

Can Civil Servants be consultants?

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Some Civil Servants make the switch to consultancy successfully, especially if they are selling consultancy to government. Many do not make it. Some of the reasons are as follows:

1. Your role is very different.
 1. You are not advising/steering the Minister
 2. You are not an administrator
 3. You have no decision-making power
 4. You have no rights: you are there on sufferance, and have to negotiate everything.
2. You are likely to be operating in a very strange environment, either a foreign civil service or a British firm.
3. The political background is very different
 1. You are not acquainted with the macro or micro political issues
 2. You have no clear political role
 3. You are perceived as part of the problem: outside consultants
 4. You may be caught between Brussels and the local government
4. You do not have clear access to data
 1. As a civil servant you have access to files, to the accumulated evidence and wisdom of years.
 2. As a consultant you have to negotiate for data. People try to influence the consultant's output by giving a biased sample of data. A lot of data is secret.
 3. In some societies all data, however harmless, is treated as a state secret. Even harmless questions may arouse the interest of the KGB.
 4. Some societies have an oral culture. They do not write things down, so the outside consultant cannot just refer to the files or previous reports. This includes some British societies, such as teachers, as well as some African governments.
 5. You do not have backstopping. You cannot lift up the phone and get expert opinion from a colleague.
5. Relationships

1. Relationships are transitory. You may see the important people for 10 to 60 minutes, and never see them again.
 2. Power relationships are not clear, and always hamper communication.
 3. You are vulnerable, not them. You do not have a job for life.
6. Convincing and persuading is all important
1. You have no authority, no position, no established credibility. You have to work by convincing and persuading.
 2. The fact that you were a Director in Britain counts against you in an environment where every second person is a Director. As for Under-Secretary!
7. Operating abroad (*See the Working Abroad module*)
1. You may have enormous depth of experience but you have no breadth of experience. You know only one system
 2. There is a danger that you will pass on the mistakes of Britain. Remember BSE.