

Building Trust as a Consultant

Michael Kelly

I've known Mike Kelly for about 5 years and I'd work with him on any project, any time. Why? I trust him for the very reasons he writes about in the following article, and I picked him to write a guest column because I suspected he would add value to this edition with anything he chose to say about building trust. Again, he did not disappoint. He has a knack for that, just as with everything he has contributed to the software testing community. —Jon Bach

As an independent consultant working in the Midwest, I've worked hard over the last few years to build a reputation as a trustworthy software testing specialist. Now, as a Software Development Manager for a Fortune 100 company, I have the challenge and opportunity of finding vendors and consultants that I trust for my projects. From both perspectives, building trust is not easy.

Delivering value

Delivery is the basic building block of trust for a consultant, whether it's showing up at the client site on time, delivering various completed project artifacts, or even something as simple as finishing a class on time. Consistent delivery of a high-quality product is where trust begins. As a consultant, you want all of your clients to associate your name with hassle-free high-quality work that's delivered on time. No one will give repeat business to someone they don't trust to deliver.

Helping build the bigger picture

If consistent delivery keeps the door open for continued work, helping the client see the bigger picture is what moves you from a trusted order-taker to a trusted partner. A partner helps find innovative solutions to problems. They help you understand the bigger problem, not just the symptoms. They help you deconstruct your most difficult problems. When your clients see you influence their strategies in positive ways, they will see you as a trusted partner they can count on to do the right thing.

Turning down work

Another hallmark of a consultant you can trust is one who turns down work or leaves money on the table. I turn down work for two reasons: availability and lack of experience in what I'm being asked to do. If I am taking a stretch assignment, I let the client know up front. If I finish something early, I deliver it early – even if I have approval to bill for more hours under the current contract. The consulting companies I've worked with who do the same are the companies I recommend to my clients when

I have no availability. Turning down business that's not right for you is an important way to build trust because the client can see that you will choose doing the right thing over closing more business.

Talking the right language

In a [recent blog post](#) I shared some experiences talking with vendors of consulting services. I didn't get the feeling they were speaking to *me*. I got the feeling they were speaking to someone else. Their message was tailored to my boss or my boss's boss, someone who didn't know the details of software testing, and someone who only had a passing knowledge of what it takes to actually deliver. Someone you trust will talk to *you*. They will talk about your problems, your goals, and in your language – not "marketing speak." Sometimes this means you have to learn the "local dialect," the way your client talks about their systems and project. Expending the effort to do so will increase trust because it demonstrates, once again, that they are more important than a quick buck.

Building up those around you

I think the final fundamental element of building trust with my clients is helping them build their own ability to deliver. For a client to trust I have their best interests at heart, I focus on making sure they understand that I'm not trying to carve out a niche for myself in their company. The best vendors I've worked with engage me upfront around the topic of how what they put in place will be sustained when *they leave*.

Being trustworthy is ultimately about being trustable. It's not enough to appear to be trustworthy – you actually have to be worth trusting. Clients will eventually see through pretenses of trustworthiness that aren't supported by a fundamental desire to leave your client better than you found them. If you want to have a reputation for trustworthiness, first start by cultivating your desire to do what is best for your client.

About the author

Mike Kelly is a Software Development Manager for a Fortune 100 company. Mike also writes and speaks about topics in software testing. He is currently the President for the [Association for Software Testing](#) and is a co-founder of the [Indianapolis Workshops on Software Testing](#), a series of ongoing meetings on topics in software testing, and a co-host of the [Workshop on Open Certification for Software Testers](#). You can find most of his articles and blog on his website www.MichaelDKelly.com.