

The Framework Collective

Introduction

All consultants must make important decisions about how they will engage with the wider world, how they will build a client base to earn a living, and how they will develop professionally. Many consultants work as independent freelancers – working on their own or occasionally with others and remaining responsible for their own marketing, contracting, work practice and professional development. However, the freelancing life doesn't suit everyone. The risks and stresses associated with being an independent freelancer are considerable and lead to frequent self-questioning: "Where will my next piece of work come from?", "What if I get sick and can't complete a piece of work?", "Will I be able to cope with the insecurity associated with cashflow problems?", "How will I ensure I am keeping up to date with developments in my field?", "How can I maintain my professional standards?".

Many people simply find it too stressful to work as independent freelancers or know themselves well enough to realise that is not an option for them. Some join large consulting companies as employees - seeking greater levels of security and a remuneration package that includes paid holidays, health insurance and pension benefits. On the other hand, even if one can find a job with a consulting company that works with civil society, being a paid employee has its own associated pressures, for example the limited freedom to choose assignments and the need to always find a balance between the interests of client and the employer. Being an employee has its own associated pressures and that is assuming it's possible to find a job with a consulting company that works with civil society.

There are alternative paths available to those for whom neither independent freelancing or employment in a large consulting company are possible or desirable. For example, it may be possible to get a position in a large NGO as an internal consultant, or even to set up your own small consulting company or social enterprise. All of these options have their benefits and drawbacks.

Another alternative worth considering is to get together with other like-minded consultants as a collective. This is the path that we have chosen in Framework.

What is a collective?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary a collective is a 'cooperative enterprise'. The word collective has connotations of coming together to achieve a common purpose or pursue a common interest. The word 'collective' also suggests working together as equals for mutual benefit.

An important characteristic of a *collective* is that it is managed without a hierarchy and that all members participate in major management and governance decisions.

As an organisational form, a collective is a flexible entity. It does not operate

according to the legally binding rules and the formal constitution that govern formal bodies such as companies or registered NGOs. However, it is a tighter knit entity than, say, a community of practice, as the members of a collective agree upon values and standards to guide their work and will often introduce a degree of structure by accepting specific roles and responsibilities in the collective.

Some collectives are created with a specific purpose in mind and can be short-lived. When the purpose is achieved the collective ends. A good example of this is the Barefoot Guide Writer's Collective which exists for as long as it takes to write one of the Barefoot Guides¹. Other collectives, such as Framework, have much longer lives – in the case of Framework, more than three decades.

Framework's common purpose

Framework is a collective of independent consultants working almost exclusively with civil society organisations.

Framework was set up in 1985 and initially worked only with civil society organisations carrying out their operations in the UK but now works internationally. Over the past three decades, members have left and new members have joined but turnover is slow, which provides stability and deep relationships. Framework members tend to stay for at least five years and some have been in the collective for very much longer (current members joined between 1999 and 2014)

Over the past 32 years, Framework has varied in size from four to eight members, but seems to work best with about five or six members.

Framework's approach to consultancy is underpinned by our commitment to professionalism, client empowerment, social justice and equity. The (current) five members of Framework have developed a common vision that guides our work: 'Framework works for a strong and vibrant civil society which is driving change towards a cohesive, equitable and environmentally sustainable global community'. We try to ensure that all our work is aligned with this vision.

To do this we have developed a Theory of Change that explains how our vision shapes our 'Dimensions of Change' and our work priorities; how we work with our clients; and our underpinning values. Our values of creativity, integrity and connection are at the heart of our work with clients, with each other, and with the wider world.

How we work together as a collective in Framework

Each Framework member is responsible for earning their own income and managing their own finances. We are not employees of Framework, and we do not draw salaries or profits from the collective. If we don't work, we don't earn an income (and that includes holiday and time off for illness). Some Framework members have set up their own Limited Company but mainly we are registered for tax purposes as self-employed 'sole traders' (although we believe in 'consulting with soul', we don't see ourselves as 'soul traders' as one person jokingly suggested!)

¹ www.barefootguide.org

Although we each manage our finances independently, we do have a shared bank account that we use to pay for collective expenditure including web hosting, email hosting, subscriptions for online services such as Basecamp and SurveyMonkey, and for booking venues for our retreats and development days. Each member currently pays GBP 30 per month into the shared account and each time a new person joins Framework they pay a one-off joining fee (currently GBP 750).

So how does this configuration as a collective work in practice?

Identity | The Framework name provides a brand identity built on a collective and individual reputation for quality work. Hence most of our work comes through 'word of mouth' from satisfied clients. Our logo supports our identity and we use it to brand our resources and our business cards.

Non-hierarchical | We don't have an organisational hierarchy - however, we each take a specialist responsibility on behalf of the collective. At present those specialist responsibilities are:

- Clients (incorporating strategic relationships, joint work and joint tenders)
- Membership (including finding new members)
- Framework business (finance, communications and marketing)
- Information Technology
- Knowledge management & resources

Decision-making is by consensus, which can be time-consuming but usually leads to a thorough discussion of issues and a decision we are all committed to implement.

Marketing | The Framework website www.framework.org.uk is used to explain who we are, our Theory of Change, how we work, who we have worked with, and how to contact us. We use a blog to share news about what we are doing and provide access to some of our resources. We use video to illustrate how we work and we have a regularly updated video timeline to show our clients and the nature of our work. We also distribute promotional materials to clients and other people with whom we work.

We collaborate on large work contracts (projects)

One of the major benefits of being part of a collective is that members can consider submitting a joint tender for a larger piece of work that it would not be practical or, perhaps, desirable to work on alone.

When one of us becomes aware of a potentially suitable piece of work we contact our colleagues to see who is interested in forming a team and contributing to the preparation of the tender document. A team can vary in size from two to four people depending on the skill set requirements and the scale of the work.

When we put in a joint tender, one person takes on the role of lead consultant and that person usually remains in the lead role throughout the length of the contract.

When we are successful and our tender is accepted one of the first things we do is to set up a project using Basecamp, a Dropbox folder for sharing documents, and a WhatsApp group for informal communication.

We provide mutual support and maintain professional standards

Because we live in different parts of the UK, we have developed a number of support mechanisms that overcome the problem of geographical separation.

We use a system of Peer Supervision (that we call Professional Development - PD for short). Each of us is supervised by a colleague using a once-a-month call that normally lasts between an hour and 90 minutes. We change the PD arrangements approximately every 18 months and when members join or leave.

We go through an Annual Review process that involves 360 degree feedback from our peer supervisor, our peer supervisee, our clients and the colleagues we have worked with on joint projects.

We organise two three-day retreats each year, usually held in a peaceful rural location. These provide an opportunity for members of the collective to:

- explore professional issues
- present case studies
- share resources
- experiment with new ideas
- develop our knowledge and skills
- socialise and relax.

Every retreat includes time for walking and we often combine the walk with shared reflection or fun activities. Two of us take responsibility on a rota basis for organising each retreat on a rota basis.

We have two development days each year and occasionally invite non-members to attend. For example, in Spring 2017 we held a development day exploring the issue of resilience and we were joined by six people who we know well or had expressed interest in joining Framework. As with retreats, two of us take turns organising each development day on a rota basis.

We have monthly group 'check-in' calls on Skype lasting about an hour. One person convenes the call on a rota basis. We prepare for these check-in calls by each writing an update on Basecamp describing what has happened during the previous month (both work and our non-working lives).

We also have lots of informal contact with each other using Skype, WhatsApp, email and phone.

How we use technology to collaborate

We have increasingly used information technology to strengthen our ability to collaborate and provide a better service to our clients. We use:

- Basecamp for managing projects – this has really revolutionised our joint-working
- Dropbox for sharing resources and creating shared project folders
- SurveyMonkey for creating online surveys relating to work with clients
- Skype for group calls
- Google Docs for co-writing documents
- WhatsApp for informal contact and for real-time communication on projects (we often WhatsApp each other whilst working on the same document in real time)

- Adobe Connect for convening clients in virtual workshops

Joining Framework

We have a lengthy and detailed joining process that includes a 'probationary' period. The whole joining process can take up to six months and involves a significant investment of time – particularly for the Framework member who takes on the additional responsibility for supervising a prospective member. Until the prospective member is confirmed following a successful probationary period they do not have full status as a Framework member (for example, they are not added to the list of members on the website and are not given a Framework email address). When new members are confirmed after the probationary period they pay the one-off joining fee.

Why we love being Framework members

When I finished writing this case study and showed it to my colleagues they told me that it describes Framework well but didn't communicate what it *feels* like to be a member of Framework. So I asked my colleagues to share their thoughts about why they love being in Framework. Here's what three of them said:

What framework has given to me:

- Opportunity to be more thoughtful about my professional practice and values
- Company, stimulation and affirmation
- Substantial new work which I wouldn't have won by myself
- Somewhere for my various bits and pieces to 'land' e.g. interesting articles, resource etc – it has a sense of being a 'sandpit' where I can trial things, experiment, play with ideas
- Motivation (I'm slightly better at doing things when I have made myself accountable to others for doing them)
- Broadened my horizons, professionally & intellectually
- PD/Annual review/strategic planning - timely, stimulating, thought provoking
- Stretches me - e.g. technology, content on collaborative projects, PD (both as supervisor and supervisee)
- Personal support during the normal vicissitudes of life

Why I love being a Framework member:

- I have a sense of belonging and purpose in all that I do, based in Framework's agreed vision and shared values.
- Our solidarity and mutual respect (as members) helps me to have confidence in what I do when working alone.
- I know that there is always someone I can turn to for friendly (and expert) advice or simply to listen and help me work through a problem.
- Framework's commitment to learning – both internally and in our assignments – motivates me to continue to pursue my own professional development.
- Provides a degree of structure in my working life which helps me to use all of my time more productively.

- Framework is simply a happy and uplifting 'place' to work in because it fosters friendship, companionship, and even fun, within our work relationships.
- I love being part of Framework for the companionship, growth and opportunities. In Framework I feel accepted and valued as a whole person – not just for professional contributions. I care about the other members, as they care for me: we share our personal as well as professional joys and struggles. I've learnt from honest reflections that others have shared about their own work experiences, from observing how they handle things I would have done differently (and not so effectively), and from our experiments together with new materials and approaches. And we have fun and enjoy each other's company!

To find out more about Framework please visit www.framework.org.uk and have a look at our video <https://vimeo.com/152604289> We'd love to hear from you!

framework

History

Framework began in 1985 and initially worked only with civil society organisations carrying out their operations in the UK.

The collective has varied in size from 4-8 members but seems to work best with about 5-6 members.

None of the founder members is still involved. There is a very slow turnover of membership. Current members joined between 1999 and 2014.

Purpose

We have a Theory of Change that describes our Vision, the 'Dimensions of Change' we work on, What We Do and our underpinning Values.

The vision that drives our work is 'A strong and vibrant civil society which is driving change towards a cohesive, equitable and environmentally sustainable global community'.

Our values of creativity, integrity and connection are at the heart of our work with clients, with each other, and with the wider world.

We work almost exclusively with Civil Society.

Framework's status as a collective

Framework does not have a formal status - for example, we are NOT registered as a company, NGO or social enterprise.

Each Framework member is responsible for their own finances for example by having their own Limited Company or being registered for tax purposes as a self-employed 'sole trader'.

How we work together as a collective

We don't have a hierarchy

Clients (incorporating strategic relationships, joint work and bids)

However, we each take a specialist responsibility on behalf of the Collective

Framework business (finance, comms and marketing)

Information Technology

Knowledge management & resources

Membership

We have a shared bank account that we use to pay for web hosting, subscriptions for Basecamp, SurveyMonkey, etc. and for booking venues for retreats and development days. Each member currently pays GBP 30 per month into the account.

How we use technology to collaborate

Adobe Connect for convening clients in virtual workshops

Skype for group calls

Basecamp for managing projects

Dropbox for shared resources and project folders

Google Docs for co-writing documents

WhatsApp for informal contact and for real-time communication on projects

SurveyMonkey for online surveys relating to work with clients

Marketing

The Framework website www.framework.org.uk is used to explain who we are, our Theory of Change, how we work, who we have worked with, and how to contact us. We also use it to share news about what we are doing and to some of our resources.

Framework's Code of Practice guides our work with clients

Most of our work comes through 'word of mouth'

Our logo supports our identity and we use it to brand our resources and on our business cards.

We have lots of informal contact with each other by skype and phone!

We provide mutual support and maintain professional standards

We live in different parts of the UK

We set up a project in Basecamp and a Dropbox whenever we start a new work project with a client

We collaborate on large work contracts (projects)

One of us takes on the role of lead consultant

We create a team that varies in size from 2-4 depending on the skill set requirements and the scale of the work.

We get new work with clients through joint bids and sharing 'word of mouth' contracts.

We hold two three-day retreats a year usually in a peaceful rural location.

We have two development days a year.

We go through an Annual Review process that involves our peer supervisor, our peer supervisee, our clients and the colleagues we have worked with on joint projects.

We use a system of Peer Supervision (Professional Development - PD) - each of us is supervised by a colleague using a once-a-month call. We change the PD arrangements approximately every 18 months and when members join or leave.