

AICN Newsletter

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CONSULTANTS: WHAT ARE YOU DOING DURING THE PANDEMIC?

With this unprecedented economic halt in America and around the world, independent consultants find themselves in a strange place. With workplaces shut down, companies have stopped or delayed many consulting projects. With so much uncertainty, the search for new clients has stopped, as well.

Members of the Alliance of IEEE Consultants' Networks Coordinating Committee (AICNCC) want to share what they are doing during these unprecedented times with other consultants.

While everyone agrees everything is fluid at present, it does not mean consultants should pass the time idly. Jacob Beningo, AICNCC chair and CEO of Beningo Embedded Group, says he is "reaching out to current and past clients to ascertain the impact to their operations and offer them support, as many companies are now learning how to

operate efficiently with a remote workforce. Early on during the crisis, I had one client ready to agree to a significant contract--only to call back the next day to say they had reduced their budget--now they only had a third of the amount they had previously agreed to. Unfortunately, this theme is becoming common, as companies take a narrow and short-term view of the economy."

Other committee members are doing similar things. William Kassebaum, a long-time committee member and IEEE volunteer, said that clients have placed several possible developing projects on hold. Hermann Amaya, another long-time committee member added all his client have cancelled meetings or visits.

The AICNCC imagines that many consultants across the country are facing similar situations. Unlike many full-time, paid employees, when consultant contracts end, consultants no longer

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AICNCC WELCOMES NEW AFFINITY GROUP IN BANGALORE



The Alliance of IEEE Consultants Networks Coordinating Committee (AICNCC) congratulates Jibin Sabu, on forming the IEEE Bangalore Section Consultants Network Affinity Group. The new Bangalore Consultants Network became official on 19 March 2020. To give a personal welcome to any new network, check out the consultants page on IEEE-USA's website for contact information. IEEE-USA also offers step-by-step instructions about how to start a formal network. We encourage new consultants networks to register as Affinity Groups. After a group forms a network, it can take advantage of IEEE's branding and resources, and qualify for funding through IEEE Section rebates. If you don't see your consultants network's contact information listed on the IEEE-USA website, contact Daryll Griffin at d.r.griffin@ieee.org.

For questions, comments or submissions
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<https://ieeeusa.org/careers/consultants/>

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receive income. Some consultants who take contracts sign W-2 forms, making them eligible to apply for unemployment benefits. However, most consultants have to adjust to closing contracts, with no new ones to replace them.

So how are consultants keeping themselves busy?

One thing consultants could do is focus on improving their skill sets and business practices, during this shut down. Kassebaum says he is reviewing his internal infrastructure tools, and examining different software tools such as Harvest, Forecast, QBO, Astra Finance, Calendly and MailChimp. He will also be looking at ways to build credit, to help finance his survival during these times, and spur growth later in the year. Kassebaum is also researching topics of interest, and providing his input through social media, websites and blogs.

Amaya is now doing more research for contracts online, by checking government databases. To be specific, he is reviewing the terms of his past 16 federal contracts, to find out other possibilities—such as the NAICS Codes awarded, Department of Defense agencies that awarded contracts, and reviewing client power utilities requirements for possible contracts. “I’m also taking advantage of free webinars, and considering taking an online management course from MIT”, says Amaya, “In addition,

I’m also looking to diversify my business offerings by learning different software platforms.”

Beningo is reviewing active projects, deadlines, general business cash flow, and making adjustments for between now and the end of the year. Further, he is taking advantage of this time to clean his office, and reorganize his files and workspace, so he can be more efficient when things ramp back up. With a little extra time available, Beningo is also developing new offerings and products for clients that he will launch, as the crisis begins to turn a corner. Lastly, he is holding remote workshops; continuing to write his newsletter; and again, staying in touch with clients—looking for opportunities to engage with them. Beningo reminds everyone to prepare now, for the project onslaught that will undoubtedly come later this year.

Lastly, AICNCC members recommend that—like everyone else—consultants should look to spend more time with family, catch up on sleep, and spend time on some activities to motivate you. Reenergize yourself—like catching that big one that got away!

Want to engage more with the AICNCC? Committee members will be monitoring social media through the Consultants Exchange in IEEE Collabratec, and in the IEEE-USA LinkedIn Group. Join, ask questions, and engage with the committee! ■

PAST PRESENTATIONS CAN HELP NEW AND EXPERIENCED CONSULTANTS IN THE AFTERMATH OF COVID-19

With states, counties and cities beginning to reopen, many independent consultants will be looking to restart suspended projects; or looking to pick up new contracts to help businesses cope in this new, COVID-19 era. For years, IEEE-USA has offered webinar presentations, to assist consultants in every aspect of improving their practices. With things slowly picking back up, consultants still have time to review a few of these presentations, and put some of the recommendations to improve their practices in place.

Is Your Focus Your Magic? – This presentation discusses the key components for defining your focus; as well as the impact of focus on all aspects of your business.

Contracts and Contract Provisions – Other Important Aspects to Consider – This webinar examines the importance of a well-drafted, professional, services agreement. It also covers some of the critical risk management provisions we should address, in all professional services agreements.

Building the Consultant Practice of Tomorrow Using Today’s Online Tools – This presentation focuses on how

small consulting companies can utilize three cloud technologies to increase their marketing reach, decrease their costs of doing business, and increase profitability.

So You Want To Be a Consultant? – This webinar provides a brief overview of the IEEE-USA E-Book, **Consulting for Geeks**.

The IEEE Member Group Insurance Program – Your success depends on how you protect your business and yourself -- from errors and omissions that may result from the work you perform.

Functioning as a Professional Consultant – This webinar covers 10 qualities a professional consultant should possess.

Consulting 102 – As a follow up to Consulting 101, this webinar will address the most important challenges facing consultants -- **How to Find Clients**.

Consulting 101 – If you're considering making the transition from a full-time, corporate position to a full-time independent consultant -- this webinar is for you.

***Webinars listed above without direct links can be found on the [IEEE-USA Archived Webinar Page](#). ■*

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR CONSULTANTS AFFECTED BY COVID-19

The economy crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic has not only affected workers and large companies, but also small businesses and independent consultants. IEEE-USA offers information to the consultant community about federal and state provided resources for assistance. IEEE-USA Director of Government Relations, Russ Harrison, provided an in-depth analysis of these government resources, during his [webinar](#)

on 6 April. Harrison spoke about the CARES Act that Congress passed into law on 27 March 2020. He focused on three main portions of the bill. The Paycheck Protection Program, the Economy Injury and Disaster Loan (EIDL) program, and the Small Business Administration Loan Subsidy program. Consultants in need -- take a look at this webinar -- full of resources that may help you. ■

NOW OPEN: SEEKING NOMINATIONS FOR 2020 IEEE-USA AWARDS

IEEE-USA is now seeking nominations for its annual awards and recognitions, given in one of three categories: professionalism, technical achievement, and literary contributions to public awareness and understanding of the engineering profession in the United States. For more details, or to nominate a deserving colleague, visit: <https://ieeusa.org/volunteers/awards-recognition/>. ■

COVID-19: WHAT GOVERNMENT CONTRACTORS NEED TO KNOW

The law firm, Venable LLP, has produced a webinar and article to help educate government contractors regarding new policies surrounding the Covid-19 crisis. These resources may be helpful to those consultants that have government contracts. This [link](#) will take you to the article and webinar. ■



HANDLING SUDDEN DECLINES IN BUSINESS...

By Daryl Gerke

With the COVID pandemic, many businesses have seen drastic reductions in revenues-- including consulting firms.

So what do you do? Don't panic. Okay, maybe for a moment, but then put on your consulting thinking cap, and start figuring out some alternate plans. After all, that is what consultants do — solve problems — and usually difficult ones that clients cannot or will not handle themselves.

A good first step is to take stock of your finances. How long can you go at your present burn rate, with little or no income? What expenses can you trim or eliminate? Are there other sources you can tap — either savings, or alternate income?

The next step is to take a hard look at both current and past sources of consulting income. Are there potential areas you have not pursued that might provide income? Is it time to pivot?

I have long used a model dubbed ACT, for Aware – Critique – Try. Not sure where I learned it, but it was many years ago. It has served me well throughout my career.

Aware: Time for creative ideas. Brainstorm. Create mind maps — make lists — whatever it takes to get the juices flowing. Don't hold back. At this stage, nothing is too far out, or too impractical.

Critique: Next, sort through your ideas and pick a couple (not more than three) to develop further. Start with some preliminary plans. List some objectives. However, don't overcomplicate things — keep it simple. You can refine things later.

Try: This step is where most people fail, due to fear and/or procrastination. Nevertheless, if your business is sinking, now is not the time to crawl into a hole and hide — or spend valuable time on things that don't matter. *The house is on fire — grab a hose or bucket — now!*

Here is a real world example. The year is 1992. After five years in business, we (me and my business partner) finally felt like we arrived. Business flowed in with regularity — until it stopped — dead. While normally we each billed about 80 hours/month, as I recall, the two of us billed about 24 hours total for the entire fourth quarter. Ouch — ouch —ouch!

What happened, we wondered? Had the parade gone in a different direction? Where was everybody, anyway? Moreover, what are we going to do?

A little background. We had been riding two waves — EMI (Electromagnetic Interference) in personal computers, and in defense. We had two major clients that provided well over half our business. When the PCs and defense suddenly dried up, so did the business from our two big clients, along with others. Too few eggs in two few baskets.

We began to look at where any other business had come from. Nothing major, but medical devices stood out. At the time, we both lived in Minneapolis/St. Paul, a medical hub, one often dubbed “Medical Alley.” A bunch of our past business was literally right in our back yard.

We noted this market was underserved. Using simple electronics, people didn’t regard it as glamorous as PCs or defense. It is also highly regulated, which scared others away. Aha — a “[barrier to entry](#),” if we could crack it.

Based on these observations, we put together a simple, three-part plan:

—[Offered to write a simple column](#) for a leading medical device magazine. Having written for a number of magazines, we had the skills and credibility to deliver. The magazine jumped at our offer, and thus began a fortuitous, long-term relationship.

—[Joined an industry committee](#) on medical devices. We approached this step with care, as committees can suck a lot of time, and there were only two of us. However, that worked, too.

—[Enhanced personal contacts in the FDA](#). We had already worked with FDA engineers, so that was simple. In addition, we truly enjoyed working with them as fellow professionals.

Six months later, we were back in business and recognized as EMI experts in the medical industry. We knew we had succeeded when an FDA engineer responded to a question about who to contact, he said in jest, “Dial 1-800-KIMMEL GERKE.”

As an aside, not long after we got a real 800 number — 888-EMI-GURU. It has served us well. It also became our trademark and web address (www.emiguru.com.)

We didn’t stop there. We continued to burnish our reputation by [writing a book](#).

Our quick, “three-part plan” probably saved the business at a critical time.

The medical “pivot” became a model for expansion into other markets. We ultimately ended up with a portfolio of industries we served — computers, defense, medical, industrial controls, vehicles, facilities, and more. Some were even [niches](#) within niches, like nuclear power plants, or farm machinery.

As the old saying goes, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” Or consider another old saying, “*When the going gets tough, the tough gets going.*”

We continued for the next 23 years, until my business partner passed away in 2015.

However, even now, I stay involved in semi-retirement, at a level that suits me just fine. ■

WHAT I AM DOING TO MAINTAIN MY PRACTICE DURING THE COVID CRISIS

By Robert Peruzzi

Like with most consultants, when America shut down, so did my consulting practice. With no business, I had to take some action to maintain myself, until this crisis subsided. My first step was to apply online for a Payroll Protection Program (PPP) loan, at the bank I use for my S-Corporation business. I applied too late for the first batch of forgivable loans; in fact, the bank is too backlogged to even accept my application for the next round. I also completed a generic PPP application, and I have it ready to go. A friendly staff member at my bank says she will contact me, when they once again accept PPL applications. I chose not to apply for an Economic Injury Disaster Loan (IEDL).

Unemployment

Through the **CARES Act**, consultants or gig workers are eligible for unemployment compensation. In addition to my consultant practice, I’m also a sole proprietor for my music business. So, I also applied for unemployment compensation under the Covid-19 special program. At the writing of this article, I have not heard back for my state’s unemployment office, on if I will receive unemployment—or how much I will receive, and how many unemployment payments I will receive.

Otherwise, along with the rest of America, I am waiting for business activity to resume, so I can restart my consultant practice. ■