

What Does It Take to Be an Effective Outplacement Consultant?

By Michael V. Mulligan, Ph.D.

Although the ultimate goal of the outplacement consultant is to help the client find a suitable position as quickly as possible, the outplacement consultant of today has challenges other than instructing the client on how to write a resume and network. The consultant faces different clients with a variety of emotional, family, financial, personality, age, career, marketing and attitude problems.

Because of the serious nature of the interaction between the client and the outplacement consultant, it is essential that counselors have the qualifications to deliver excellent service and prepare the client to handle critical situations that arise due to unemployment and the job search. Since there is no university or professional organization that trains an individual to be an outplacement consultant, the responsibility rests with the outplacement firms to make sure their counselors have the skills, knowledge, and experience to do the job. The International Board of Career Management Certification in San Rafael, California certifies individuals but does not currently provide training.

As an owner and practicing counselor of an outplacement firm, I would like to first identify the job tasks and then describe five important qualifications that I think one should acquire to be an effective outplacement counselor.

Job Tasks

Consultants should be willing and able to:

1. Work with a variety of clients from different industries and functional areas. This experience and knowledge can help individuals move into different careers.
2. Work with corporations in helping their management terminate individuals properly and within the law while providing a fair severance package.
3. Help the client and spouse work through the separation trauma, emotional stress and various concerns about leaving the company.
4. Handle clients terminated on the company premises carefully and in a sensitive manner.
5. Work with the corporate outplacement coordinator throughout the job search campaign.
6. Communicate to the client the outplacement services being offered and how to take full advantage of them.
7. Help the client through the self-exploration and career-exploration stages so they can determine their next job target.
8. Work with a client, teaching him/her the steps to finding, starting, and managing his/her own business if this is a goal.
9. Work with the client, teaching him/her how to write a resume that is appropriate to the job target.
10. Work with a client, teaching him/her how to write appropriate letters for the job search.
11. Teach the client how to develop, organize and implement an active job search plan of action.
12. Teach the client how to find and use research materials, to identify target companies, organizations and people.
13. Teach clients how to answer ads, track ads and follow up.
14. Teach clients how to use the internet to find positions and post their resume.
15. Teach clients about the various networking groups by location and functional area.
16. Teach clients how to develop and maintain a network of people who will be willing to help them develop contacts and job leads over an extended period of time.
17. Teach clients how to conduct exploratory/low stress interviews.
18. Teach clients how to contact companies by letter and phone and how to arrange a meeting with someone who can hire them.
19. Teach clients how to prepare for a telephone or a face-to-face high stress interview.
20. Teach clients how to close during the interview and follow-up.
21. Teach clients how to arrange for more time after an offer, so one can expedite other job possibilities.
22. Teach clients how to negotiate and gain what they want without losing the offer.
23. Monitor and evaluate the weekly activities of each client to make sure they carry out the job search process properly, so interviews and job offers come.

24. Continue training the client in areas that could knock him/her out of an interview or job offer
25. Confront clients with existing weaknesses and then implement a developmental program, so the individual can be more effective in the next job
26. Provide job leads, contacts and promote all clients, when necessary
27. Establish and achieve specific objectives for a group workshop.
28. Use group dynamics knowledge to build group cohesiveness and help each individual establish and achieve goals in a group.
29. Use a combination of slides, overlays and videotapes to make a group program fast-moving and enlightening.
30. Communicate clearly and specifically when explaining each part of the job search process.
31. Draw out and have good eye contact with each member of the group
32. Follow up with each member of the group to learn how the job search process is going.

Five Important Qualifications

1. Skills and Knowledge

Excellent counseling skills are a must. Every consultant should be able to help a client explore and develop an in-depth understanding of the situation before action plans are made and implemented. The skill is being able to listen and communicate the feelings and message of the clients back to them. Unfortunately, many consultants without counseling training have a tendency to be very task-oriented and they give advice prematurely without thoroughly understanding the individual's abilities, interests, and situation.

When one examines the past work experience of consultants delivering outplacement services today, one will find individuals who come from all industries and functional areas. If a consultant has no formal counselor training, it is important that they receive professional training to sharpen their listening and responding skills. A consultant functioning at a harmful level can prolong the job search for a client.

Knowledge of the law in regard to termination, severance packages, and how to terminate properly is extremely important. This information can be helpful to the sponsoring corporation in helping the sponsored client come away with a more positive attitude thus avoiding lawsuits.

Knowledge about tests, assessment tools and the skill to

properly interpret information is crucial to self-esteem, self-understanding and job targeting. Improper interpretation can do great damage to an individual's self-concept and planning process. Tests should be selected and administered based on the needs of the client.

Excellent writing skills are essential in developing resumes and letters. The consultant must be able to write and help the individual pull important accomplishments out of the past to develop an effective resume and letter.

Effective training skills in salesmanship and communication should be required. If clients cannot be taught to sell themselves and communicate to others, expect them to be without a job for a long time.

Marketing strategy and planning skills are crucial. The client needs to know how to develop a marketing strategy and a plan to follow every day during the job search campaign.

An expert in the job search process is imperative. It takes experience and knowledge over a period of time to learn the best techniques to use in obtaining job leads and offers. The consultant should not be two pages ahead of the client in the book.

Knowledge of industries, job functions and the world of work is an ongoing study. A consultant can be most effective in the job targeting and career planning process if he/she is familiar with various occupations and qualifications. Knowledge of the transference of skills to other jobs can be of great importance to clients in career decision making.

Knowledge of resources – directories, newspapers, associations, search firms (retainer and contingency), 10K's, etc., is crucial. Understanding online resources such as the Internet is also essential. Clients need to know where to go to learn about companies and the people that manage them.

Being skillful as a manager is critical. Every client needs to be managed differently. The consultant needs to know the clients personally and what it takes to motivate them to do certain activities. It is also important to be sensitive to the difference in clients in regard to race, sex, culture, and background.

Time management skills are essential. Many clients will talk to you all day if you will let them. It is not only important for consultants to make good use of their time, but the client also needs to know how to get more activities completed in a day.

A model and teacher of good interpersonal relationships is very important. The outplacement consultant works with so many varying personalities, he/she has to be able to

respond with empathy, warmth and respect toward all clients. How to relate with people during an interview and at work can be extremely helpful to the clients. A model program can be implemented to help those who have problems in these areas.

Knowledge of group dynamics is important if one is leading a group. All outplacement consultants will be involved with group work and need to understand how to use group sessions to help clients

2. Personality

The outplacement consultant has to have the patience to listen to a client and be task-oriented enough to move the client forward. He/she also should be warm, cheerful, friendly and be client-centered. The consultant should be supportive, non-judgmental and show respect, despite the length of time it might take the client to find a position.

3. Education

There are a number of people working as outplacement consultants today with B.A. degrees. My preference is to hire people with a Master's Degree or above in Counseling or Business because the courses they take better prepare them to work with clients. You are money ahead if you hire people who already have the skills and knowledge you want in a counselor. If a firm doesn't have at least one Ph.D. in counseling or clinical psychology, they should hire one on a full-time basis.

4. Physical Attributes

The outplacement consultant should strive to be in good physical condition, so he/she has high energy to listen. In addition, the consultant should be aware of his/her physical appearance, so that it does not distract the client from the counseling process.

5. Work Experience

The ideal person to hire is someone who understands the work environment and industry where the client has been, and yet has the experience in counseling, tests and measurement, career planning and the job search to help the individual find a similar position or to direct him/her toward a job that utilizes his/her transferable skills and experience. Many consultants today are balanced between human resources, psychology and behavioral backgrounds, and a variety of functional areas.

The best solution is to hire someone who comes close to the qualifications and is willing to be trained. Then, it is the firm's responsibility to systematically train the consultants in all job tasks necessary to be an effective consultant.

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