



CONSULTANT FIELD GUIDE

presented by

PARAGON
IT Professionals

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“I’m so glad I was pursued by Paragon. I’ve been consulting now for four years and it’s the best career decision I’ve ever made.”

Consultant of the Quarter



INTRODUCTION

If you’ve downloaded this eBook to guide your decision on whether to follow the path of the technology consultant, you’re in luck. The team at Paragon IT Professionals has come together to aggregate more than 20 years of IT recruiting and placement expertise into one easy-to-digest guide. We hope you find this compilation as satisfying to read as it was to pull it together.

What you won’t find in the pages that follow are thinly veiled sales pitches for our products and services.

We’ve been in business for more than two decades by building genuine relationships with our clients and consultants – built on trust, transparency, and the golden rule (i.e., not being “sales-y”). Of course, every company says that, so it’s up to you if you’d like to put us to the test.

The final chapter of this eBook will contain our company history and outline our plans for the future. We’ve included it for additional background and context, but feel free to skip that section if you’d like. We’ll make an occasional mention of our process or programs for context, but I think you’ll agree we’re living up to our core values and being informative vs. pitching you at every turn.

Also, we encourage you to challenge the ideas and concepts in this document. If you have experiences in line with – or contrary to what we present – we’d love to hear from you. We’ll continue to make revisions and enhancements to this eBook on a regular basis. Your feedback matters. It always has, for 22 years.

PARAGON'S WHY

**Paragon exists to obliterate
the talent and skills gap in our
economy.**

**For over two decades we've
delivered legendary service to our
clients and consultants by
matching the right people, to the
right opportunity, with the right
skills, at the right time.**

Please reach out if we can be of service.



Disclaimer

Nothing in this eBook should be construed as legal or financial advice. This material is based on experience and history, not on laws, codes, or statutes. It's up to you to determine the correct approach and seek advice to ensure compliance with all federal, state, and local laws.

FINDING YOUR GIG

In today's economy, technical skills continue commanding significant wage premiums and are in high demand. Unemployment is low and, at least for now, the economy is still humming along with a positive outlook. As an aspiring consultant looking to break out, what are your best options to maximize the efficiency of your consulting or contract role search?

We've got you covered. Read on for more information how to develop the consulting work life of your dreams!



LEVERAGE AN IT STAFFING AND RECRUITING FIRM

Recruiting firms can become your greatest asset when it comes to finding your next great career challenge. This not only goes for finding consulting gigs, but also in looking for full time placement within a company. Most firms are genuinely interested in delivering the perfect fit for you, your lifestyle, and your career goals.

What are the key benefits of working with an IT Staffing firm?

1 Relationships Equals Speed to Market

IT staffing firms typically have relationships with a diverse set of companies in varying vertical markets. Instead of going through a typical ‘job application’ process for a full time opportunity, a recruiter can often get you in front of hiring managers quickly if you’re a good fit for the role (side-stepping the common horror story of submitting a resume and never hearing from the company again). You’ll likely get many more interviews in a much shorter time period if you have an advocate working for you. We’ve seen roles go from initial recruiter contact to interview to offer in 72 hours! That happens more frequently than you’d expect when you have a targeted skill set that’s in demand.

Good recruiters today find ways to stay connected and engaged with you throughout your contract. With labor as tight as it is today compounded by the skills gap, recruiters are passively cultivating relationships via face-to-face events, social tools, and local user group meetups to stay connected with you.

2 Professional Development Opportunities

Elite recruiting firms offer professional development opportunities for their consultants. For example, at Paragon, we typically split topics between technical skill building and “soft skills” like collaboration, communication, and leadership. We believe providing opportunities for development is essential, because in many organizations, contractors are not allowed to participate in company activities due to policy or cost restrictions.

3 More Interviews (If Desired)

Many consultants pick and choose the companies and roles they'd like to interview for because they have a choice. Some find it very rewarding to interview at many organizations to get a feel for their potential fit on a team or project. It never hurts to make a good impression on multiple organizations in your geographic area. Contracts do typically end after a set period of time, so there's nothing like building a group of people who can't wait until you're available to join their teams again.

The interview process for full time employment (FTE) roles vary heavily depending on the organization size and sophistication of their HR team and recruiting practices.

4 Flexible Accounting Options

Many recruiting firms have flexible arrangements on how wages will be processed. Paragon, for example, offers W2 (with benefits, or without benefits), 1099, Corp to Corp, and even Salaried options for our consultants. Having the option to be a W2 contractor means that all taxes and other deductions will be managed for you. Being a 1099-contractor (you receive the gross wages and have to manage taxes, etc. on your own) has benefits and drawbacks. Seek advice on the best option for you and your life situation.



BENEFITS OF CONSULTING (AND HOW TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THEM)



Workplace Culture

As a contract consultant, you will most likely be more immune from workplace culture, drama, and politics. This is not to say you won't observe your share of workplace culture challenges – but you're typically far more insulated from their impact. Consultants' focus of time and energy is on the project and tasks at hand, and less about trying to climb a corporate ladder.

Many successful consultants with in-demand skills are recruited to move into a full time role as they demonstrate their value in an organization. It's nice to be wanted and have choices. If the time comes to convert to an employee and you love your company, the decision will come with little angst. We have a large contingent of contractors in our world who simply refuse to join organizations in a full time capacity. They enjoy the benefits and opportunities of consulting by staying outside the corporate box.

If you are or have been an FTE, you know that organizational behavior can be particularly vexing. There's nothing wrong with climbing the ladder and working hard to achieve one's goals; however, you may have to struggle through years of reorganizations, changing bosses, cultural silver bullets of the month and more to get there. Typically, consultants feel more immune to these symptoms. It's powerful knowing that in X months, you can simply walk away with no regrets if you so choose.



When the Work is Done, You're Done

In some cases, contractors are limited to 40 hours per week and overtime is rare since costs can quickly get out of hand. This varies from company to company. If your consulting gig doesn't allow OT, and you enjoy putting in 40 hours and spending the rest of your time with family, friends, activities and favorite pastimes, you're set. If you like to engage in side hustles and gigs, you'll find you have ample time to take those on. And, when it comes time to find a new contract role after 6, 12, or 18 months, you'll have time to focus on that task in the pre- and post-work hours.

If you're in a full time salaried role today, we're guessing you work more than 40 hours per week for the same pay (bonus and profit-sharing considerations aside). In today's economy, it's commonplace for FTEs to work 50 or more hours per week just to get the basics of their job completed. Outliers aside, this is an important consideration that can really change lives. If you're in the situation where someone's role has been eliminated and you're picking up the slack with no backfill in sight, contracting for only 40 hours per week will positively affect your universe. And your family and friends will find you more pleasant to be around. If you've found a consulting opportunity that does pay for OT, you may still be working more than 40 hours occasionally, but the difference is, you will get paid for those extra hours (unlike being FTE).

Benefits and 401K

Many staffing firms, especially those with larger scale established operations, offer a full suite of benefits including a 401K. If you have a spouse or partner with benefits that cover both of you, the benefits question will quickly fade into the background. If current benefits suddenly end, at least you have options to consider.

Paid time off (PTO) is often a big factor in one's decision to become a consultant. Organizations tend to provide anywhere from 10-20 days of PTO immediately upon hire. The largest organizations often allow FTEs to buy one or two additional weeks of vacation through payroll deduction. Typically, as a consultant, you would not be eligible to receive PTO from your consulting firm UNLESS you chose the salaried option with them, and not all firms offer that.

Many of the largest companies around offer a very robust set of benefits to their FTEs that surpass offerings by recruiting firms or those available to an individual. The trade-offs are contingent on your preferences and lifestyle choices. If we can help you make that decision, or if you have questions about what is most advantageous for you, feel free to contact us.

Fringe Benefits

As an FTE, especially at a larger organization, you'll likely receive fringe benefits due to the company's scale and employee pool size. Big companies often offer things like long term disability, legal and commuter benefit plans, 401K matching, and very affordable and high dollar life insurance options. Some (not all) recruiting companies offer some of these as well. Be sure to ask!

Bonus plans and programs are typically reserved for FTEs as well. For example, if you make \$80,000 as a salaried full time employee, a 10% bonus on that amount is a substantial payment to consider. In most cases the amount of the bonus payout is variable based on many factors, such as how well the company did throughout the year, your performance rating, etc. so give this factor a good amount of consideration.

More than not, contractors won't be invited to attend conferences or engage in professional development activities that FTEs are provided. It's the nature of the arrangement, so it's up to you to independently seek out enrichment opportunities.





Flexible Work

At Paragon, we are constantly promoting flexible work schedules to our hiring managers.

More and more organizations are finding the benefits -- and experiencing the challenges -- of deploying remote workers. If you're a work from home guru, this element will be a crucial part of your decision-making path. We don't see a ton of companies allowing 100% work from home in a contracting capacity, but a good amount of them are offering some sort of partial work from home on a when-needed basis.



Job Security

Are you surprised if we bluntly stated that "Job Security" is at least equal when comparing consulting to FTE roles? Welcome to 2019. We're certain this issue can be debated, and we encourage it. In our experience, skilled contract consultants who work well with others are unemployed by choice (e.g. taking a month off to travel between contracts to refresh while their recruiting firm works on their behalf to find their next great gig).



Developing a Portfolio of Transferable Skills

When you contract, over time you'll inevitably be exposed to many new concepts and opportunities to develop skills. Most projects take twists and turns that are unexpected and require alteration of plan A. In some cases, the company you're contracted with may put you through training to build the skills they need, because they see you're worth the investment and the project demands it.

It's key to leverage some of the concepts in this eBook to let the world know about your skills and accomplishments (refer to the upcoming "Homework" section). Many times, recruiters are doing keyword, hashtag (e.g., #java), or specific skill searches via the web or LinkedIn to connect with talented people. Keep yourself visible and add your skills into your LinkedIn profile. If you have an especially obscure or high demand skill, tell the world using as many outlets as you can.**

One can certainly do similar things in FTE roles. Most commonly, when someone is transitioning from being a long-time FTE to the search for a contract role, we see more difficulty in trying to verbalize that experience and a period of rapid catching up on social profiles, building connections, etc.

****WARNING:** You will likely begin to get more and more inbound inquiries from recruiting firms as you become more findable online. We recommend setting up email filters and rules to manage this clutter. You'll quickly figure out which firms have real opportunities and want to partner with you to find a great gig vs. those who are churning through resumes online and spamming hundreds at once.



Reputation Building

Paragon has many consultants who've reached "Rockstar" status because of their consulting reputation — they've done excellent work, they have high emotional IQ, they document their accomplishments, and they network effectively. Ultimately, these consultants can really write their own ticket because they've made the investment in themselves. Their reputation precedes them.

Like most of the elements that make up a candidate profile, building a reputation can of course be done by either consultants or FTE's. Our experience is that building a reputation as a consultant, especially one who works with a recruiting firm, will drive that reputation to a much wider circle of influence.

Espirit de Corps

You may find some big differences in the vibe between teams of contractors and teams of FTEs in organizations. Some contractors can feel at a disadvantage and rather forgotten within some organizations, though we've not found that to be a common trend. You might end up on a team of consultants who just want to put in their 40 hours and go do something else. If you're looking for more "team mojo," you might be able to create it, have to wait for your next gig to feel it, or switch to an FTE role to get it.

When Paragon's Consultant Relationship Program leader does exit surveys with consultants, we don't find a high instance of feeling poorly about one's team, so odds are if you're open to new things and are a natural team builder and player, you'll be satisfied.

Feedback and Performance Management

As a contractor, many companies will forgo the usual 1:1s and performance management conversations prevalent as an FTE. That lack of feedback might leave you wondering if you're actually doing well, progressing in your experience, etc.

If we take an objective look at this category over the last 22 years, we can say with confidence that FTEs have just as many challenges with getting feedback, coaching, and development as consultants. It's tough for companies to get this right. That's why our country spends more than \$24 billion (yes with a "B") per year on leadership development training.

Take a moment and ask yourself how that investment is paying off for you as a leader or individual contributor? Odds are there's massive room for improvement.

Paragon identified this gap many years ago and developed the Consultant Relationship Program to address it. Where appropriate, we engage in proactive feedback sessions and coordinate performance management with leaders in our partner companies.

Personal and Professional Development

We've mentioned development opportunities multiple times throughout this eBook. Large- and medium-sized companies often have learning and development groups who produce content and arrange for courses, seminars, and symposiums for FTEs. Consultants are not often provided the opportunity. In today's environment with so many opportunities to educate oneself, this element has taken on less weight in the Consultant vs. FTE equation, but still definitely something to think about.



HOMework FOR YOU TO PREPARE FOR THAT NEXT GIG (Whether You're an Industry Vet or a Newbie)

✓ **Build Your Brand and Have Market Presence**

Resumes are fairly one dimensional, but a body of content online lets people know who you are well before they meet you.

✓ **Leverage a Simple Website with Fresh Content**

We always recommend WordPress and one of the hundreds of low priced and amazingly feature rich themes available today. Write blogs and leverage video to the best of your ability to become findable online. If this sounds daunting, ask yourself, "What's the first thing I do to go find anything out about anyone or anything?"

The answer likely popped into your head as if programmed by some artificial intelligence, right? (A topic for another document perhaps). Simply put...**Be found.**

✓ **Maintain Social Media Engagement and Profiles**

LinkedIn will likely be your social home base. Even if you have a full book of business today, anything can and probably will happen to disrupt some part of your business income stream. Back yourself up with a solid social presence.

✓ **Extra Credit: Create and Deliver a Podcast**

If you're passionate about a topic, seek out others who share that same passion and interview them with engaging questions. **Just start** and see how it goes. Podcast growth is massive as we transition from over the air content to curated content. Use the very simple and incredibly robust platform called Anchor.fm. We host our podcast there (www.anchor.fm/paragon) and it's an incredible piece of technology.



Trust yourself. Prepare. Be open to opportunities. Ask a lot of questions along the way. No matter what, keep your chin up and your outlook optimistic. You're a highly skilled, intelligent, articulate, awesome, in-demand individual!

Sincerely,
The Paragon Team

THE PARAGON STORY



Committed to legendary service. Invested in leaders. Focused on relationships. Improving communication and engagement. Nurturing the future of the IT industry. Paragon IT Professionals is a trusted partner in talent acquisition and IT solution integration.

Paragon was founded in 1997 by brothers Craig and Joel Jackman to change how search firms and clients interacted. With an entrepreneurial background and an innovative spirit, Craig and Joel set out to be more than just a service provider. They wanted to be a valued partner to their clients — helping them get the right people in the right roles, which in turn benefited each clients' strategic initiatives. With two desks, two chairs, a fax machine and a whole lot of tenacity, they started Paragon with the mission to create a great company where people could thrive, love their work and make a meaningful contribution.

Today, Paragon is deeply connected to IT communities throughout the Midwest. Providing exceptional resources locally, nationally and internationally, we have enjoyed delivering success to organizations while leveraging our renowned experience, speed to market and industry knowledge. Headquartered in Des Moines, Iowa, our presence includes hundreds of consultants in multiple states, as well as global partnerships, providing the best talent and solutions for our clients' needs.

Because of the deep commitment to nurturing the future of the industry, the IT Leadership Forum was founded in 2010 to support investment in internal and external talent. Through the IT Leadership Forum, our clients are able to benefit from a leader acceleration process and experience holistic success throughout their organization — attracting, engaging and retaining the best people. Paragon is also an active member in technology association leadership initiatives. A passion of Paragon is looking to help resolve the challenge of a constrained IT workforce by investing in students' education and opportunities. We are proud of our 501c3 scholarship fund and believe deeply in creating opportunities for future leaders and change agents.

One of the key differentiators in working with Paragon is our experience that extends over two decades, giving us insight that few companies have in the marketplace today. Since opening our doors, we have achieved stability and long-term success despite economic downturns; constantly adapted to an industry defined by innovation and disruption; and anticipated the evolving needs of our customers.

The future of Paragon demands we become a comprehensive IT advisor, offering solutions in IT Staffing, project services, and software sales and integration. We continuously grow and excel within the industry and continue to do so by embracing continuous marketplace changes with the same core values and leadership that has set us apart for over 20 years.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- a. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2018/05/21/so-you-want-to-be-a-consultant-five-signs-consulting-is-right-for-you/>
- b. <https://www.wayup.com/guide/community/mckinsey-224358-sponsored-1-consulting-career/>
- c. <https://www.itcontracting.com/10-step-contracting-guide/>
- d. <https://headmelted.com/ten-reasons-not-to-be-a-contractor-4515cd4f30f7>
- e. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/louiscolombus/2018/05/23/10-charts-that-will-change-your-perspective-of-big-datas-growth/#2c884a202926>



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