

# Cliff Consulting

**CLIFF CONSULTING KNOWS** what it is. And Bob Cliff, founder and CEO, would have it no other way. Unlike the other six firms on this year's Small Jewels list, Cliff isn't a new, niche firm that's looking to break out. An IT and operations project strategy firm focused on financial services and healthcare delivery, it may be the profession's prime example of "slow and steady wins the race." But don't let that fool you into thinking there's nothing flashy about Cliff. In fact, by today's consulting standards, nearly everything is flashy



**Bob Cliff, founder and CEO of Cliff Consulting, with Robin Nasatir, president and chief operating officer**

about the firm. It has no travel budget, its employees don't have titles, per se, and junior staff is non-existent. Some clients date back to the Gerald Ford years, and most of its consultants date back to at least Ronald Reagan. The average Cliff consultant's level of experience is 25 years and average tenure with Cliff is 13 years.

"We're certainly a different kind of firm," says Cliff, who founded the firm in 1972 after stints as an industrial engineer and a professor at U.C. Berkeley. "Our experience and our tenures are so remarkable, and unprecedented really, in this industry." The reason no one leaves, he says, is because "Cliff offers people the opportunity to do what a consultant really wants to do—get embedded into an organization and really consult with them without other distractions." And that's the way it's been at Cliff for the last 36 years. He started the firm with a few associates and grew it to a dozen billable consultants. It's pretty much stayed there ever since.

**Headquarters:** Oakland  
**Offices:** 1  
**Billable Consultants 2007:** 13  
**Revenue 2006:** \$2.5 million  
**Revenue 2007:** \$3 million  
**Projected revenue for 2008:** \$3.7 million

**“It's not all about us. We try to bring out the best in our clients. We're going to work through them, empower them and motivate them.”**

*Robin Nasatir, president and chief operating officer*

"Growth is a business choice, not a mandate," he says. "I call it 'right-sizing.' For us, this is the right-size firm. It allows us to preserve a healthy work/life balance that is so important to the success of the firm." That work/life balance includes travel as a choice and the ability for consultants to manage their own work schedules. "That's one of the main reasons we have associates who have been with us for more than 25 years," he says. But with such an experienced staff, the inevitable is finally happening at Cliff. Two senior people are going to semi-retire this year, so Cliff finds itself in the unusual position of having to hire new people.

"We're looking for very seasoned professionals, people with a minimum of ten years' experience in consulting, industry or a combination of both," says Robin Nasatir, who was appointed president and chief operating officer of Cliff last month. Nasatir, who has been with Cliff for 20 years, was previously vice president. In her new role, Nasatir will run the day-to-day operations of the firm. Cliff will stay on as CEO and will still guide the strategic direction of the firm.

"I think hiring is a little more difficult for us," Nasatir says. "I think we have a cultural difference in our approach. We call it the 'Cliff way.' Our style is very collaborative with the client; we partner with them on everything we do." The result, she says, is an approach that's different from most other consulting firms. "We try to bring out the best in our clients. We're going to work through them, empower them, train them and motivate them," Nasatir says. "It's

not all about us. We're helping the client grow and develop."

The approach is something Cliff calls "egoless consulting." At Cliff, "we're not looking to show off or dominate the conversation," he says. "At the end of the day, the finished product is the client's product. They very much feel a sense of equity in the result. That means there's a high success rate."

That type of investment from Cliff leads to those deep relationships with clients, he says. "I absolutely love what I do, and I think it shows when I'm with a client," Cliff says. "I almost hate to say it, but I've had a lot of fun working. It's really too bad more people don't."  
*—Joseph Kornik*



**Robin Nasatir**  
President & CEO  
Cliff Consulting

*Oakland, Calif.-based Cliff Consulting was founded by CEO Bob Cliff 36 years ago. It is a 15-person, IT operations and strategy firm focused on financial services and healthcare delivery and was named one of Consulting magazine's Seven Small Jewels in 2008. Robin Nasatir, who has been with the firm for 20 years, recently was appointed president and chief operating officer. She will now focus on the day-to-day operations of the firm, while Cliff will guide the*

*firm's overall strategic direction. Nasatir took a few minutes to speak with Consulting magazine's One-on-One about her promotion.*

**Consulting: Congratulations on the new role. So, what does the new position mean to you?**

**Nasatir:** Thank you. This transition feels like a very natural progression to me. Bob (Cliff) and I have worked side by side managing the firm and preparing for this transition for the past four years. And although I'll be running day-to-day operations now (with the help of our office staff), Bob will still be active as my thought partner in making strategic decisions. My goal is to maintain the values, culture and reputation that Bob has built for Cliff Consulting over the past 35 years.

**Consulting: So, Bob Cliff isn't riding off into the sunset just yet?**

**Nasatir:** No, no. Bob will still be my partner in running this firm, and we really don't see that changing. He still plans to be very involved in strategic decision-making and general oversight of the company. The major change here is that Bob will be stepping out of the day-to-day operations so that he can enjoy some much-deserved time on his boat, on his skis, and traveling the world.

**Consulting: Cliff Consulting was named one of our Seven Small Jewels for 2008. It's a firm with a unique approach to its clients, isn't it?**

**Nasatir:** We were absolutely thrilled to be named one of your Seven Small Jewels. In a lot of ways, it really helps to validate that we've had the right business model all these years. And, yes, we do have a unique approach with clients. I think it's a different cultural approach. We call it the "Cliff Way." Our style is very

collaborative with clients; we partner with them on everything we do. We typically provide one or two experienced consultants to partner with the management team to leverage internal knowledge and work within their culture. Our goal is to empower our clients' resources to implement solutions that they see as their successes, not ours. It's not all about us; we're there to help the client grow and develop. An ideal client is one who would welcome that level of partnership and appreciate our collaborative style. We aren't there to impose our process or culture on them or to bring in armies of juniors to do the work.

**Consulting: Right, you have no junior staff—or senior partners for that matter. Does that structure, or lack of structure, make it more difficult?**

**Nasatir:** Actually, our consultants find Cliff's organizational structure to be a welcome change. There are no junior staffers to manage, administrative headaches, sales goals or office politics. We offer our consultants professional growth opportunities with increasingly more challenging and complex client assignments. They have the option to choose their own work hours, their own assignments, and to work from home if they wish. Also, at Cliff, travel is a choice.

**Consulting: What do you mean by that?**

**Nasatir:** I mean our consultants can choose to travel if they want to. We've done work outside the San Francisco Bay area, but only because one of the consultants wants the assignment.

**Consulting: So, what's up first on your to-do list?**

**Nasatir:** This year, we are actively working through our referral network to add a few new consultants and diversify our client base a bit. Our goal is to hit a "sweet spot" of 15 or 16 billable consultants. We feel that's the number where we can remain focused on our clients' needs rather than needing to set sales goals or require extensive travel, which is what starts to happen when a firm gets bigger than that. Although we are seeking a few new clients, our greatest challenge is recruiting people with the right blend of experience and style. Our consultants have all been in the business at least 10 years and consistently deliver very high quality work, but I think the reason we sustain very deep relationships with our clients is because our people are all good listeners, good communicators and great collaborators. That's a hard combination to find, but we are optimistic that we'll be able to add a few consultants this year who are a perfect fit.