Close to 150 AIIP members include consulting in their professional profiles in the AIIP member directory. A brief inspection of sample profiles confirms that, indeed, they offer consulting services in a vast variety of information domains from chemistry and engineering to aviation and public policy. Some AIIP members have backgrounds in librarianship and related disciplines, and knowledge management and records management are also well represented among the areas in which AIIP members consult.

How Are Consultants Different from Researchers or Freelancers?

What sets consulting apart from research services or freelance support? What is the difference between a consulting assignment and a competitive intelligence assignment? What are clients paying for when they engage an AIIP member in a consulting project as opposed to a market research project?

The short answer focuses on the contrast between, “Here is the data, you decide what to do” and, “Here’s what I recommend you do….” More specifically, we can say the following:

- Research and investigative work mobilizes unique and highly specialized skills to deliver to the clients impossible-to-find information, data and analyses they are unable to obtain themselves, but it tends to stop short of recommending a course of action. The client is expected to weigh the evidence provided so as to determine a forward path, and the researcher is not connected to the clients’ decisions.

- Freelance services are typically provided to a client needing specialist support or project assistance; the client provides direction and the freelancer applies his or her expertise.

- Consulting, on the other hand, revolves around advising clients about what they ought to consider doing; hence consultants are very much connected to the clients’ decisions and subsequent actions. Consulting does not preclude research or tactical work and often arises from investigation or from, for example, an organizational information audit.

Consultants have traditionally been the subject of some joking references. (It’s a familiar jibe that a consultant is someone who borrows the client’s watch and then advises the client that time is a scarce resource because it’s now 4 pm.) Some have an impression that consultants, as glib purveyors of the management fad of the day, cruise through client organizations leaving behind, along with their six-figure bills, politically fashionable but impossible-to-implement-in-practice recommendations – in other words, delivering no value but causing lots of resentment on the part of the staff on the ground.

Naturally, the truth is otherwise. Most consultants take pride in their roles as trusted partners who care deeply about steering their clients in the best direction.

Why Do Clients Hire AIIP Consultants?

Typical drivers for our consulting assignments include budget cuts, changes in operational focus, upcoming program reviews and organizational planning frameworks. A common trigger is the client realization that “We can’t go on like this” or “We don’t have the required skill sets in house.” In some cases, the consulting project is occasioned by retirement or management turnover. 

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– a new manager may wish to get off on the right foot and engage consulting help to manage a steep learning curve quickly and devise an appropriate set of priorities in light of various impacts and pressures. Common to many consulting engagements is the client’s consideration that the contemplated effort’s duration – say, a few months – does not warrant creating a new full time position.

What Do AIIP Consultants Do for Their Clients?

The focus of each engagement naturally depends on the client’s business and circumstances. Our work may involve technical assistance as well as management advice. The following is a small sample of projects we might undertake:

- Digitizing a fragile archival collection (where we recommend equipment, software and workflow)
- Re-designing an information support unit’s services based on a user needs assessment
- Shaping from scratch a new product or service
- Designing a community awareness campaign
- Crafting a social media communication approach
- Constructing a business case for a new venture or purchase for sustaining existing funding
- Developing an evidence-based white paper or presentation
- Recommending policies and design for a corporate document repository
- Assisting management in succession planning and recruiting

Yet in every project, our key contribution is our expertise, experience and insight. For example, our access to the latest information technology developments gives us the opportunity to encourage clients to move into new territory; our cumulative experience over many years gives us the perspective to advise how to align such a move with the organization’s direction and priorities.

In order for us to apply our expertise, experience and insight we rely on mutual trust as the foundation for a successful consulting engagement. Clients trust consultants to recommend the best option in light of the circumstances at hand, and consultants trust the clients to be open and honest about challenges, limitations and organizational goals.

What Is the Value Proposition for Clients to Engage Consultants?

Whether the motivating factor for clients is a desire for prudent planning, a need to cope with unforeseen circumstances, a requirement for compliance with new regulations or a lack of in-house expertise for a one-time project, clients obtain several key benefits:

- Consultants are cost effective: Ramping up skills for a special project internally is an option, but probably an expensive one in the long run. Clients appreciate the return they get on their investment in the right expertise for the project at hand, and the predictability of cost is a bonus when the consulting fee is fixed in advance.
- Consultants bring to bear their practical experience from other projects: Clients value the fact that in addition to the expertise required for the project, consultants bring nuanced insight from having seen how a particular approach worked in practice in other settings.
- Consultants bring an unbiased approach: Clients value the fact that the advice they get is free of attachment to “the way we’ve always done it” and unencumbered by organizational politics.
- Consultants are effective in delicate situations requiring unusual finesse in communications or calling for a neutral party to be the source of unwelcome or difficult news. Clients are in a better position to carry out change when everyone is aware the recommendations for it came from external experts.

However, the most important benefit clients mention is associated with peace of mind. They appreciate knowing that experienced and capable people, with a track record of delivering worthwhile results, are on the team to minimize risk and maximize the likelihood of success. They like the stress reduction inherent in not having to venture into unfamiliar territory to take on tasks for which they are not prepared – and they like the opportunity to add to their skills as they participate in the unfolding project. Where it is possible, we consultants attempt not only to produce the agreed deliverables but also to teach by example the client’s staff members how to perform a process or design a future project. One testimonial of which I am particularly proud was “Ulla leaves a lot of knowledge behind.”