

## 5. Kurt Salmon Associates, Atlanta/New York

**After hearing how friends from business school waited more than six months before** being staffed on a consulting engagement, Farzan Bharucha did not expect to actively contribute to client deliverables until the end of his first year. However, by the end of his third month with Kurt Salmon Associates, the 26-year-old consultant had already been staffed on three projects, and he finds himself frequently residing on the front lines when it comes to initial data analysis.

"At KSA, there is no doubt that if you show the aptitude to cope with the workload, no one is hesitant to give you greater responsibility," says Bharucha, who joined the firm last July.

KSA advises consumer products, retail, and healthcare clients on strategy, process, and technology deployment. Consultants say that the firm has an entrepreneurial atmosphere and that leadership cares about their personal and professional growth. Results are recognized and rewarded.

On Bharucha's first project, for example, one of his managers asked him to develop a white paper on contemporary inpatient bed models. The manager gave him boundaries for the content, suggested some sources, and monitored and encouraged his progress. The finished document has now been handed to several other clients.

"I love the fact that at KSA it doesn't really matter how senior or experienced you are. If you come up with a good idea, everyone is ready to give you credit for it," Bharucha says.

The formal mentoring program is not as robust as in other firms, but client teams are small and junior consultants are developed by having them work closely with their managers. Consultants work on a minimum of two client engagements but as many as four, forcing them to be very structured in managing their time and efforts.

As the economy improves, the firm is enjoying selling more business. However, one result of this is that managers are focusing more on client needs than on internal ones. Still, management has an open-door policy and is willing to listen to feedback.

"You won't get in trouble at KSA for making a mistake with a client, but you will get in trouble for hiding problems and not asking for help," says one consultant.

Nearly 70 percent of KSA respondents travel between three and four days a week and admit that it can be tiring. But, the firm appears to be advancing efforts to strike a better work/life balance for its people. Point of fact: KSA was one of the highest-ranked firms for consultant satisfaction with flexible work arrangements.

are revving up their recruiting efforts and doling out hefty signing bonuses. However, one downside to this is that the ones who survived the layoffs and are toiling long hours on undersourced projects are feeling neglected. "They hire in new talent at higher pay, but aren't bumping up existing employees as they should," says a 26-year-old consultant in Georgia at a former Big Five firm. "Financially, they should do more to retain top performers."

At other companies, those who have been around the longest are definitely taking home larger pieces of the bonus pie. "Individuals get rewarded on past performance, not current performance," one consultant complains. "Many partners continue to get their perks, even though most bill few hours and attract very little, if any, new business."

It seems that many firms, including KSA, are making changes to their reward systems, and some worry that these changes may affect their close-knit cultures. "This tweaking can encourage focus on individuals, but leaders need to ensure that this focus does not discourage the team environment that has so successfully driven better results for our clients," says a KSA consultant.

When it comes to health benefits, DiamondCluster leads the pack. And, it's no wonder. The company pays 100 percent of the medical, dental, and vision coverage for their associates and their families and/or domestic partners. New DiamondCluster employees also don't have to wait a single

day to enroll in their 401(k) plan. Booz Allen Hamilton, which has consistently scored well in this category over the years, contributes 10 percent to their employees' 401(k) plans, even if the individuals don't.

### Career Development

One way that firms may want to differentiate themselves from competitors is to consider again beefing up training and development programs that were trimmed or shifted mostly to e-learning systems during rough times. For our entire survey population, 63.5 percent say that they are satisfied or very satisfied with their firm's T&D programs. This is the lowest the satisfaction level has been in the four years we have been conducting the Best Firms survey.

In terms of the amount of training they receive, pros at McKinsey, BCG, ZS Associates, and Accenture get more hours of training than anyone else. In addition to the strategy firms, Accenture, ICF, and ZS Associates were places where consultants said that the training received is top-notch.

"When you do not have an important skill, it is viewed as a development area rather than as a skill deficit, and efforts to develop this skill are keenly observed and rewarded," says Lauren Moore, a 23-year-old associate consultant at BCG. "Also, most project managers are very respectful of the time that you commit to training."