

What to look for in a SharePoint Consultant - and how LinkedIn collaboration helped create this composite profile

As someone who wants to help my customers understand the power of collaboration and the benefits it can bring if it's embraced and acted upon, I wanted to undertake a very simple experiment that I could hold up as an example people could relate to. This came about because I come across many people who have the pre-conceived notion that free blogs are all about some 20-year-old writing about their week-end in Vegas (so much for what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas!), rants of a personal nature, or entertainment related subjects. The perception is that blogs which post "serious" (e.g. technical) Q&A forums keep the answers under lock and key and you need to pay to get at the valuable answers. And, let's face it, a lot of free blogs are about self-promotion, so that is also a bit of a turn-off. But does that mean that what's left are crumbs that aren't worth your time? So I did a little experiment (sample of one!) and thought I'd incorporate a subject of interest these days as Microsoft's SharePoint product exceeds the 100 million licenses deployed mark and people are starting to look at it for their own organizations.

Well, let me state the obvious, a sample of one experiment does not a scientific survey make! However, let me share with you the result of my test. I'll spoil the ending – I was favorably surprised! Because our company sells SharePoint-based applications and services, I wanted to get a better feel for what makes a good SharePoint consultant since a SharePoint consultant can make or break your SharePoint project. I went to LinkedIn, which is a social network (free to everyone) which is predominantly made up of professionals, and my question was going to be What do you look for in a SharePoint consultant? However, a quick search (which the system prompted me to do as I typed my question) revealed that someone had already asked that question in just slightly different words, which were "What skills are you looking for when hiring/recruiting a SharePoint Consultant?" Well, that was efficient! The answers were already all compiled for me in one neat place – there were 10 of them at my fingertips at the time of writing. That was easy enough, but now the real test was to determine if the answers provided any real insight or if they were just flippant answers which I'll call fluff.

And this is the part about being pleasantly surprised. Not one person captured all the elements of a comprehensive answer as you might find in a Harvard Business Journal, but each answer was a different perspective, succinct and insightful. When taken as a whole, in 10 answers we have an excellent composite profile of

a good SharePoint Consultant. The answers weren't "commercial", they were all legitimate happy-to-help answers by professionals who freely took of their time to help other professionals they didn't even know.

Let me share with you some of their wisdom, and I took the liberty to pepper this with some of my own thoughts as well.

- SharePoint is a platform and the breadth of what it can do means that no one individual could really have the depth required to master all aspects. Now *that* is a case for collaboration if I ever heard one, but I digress....
- A good consultant knows what he doesn't know and will not put you in a blind-leading-the-blind situation. He will be upfront about the limits to his comfort zone and recommend rounding out his talents with contributions from others. He is usually well-connected or part of a company where he can count on others to collaborate with him.
- There is an important distinction to be made between a SharePoint consultant, a SharePoint developer, a SharePoint architect/designer, a SharePoint project/implementation specialist, and a SharePoint administrator. In effect, these are all related roles, but each has a different skill set. You need to know when you hire a SharePoint consultant, which of these roles you had in mind because perhaps your view of "consultant" encompasses the narrower definition as someone who is an extension of you and is primarily concerned with understanding the business requirement and ensuring that the right process, skills and metrics are in place to deliver on the stated objectives.
- A SharePoint consultant (narrower definition), would therefore primarily have superior Business Analysis skills, which means be able to translate business needs into technical specifications and ensuring the best functionality and flexibility as possible.
- A strong consultant will understand where the needs may evolve, including business processing and information requirements inside and outside the enterprise. He/she will understand that the initial design and configuration of SharePoint must address the overall picture even if only a small portion of it is being implemented on Day 1. I'll stop saying she everywhere, but you know I mean both genders.
- Communication is one of those skills that transcends so many areas of business, and it's just as important for a SharePoint consultant as for a cardiac surgeon. He must talk in a lay person's terms with the business

leaders, and talk “developer language” to the dev team. More important than talking, he needs to listen.

- He must be generalist enough to understand the broad scope of SharePoint. You don't want a consultant who has not experienced SharePoint as it is out-of-the-box enough to leverage what's already there rather than to recommend custom development.
- Understanding SharePoint per se is not enough however. A good SharePoint consultant will also understand the underlying wider technology supported by SharePoint (Windows Server, SQL, .NET Framework, IIS, Clustering, NLB, Storage, ISA Server, InfoPath, Active Director, Authentication, Forefront, SQL Reporting Services, etc...). He will also have good diagnostics abilities.
- A good consultant keeps honing his generalist skills by attending conferences, reading current articles, talking to implementation specialists so that he's not only aware of what SharePoint can do, but what the growing ecosystem around SharePoint can provide in terms of additional web-parts, integrations, and SharePoint-based applications that can add a lot of value to SharePoint without re-inventing the wheel.
- The best SharePoint consultant for your project will also have specialist technical skills in the 1 or 2 areas of particular relevancy for your implementation.
- Documentation skills, so that the consultant doesn't leave you without the ability to pick up easily where he left off, is important.

In order to understand the key skills for your SharePoint consultant, you need to understand that SharePoint itself is not really the source of the complexity. Rather, it is the design of the deployment, the uses made of it, its part in an integrated, unified business system, and how you actually use it to deliver on business objectives which make it challenging. This understanding is ultimately going to make the difference between a happy ending and frustrated customers who end up giving SharePoint a bad name.

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