

Interview with Michael Clarke, Consultant

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Name: Michael Clarke

Title: President

Company: Clarke & Company

Number of years in current position: 5

TD: You're well known in the publishing sector. How did you end up in your role as a consultant?

MC: Like just about everyone else in the industry, I wound up in STM and scholarly publishing by accident. I was in graduate school at the University of Chicago and knew I was interested in publishing. I was thinking about moving to New York, but before I did I fortunately stumbled into a position at the University of Chicago Press (UCP), which in those days was far ahead in terms of electronic publishing tools and technologies. UCP gave me an invaluable grounding in digital publishing that I still draw from today, though of course the technology has moved on. The leap into consulting was more recent, though it was a transition that I had been contemplating for some time. Since founding the firm nearly 5 years ago with my colleague Pam Harley, I have not looked back. It has been a rewarding experience.

TD: What's a typical day like for you?

MC: I walk to the office most days unless I am traveling to meet with clients or to an industry event. I usually start the day with correspondence. Most days I have several phone calls. I often read about the death of the phone call but at our firm it is alive and well as I spend several hours a day on the phone. These are typically client calls, research interviews, internal calls with remote colleagues, or calls related to industry service (I am often on committees or boards for CSE and other associations).

Often I have lunch or coffee with clients who are local (I live in DC) or in town for meetings or events. Most days I spend part of the day working on either a proposal for new work or a deliverable for an existing client. And just about every day I read—a lot. Most of my reading is research related to specific client engagements, but I also read to keep current with developments in the information industry writ large.



Michael Clarke

TD: What are the most interesting parts of your job?

MC: Meeting so many interesting people. This industry has a surfeit of smart and talented people doing such interesting things. From our clients, my colleagues, and the many researchers and librarians we speak with regularly, I am surrounded by interesting people and fierce intellects. We have a saying at the firm whenever we walk into a client meeting, board discussion, or other similar situation: Assume you are the dumbest person in the room, because you are probably are.

TD: What are the most challenging aspects?

MC: There is a lot of juggling. We typically have somewhere in the vicinity of 20–25 active engagements at any time. That is a lot to keep track of. In addition to all of the client assignments, my colleagues and I are quite active in the industry. For example, I serve on the board of Silverchair Information Systems and am active in a half-dozen industry associations. I also write for the Scholarly Kitchen, produce the Scholarly Kitchen Podcast, and speak three or four times a year at industry events. Beyond that there is managing

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the firm itself—keeping track of finances, marketing, invoicing, and other administrative tasks. We have also begun developing our own events—the first of these was an executive seminar for societies on working with commercial partners, held earlier this summer. I rely heavily on software and my colleagues to make sure nothing slips through the cracks.

TD: What was the biggest surprise to you about being a consultant in this industry?

MC: How different each organization is. Even organizations that appear outwardly similar can have unique circumstances, cultures, and politics. Every assignment with a new client starts with learning about the organization.

TD: What particular skills are critical to be successful in your role?

MC: There are two. The first is being able to communicate well. This is fundamental to my job. This includes proposals, reports, emails, oral presentations, and many other kinds of communication. I often think of Edward Tufte's analysis of the failure of communication in NASA presentations leading to the *Challenger* shuttle disaster. While the stakes for most of our presentations are much lower, being able to write clearly and concisely is nonetheless mission critical.

The second vital skill is the ability to continue learning. This is a meta-skill, in that it enables learning new skills continually. People can sometimes get complacent and neglect what our clients involved in education call "lifelong learning." As a consultant, such neglect is not an option as each assignment brings new challenges. I learn something new with every engagement—this is an aspect of my work that I particularly treasure.

TD: What are the biggest changes you've seen in the publishing industry since you started?

MC: The initial transition to digital in the STM & scholarly sector of the publishing industry was remarkably smooth relative to many other industries (e.g., news, music, magazines, trade books). Scholarly publishers were far ahead of just about any other industry in converting content to structured information (via SGML and later XML), developing digital workflows, adopting new technologies and tools, and so forth. Publishers were also (critically) able to transition from print subscriptions to site licenses without losing a beat. This was largely because the Internet, and the explosion in electronic media unleashed by Tim Berners Lee and the World

Wide Web, originated with the research community. Research universities and government laboratories were early adopters of the Internet, and the Web was designed explicitly for scientific communication. The challenge publishers are now facing is that technological developments are being driven by consumer-facing technology companies whose platforms were not designed for scholarly information or for scientific and scholarly use cases.

TD: Do you have any predictions for the future?

MC: We have reached peak subscription (Jan Velterop coined the term during an SSP panel I moderated a few years ago). I subsequently wrote a piece in the *Scholarly Kitchen* on this topic. What I mean by this is that library budgets are stagnant and there are no new markets left—publishers have already sold into all the major research institutes in China, India, South American, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. The Big Deal is a mature product. This means that publishers must come up with new sources of revenue. Open access (OA) is part of this equation, but the OA market has not grown as fast as many predicted. This would ordinarily lead to a spate of acquisitions, but there are not many independent publishers left other than societies, and they are not selling their publications (though they are increasingly licensing them).

This environment is likely to put a focus on new product development and acquisitions outside the traditional markets for publishers. And indeed we are already seeing this happen with Wiley's acquisition of Atypon, Elsevier's acquisition of SSRN and bepress, and Taylor and Francis' acquisition of colwiz. While not publishers, Sheridan's acquisition of PubFactory and Clarivate's acquisition of Publons are likewise acquisitions in the same vein.

TD: When you were a kid, could you have imagined yourself doing this job?

MC: My father was a consultant and taught computer science as a college professor, so working as a consultant in the scientific and scholarly sector is the apple falling not far from the tree.

TD: If you had to give one piece of advice to someone who's interested in working as a consultant or in the scholarly publishing industry, what would it be?

MC: Don't be afraid to move around and try different roles at different organizations. You learn a lot that way and you may not know what role you are most suited to until you try a few on for size. A second

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piece of advice is to find a mentor (whether formal or informal)—someone to bounce career ideas off of and who knows you, and your circumstances, well enough to be able to offer more specific advice. Mentors can also be very helpful about opening new doors for you as your career advances.

TD: Can you share a favorite story about one of your clients or your job?

MC: One of our recurring assignments is helping the National Academy of Sciences organize a biannual meeting on the scientific journal. Through this engagement, we have had conversations with numerous NAS fellows, a Nobel laureate, the inventor of the graphical user interface, one of the architects of the Internet, and a great many other researchers and technologists doing truly extraordinary work.