The Secret Code

A study of successful consultants in 7N

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What makes you stand out?

For decades, 7N has supplied consultants to large businesses who habitually use external consultants and have experienced both good and bad ones.

So, what is it that makes the really successful consultant stand out? Why does the client praise one consultant's performance, while another might just be adequate – even if they on paper seem to have the same qualifications?

Knowing the answer to that question is vital when you have an ambition to be the leading supplier of consultants to companies in which IT is an integrated part of their business.

What turns the best into the best?

It is practically self-evident that the secret lies in the consultant's personal and social skills. But what exactly makes the best stand out? What do they do? What is their unique power?

It makes sense to define these skills as precisely as possible. Both to our clients and to our current and future consultants.

A daily inspiration

This is why, as far back as 2006, we gave an industrial psychologist the task of outlining 'The Secret Code' – The competences of the perfect consultant. Ever since, the results have inspired and challenged us to become even better when we:

- Recruit consultants
- Develop our consultants' skills
- Allocate the perfect match to a specific assignment

The Secret Code is no more secret than we happily share it with clients, consultants and others, who might be interested. We are convinced that it will benefit everyone to know what it takes to match clients with critical IT needs with exceptionally skilled IT consultants.

Enjoy!

Jeppe Hedaa
CEO
7N

The competences explained

The six competences identified by the analysis are present in all the consultants chosen for the survey. The consultants, of course, also have an extremely high level of IT qualifications – that is an absolute prerequisite for qualifying as a 7N Consultant. But the survey shows that what really makes a difference is the way the consultant uses his IT skills.

Each of the six competences comes with five important characteristics and with a short explanation. Furthermore, they are illustrated with quotes from the interviews.

You will also find a number of brief examples of the way the consultants use the skills in practice. The examples are divided into three levels that tell you whether the consultant uses the skill 'successfully', 'averagely' or 'with difficulty'.

All 7N Consultants in the survey use most skills successfully, but some have one or two average marks. The other examples of 'averagely' or 'with difficulty' are based on the interviewees' experiences with other IT consultants, who have not met the expectations.

All statements and situations are anonymous, and for that reason all interviewees are referred to as 'he'.

The six competences

1 **Insight into own strengths and weaknesses**
The consultant makes positive use of his abilities
and knows his own limitations

2 **High performance under pressure**
The consultant keeps his cool and maintains a high
performance level when the pressure is on

3 **Holistic project understanding**
The consultant understands all the important aspects
of a given project – also the non-technical ones

4 **Diplomatic authority**
The consultant uses his professional overview
in a considerate manner

5 **Social capacity**
The consultant is sociable, accommodating
and helpful

6 **Empathy**
The consultant reads other people – and uses this
in a positive way

1

Insights into own strengths and weaknesses

The consultant makes positive use of his abilities – and knows his own limitations

Knowing what you do not know is a kind of omniscience.

The words of the Danish inventor and poet Piet Hein could well serve as the motto for those competent consultants who recognize the limitations of their abilities. This quality may appear commonplace, but it is anything but in the consultant business. It is not enough to only possess self-knowledge; as a (highly paid) consultant, you must also have the courage to acknowledge your limitations.

A consultant who possesses this competency will acknowledge the necessity of keeping oneself professionally up to date and always seek to be in command of a wide range of different technologies to increase his strengths. He will strive for excellence within his field, but never hesitate to ask others for help to achieve the best solution to a given project.

It is all about balance; you should demonstrate your professional knowledge and expertise without being self-assertive and intrusive. This means that you must not see yourself as the project savior, but rather as the project servant. It is important to be open about your strengths and weaknesses and to be realistic about what you can manage on your own and when you need to reach out to others. The essence of this is aptly expressed in another line of Piet Hein's wisdom: "Great is he who knows, but greater yet, is he who knows, where to ask."

A consultant who demonstrates this competence...

...successfully:

- Is honest about his own skills and admits shortcomings without hesitation.

- Seeks help actively and quickly, if he is in doubt as to the solution of a problem.

- Defies the scepticism of others and delivers a challenging service or change as promised.

- Provides a clear response if a problem cannot be dealt with as agreed or expected.

- Continuously adapts to changes. Maintains and upgrades his own professional skills to match major technological developments.

- Spends a lot of time networking. Considers both personal and virtual networks to be crucial when having to solve difficult problems.

...averagely:

- May misjudge his own skills in situations where many people are involved in a project, or if the project includes complex development tasks.

- Will sometimes realize too late that a problem should have been tackled differently.

- Gives high priority to professional development but may become involved in too many projects at once and neglect his own professional development.

- Is most often open about his own strengths and weaknesses in a project, but may hold back a little if, for example, he faces competition from others, or if he has previously been corrected within the same area or in the same group.

...with difficulty:

- Alienates himself from others through loud and unrealistic communication about his own strengths.

- Is too humble, uncertain and timid about his own skills.

- Holds on to assignments long after he should have handed them over to others or refuses to accept appropriate assistance.

- Typically spends little time on professional networks and supplementary training.

Colleague

He always takes the shortest route to the solution of a problem – and that is often to ask others instead of wasting time trying to find the solution to a problem that lies outside his area of expertise. He is ruthlessly honest about what he knows and what he needs help to solve.

Consultant

I analysed the problem – broke it down into its component parts – and discovered that I could not come up with a satisfactory solution myself. I went straight to the Internet and sought assistance from people I knew had detailed knowledge within the area. This gave the project just the push it needed. If you don't know what to do, you have to be able to admit it – and then seek help immediately.

Client

He set a very personal agenda in this project, but constantly drew on collective experiences. He had an ongoing dialogue with his network and involved relevant people from this network in the project. The intention behind this was not to sell other 7N Consultants, but always to get the most specialized professional opinion on a given issue.

Manager

Within the project, he took special care to make clear what was within and what was outside his area of expertise. He is ruthlessly honest and makes sure that expectations for him and other participants in the project are in tune.

2 High performance under pressure

The consultant keeps his cool and maintains a high-performance level when the pressure is on

An uptime of almost 100 percent – even during peak periods – such are the demands usually made on critical IT systems. In such high-pressure situations, clients are very reliant on the consultants to meet the demands that have been laid out – and the most skilled consultants manage to do so while demonstrating an extremely high work ethic.

A reliable consultant acts calmly. Demonstrates great patience and provides optimal support, also in stressful situations. He manages to maintain control of the situation when others begin to unravel and lose focus. Also, he does not miss important details, even when things move fast. He can execute his tasks confidently even when others become frustrated without getting sidetracked by any opposition and will remain focused on reaching the defined target.

Most complex development projects go through critical phases and periods of extreme time pressure. Very often, it is the handling of such phases that determines the success or failure of the project in question. It is here that the consultant's capacity to keep his cool makes all the difference.

A consultant who demonstrates this competence...

...successfully:

- Exudes energy and displays he has the capacity to solve problems.

- Maintains a structured approach that others can draw on for support, and which can easily be communicated.

- Ensures that everyone involved learns something – even during periods when it would have been quicker to deal with the problems himself.

- Sticks to agreements concerning both meetings and deliveries.

- Does not immerse himself in his work at the expense of his family – but often has leisure interests that reflect the professional and intellectual challenges of his job.

...averagely:

- Will generally exude energy, but may find it difficult to remain calm if, for example, deadlines are brought forward, or the fundamental framework of the project is suddenly changed.

- Rarely has difficulties 'switching off' from work. However, may sometimes feel weighed down by his workload and find it difficult to relax.

- Takes the lead in most situations but may be unwilling to take on trivial or purely operational tasks.

- May have a tendency to isolate himself when under pressure and work alone on solutions that normally involve others. Prioritizes collaboration and collegial exchange lower during peak periods.

...with difficulty:

- Takes on too much and then finds it hard to admit that the workload is too much for him.

- Does not recognize the overload himself – might arrive at work unprepared, having forgotten an important issue.

- May appear too aggressive or manipulative – for instance, when dealing with suppliers – or too persistent and insistent under pressure.

- His performance clearly declines when project pressure increases, or if frameworks and role distribution are unclear.

- Misses deadlines and loses track of important details. Forgets to keep others informed about changes in agreements or targets.

Colleague

I would dread having him as my opponent on any project. He is simply too clever and too persistent. He does not let himself get sidetracked when difficulties arise or when someone tries to push him around. His determination to reach the set target has seen this project through to a successful conclusion.

Consultant

The client was a little sceptical. Could I actually handle this job? Personally, I had no doubts and was a little surprised that others found it so difficult. But I knew my own capacities and my commitment in making things work. Then I simply had to remain calm and prove that it was not a problem.

Client

Everyone was under pressure in this project, and everyone demanded his attention. Gradually, he was the only one that exuded a little bit of energy. He was also the only one anyone dared ask to handle yet another urgent matter. He actually took on a lot of problems and solved them without looking worn out or frustrated. He would often arrive the next day with a solution to a problem that he'd managed to solve.

Manager

There are always a number of irritating tasks that just have to be dealt with. He got straight down to work, solving all the issues that others had conveniently neglected – even though he was actually overqualified for such trivial tasks. Such an attitude has a positive effect on all other people in the project.

3 Holistic project understanding

The consultant understands all the important aspects of a given project – also the non-technical ones

A distinguishing feature of a really successful consultant is his ability to understand all dimensions of a complex development project, from the purely professional challenges, through the commercial advantages, to human relations within the client's organization.

When such a consultant initiates a project at a client, he decodes with great expediency and precision all relevant decision-makers and key figures inside and outside the organization and forms a general view of internal and external cooperative relations. A consultant possessing this competency recognizes technical and collaborative problems before they become evident to others. He is incisive when identifying the most imminent issues related to the project's success criteria and thoroughly assesses the possible causes. Moreover, he systematically acquires all relevant facts about the project and connects them to more political and irrational circumstances to attain a more comprehensive understanding of the situation.

This ability to understand all aspects of a project often comes as a pleasant surprise to both clients and colleagues. They typically expect external consultants to map out the course exclusively or primarily from an IT perspective. Holistic project understanding, coupled with a broad awareness of the organization in question, often makes consultants with this kind of competency the very pivot of the projects they participate in.

A consultant who demonstrates this competence...

...successfully:

- Quickly identifies the resource people in a project group and establishes what they can contribute to the project.

- Registers and respects the various perspectives and challenges to be found among the people in and around the project within the client's organization.

- Identifies the critical problems – and possible solutions to these – at an early stage in the project.

- Follows up on lacking documentation and pursues it until it is in place. Quickly builds up an overview based on facts and relies on it when handling various tasks and projects.

- Develops a sense of the project very quickly and has the ability to simultaneously draw useful parallels to other spheres and experiences that may benefit the project.

...averagely:

- Quickly forms an overview of the relevant professional resource people. Typically needs a little longer to build up an understanding of the organizational and political problem areas.

- Spends time and energy on understanding the historical background of an issue – but may find it difficult to change his perspective and view the issue from a different and more progressive angle.

- Systematically uncovers facts in a project but may find it difficult to simultaneously keep track of the project's more general and strategic perspectives.

...with difficulty:

- Finds it hard to understand the commercial and organizational aspects and opportunities in a given project.

- Forms an alliance with a specific professional group within a project or remains unswervingly committed to one specific historical explanation of a problem.

- Relies too heavily on his own immediate judgement and neglects to include obvious sources or facts in his evaluation of an issue.

- Finds it hard to get a realistic overview of projects and often misjudges the competences and energy of the people involved.

- Cannot stand to have his understanding of a problem challenged and is quick to take up a defensive position.

Colleague

In the beginning, he didn't make his presence felt as much as we had perhaps expected, but it didn't take him long to establish how the problem was to be solved. From that point on, he went directly to the right people for the answers or assistance that he needed.

Consultant

I always register quite quickly who others turn to. There is always someone in an organization who has the right knowledge – and this is a resource that must not go to waste.

Client

He has an impressive ability to understand our business and, at the same time, think in comprehensive terms. His input is proactive and independent – and always presented without prompting.

Manager

He was very conscious of the fact that it is not enough to befriend the local IT people; everyone in the organization has to be influenced. Each group faces specific challenges and problems, and the world actually looks very different from each desk.

4

Diplomatic Authority

The consultant uses his professional overview in a considerate manner

Professional skills of superior quality can be a dangerous weapon in the wrong hands. A brilliant consultant can kill the motivation of a team if he ruthlessly hammers through his own – correct – solutions.

On the other hand, a consultant cannot make it through solely with diplomacy and a "what do you think" approach. As a consultant, you are expected to utilize your professional strength and overview to influence the participants of a given project and to step into character, without using manipulation or exposing anyone's professional weaknesses. Successful consultants master this balance between diplomacy and authority – they show consideration for all parties involved in a project while assuming authority if a conflict between project participants could potentially damage the project's targets or result.

A consultant capable of performing diplomatic authority uses his professional and personal authority to influence the project, to direct attention to a given aspect, or, when necessary, to inspire a demotivated project participant.

A consultant who demonstrates this competence...

...successfully:

- Listens and builds a thorough understanding of the various issues before defining direction and delegating responsibility.

- At the first sign of discord, he personally seeks out all the relevant people, thus preventing minor misunderstandings developing into serious problems.

- Personally challenges individuals to take on a demanding responsibility – without undermining their motivation and energy.

- Continuously negotiates and clarifies agreements within the project organization to ensure that everyone knows their roles and responsibilities.

- Informs key individuals about changes but can bypass formal lines of reference and project structures if necessary.

...averagely:

- Listens to everyone involved in an issue. Does, however, have a tendency to place too much emphasis on his own views.

- Throws himself into the solution of urgent problems, but sometimes forgets to inform and involve other parties responsible.

- Demonstrates a clear professional overview but may be too reluctant to make his position clear if a conflict starts to develop.

- Fundamentally respects different approaches to an issue but may become clearly impatient or frustrated if these delay the solution to a problem.

...with difficulty:

- Has problems putting forward relevant input.

- Ignores parts of an issue or neglects to involve some of the relevant participants in a project.

- Loses his overview if the project diverts from the professional agenda.

- Attaches himself too closely to superior decision makers and other key figures.

- Acts insensitively and stubbornly when things come to a head.

- May breach confidentiality agreements or act disloyally towards others who rightly expect his support.

- Is too quick to make decisions and neglects to keep everyone involved motivated for new goals and distributions of roles.

Colleague

To begin with, he listened and asked a lot of questions and made a great effort to understand what people experienced as particularly difficult. When the listening phase was over, he assumed centre stage and began to define directions and delegate responsibility. The participants responded positively to this, because he had spent so much time familiarizing himself with their situation.
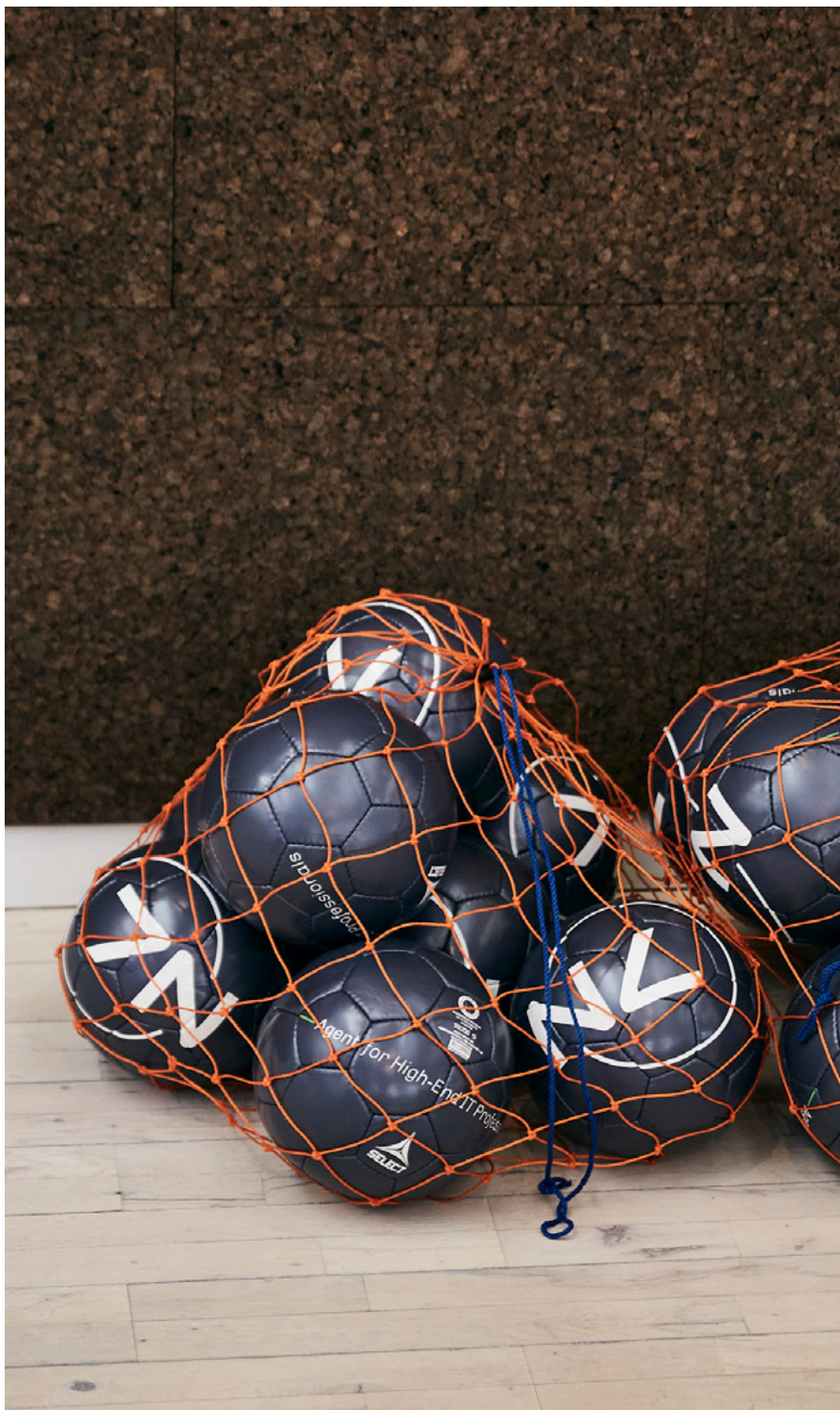
Consultant

It was difficult to get people to work overtime on weekends. Finally, I went around to each and every employee and – with a glint in my eye – asked them if they wanted to work Saturday, Sunday or both days... meaning: They couldn't have the whole weekend off.

Client

To put it shortly, he leaves a visible footprint on our organisation – without walking all over us.

Manager

He does not allow himself to be influenced by a bad atmosphere, but constantly focuses on the central issue – for example by focusing on what was available in the way of control options. Ultimately, he succeeded in saving the manager responsible and finding a way to neutralize the incorrect decisions that had been made.

5

Social Capacity

The consultant is sociable, accommodating and helpful

Not everyone has the natural ability to fit in comfortably among a lot of new people in an unfamiliar organization. It is, however, an important competency for those seeking to create a smooth working relationship on a difficult project. It demands more than simple politeness and professional interest in other people – it requires a helpful and calm manner along with having a certain sense of how to handle situations in both professional and social contexts.

Consultants who genuinely excel in this competency are the ones who due to their positive and easy-going manner are instantly liked by everyone. They find it easy to talk to most people, without stepping over the line. Their social capacities reflect an immediate interest in the people around them, and often, they initiate social activities among the team. Naturally, they manage to make sure that everyone is involved and that no one feels left out.

It is relatively rare to find IT specialists who really master this competency, as many are naturally introvert. Therefore, it is even more desirable to have this competency represented within a project team.

A consultant who demonstrates this competence...

...successfully:

- Quickly gets close to other professionals in new contexts. Presents an open and accommodating attitude by, for instance, asking people about their jobs.

- Smiles, listens and encourages people to open up.

- Looks after new members of a group and/or people who have difficulties.

- Is quick to mention something about himself and hereby create new and productive working relationships.

...averagely:

- Functions particularly well with individuals and in small teams – and primarily in professional contexts. Finds it more socially difficult to be in very large groups or in non-IT contexts.

- Generally strives to ensure that everyone participates in the everyday dialogue, but may overlook the quieter members of the team, or forget those who are not actually present.

- Thrives in social situations and normally takes the initiative to make contact. Can sometimes withdraw and leave others to take the social initiative.

...with difficulty:

- Becomes nervous or unsure of himself when the focus moves away from the professional context.

- Needs to have a clearly defined role in his interaction with others.

- Finds it hard to tolerate the social needs of others – e.g. small talk or short breaks.

- Excludes certain people from his social sphere of attention or makes too obvious an effort only to be sociable with the most

6

Empathy

The consultant reads other people and uses this in a positive way

This competency is often accredited exclusively to women. However, the study of successful 7N Consultants refutes this, although there may well be some truth to the assumption that this competency is often lacking in male-dominated environments. Therefore, empathic consultants – men or women – can often benefit greatly from the skill in this field.

An empathic consultant is one who has a particularly fine-tuned empathy, a kind of social sensor, which lets him accurately register and interpret other people's signals, like nuances and changes in the project participants' attitudes, and act accordingly. He can sense even the smallest negative vibes from the people around him, regardless of whether such signals are directed at him or someone else in the group. An example of this could be uncovering job dissatisfaction before this becomes evident to others, but without exposing the problem.

Moreover, the act of being empathic often involves having an understanding of the challenges and specific problems of all parties involved in the project, while still being able to move freely between various intellectual and emotional positions. Lastly, a consultant who possesses this skill meets everyone without prejudice and has an open and accommodating behavior.

A consultant who demonstrates this competence...

...successfully:

- Takes the initiative to solve problems confidentially – for example, by giving the manager responsible a hint about what is not working (often) along with a possible solution to the problem.

- Diffuse negative energy by, for instance, speaking appreciatively, displaying generosity, while still managing to steer the conversation towards facts and progress.

- Is fully aware of which project participants are under pressure, but never makes an example of anyone, and always ensures that everyone feels part of the team – even those who are actually causing problems.

- Preempts criticism in a constructive and solution-oriented manner.

...averagely:

- Can view an issue from several perspectives and understands the problems and concerns of the various project participants.

- Might find it more difficult to suggest solutions that take everyone into consideration.

- Is very attentive to the motivation and moods of others but may also misinterpret or completely miss important signals from other people. Plays an active role in solving other people's problems – sometimes even problems whose solution was actually someone else's responsibility.

...with difficulty:

- Finds it difficult to define his position without clear, unambiguous statements from others regarding their attitude and state of mind.

- Focuses excessively on rational facts and finds it difficult to understand explanations or arguments that contain irrational issues.

- May appear inflexible and insensitive to others in situations that obviously require understanding and care.

- Devotes much attention to his own needs and interests in a given situation – at the expense of those of others.

Colleague

He counters my stubbornness with remarkable patience. He listens to me again and again and is happy to explain everything one more time so that I don't feel stupid.

Client

He masters the art of maneuvering in the 'grey area' between being an employee and being an external consultant. He quickly becomes part of the team, which is essential in our organization and crucial to the way we work. At the same time, he never crosses the invisible line where he might become too familiar with the others.

Client

He knew precisely what the others were thinking and had a clear impression of who felt under pressure. But he never exposed any project participants and always made sure that everyone felt part of the team – even those who actually created problems. He discreetly and unselfishly approached the person in question and asked if he could help. This proved to be an incredibly efficient way to stimulate progress.

Manager

I was actually a bit annoyed with him, but he picked up on it almost before I had formulated it. He quickly succeeded in calming me down and switching the conversation to a progressive and constructive theme that we could work on together.

End note

At 7N, we continually strive to improve our understanding of what it takes for consultants to be among the top 3% in their respective fields. This is where The Secret Code plays a key role.

Since our survey back in 2006, we at 7N have evaluated thousands of high performing IT specialists in collaboration with our clients. What we find is that, in addition to being highly competent in their fields, over and over again the six competences described in The Secret Code are a crucial factor in determining how successful the consultant is when working with and for the clients.

Since then, we have also delved into a number of other studies that all underline the importance of 'the soft skills' such as those described in The Secret Code, in a knowledge-driven business world. The competences in The Secret Code not only help the consultant to become more proficient at delivering the task in cooperation with the client, they also enable him/her to become a better team player and more effective communicator when dealing with project participants and key persons. Recent studies in the field have shown that consultants who master these types of competences are more highly valued, and that is also reflected in the type of tasks they are given and, subsequently, the potential financial rewards they reap.

With The Secret Code, we can offer very specific areas to focus on that have been proven to make a difference.

We hope you will find them useful.

7N Group is an elite IT consultancy agency with more than 20 years of market experience in serving all aspects of critical IT projects both within the public and private sector.

We have dedicated ourselves to finding the right match between our consultants and the companies we serve – we believe that is how the best results are created. At 7N, we have built a professional community of extraordinary people. A community dedicated to achieving professional and personal development. A place where the best gets to play with the best.

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