Why Great Teams Need Both

Idea In Short

Consulting, and project work more broadly, is fundamentally a team sport, one built on a simple premise: a well-assembled group of people with different roles will consistently outperform any single individual working alone. Understanding why teams provide both breadth, the ability to see connections and challenge assumptions, and depth, the specialist expertise needed to get details right, explains why staffing decisions matter as much as raw talent.

Project Work Is a Team Sport

One of the most underappreciated aspects of consulting, and project-based work more broadly, is that it functions as a genuine team sport. There is a shared goal, people occupy different roles, and no single person needs to be good at everything, provided the right mix of people sits on the team. Knowing how to staff a project well, matching the right combination of skills and perspectives to the scope of work, is itself a distinct professional skill.

Why Groups Outperform Individuals

Research on collective decision-making has long argued that a diverse group of informed people will generally make better decisions than any one individual working alone.1 Regardless of how strong a piece of analysis or a draft deliverable already is, it typically improves further after a genuine review. Common improvements include catching gaps in logic, where a step gets skipped or an assumption fails to sync with the rest of the analysis, sharpening the narrative so the strongest points land in the right order, cutting redundant material that dilutes the core message, and tidying up small errors in syntax, formatting or attribution that a tired author no longer notices.

Trust Makes Feedback Useful Rather Than Threatening

Genuine trust between teammates is what makes constructive feedback actually constructive. Without it, criticism reads as hostile, malicious or simply nit-picking, rather than as a genuine attempt to improve the work. Listening with real openness, treating feedback as useful information to filter rather than a personal verdict to defend against, tends to make someone a stronger collaborator over the long run. At the same time, whoever owns the final deliverable retains ultimate responsibility for its quality, so taking in what is genuinely useful and setting aside the rest is a healthy balance to strike.

What Happens Without a Culture of Trust

Where a culture of trust is missing, people spend far too much energy double-checking each other's work, second-guessing decisions already made, or navigating interpersonal politics instead of actually doing the work. Because most professional services work involves people collaborating closely, often on the very same document or deliverable, setting clear expectations, building genuine trust and maintaining disciplined revision control are basic prerequisites for functioning as a team at all.

How Teams Provide Breadth

A team helps individuals go broader by brainstorming together, surfacing lateral ideas, and generally forcing a more cross-functional view of a problem. It is easy to become overly fixated on the current state of a business, or trapped inside a client's own way of framing an issue. Staying genuinely useful to a client requires remaining close enough to their reality to be relevant, while staying detached enough to notice adjacencies and connections elsewhere in the business that an insider might miss entirely.

When Strategic Breadth Matters Most

At certain points in a project's life cycle, this kind of broad strategic thinking becomes especially important: assumptions need to be tested, new data needs to be uncovered or generated, and established best practices need to be applied deliberately rather than assumed. More experienced team members often provide much of this breadth, since they have encountered similar situations before and have a sharper sense of where else to look for answers.

How Teams Provide Depth

Well-run project teams also tend to run lean, with little room for anyone not genuinely pulling their weight. Even a relatively junior team member can carry full ownership over a defined piece of work, however limited its scope. Specialists bring a different kind of value entirely: genuine domain expertise built from deep focus on a single industry or function, rather than broad generalist knowledge.2 A useful comparison is a specialist role in team sports, brought in for one specific, high-stakes situation precisely because of narrow, deep skill rather than broad versatility.

Learning Happens Through Doing

As with most professional services work, a substantial share of genuine learning happens through apprenticeship and hands-on training rather than formal instruction alone. Formal education, prior work experience and accumulated knowledge matter, but without applying that knowledge inside an actual structured project, alongside a real team facing a real client context, even a highly credentialed person remains, in practice, only a smart individual without direct experience.3

- 1The Wisdom Of Crowds
- 2Subject-Matter Expert
- 3Apprenticeship

Summary

Great project teams combine two distinct strengths: breadth, the cross-functional perspective that catches blind spots and surfaces new angles, and depth, the specialist expertise that gets technical details right. Trust between teammates is what makes both possible, turning honest feedback into genuine improvement rather than something to defend against.