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In-Service Training for Career Development in the Consulting Industry

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Abstract:

In-service training is a cornerstone of professional development in the consulting industry, where rapid technological change, client expectations, and competitive dynamics demand continuous learning. This article explores the strategic role of in-service training in enhancing consultants' competencies, fostering career progression, and sustaining organizational competitiveness. Drawing on peer-reviewed literature, it examines best practices in learning and development (L&D), the integration of mentorship and experiential learning, and the alignment of training with evolving industry demands. Recommendations are offered for designing scalable, inclusive, and impactful in-service training programs tailored to the consulting context.

Key words: In-service Training, Career Development; Consulting.

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Introduction:

The consulting industry thrives on intellectual capital, agility, and the ability to deliver tailored solutions across diverse sectors. As such, the professional development of consultants is not merely a human resource function but a strategic imperative. In-service training—defined as structured learning provided to employees during their tenure—plays a pivotal role in equipping consultants with the skills, knowledge, and adaptive capacities necessary for sustained success (Day et al., 2021). This article investigates the mechanisms, benefits, and challenges of in-service training in consulting, with a focus on career development outcomes.

The Strategic Imperative of In-Service Training in Consulting:

Consulting firms operate in environments characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). To navigate these conditions, consultants must continuously update their technical expertise, interpersonal skills, and industry knowledge. In-service training serves as a vehicle for this ongoing development, enabling consultants to remain relevant and competitive (Taranekar, 2023).

Moreover, the consulting profession is marked by a steep learning curve, especially for early-career professionals. Structured onboarding programs, such as Consultant Development Programs (CDPs), integrate foundational training with real-world project exposure, fostering both immediate performance and long-term growth (Taranekar, 2023). These programs often blend classroom instruction, e-learning modules, mentorship, and rotational assignments to create a holistic learning environment.

Divergent Perspectives on In-Service Training in Consulting: What Literature Review Says

In-service training within the consulting industry has been examined through multiple theoretical lenses. Two dominant views emerge in the literature: one emphasizing structured, competency-based development, and the other advocating for emergent, experiential learning embedded in practice.

Structured Competency-Based Training as a Strategic Asset:

Day et al. (2021) argue that structured in-service training programs—particularly those grounded in competency frameworks—are essential for developing leadership capacity and ensuring consistent service quality across consulting teams. Their research highlights the importance of aligning training with organizational strategy, using metrics to evaluate impact, and integrating leadership development into early career pathways. Structured programs, they contend, offer scalability, predictability, and measurable outcomes, which are critical in high-performance consulting environments.

Similarly, Taranekar (2023) supports this view by documenting the success of Consultant Development Programs (CDPs) in onboarding new hires. These programs combine formal instruction with rotational assignments and mentorship, creating a scaffolded learning experience that accelerates career progression and reduces attrition.

Experiential and Emergent Learning as the Core of Consultant Development:

In contrast, scholars such as Bastardoz et al. (2021) and contributors to the Online Journal for Workforce Education and Development (2024) emphasize the value of experiential learning, informal mentorship, and adaptive capacity. They argue that the unpredictable nature of consulting work—marked by shifting client needs, cross-cultural dynamics, and complex problem-solving—requires learning that is fluid, context-sensitive, and embedded in real-time practice. Rather than relying solely on structured curricula, they advocate for learning ecosystems that support reflection, peer exchange, and iterative growth.

This view aligns with contemporary theories of adult learning and organizational behavior, which suggest that professionals learn best when they are actively engaged in solving meaningful problems and when feedback is immediate and contextual (OJWED, 2024).

In the author's view, while both perspectives offer valuable insights, a hybrid model that integrates structured competency development with experiential learning is most appropriate for the consulting industry. This synthesis is justified on several grounds:

- ⊕ **Consulting Requires Both Depth and Agility:** Structured training ensures foundational competencies and alignment with firm standards, while experiential learning fosters the agility needed to navigate client-specific challenges.
- ⊕ **Learning Must Be Continuous and Contextual:** Consultants benefit from scaffolded learning early in their careers, but long-term growth depends on reflective practice and adaptive problem-solving.

- **Mentorship Bridges Both Worlds:** Formal mentorship programs can provide structure while enabling emergent learning through dialogue, feedback, and shared experience.
- **Technology Enables Integration:** Digital platforms can deliver structured content while supporting peer exchange, microlearning, and real-time feedback loops.

Thus, consulting firms should design in-service training programs that begin with structured onboarding and evolve into dynamic learning ecosystems. This approach honors the complexity of consulting work and supports career development across diverse trajectories.

Models and Modalities of In-Service Training:

1. Competency-Based Learning

Competency-based training frameworks align learning objectives with the specific skills required for various consulting roles. These frameworks emphasize measurable outcomes, such as problem-solving, client communication, and data analysis, ensuring that training translates into tangible performance improvements (Career Development International, 2025).

2. Experiential Learning and Project-Based Development

Experiential learning—learning through doing—is particularly effective in consulting, where real-time problem-solving is central. Project-based assignments, shadowing senior consultants, and participating in cross-functional teams allow consultants to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts (Day et al., 2021).

3. Mentorship and Coaching

Mentorship is a critical component of in-service training, offering personalized guidance, feedback, and career navigation support. Formal mentorship programs have been shown to enhance job satisfaction, retention, and leadership development in consulting firms (Online Journal for Workforce Education and Development, 2024).

4. Digital Learning Platforms

The rise of digital learning platforms has transformed in-service training delivery. Microlearning, gamification, and AI-driven adaptive learning systems enable consultants to access personalized content on-demand, fostering continuous learning without disrupting client engagements (Career Development International, 2025).

Career Development Outcomes of In-Service Training:

- In-service training contributes to career development in multiple dimensions:
- Skill Acquisition and Specialization: Consultants gain domain-specific expertise, certifications, and methodological proficiency, enhancing their value proposition to clients.
- Leadership Pipeline Development: Structured training identifies and prepares high-potential consultants for leadership roles, ensuring succession planning and organizational continuity (Day et al., 2021).
- Increased Retention and Engagement: Employees who perceive meaningful development opportunities are more likely to remain with their firms, reducing turnover and preserving institutional knowledge (OJWED, 2024).
- Enhanced Client Impact: Well-trained consultants deliver higher-quality insights, foster stronger client relationships, and contribute to firm reputation and growth.

Challenges in Implementing Effective In-Service Training:

Despite its benefits, in-service training in consulting faces several challenges:

- ❖ Time Constraints: Billable hour models often limit the time consultants can dedicate to training.
- ❖ Customization Needs: One-size-fits-all programs may fail to address the diverse learning needs of consultants across functions and geographies.
- ❖ Measurement of Impact: Demonstrating the ROI of training initiatives remains complex, particularly in linking learning outcomes to client satisfaction or revenue growth (Day et al., 2021).

Recommendations:

To maximize the impact of in-service training on career development in consulting, firms should consider the following strategies:

1. Embed Learning in the Flow of Work: Design training modules that integrate seamlessly with consultants' daily tasks. For example, just-in-time learning resources and project-based simulations can reinforce learning without requiring extended time away from client work.

2. Foster a Culture of Continuous Learning: Leadership should model learning behaviors, reward knowledge sharing, and create psychological safety for experimentation and growth. This cultural foundation is essential for sustaining engagement with training initiatives.

3. Leverage Data for Personalization: Use learning analytics to tailor training content to individual career paths, performance gaps, and aspirations. Adaptive learning platforms can dynamically adjust content difficulty and format based on user progress.

4. Prioritize Inclusive and Global Perspectives: Ensure training content reflects diverse cultural contexts, client geographies, and inclusive leadership practices. This is especially critical for global consulting firms serving multicultural clients (CareerWise, 2024).

5. Evaluate and Iterate: Implement robust feedback mechanisms and performance metrics to assess training effectiveness. Use these insights to refine content, delivery methods, and alignment with strategic goals.

Conclusion:

In-service training is not merely a developmental tool but a strategic lever for career advancement and organizational excellence in the consulting industry. As firms navigate complex client demands and evolving market dynamics, investing in scalable, inclusive, and evidence-based training programs is essential. By aligning learning with career trajectories, embedding training in daily practice, and leveraging technology for personalization, consulting firms can cultivate agile, empowered, and future-ready professionals.

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