

The Consulting Manager: A New Approach to Talent Development in Professional Services

By John Quirk

Introduction

A Professional Service firm's success is inextricably linked to its ability to acquire, nurture and retain top talent. At my former firm, we used an innovative approach to talent management that went beyond traditional structures: the Consulting Manager (CM) role. This paper examines our unique implementation of the CM role, exploring its dual nature as both a billable consultant and an internal talent developer and leader.

Historical Approaches to People Management in Professional Services

To fully appreciate the innovation of the Consulting Manager (CM) role, it's crucial to understand the historical context of people management in professional services firms. Traditionally, these firms have employed several models, each with its own strengths and weaknesses:

The Partner-Centric Model

Historically, many professional services firms relied on a partner-centric model for people management. In this approach, partners were responsible for both client relationships and the development of junior staff.

The Advantages to such an approach included:

- Direct mentorship from experienced professionals
- Clear career progression path (associate to partner)
- Strong client-focus and business acumen development

However, the Partner-Centric model also created challenges:

- Inconsistent quality of mentorship across partners
- Potential for favoritism and uneven development opportunities
- Limited bandwidth of partners, often prioritizing client work over staff development

The Practice Leader Model

In some cases, as firms grew, many adopted a practice leader model, where senior professionals managed both client work and internal teams within their specific practice areas often owning a P&L for the practice.

Again, the model presented pluses:

- Deep domain expertise in mentorship

- Alignment of skill development with practice area needs
- Clear specialization paths for employees

And minuses:

- Siloed development, potentially limiting cross-practice exposure
- Risk of practice leaders becoming bottlenecks in decision-making
- Challenges in developing well-rounded professionals

The HR-Driven Model

Some firms, typically larger, have attempted to centralize people management through robust HR departments and programs.

For this approach the pros include:

- Consistent processes and policies across the firm
- Professional approach to performance management and development
- Potential for more objective evaluation and promotion decisions

And on the opposite side of the coin:

- Risk of disconnection from day-to-day client work realities
- Potential lack of technical depth in development conversations
- Can be perceived as bureaucratic and impersonal

The Project Manager-Led Model

In this approach, project managers take on the bulk of people management responsibilities for their team members.

The advantages for this approach are typically cited as

- Close alignment of development with project needs
- Real-time feedback and coaching
- Clear link between performance and project outcomes

And the disadvantages include:

- Short-term focus, potentially neglecting long-term career development
- Inconsistent experiences across different projects and managers
- Risk of prioritizing project delivery over individual growth

While each of these models has merits, they all struggle to balance the demands of client work with the need for consistent, quality talent development. The Consulting Manager role as we developed it was designed to address these challenges, combining the best aspects of these traditional models while mitigating their drawbacks. The role grew during a period that we were reorganizing in order to move away from a Practice Leader model. The Practice Leader role was a large one and often difficult to find people to fill the role externally and a very long process to develop from within. As part of the reorganization effort, we attempted to deconstruct the Practice Leader responsibilities into roles. Out of that came the idea and vision for a Consulting Manager.

The Consulting Manager: A Dual-Role Innovation

The Consulting Manager (CM) should not be viewed as a full-time position, but rather an additional responsibility taken on by select consultants. Key aspects of the role include:

Dual Responsibility CMs maintain their primary role as billable consultants while taking on additional talent management duties. This dual nature ensures CMs remain connected to client work, maintaining their technical skills and market understanding.

Diverse Backgrounds CMs are selected from across the organization, regardless of technical background or years of experience. The primary selection criteria are communication, a passion for growing people and the ability to advocate for team members.

Structured Engagement The expectations of the CMs must be clearly communicated and followed up on. We expected our Consulting Managers to conduct bi-weekly 30-minute one-on-one meetings with their team members and write quarterly reviews, ensuring consistent engagement and feedback. They worked with team members on career development plans, training and certifications

Cultural Cornerstone By spending the one-on-one time building relationships with their team members, our CMs quickly became the heart of our company culture, playing a crucial role in shaping and maintaining the firm's values and work environment.

Financial Incentive To recognize the additional effort required, our CMs must be compensated accordingly. Our approach was to provide a fixed quarterly stipend payment to recognize their efforts. This approach values their contribution to talent development without removing them from billable work. The expectation was set that as a CM they would be spending on average about 4 additional hours a week holding one-on-ones, attending meetings and writing reviews

Implementation

Our implementation of the CM role involved several key elements:

- **Selection Process:** We identified individuals with strong interpersonal skills and a passion for developing others, regardless of their technical specialty or seniority.
- **Training:** CMs underwent training based on the Manager Tools framework (manager-tools.com), learning best practices for conducting one-on-ones, providing feedback, and other essential management skills.

- **StrengthsFinders Integration:** Every employee completed a StrengthsFinders assessment, and CMs were trained in strength-based management techniques to leverage these insights.
- **Regular CM Meetings:** Twice-monthly meetings were held with the CM teams, in addition to individual one-on-ones with each CM. These meetings kept CMs informed about company performance, project pipelines, and strategic initiatives.
- **Diverse Team Composition:** Crucially, we structured each CM's team to include a variety of skills, experiences, and roles. This deliberate diversity was not based on technology specializations or job titles. Instead, we aimed to create microcosms of the firm within each CM's team, fostering a broader understanding of the company's capabilities and experiences across all team members.

This approach to team composition served multiple purposes:

- It encouraged cross-functional knowledge sharing, helping consultants understand the full scope of the firm's services.
- It provided CMs with a comprehensive view of the firm's capabilities, enabling them to better identify cross-selling opportunities and suggest innovative solutions for clients.
- It facilitated mentorship and learning across different specialties and experience levels, promoting a more well-rounded development for all team members.
- It helped break down silos between different practice areas or technologies, fostering a more cohesive company culture.

By intentionally mixing team compositions, we created an environment where junior developers might sit alongside senior project managers, and data analysts could learn from UX designers. This diversity of perspective and experience within each CM's team became a cornerstone of our talent development strategy, driving innovation and collaboration across the entire firm.

- **Strategic Staffing Approach:** We implemented a deliberate staffing strategy to ensure that consultants were typically not assigned to projects managed by their own CM. This approach served several important purposes:
 - It allowed consultants to speak openly about their current project work, challenges, and concerns without fear of directly impacting their project relationships.
 - It provided an additional layer of objectivity in performance evaluations and career discussions.
 - It broadened the network of relationships within the firm, as consultants regularly interacted with leaders outside their CM's direct influence.
 - It prevented potential conflicts of interest where a CM might be tempted to prioritize their own project needs over the broader development needs of their team members.

This staffing strategy was crucial in maintaining the integrity of the CM role as a neutral advocate for consultant development. It ensured that the one-on-one discussions and career guidance provided by CMs remained focused on the consultant's overall growth and well-being, rather than being overly influenced by day-to-day project dynamics.

In addition, this approach encouraged consultants to develop a broader perspective on the firm's operations and leadership, as they were exposed to a wider range of project managers and leadership styles. It also reinforced the idea that the CM role was truly about individual development and advocacy, separate from project-specific performance management.

Impact on Firm Performance

The implementation of the CM role led to several significant improvements:

1. **Enhanced Company Culture:** The CM role became a cornerstone of our company culture, fostering a sense of belonging and investment in individual growth. After implementing the CM role, we were consistently named one of the top firms to work for in our metropolitan area.
2. **Improved Retention:** Employee retention became one of the top traits of the firm. We maintained an average employee tenure of over nine years, and the amount of annual employee turnover was negligible.
3. **Accelerated Skill Development:** The focus on strength-based management and regular feedback led increases in employees expanding their skill sets, keeping up with new technologies and earning technical certifications.

Financial Benefits of the Consulting Manager Model

While the primary goal of the CM role is to enhance talent development and retention, it also offers significant financial benefits to the firm:

Reduced Turnover Costs By improving retention rates, particularly among high-performers, the CM model dramatically reduces turnover costs. Consider that the cost of replacing a professional services employee can range from 50% to 200% of their annual salary when accounting for recruiting, onboarding, and lost productivity.

Efficient Talent Management Structure The CM model allows for a higher ratio of mentors to team members than traditional HR structures, without the need for a large, non-billable HR department. This lean approach to talent management enables the firm to support growth without adding significant managerial overhead. As we grew over the years our management costs remained relatively flat, resulting in overhead cost savings.

Accelerated Professional Development The focus on strength-based management and regular feedback accelerated skill development among our consultants. This not only allowed us to staff projects more efficiently but also enabled us to command higher bill rates for our increasingly skilled workforce.

Enhanced Sales and Cross-Selling CMs, with their broad view of team member skills and project experiences, were instrumental in identifying cross-selling opportunities.

Long-term Client Relationships Improved talent retention and development led to stronger, more consistent client relationships. This continuity resulted a more stable and predictable revenue stream.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Implementing the CM role was not without its challenges. Some key lessons include:

- **Balancing Act:** CMs must carefully balance their billable work with their talent management responsibilities. Clear expectations and time management training were crucial.
- **Consistency Across CMs:** Ensuring consistent quality of mentorship across different CMs required ongoing training and peer support structures. Executive leadership must spend time educating and mentoring the Consulting Managers
- **Scaling the Model:** As we grew, we had to carefully manage the number of team members assigned to each CM to maintain the quality of interactions. Typically, a new Consulting Manager would start with a four person team – no one had more than eight people on their team.

Conclusion

The Consulting Manager role represents an innovative approach to talent management in professional services. By creating a dual role that combines billable work with internal talent development, we were able to foster a culture of continuous growth and engagement.

This model offers several advantages:

- CMs maintain their market relevance and technical skills through continued client work.
- The role provides a development opportunity for consultants interested in leadership without creating a separate management track.
- The distributed nature of the role allows for a higher ratio of mentors to team members than a traditional HR structure.
- The model reinforces a culture of peer support and continuous learning.

I would encourage all firms to consider a similar approach, and if you do, I recommend:

- Carefully defining the CM role and its responsibilities.
- Investing in robust training programs for CMs, particularly in people management skills.
- Implementing clear metrics to measure the impact of the CM role on employee satisfaction, retention, and performance.
- Regularly gathering feedback from both CMs and their team members to continuously refine the program.

In a business where talent is the primary differentiator, innovative approaches to talent management are essential. The Consulting Manager role offers a unique model for fostering a culture of growth, engagement, and performance in professional services firms.

About the Author

John Quirk has over 30 years of experience leading successful professional services firms. John has a proven track record of building high-performing teams, fostering award-winning cultures, and delivering exceptional client value. His previous white papers have explored innovative approaches to talent management, metrics, and organizational success. You can find those papers and more at [Quirk's Next Thing](#). You can reach John at john.quirk@gmail.com.