

than the original. Their consultancy can also be down-to-earth and accessible. They are part of the entrepreneurial consultancy basket.

career independents: don't tell me what to do

In the final basket are the career independents. They have made a career of consulting and contracting because they couldn't stand being told what to do, where to go and when to do it. Perhaps they disliked consulting outside of their own values set for other people. Maybe they wanted to be more in charge of their own time.

Perhaps they didn't like being part of a team where they had to introduce others they didn't like or trust to their valued clients. Non-team players can become career independents simply because they don't want to have to work with a team. Some of them are in fact unable to work in a team under any circumstances.

Daniel Pink chronicles career independents in the US (Pink 2001). He calls them 'Free Agents'. In an amusing article he outlines certain words to avoid with a career independent, and redefines them. For example, the word 'empowerment' is patronising to a career independent or free agent. Organisations don't empower free agents, free agents empower organisations by turning up. As Pink says, their hidden thought is: 'I think I'll empower General Motors by showing up for work today.'

Other words to avoid with free agents and career independents include 'human resources' (people are not resources; timber and oil are), 'retention' (you can inspire, motivate, but not retain people, due to their two legs), and 'paying your dues' ('Work isn't a country club. Nobody has to pay dues. They just have to do great work'). Career independents work for themselves, for the challenge, for the money, for their families — but not for anyone else. If anything, you work for them. The world works this way for the career independent.

■ ■ ■ A BRIEF EXPLANATION OF THE ABILITY MYTH

'What's your edge?' I asked Peter, a strategic planning consultant.

'My organisation does the best job imaginable. We're more professional, we're better educated and we're more intelligent.'

Welcome to the ability myth. We believe that if we are the best technicians in our chosen field, the best at understanding our clients' needs and translating them into actions, then we will be successful in business. That's the myth.

If that's the case, then how do so many mediocre performers manage to run successful businesses? Why is it that some of the busiest consultants have only one tool, and they use it to solve every problem? Why are business school professors so knowledgeable, yet sometimes so impractical?

The reason is that other factors come into play before ability. Those consultants who don't understand the ability myth formula can end up the best-educated — and most under-utilised — consultants in the world.

The ability myth works this way: the consultant with the most ability won't necessarily get the work, not unless they deal with two other factors first — availability and affability.

Before we start delving into the different aspects of the ability myth, let's just get clear on what it is and how it works. Sit back and understand the consulting industry.

The ability myth in health care

My brother-in-law is a very good surgeon. He explains that clients (patients, he calls them) use three principles to select their medical service provider: availability, affability and ability.

Think back to the last time you looked for a new doctor or dentist. When I recently chose a new GP I looked for practitioners in my local area, and then for those who were open when I'd be likely to want to see them (this is the availability principle).

Then, I took my various minor complaints to different GPs. Those doctors or receptionists who were rude to me, those who forgot my name, and those who didn't credit me with any intelligence were instantly crossed off my list. In short, if they had a bad bedside manner, I wasn't interested (this is affability).

Finally, I asked around friends and relatives within the medical field to check out that the person I liked was in fact reputable. It was fortunate that she was because I had already ruled out quite a few because of their lack of affability. This is the ability myth in action: it only counts if other needs are met first.

the ability myth in consulting

So it is with consultants. Whether you're a good consultant or not, if the client does not know you exist, you're ruled out before you get to first base. If they know you exist, but they don't like you — because of arrogance, a clash of values, or just the colour of your shirt — then you don't get past second base. Third base is knowing what to do to fix their problem or deliver their service. This is ability. Think of it as a game of baseball (see Figure 1.6)