



Adding Value

Understanding Value

There are two types of value you can add to a client site:

	This type of value...	Is defined as...
<p>What You'll Learn in this Chapter</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding type of value • learning ways to add value • sharing knowledge and innovation 	<p>Direct and Expected</p>	<p>Things that directly affect the deliverable you're hired to complete. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding the client's needs so you deliver what's expected • delivering a fully-tested, high-quality product on time • clarifying with the client that they received what they expected and that you can now proceed to your next task
	<p>Extra and Very Much Appreciated</p>	<p>Things that define the process you use to obtain the deliverable. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contributing constructive and creative alternatives to the client that are related to the project delivery • raising the level of professionalism at a client site by arriving on time for meetings, dressing a cut above, and focussing on why you're there • maintaining a high level of productivity • exercising leadership skills, speaking well of people when they are absent, supporting client objectives and directions, and remaining factual in all your discussions • managing all of your own conflicts in a professional and direct manner

Adding Value

When you add value to projects you work on, you gain a high-quality reputation, and we all know that a contractor with a high-quality reputation gets better references and wins more jobs.

Meeting your Deliverables

One obvious way to add value is to deliver your assigned tasks on time and within budget. When you deliver on the task, you're telling the client the following:

- I understand the task—there's nothing worse than completing the task and having the client say, "No, no, that's not what I wanted!" As a consultant, it's up to you to understand the project and deliver what the client wants. To do this, use the Learn to Listen steps detailed in *Communicating Effectively* on page 119.
- I meet my time commitments—If you told the client "I'll have this done in 4 days" it's critical for you to keep that commitment.
- I understand the project dynamics—If you're completing the work and see that there's slippage, analyze the slippage and tell the client right away. Many people are afraid to bring up bad news. You need to remember that while nobody likes surprises, they like bigger, nastier surprises even less.

The golden rule—if there's going to be slippage on the project deliverable, bring it up early with all the facts.

As a contractor, delivering on a task involves more than just banging out an e-mail with your work attached at the very moment you are finished. Delivering your work in a professional manner requires that you:

- Fully-test your deliverable before you deliver it—it's a given: if you rush your deliverable and don't test it, problems always appear. Not only that, someone else will find the problem. At best, you'll look unprofessional. At worst, incompetent.
It's better to talk to the client and say, "The deliverable's done, but I need X days to test it.", than to have a problem appear later.
- Ask the client to confirm that the deliverable is complete—do this at the time of delivery. This helps you make sure that all the tasks associated with the deliverable are complete. We're all guilty of making assumptions, including clients. They may be assuming that part of the deliverable includes user training, or something like that. To make sure it's a clean delivery, just ask the client "Is there anything else that you need in the delivery of this task?" This simple question prevents misunderstandings.

Projecting a Positive Attitude

Many contractors think that having a positive attitude means saying yes to every request a client makes. In fact, being dependable and eager to accept responsibility is only part of having a positive attitude.

Become the most positive and enthusiastic person you know.

Approaching Tasks Professionally

A large part of projecting a positive attitude is having a professional approach. This means being conscious of why you're there, and why you're being paid. Also, your behavior needs to be appropriate for the project and for the client site. Knowing what's appropriate is mostly common sense, however corporate culture also has impact. See *Tuning in to the Corporate Culture* on page 108 for tips on navigating corporate culture.

Remember that you are representing at least one company at the client site—your own. If you are working through an agency, you are representing the agency as well.

Possessing a Healthy Sense of Humour

Having a professional and positive approach doesn't mean checking your sense of humour at the door (unless, of course, that's appropriate for your project site). Clients often value a consultant who can bring appropriate humour to a situation—it helps alleviate stress and diffuse potentially difficult situations. But use humour only if you're sure it's appropriate; off-colour, racist, sexist, or slandering humour in the workplace is never appropriate—it can be taken as harassment by other co-workers.

Setting an Example

Etiquette encompasses how you work with co-workers. For example, in a culture where no one is ever on time for meetings, you can raise the level of professionalism by being punctual for all formal and informal meetings. Also, when you go for lunch with your co-workers and they decide to stay late at the restaurant but you have tasks to do at the client site, you can set a professional example by paying your bill and leaving early.

A professional approach means getting down to business. You add value every time you raise the level of professionalism in the environment. Focus on why you're there and what you're being paid to do. Instead of chatting around the water cooler for

half an hour, chat for five minutes, and then excuse yourself and get back to work.

Communicating Effectively

It's critical that contractors be able to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing. Written communication is especially important since most inter-office communication is done via e-mail.

Increasing Productivity

Productivity adds value to a project. Clients always appreciate a productive contractor. The most obvious way to show that you are productive is to use your technical expertise to meet your deliverables. You can also show your productivity in a number of day-to-day ways, including:

- Shutting your door—not all the way, but about 75% of the way. This tells people, “I’m busy, but open to important interruptions.” Clients respect this, and see that you’re a hard worker.
- Setting your priorities—when someone comes to ask you about something, be approachable, but know what your priorities are. You can ask the person “Is it urgent?” If they say no, then you can suggest, “Can we meet later? I need to finish this task.” This shows that you know how to stay focussed.

- Managing your time—it's easy to let a million trivial details derail your productivity. You need to know how to manage your time effectively in order to complete the tasks you were hired to complete. Take a note from Steven Covey in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and categorize your tasks in the 4 quadrants of:
 - **Urgent and Important**—do these first, they are obviously on fire and need attention now.
 - **Not Urgent and Important**—do these next, they are your planning and strategy items that will give your work form.
 - **Not Urgent and Not Important**—Calling back your friend to arrange dinner, going to the bank for cash, chatting at the coffee room. Tasks of a personal nature fall into this category when you are at the job site. Often though, this category can be a real time waster and a distraction for people who are not focussed.
 - **Urgent and Not Important**—If something falls into this category you should immediately and wholeheartedly ask yourself “Why would I spend any time on this, how did this get on my list?” Going out for a smoke during work is an urgent and not important task; if you smoke, be discreet about it.

Spend most of your time on tasks in the important categories, and make sure you tag everything coming across your desk as to which quadrant it fits into, you will save potentially wasted time this way.

Practicing Leadership

Your attitude can affect the morale of your co-workers. You can raise the level of professionalism by practicing leadership skills. This does not mean that you have to walk onto a job site and save the day. Leadership means setting an example or delivering ideas that help others forward the task to the goal. Leadership also means that in all your discussions on a client site, always stick to the facts and never speak ill of someone

who is not present. When someone approaches you and speaks poorly of someone else, suggest that they invite that person into the room so they can do something constructive with the criticism.

It's also important to note that when you don't speak ill of others, people will realize you won't speak ill of them in their absence.

Leadership means supporting client objectives and processes for doing things while on the project. You're supporting the decisions the team uses to operate, whether you personally believe it's a good or bad decision. When other team members see your position, they're more likely to support the client objectives and processes as well.

Effective communication skills are a big part of leadership. A true leader sticks to the facts in any situation. You can increase the professionalism in your day-to-day communications with co-workers by stating the facts:

Instead of saying...

State the facts...

I think we're spending too much time in meetings.

I've been in meetings 20 hours per week, and so has everyone else on the project. That takes away 120 hours a week from the project.

I don't think the testing department likes me.

OR

I don't think the testing department wants me to succeed.

On my last three deliverables, the testing department was unable to test my code for over a week.

I don't want to use PowerBuilder for this project.

I have checked into Visual Basic and it has add-on libraries that address most of what we are trying to develop. It would make sense to use Visual Basic for this project.

Quality Documentation

Quality documentation adds value. Whether it's documenting your computer code so another programmer can understand it, or producing a technical guide that explains exactly what you did, this capture of knowledge will be greatly valued by the client after you leave—it may win you an extended contract, a renewal, or a future contract.

Good documentation is something the client appreciates only when you're gone. That leads to a lot of repeat business.

What is quality documentation? Usually it is explanatory in nature. It doesn't have to be verbose, but it does need to be helpful and clear in describing what you did and how your work flows.

Another type of documentation that adds value is keeping an accurate, detailed timesheet. Instead of writing that you spent eight hours on a general project, specify how many hours you spent doing specific tasks.

For example, your timesheet could read:

- Two hours analyzing code on the WXY project
- Four hours implementing code modifications on the WXY project
- Two hours creating custom reports for the marketing department on the WXY Project

You can also use this timesheet documentation to support your actions if the client asks why you haven't completed a particular task, or how you determined your priorities. Reviewing how you spend your time also helps you optimize your time.

It is a good practice to have your client sign each timesheet at the end of the month to ensure that they understand where and how you are spending your time.

Being Reliable

Another way of adding value is reliability. In the contracting world, reliability means that the client can count on you to complete tasks, even if it requires extra time or overtime.

Go the distance. When you accept a task, finish it.

There are numerous stories about contractors who worked weekends or evenings to complete critical deliverables, and consultants who come in during vacations to fix problems. The delays or problems might not be a consequence of something the contractor did, but they stepped in to help anyway. This tells the client “I’m reliable and can complete the task.”

Inevitably, any professional career requires overtime. To get a reputation for being reliable, you’ll also need to be flexible.

How often does this happen? As often as necessary. On some projects, you’ll never be asked to stay late or come in on weekends. On other projects, you’ll find that the client is constantly requiring overtime and weekend time. If this is the case, you’ll need to decide whether you want to work for that client again or not. *Whatever you do, finish the contract and put in the time required.* Resolve the issues at the time of renewal or when you get another contract with the same client.

Knowing your Industry

As a contractor, it’s your responsibility to keep up with the changes happening in your area. This means taking courses, reading trade journals, networking with other industry professionals, and so on. As a result, you may be aware of ground-breaking change in your industry before the client. This gives you an opportunity to add value.

To succeed in business, to reach the top, an individual must know all it is possible to know about that business.
—J. Paul Getty

Sharing Knowledge

Another way to add value is by sharing your technical knowledge and creativity. This can mean that you mentor other people on the team, or that you share your knowledge by offering innovative and creative project alternatives. Clients really appreciate it when you pass on knowledge to their employees during the term of your contract.

Innovating Methods or Procedures

Good ideas are always highly valued by companies, but you have to present them in the right way. Before you go to your supervisor or project manager with an idea, make sure you've shown that you have the expertise to back up your idea. You also need to demonstrate that you understand current processes before you suggest improvement.

The Two Step Approach

You need to present ideas in the right way. Be open with the client—don't develop the idea in private and then present the finished alternative. If you present the idea and they don't want to implement it, be prepared to complete the original task—it's their money and their decision.

- Step 1. Demonstrate that you understand the methods they're using now. You need to demonstrate this through your work, and by being able to describe the current process accurately and concisely either verbally or in writing. This means using careful observation skills and effective communication techniques.
- Step 2. When you've demonstrated your understanding of the current process, say "I'd like to talk to you about my idea. Imagine if we did this, and did it this way. What do you think?"

Don't suggest the idea without demonstrating understanding first. If you do, the first thing they're going to ask is, "What about the idea we're currently running with?"

Seek first to understand. Then seek to be understood.
—Stephen Covey

Understanding the Context

There are four ways that decisions are made in a work environment:

You're directed what to do—in this instance, you have to present your supervisor with the current understanding and then with your idea, and say, "Tell me, which one do you want me to work on?" This allows your supervisor to direct your actions.

You're directed what to do and how to do it, but your input is valued—in this case, you'd ask your supervisor to meet and discuss the idea and its relative merits. Then after the discussion, you can ask your supervisor which way he or she thinks is best.

You're in a peer-to-peer relationship with people on your team or your supervisor—in this case you approach the idea as a team, saying "We need to decide which way we are going to do this. The old way, the new way, or some combination. What are your thoughts?" Then you arrive at a decision together, as peers.

You're in a relationship where you make, and are responsible for, the decisions—in this instance, you describe the old way and the new way. Then your supervisor tells you "Well, you're responsible. You pick the best way."

As a contractor, it's important for you to understand the context before you talk about your idea. Remember it isn't what you think the context is, it is what your supervisor thinks the context is. Again, use your observational skills. When you know the context in which decisions are made, you can present your idea accordingly.

Many contractors find the experience of presenting an idea difficult when they don't understand the context in which decisions are made. If you present your idea in a decision context that doesn't apply to the project, most often the idea won't be implemented and you could lose favour.

Mentoring

When you are good enough at something that you can transfer that skill to other people on the client site by mentoring, you add value. Often a client may extend your project just so you can transfer your skills to their employees. They may keep you around because you help other people to work well.

Sharing your knowledge, skill, and professionalism improves your reputation—you become known as a source for the answers when people have questions.

Remember though, when people want your advice, they will ask you. Don't press your opinions, only offer them. When you respond with some mentoring, back up your knowledge with direct sources, experience, and an example of how this has worked in the past.

The best way to mentor is to do your work to such a degree of excellence that you are sought out on the project for advice. Remember too that it is natural on a team to share ideas, so don't mistake yourself as a mentor if you are only asked for an opinion from time-to-time just like everyone else.

Exceeding the expected performance and consistently presenting you and your work as professional, you'll add value to your customers. Read *Finishing Up* on page 153 to learn how to finish a contract on a high note and leave the doors open to future work with your client.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q If I detect that the project dates may slip, when should I tell the client?

A Tell the client as soon as possible. Make sure you understand and can explain why the dates are slipping, and quickly work out a recovery plan.

Q Should I postpone my deliverable for testing?

A If necessary. Always make sure your deliverables are of high quality. If this means postponing the delivery so that testing can happen, make sure the client understands this and agrees to it.

Q Will co-workers resent me if I leave a lunch engagement to return to work early?

A Your reputation is not built on lunch engagements, it is built on the value you contribute to each project. If you have work to do that is pressing, leave the long lunch for another day.

Q How should I share innovations with a client?

A Make sure that you demonstrate an understanding of the current situation first and know the context in which decisions are made on your project. Then, offer the innovation to the client in the right context.

Things to Remember

- Meeting deadlines and commitments is the primary way you can add value.
- Having a professional approach to your assignment also adds value to the project.
- A positive attitude helps you win contracts and enhance your reputation.
- Share innovations and ideas with your client, but do it right. Don't be pushy.
- Mentoring is a great way to share your knowledge at a client site, but you need to be an expert in an area before you can be a mentor.

Notes

--

Adding Value