# Finders, Minders, Grinders

## Idea In Short

Understand the pyramid before joining or running one. Finders sell and own, minders manage projects and people, grinders do the analytical heavy lifting. The leverage ratio between them sets bill rates, work type and profitability. Know which role you play and which you are building toward.

## Slang With a Pedigree

Finders, minders and grinders sounds like slang, and it carries a serious pedigree. David Maister coined the trio to describe the roles inside professional services organizations, drawing on his years advising law firms, and the model applies equally to management consulting firms and investment banks.1 Anyone interested in partnership economics should read his collected articles on managing professional service firms, timeless truths about delivering great client work, recruiting and retaining talent and keeping leverage in check. Maister was a Harvard Business School professor who left, a rare move, to teach super smart people how to run their own businesses, and the first chapter's archetypes ring true for anyone who has worked in the large consultancies.

## Finders: The Owners Who Hunt

At the top of the pyramid sit the finders, usually equity partners, who find the business. They are owners, meaning the firm's success is their personal financial success, and they are in it to win it. Finders hunt for a living, spending 80 percent or more of their time on business development and account management, because their job is not project delivery but finding work that others deliver. They are in sales, whatever their titles say. Beyond selling, partners and managing directors should be taking care of existing clients, finding new ones, training up the next generation of leaders and managing the practice so the talent pipeline matches expected demand. Ownership means the pyramid's health is their problem.

## Minders: The Ones Holding It Together

In consulting terms, minders are the senior managers, engagement managers and managers. They carry relevant experience and spend their days working with clients while keeping teams busy and on track, keeping the wheels of projects running, all in service of the goal of making partner. They seek to please, and frankly they hold the place together. The role rewards genuinely, since a minder influences dozens of junior consultants through mentoring, coaching, recruiting, training and investing in younger people.2 It is not always rainbows and ponies, as anyone who has lived the late nights, difficult team dynamics, broken spreadsheet models and grumpy clients will confirm. Projects go up and projects go down, and the minder rides every swing.

## Grinders: Getting Visibly Smarter

At the base work the grinders, bright young stars out of top universities, ages 21 to 25, smart, impressionable, eager to please and a bit anxious. They put in long hours learning to do research, run database queries and crunch data until it has been pulverized into sand. The learning curve is the compensation beyond the paycheck, since junior resources absorb enormous amounts on the job; as one manager put it, you can actually see them getting smarter. By a half dozen projects they are mature beyond their years and fairly self-sufficient, and after a few short years at a top firm their market value has likely risen 20 to 30 percent. The grind is real, and so is the compounding.

The three roles are archetypes rather than fences. Any project needs all three, anyone can help find repeat business at the client site and minders regularly step in to do heavy lifting. The labels describe hiring tracks and typical time allocation, and the best professionals learn adjacent roles before their titles require it.

## Career Moves Inside the Pyramid

The model doubles as a career map, because each transition demands skills the previous role never required. Grinder to minder means trading personal output for team output, learning to review rather than redo and to develop people while delivering projects; the analysts who make it are those who started coaching peers before anyone asked. Minder to finder is the steeper cliff, since managing delivery says nothing about winning work, and firms are full of superb engagement managers who stall because they never built relationships that generate revenue. The preparation starts years early: cultivate client counterparts who will someday hold budgets, develop a point of view worth seeking out and practice spotting add-on opportunities inside current work. Ask any partner how they made it, and the answer involves selling long before their title said sales.

## Leverage Sets the Economics

The ratio among the three groups determines the pyramid's shape, and the shape determines the business.3 A tall pyramid implies a lower leverage ratio, with more partner and veteran time in actual delivery, higher bill rates and work that is more advisory, strategic and open-ended. A flatter pyramid implies higher leverage, a larger base of analysts and associates, lower bill rates and process-oriented work requiring significant numbers of people to implement. Neither shape is good or bad, merely suited to different types of work, and firms get into trouble mainly by pricing one shape while staffing the other. Anyone who cares how their consulting or law firm really operates should study the staffing model and trace its consequences for client service, profitability and satisfaction. Maister filled 300 pages on the subject, and the working version fits in a sentence: know your role in the pyramid, play it well and build deliberately toward the next one. Then go to the client site and mind and find.

- 1David Maister
- 2Mentorship
- 3Leverage (finance)

## Summary

Professional services run on Maister's pyramid: equity-owning finders hunting work, minders keeping projects and people on track and grinders getting visibly smarter through the crunch. The leverage ratio shapes economics and work type, with neither tall nor flat inherently better. Mind and find accordingly.