

Public Sector Consulting 101

Anna Brunner, Booz Allen Hamilton
Kirsten Jacobson, Grant Thornton

Interested in working with the federal government? While watching USAjobs or interning are still viable paths there, public sector consulting is another way to work in most federal agencies.

According to a [recent GAO report on government consulting](#), federal agencies obligated over \$430 billion through contracts in fiscal year 2015, accounting for almost 40 percent of the government's discretionary spending. Sixty percent of this spending consisted of professional management services including anything from accounting, technology, communication, program evaluation, performance management, budget analysis and more.

Advantages

Here are some major advantages to working in public sector consulting:

- **Federal experience** - For those of you driven by public-service motivation, you are contributing to the federal government often working directly alongside your "Fed" colleagues. Plus if you'd like to be a "Fed" in the future, you already have federal public sector experience. In my current project most of the federal employees were contractors previously.
- **See how the sausage gets made** - As we said, 40 percent of government discretionary funding is contracting. It is an enormous part of how the federal government functions. Kirsten's client, the Student and Exchange Visitor Program, consists of around 400 people - 100 federal employees and 300 contractors. In 2014, the federal government issued nearly [80,000](#) Requests for Proposals (RFPs). Thousands of companies submit proposals in hopes of snatching up these opportunities. In some consulting companies, you may be expected to help out with these proposals.
- **Flexibility** - You are not stuck on one project. Some projects can last for years, some for a few months. Most often, you can move projects if you want to try out new agencies or use different skills. In theory, you can switch every year without changing employers. Depending on the company, there may be opportunities to work with "private sector" clients including nonprofits and higher education institutions.
- **Pay** - Public sector consulting is still based in the private sector. The private sector often pays more than most federal jobs and definitely more at an entry level. That said, federal benefits are most likely better. Make sure to ask about a firm's 401K match, healthcare options, other insurance, and other benefits

available. You never know the benefits that may be available, ie. bonuses, reduced car rental and cat/dog adoption refunds. Kirsten adopted her cat, Lena, through this benefit. Pictures available upon request.

- **Training opportunities** - Consulting firms promote further learning. Do you want to learn Tableau, Power BI, Business Process Model and Notation mapping, or another software? Are you interested in an additional certification like Lean Six Sigma or the Project Management Professional? There's likely a class available at your job, they may reimburse course fees, and you may receive a bonus for passing. (This is true of Grant Thornton and Booz Allen. Make sure to ask at smaller firms.) The firm may require you to have a certain number of learning credits per year.

Challenges

No job is without its challenges:

- **The Bench/the Beach** - While federal jobs can provide more security, consulting has a level of risk. Whether you're hired straight onto a project at their firm, or are hired as part of their staff capability building, most firms have a "bench." The bench (also known as the "beach") is when an employee is getting paid by the consulting firm, but are not working on a client project. The bench gives staffing flexibility to firms, allowing for individuals to onboard onto new contracts without having to be pulled off a current contract. Depending on the firm, whose responsibility for finding your first or subsequent project may vary. For example, Booz Allen Hamilton employees expect their Career Manager to find them their first project, while the employee may also need to do some heavy networking. However, subsequent projects are entirely the responsibility of the employee. All firms work differently and it is important to ask the company what their bench policy is.
- **Billable hours target (ie. utilization or production hours) - *Make sure you understand the firm's billable hour expectations.*** Trust us, that deserved italics, bold, and underline. Billable hours are the work hours that you work directly for a client. Billable hours are how the firm makes money. Based on your level at the firm, you will likely have a specific target. In many firms, this a major consideration for how you are evaluated, bonuses, promotion, and sometimes your employment. Keep in mind that most firm trainings, meetings, time on the bench or beach, and other activities do not count toward this number. Also, ask how holidays are factored into this number.

The exact language is likely different at each consulting firm so make sure to ask.

One popular term, utilization, is the percent of a total working year (5 days a week, 8 hours a day) that you are expected to bill to a client. For instance, if your target utilization is 95%, you must bill 95% of 2080 hours (52 weeks x 40 hours per week). Another term, production hours, is simply the number of billable hours expected in a year (ex. 1976 hours).

- **That first project** - Depending upon the circumstances of your hiring and your company, you may be placed on your first project without much say in what it is or be placed on the bench. In either case, networking within your company is pivotal in getting off the bench or finding a project to roll onto that is more in line with your interests.
- **Risk** - At some companies, if an employee is on the bench too long between projects, they are at risk of receiving a Lack-of-Work (LOW) letter. An LOW gives the employee a deadline for finding a new billable project. If the employee is unable to find a billable project by the deadline, they will be let go from their position, effective the day after their deadline. This can be a terrifying prospect but every company is different. It's important to ask firms what their policies are, including policies if the government shuts down. Some companies furlough their employees while the government is shutdown so they don't have to pay their employees. Other companies keep their staff and pay them while it's shutdown. Feel free to ask about these policies.

Get your foot in the door

First off, while there are hundreds of consulting companies all across the United States, there are a few big public sector consulting firms that have more name recognition than others. For example, when people mention "The Big Four," they're referring to the four largest consulting firms which include PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Ernst & Young, Deloitte, and KPMG. Additionally, Boston Consulting Group, Booz Allen Hamilton, Grant Thornton, and Accenture are other big names in the consulting world. A great resource to learn more about different consultant firms, their rankings, specialties, and more is [Vault.com](https://www.vault.com).

Our first suggestion to get your foot in the door is to speak with La Follette or Wisconsin alumni that are currently working in the consulting companies that you wish to work. Use informational interviews, as taught by Hilary Shager's course, to connect with current consultants and get an inside scoop on their company, their experiences, as well as their advice in maneuvering the application process. These connections can potentially lead to mentor-mentee relationships. This leads to our second suggestion.

Secondly, the best way to get on the fast track to being hired is to find someone at the firm who is willing and able to give you a referral. Because these firms received hundreds, if not thousands, of applications for a single position, the more you're able to stand out the better. Many companies give bonuses to employees whose referral gets hired which gives employees a big incentive to refer. Cultivate those relationships early and then leverage them when they're hiring for post-graduation. If the firm you're trying to get hired by doesn't have a referral program, ask to be connected with a university recruiter for an informational interview.

Questions to ask

Finally, the following are questions to ask when deciding whether to take a job in consulting.

- Does the firm provide Paid Time Off (PTO) to their employees, or do they provide "flex-time" for time off? Similarly, ask about sick leave and federal holidays.
- What are the billable hours expectations (utilization, production hours, etc.)?
- What are benefits like?
 - How much do you pay for health/dental/vision care on average?
 - Do they contribute to a Health Savings Account?
 - What is their 401K match policy?
 - What other benefits are available?
- What types of growth opportunities does the firm offer?
 - Certifications?
 - Training courses? Is there a required amount of training per year?
 - Promotion opportunities?
- How is success measured in regards to promotion opportunities?
- What are bench or beach policies? Are there penalties for bench time (LOWs)?
- How are you assigned (or not assigned) to your first project?
- How accessible is leadership?
- What is the general working culture like?
- Who are the firm's largest clients and what type of work does the firm provide?

- Does the firm have a private sector side? Are there crossover opportunities between private and public clients?

If you have further questions please feel free to contact Anna Brunner (Booz Allen Hamilton) at abrunner7@gmail.com or Kirsten Jacobson (Grant Thornton) at kirstenkjacobson@gmail.com.