deserve the most suspicion, so translate each one into the Tuesday-afternoon task it implies before falling in love. Check whether the reporting line matches the promised influence, because a strategy role three layers from the chief executive rarely shapes strategy. Ask what happened to the previous occupant, how success will be measured in year one and whether the team has a record of promoting people onward or holding them in place. The recruiter's summary is marketing, and the diligence is yours. Candidates who apply consulting rigor to their own careers consistently choose better than candidates who chase titles.

The Call Option Thesis

Stepping back from the individual postings, a pattern emerges. Management consulting functions as one of the fast tracks to career goodness, not because the consulting work itself lasts forever, but because it manufactures options. The postings above want consulting-trained candidates for strategy leadership, deal work, operations and innovation, across industries from medical devices to retail to food. The financial metaphor fits precisely: consulting is like buying a call option with little premium, a modest upfront cost for the right to choose among valuable futures later.3 The option is real and so is the exercise decision. Candidates who bring their consulting skepticism to their own job search, interrogating scope, reporting lines, predecessors and the distance between the title and the actual work, convert the option at its true value. Those who fall for the first glamorous paragraph learn what fine print costs.

- 1Charles Aris
- 2Private equity
- 3Call option

Summary

Recruiter postings map the post-consulting landscape: strategy leadership, private equity operations, promotion into general management and business model innovation. Read each one skeptically, asking about scope, reporting lines and predecessors. The consulting years buy the option, and diligence decides how to exercise it.