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# The Secret to Consulting Success:

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The Difference Between  
Associate Programmes,  
Partnerships and  
Franchises Explained

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# The Secret to Consulting Success: The Difference Between Associate Programmes, Partnerships and Franchises Explained

What sets some consultants apart? Why do some consultants struggle to land clients, while others turn down jobs every day?

You might have heard about associate programmes or consulting partnerships and dismissed them as consulting firms in disguise. Some of them are. But, others are there to help you build a thriving business that is all your own.

**Interested? You should be!**

Here is the run-down on associate programmes, consulting partnerships and franchises – what you need to know to pick the right partners for your operation. Get ready to take your independent consulting practice to the next level!



## What's in a name? ... Not much really.

The unfortunate reality is that the naming conventions here are all over the place. This is one of the main reasons that consulting franchises are the best-kept secret in the industry.

In an effort to bring clarity to the outcomes that can be achieved with partnerships, we are going to divide the organisations under-discussion into two distinct categories:

- Consulting Associate Programmes
- Consulting Franchises

However, it HAS TO BE STRESSED that there are no industry standard terms. In the real world, most organisations that fall into these categories use multiple naming conventions, and the most common term "consulting partnership" is used to describe any number of things — something we will address at the end.

Consulting franchise, although a useful term, is rarely used. But, we want to push it here as a distinct type of operation that is most suited to help you create a self-sustaining, independent consulting business.

What needs to be understood, in short, is that when looking into these organisations, you need to look at what they deliver. Do not simply make judgments based on a name. The names won't get you far on their own!







## Consulting Associate Programmes

Associate programmes are, generally speaking, outgrowth operations of successful independent consultants who end up with so many clients that they run out of time. This is not hugely distinct from what large consulting firms are, just smaller and with less structure.

It is worth noting that these same large consulting houses, like KPMG, Bain and McKinsey, offer what are effectively graduate schemes that they call “associate programmes”. But, this is not what we are talking about.

For our purposes, associate programmes are a distinct category of organisation that independent consultants can join to access clients while maintaining a significant amount of autonomy – receiving little support and broadly remaining independent actors, but operating in loose association.

### **Delivered clients**

The primary purpose of consulting associate programmes is to provide a pool of independent resources to the parent consulting group while delivering clients to independent consultants.

The ‘associates’ get jobs without needing to directly invest in networking, while the associate programme gains ‘overflow’ capabilities – allowing the small consulting firm to deploy a large amount of resources without actually hiring staff directly.

For a new consultant, this can seem ideal. Associate programmes allow you to gain experience as a consultant, avoid the hassle of networking and feel secure that your next job is just around the corner.

For someone starting out as a consultant with limited professional experience and no personal network, these programmes can deliver a viable entry point into consulting. However, they are limiting.

### At a cost

While working as an associate within one of these programmes, you have 'independence', but not true autonomy or self-reliance. The associate programme controls your client relationships, dictates your access to clients, could cut you off and directs how much you charge. They also tend to take a rather substantial segment of your fees — often in excess of 50%.

What you need to know is that the clients you gain through an associate programme are not your clients — they will remain loyal to the associate programme. The associate programme will deliberately prevent you from forming a direct relationship, injecting themselves into negotiations and communications.



### Sometimes with training

Associate programmes will provide some training opportunities. Sometimes these are at extra costs and sometimes they are part of the programme. But it is more likely that it will be a separate function that operates on a pay-to-play basis.

The loose nature of association means that you will likely not be viewed as an asset worth developing. People come and go, meaning that your relationship with the associate programme will be broadly limited to the specific client relationships they deliver to you. There is no culture of comradery or mutual development — you are a 'gun for hire' that will be expected to operate self-sufficiently in all ways other than owning the client relationship.

### But without exclusivity

Very few associate programmes require any kind of commitment of exclusivity on behalf of their 'partners'. That means that while working for the associate programme, you will be free to seek consulting jobs entirely separate from the organisation.

Many independent consultants who work with an associate programme have relationships with several associate programmes at one time, along with their own truly independent businesses. Probably the most constructive way to approach associate programmes is as a supplementary means of gaining access to clients while growing your own business on the side.

Although you gain experience with an associate programme, you are not actually building up your own network of clients, and it is easy to become complacent when it comes to building a business of your own. Many who enter an associate programme with this in mind never transition away to develop their own business.

### Consulting Associate Programmes Deliver:

1. Access to clients and job opportunities
2. Access to some training opportunities
3. Flexibility in how you approach outside job opportunities

### Consulting Associate Programmes Do Not:

1. Directly enable you to develop your own personal network
2. Contribute to the growth of a self-sustaining business
3. Permit you to maintain control over your fees or client relationships obtained through the associate programme

### With Consulting Associate Programmes You Will:

1. Get job opportunities delivered to you
2. Develop experience as a consultant
3. Sacrifice a substantial portion of your fees for jobs obtained through the associate programme — often in excess of 50%



## Consulting Franchises

Consulting franchises, like associate programmes, can also be described as loose associations of independent consultants. But, how that loose association functions is effectively the reverse of associate programmes – enabling their members to build and maintain their own network of relationships rather than supplying them with work directly.

In reality, consulting franchises trade under a number of different names – often calling themselves consulting partnerships and sometimes even associate programmes. The important distinction is what they deliver and how they deliver it.

True consulting franchises stress training, administrative support, mentorships and partnering within a context of client self-ownership and self-employed, direct control. This makes them ideal for new consultants who actually want to work for themselves.

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### Delivering face-to-face advice

One of the most valuable things offered by a consulting franchise is access to other, established consultants. This can take the form of training courses conducted by real consultants, one-to-one meetings to get tailored advice and even mentorship opportunities that provide ongoing support from a consultant who will get to know you and your business.

What you get with a consulting franchise is tailored access to one of the hardest found commodities within the consulting landscape – quality advice on how to be a consultant.

### Helping you build a franchise

With a consulting franchise, the outcome is foreshadowed by the name – these organisations want to help you set up your own franchise business, one that conforms to their standards of excellence, but also one over which you are in control.

This is the main reason that ‘consulting franchise’ is a useful term. It describes almost exactly what these organisations do. It is simply not an often used term.

The way you know that you are dealing with a franchise is their emphasis on enabling you to access your own network of clients and grow the skills you need to run your own business, rather than simply serving you up job opportunities over which you can exercise no control.

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### The training you can count on

Training schemes exist for a large number of specific and technical tasks – how to be a marketer, how to build IT infrastructure, how to hone an HR department. But when it comes to learning how to network, how to own a meeting or craft a quality follow up email, it can be much harder to separate the wheat from the chaff.

A lot of ‘become a consultant tomorrow’ seminars are a crock of nonsense. If you want a guaranteed no-nonsense approach, you need guarantees that your trainers take your success seriously. Simply chucking a few thousand pounds at a coaching session is a guarantee of nothing.

With a consulting franchise, you know that everyone knows what they are doing — they are consultants themselves. You also know that they are invested in your success. Profit-sharing schemes mean that they make money when you make money — not before and not regardless.

### **Keep your clients and keep your fees**

The biggest difference between a consulting franchise and an associate programme is your ability to maintain control over your client relationships. This is central to what it means to be an independent consultant. Your clients are buying into you, allowing you to build a personal brand and achieve the job security that comes along with owning your own business.

When working with a consulting franchise, you aren't simply working for an organisation, you are working with an organisation to maximise the growth and success of your own business. In addition to growing your own network and planting the seeds of a self-sustaining operation, you keep a much higher percentage of your fees as a result.

Unlike associate programmes where you might keep less than 50% of your day rate, with the franchise model, you can expect to retain at least 80%. The money you do share is invested back into your operation in the form of training and ongoing administrative support.

### **Exclusivity and camaraderie**

Part of the reason that training schemes and support are built into franchise consulting groups is that they are an exclusive relationship. Unlike associate programmes, all of your jobs will effectively flow through the franchise. That can sound limiting, but this exclusivity will not limit the types of jobs you take or when you work. You are in control of your client relationships and how you work.

This also comes with the bonus of being viewed as a valuable part of a community. You will be invested in, supported and helped to succeed to the best ability of the organisation. This will help you to build a business that is all your own. If you ever choose to leave a franchise consulting group, those client relationships come with you.



### **Gain access to an executive assistant (EA)**

Part of the ongoing support offered by a consulting franchise is administrative and executive assistance. Most commonly, this comes in the form of access to an executive assistant (EA).

Having a good EA is an asset that a lot of independent consultants overlook, but should not. Administrative tasks are time-consuming and need to be done, but are generally not the best way for a consultant to spend their time. By delegating these tasks, you will develop a more efficient schedule, avoid calendar clashes and have more time to focus on networking, delivering to clients and pursuing new training opportunities.

A good executive assistant can do even more. They will know the ins and outs of your business, and over time, will get to know what you do well and where you struggle. This will allow them to more effectively support your operation, but also give you advice. The best EAs will not only help you run your business, but also tell you when you are making a mistake or overlooking an opportunity.

Most consulting franchises will give you access either to your own EA or a shared one, enabling you to focus on what matters at the lowest cost to you.

### **Gain opportunities to tag-team**

Being a member of a franchise consulting operation delivers opportunities to network with other independent consultants. This is an opportunity that associate programmes also deliver. But because of the independence you retain over client relationships in the franchise model, you have more options available over what to do with these relationships.

A lot of consultants form long-lived professional relationships with other independent consultants working within the same franchise consultancy. This allows them to pool their skills and expertise, delivering better outcomes to a wider range of clients.

### **Consulting Franchises Deliver:**

- One-to-one training
- Mentorship opportunities
- Administrative support

### **Consulting Partnerships Do Not:**

- Directly provide you with clients
- Create employee/employer relationships
- Interfere in your client relationships

### **With a Consulting Partnership You Will:**

- Grow a network of clients
- Keep 80%+ of your fees
- Receive training and guidance on how to build a sustainable business of your own.



# Consulting Partnerships

Consulting partnerships is a term used by almost everyone in the industry. Both what we have called associate programmes and consulting franchises use the term 'consulting partnerships', and often call the independent consultants working for their organisation 'partners'.

Large consulting firms also use the term 'partner' to describe their most senior members who have a stake in the business – very similar to how the term is used to describe senior lawyers. The term might also be applied in a very similar sense to a core team of independent consultants running an associate programme.

When used to describe 'associates' within an associate programme, or member of a consulting franchise, it does not indicate that the individual has an invested stake in shares or ownership over the organisation.

Instead, it is just used to denote a level of independence that separates this person from a 'standard employee'. This level of cross-purpose use makes the term 'partner' and consulting partnership relatively unhelpful, although it remains one of the most common terms used to describe any number of relationships and associations within the consulting industry.

The main takeaway is that 'partner' and 'consulting partnership' are phrases that you are very likely to run into, but are phrases that communicate very little meaning on their own. You can feel relatively sure that such a role will be distinct from that of a 'traditional employee'. But, anything beyond that will require looking at the specifics and comparing them to the outcomes described here.

## A Consulting Partnership is:

1. A widely used and hard-to-define term
2. Unlikely to be a standard employee role
3. A term that requires looking further into the details to understand in the specific circumstances

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## Keep Your Strengths, Weaknesses and Goals in Mind When Investing in Support

Some independent consultants prefer to work entirely on their own. But most don't. Even those that are not affiliated with some kind of partnership, franchise or associate programme still have their own support staff and network support.

No matter how you approach consulting, hiring an executive assistant (EA), for example, is a great decision. It will help you focus on what matters, allowing you to grow your business and expand your skill set.

Most new independent consultants, and even many established practitioners, however, benefit from structured support networks. It can be very difficult to find credible training programmes outside of profit-sharing schemes, and some consultants struggle to get their network off the ground, find their first paying client and grow their business.

When assessing the best fit and comparing the attributes of associate programmes and franchises, you need to think about your own strengths, weaknesses and goals. If you want to truly work for yourself, a consulting franchise is the only way to go. What separates working for a firm and working for yourself is direct control over your client relationships. If you don't own those relationships, you are, realistically, someone's employee.

If your goal is to simply put your skills to use in a more varied number of organisations and scenarios than your current job allows, then an associate programme might give you what you want – particularly if you don't like networking or do not have faith in the size of your network. You can also use an associate programme to obtain a steady stream of job opportunities while building your own client relationships on the side.

It is important to recognise, however, that most people who have already developed a professional career have a larger network than they may realise. You also don't need to know that many people to get an independent consulting business off the ground. A few well placed connections that can give you a handful of introductions is all you need to get the ball rolling, land your first client and then springboard into a career that is truly your own. A consulting franchise can help you do that.

For anyone playing with the idea of becoming an independent consultant, what you need to know is that there are people out there excited to help you. It is time to stop procrastinating, get out there and get started!

Are you interested in taking  
your next steps into being an  
independent consultant?

**Speak to Us**

Or contact us via:

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**Thank you.**