

Entering new markets

You may at some point want to broaden or change what you do, because markets are changing or your interests are changing. In order to shift professionally, you need to find a way to do new kinds of work. That requires being able to do the new work (so you are providing your clients with the best choice for them) and to convince a prospective client or clients ahead of time that you can. Here are some paths that you can successfully follow.

Build your skills outside client work

You can build a lot of capability in a new area without doing a full project. You can learn much of what has been documented somewhere and even some the knowledge known just by experienced practitioners. You won't become an expert this way, but you'll be off to a good start. You can:

- Read about the new area. Get a recent, well-received book on the subject. You'll learn the vocabulary and basic approaches.
- Get someone to help you. Engage in a dialogue with a practitioner. You may know someone in the field. Or one of your clients may know someone they work with already. Or you can contact the leading industry association or browse the Internet to find a leading expert, and simply offer to pay them to help you learn the ropes.
- Practice on your own. Find some case studies or some data, and see what you can make of it. Perhaps you can find a place to try the new approach as a volunteer; a non-profit organization (particularly a small one that you've been associated with before) might be happy to have your "best efforts" attempt to help them address an opportunity to improve that otherwise would receive no attention. Your help will be much better than none.

Hire/ rent the skills you need

If you are in something other than a solo practice, you can consider hiring the skills you need, or finding some contractors who can do the work with you. You can learn by working alongside them.

Go with a client who knows you

Clients often prefer the person they know, like and trust to someone who is more "expert" but who they just met and with whom they haven't worked. Some of your clients may not care that "you haven't done it before," because they have a need you've helped identify, and they prefer working with someone (you) who already understands their organization and culture.

Partner with someone the first time (with a client who knows you)

Offer to bring your client a firm or person you will partner with who has lots of experience and skills in doing the needed work. You have screened this outside resource for capability and track record, and for willingness to let you work with them on this particular project.

Tell your client that you will work with the partner, so your client can be assured that the new partner will be aware of the nuances of working with that client. Your partner gets a new client; your client gets terrific professional help (technically and in terms of the relationship); and you get the chance to "do the work" alongside your partner, which will give you credibility and capability in other settings in the future.

What to do this week

If broadening or shifting your practice is on your agenda for this year, think about which of these strategies could work for you. Which clients (if any) are prospects? How could you take the first steps to begin to learn more?

What are these tips?

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