

# Position Paper - Specializing With Little or No Relevant Proof v1

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# Specializing With Little or No Relevant Proof

*Dear generalist self-employed software developer who would like to specialize,*

You face multiple struggles. Deciding *how* to specialize is one of them. But after that decision is made, you may face an uphill battle when it comes to your credibility.

What if you would like to specialize in a way that is not backed up by a lengthy track record of successful projects? In other words, what if you want to specialize in something that you have limited direct experience with?

There will be a part of your mind that says to you: "You're out of luck, buddy. Stick with the generalist thing. At least it works, and you won't have prospects turning you down due to lack of experience."

To that part of your mind, I say: "Not so fast! There is a way, if you'll hear me out."

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## Sidebar:

As a quick reminder, here are the five ways you can specialize:

1. Choose a market vertical and, over time, become remarkably good at applying your skills to their unique business needs.
2. Choose a problem domain and, over time, develop world class expertise in solving that problem.
3. Choose a technology platform and, over time, become a world-class expert in that platform.
4. Develop a unique way of packaging or delivering your services. Specialize in *how* you deliver your services.
5. Combine two of the above approaches.

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Let's imagine the world's most demanding prospect (TWMDP). I once interviewed a buyer for a large software project. He wasn't TWMDP, but he had a lot in common with that prospect, and this interview surfaced many of the requirements TWMDP would have for you:

1. A track record of prior success doing almost exactly what you're going to do for them at the same or larger scale than you're going to do for them.
2. References
3. Demonstration of technical and project management depth and breadth
4. (In some cases) A deep bench and or scalable capacity
5. Internal consensus from other project stakeholders and their boss before hiring you
6. (If you're not already a preferred vendor or cost more than the prospect's rate card range) Unique value specific to the project at hand
7. Cultural fit, process fit

This is "the gauntlet". This is what that risk-averse part of your mind is worried about. It doesn't want you to face this gauntlet and come up short, and it would prefer a mediocre safety to a risky chance at real success.

Part of the gauntlet might be specific to Fortune 1000-level buyers (specifically the rate card and need for internal consensus-building), and part of it is what *any* savvy buyer would subject your firm to.

Proof is the part I get the most questions about from generalists who are on the cusp of specializing, so for this article, I'll focus on the proof part of the gauntlet. That's items 1, 2, 3, and 6.

You *want* to be in possession of proof so compelling that your prospects figuratively trip over themselves on the way to the company checkbook so they can hire you before somebody else does. That's where we all want to be, but few generalists have that kind of proof. This lack of what I call Relevant Proof would seem to be a roadblock to specialization, but I believe it does not need to be.

I've worked with hundreds of business owners on the specialization question, and I've seen some patterns that differ from what you might expect. You might expect that, as a newly-minted specialist, you'll have prospects slam the door in your face over and over again because you lack Relevant Proof. It doesn't actually play out that way, and I'm going to spend the rest of this article explaining why.

I'll talk about:

1. The "Insider Advantage"

2. The “Specialist Hunger”
3. The usage of Relevant, Ambient, and Constructed Proof
4. The need for outbound marketing to make all of this work

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### Sidebar:

Proof is anything you can show or tell a prospective client *before they decide to hire you* that increases their trust or decreases the perceived riskiness of hiring you.

Now that I’ve spent several paragraphs emphasizing the importance of proof, I want to pull a fast one on you and say that proof is really just a means to an end. Proof is *one* way to build trust with prospective clients, and in the case of wanting to specialize with little or no relevant proof, what we’re really interested in is understanding *all* the ways you can build trust.

When we start thinking more broadly about ways to build trust, then having little or no relevant proof seems less devastating than it might otherwise.

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## The “Insider Advantage”

Insiders have an advantage. This advantage is primarily social rather than technical. Furthermore, this insider advantage accrues most to the specialist that has focused on a market vertical (the first specialization approach listed above), and to a lesser extent to the specialist that has focused on a technology platform (approach #3 on the list above).

Think for a moment about your conversations with others. The conversation you could have with another software developer is markedly different than what you could have with someone who doesn't know the first thing about software. The deeper conversation you could have with another developer comes from:

- A shared vocabulary
- A shared interest
- Shared experiences, even if just in a broad sense
- (possibly) A shared worldview

You and another software developer are both members in the same audience. To each other, you are insiders.

If you specialize by focusing on a market vertical, you and your prospects are now members of the same audience. You begin to have a shared vocabulary, shared interests, shared experiences, and possibly even a shared worldview.

This makes you an insider in your buyer's world. Not *completely* an insider, but more of an insider than your generalist competition. Not a *longtime* insider, but more of an insider than your generalist competition. Not a *well-known* insider, but more of an insider than your generalist competition. The longer you maintain and deepen your focus on your chosen market vertical, the stronger your status as an insider becomes.

The insider advantage begins the moment you *decide* to focus. You amplify this advantage every time you learn more about your chosen target market and get an opportunity to apply your skills to their business problems.

The big question this probably raises for you is the following: at what point am I *enough* of an insider that it's an actual

advantage for my business? I've seen the insider advantage take effect far sooner than you'd expect.

Some participants in my Positioning Accelerator Program do customer development-style interviews while validating a potential specialization. Some have gotten interest in their services *while conducting these interviews*. In other words, they've been investigating the *possibility* of specializing in Vertical A and their interviewee gets excited enough about this possibility that they say something like, "can you tell me more about your services?" This happens because of the "specialist hunger" (described below).

Caveat time:

1. Not every person in every vertical will respond with maximum enthusiasm to the insider advantage. Specialization is about harnessing multiple advantages, not finding a single "magic bullet" (because there are no magic bullets).
2. The threshold of credibility you need to exceed in order to be perceived as an insider varies. In some cases it is surprisingly low, and in others it is discouragingly

high. Customer development-style interviews can be a shortcut to discovering where that threshold is for the vertical you might be interested in specializing in.

## The “Specialist Hunger”

We modern humans understand the general value proposition of specialists. The mental schema we use goes something like this: some problems are so complex or difficult that they benefit from people fully focusing their career on solving those problems. In other words, the additional value of specialization is *worth it* when focused on certain problems. Or from yet another perspective, our society values specialists; we just do.

I believe but cannot (yet) prove that among software developers, specialization is less common than in other professions. In the US, about 70% of physicians are specialists<sup>1</sup> and about 33% of CPAs are specialists or are planning to specialize<sup>2</sup>. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd guess that no more

1 Physicians who are specialized: <http://content.healthaffairs.org/content/11/1/235.full.pdf>

2 CPAs who are specialized: <https://www.accountingweb.com/practice/practice-excellence/expert-says-specialization-only-option-for-cpas>

than 10% of self-employed software developers are specialized in a *meaningful* way (sorry, but saying “I’m a specialist in Rails” doesn’t count as a meaningful specialization; it’s too broad).

In other professions, the roadmap for specializing is relatively well-defined. Want to specialize in tax law? US News lists 26 schools as offering a tax law specialization program. The path to other specializations, like securities or banking law, is similarly well-defined.

In software development, the roadmap to specialization is not so nearly well-defined. This is caused in part by the rapid pace of change in the software landscape and the seductive siren song of platform specialization, which distracts developers from considering more valuable, evergreen, defensible specializations in a market vertical or business problem domain.

If you get behind on your tax payments and find yourself in need of an attorney who specializes in tax law, you find a tax attorney. It’s not difficult. Two seconds of searching on Yelp just yielded half dozen that are local to me.

In software development, it’s different. As a specialized

software developer, the “look up from their coffee and pay attention” impact you have on prospects within your area of specialization is dramatic when compared to specialists in other fields.

You’re a physician who specializes in repetitive motion injuries? *Good for you.*

You’re an attorney who specializes in securities litigation? *Meh.*

You’re a software developer who specializes in applying blockchain technology to shipped cargo contracts? *Whoah! Really? My uncle works for Maersk. You should meet him.*

The world’s most demanding prospect (TWMDP) is not going to trip over themselves to hire you simply because of your specialization, but you do stand a higher chance of making it through their gauntlet if your specialization aligns with their needs. And less demanding prospects will look more favorably on you if your specialization matches their needs.

We could simplify this all by saying:

**Because of how specialists are perceived within the culture**

**and how (relatively) rare specialization is within the world of software development, you will be more memorable, referable, and easier for prospects to pay attention to.**

In other words, you satisfy a hunger in the market for specialists. This hunger does not bypass the need for you to present proof to your prospects, but it does lessen the need for extensive proof. On that note, let's discuss proof.

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## Sidebar

There are 9 basic forms of proof you might use in your marketing and sales:

- Social proof
  - Testimonials or quotes from previous clients
  - Case studies
  - Clients who will serve as a reference for you
  - Third-party expert/authority endorsements
  - Logos of clients you have previously worked with  
(the weakest form of social proof because of how

non-specific, near-anonymous, and easily abused  
it is, but still worth using if you have nothing else.)

- Demonstration of skill or expertise
- Guarantees
- Demonstrating the mechanism by which you produce uniquely valuable results
- Being very specific in your marketing
- Articulating a contrarian viewpoint
- Acknowledging any weakness in your claims
- Third-party proof
- Playing up your specialization

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## Relevant, Ambient, and Constructed Proof

We're now getting down to the heart of the matter. You are concerned that if you specialize without strong *relevant* proof, you'll be rebuffed by prospects. I maintain that *relevant* proof is not the only kind of proof that you can use as a newly-minted specialist.

What is this relevant proof beast?

Simply put, relevant proof is having done for Client A what you propose to do for Potential Client B. It's a relevant track record. The longer and more impressive this track record, the better. Ex: "We've helped 4 previous clients increase sales by at least 15% by building web apps that integrate with MLS and Salesforce. Your project is quite similar and will present only a minor technical challenge for us, allowing us to focus on discovering and meeting your business requirements more effectively."

Possessing an overwhelming amount of relevant proof is the position you want to work your way into. Specialization helps you get there faster. But how do you get started?

You combine relevant proof with ambient and constructed proof.

### Ambient Proof

Ambient proof is proof that speaks to your character, ability to move a project to successful completion, or the ease of

working with you. Ex: “Pat was a real pleasure to work with. He is a great communicator, and his positive attitude is an asset to any project you might be considering him for.”

Ambient proof is not as powerful as relevant proof, but it does work to reduce a prospect’s anxiety, and so you should make use of ambient proof in your marketing and sales process.

As you develop relevant proof over time, you’ll gradually displace the ambient proof on your website or sales collateral with relevant proof.

### Constructed Proof

Constructed proof is a demonstration of your expertise, insight, skill, or thinking as applied to your specialization. It might take the form of white papers, screencasts, “talking head” videos, blog articles, audio/video interviews, an [educational resource center](#), or other forms of educational content marketing.

I call it “constructed” proof because *you build it* on your own initiative. You don’t need a client to hire you to build it, and you don’t need extensive real-world experience to build it.

Let's say you're wanting to specialize in building software for pharmaceutical companies, and you have ambient proof but no relevant proof. Constructed proof to the rescue!

- Could you interview 10 CTOs at pharmaceutical companies about the challenges of getting a strong ROI on custom software? It might not be as easy as working on a fun coding side project, but I'd bet money you're smart, organized, and curious enough to do a great job of this interview series. Would these interviews serve as effective constructed proof for your first few prospects in the pharma vertical? I'd also bet yes.
- Could you do enough online research to identify the 5 most common threats scrappy startups are posing to large pharma companies? Could you then suggest solutions to these threats through a series of 5 or so in-depth articles? Again, I'd bet money the answer is yes.
- Could you identify a single relevant, painful issue that your pharma prospects are struggling with, build a proof

of concept, and open source it? Again, I'd bet the answer is yes.

Those are three concrete examples of constructed proof.

In case you were wondering at any point whether constructed proof is one the one hand some kind of "magic bullet" or on the other hand some kind of con you can use to trick prospects... it's neither of those. Remember that you're looking to harness multiple individually small but collectively powerful ways of building trust with prospects. Constructed proof can be part of that team of trust-builders.

Finally, make no mistake: constructed proof is a *speculative* investment. It's a gamble. Constructed proof is not going to bring the world's most demanding prospect (TWMDP) to your doorstep, hat in hand, begging you to work on a cherry project. But, in combination with a small amount of relevant proof and a strong showing of ambient proof, it will get enough prospects over the "minimum trust threshold" to help you accumulate more relevant proof over time.

## A Few More Notes on Proof

In the list of 9 basic proof elements above you may have noticed that playing up your specialization is itself a form of proof.

The world of software developers is full of generalists, or businesses that have “specialized” in extremely broad areas like WordPress, Rails, or [insert platform x here].

When you *actually* specialize, your marketing starts to exude a quality that prospects find very appealing. You begin to portray your business as *focused* (“we know with real clarity who we serve and what we do for them”) and *disciplined* (“yes, we really are this focused. We know how to say no to lesser prospects in order to serve better prospects.”).

While there are focused and disciplined sociopaths in the world, for the most part focus and discipline are qualities we associate with trustworthy people. Instead of referring you to the top of this paper, I’ll just reiterate my definition of proof here: proof is anything you can show or tell a prospective client *before they decide to hire you* that increases their trust or decreases the perceived riskiness of hiring you. Being focused

and disciplined will help prospects trust you, even if you lack impressive amounts of relevant proof.

While I would not expect the following of a brand new specialist, I want to briefly touch on one more thing that lessens your requirement for relevant proof. It is the startlingly accurate diagnosis.

The fastest I have ever seen a prospect move from undecided to ready to work with me is immediately following a startlingly accurate diagnosis of their problem. It seems to be a shortcut to high-trust status. A year or so ago, I asked a Positioning Accelerator Program participant why he decided to work with me. I'm paraphrasing here, but his response went basically like this: "You seemed to understand why my business had plateaued, so I figured you could help me get unstuck."

As a software generalist, you can deliver a startlingly accurate diagnosis more often than you think you can. There's a fine line between confidently helping a client and going too far beyond your skill and committing "consulting malpractice". But even if you play it safe, I'd bet that you can—at least part of the

time—deliver a startlingly accurate diagnosis to a prospect. After all, even though you are ultimately wanting to become an insider to their world, you are actually an outsider who can often more accurately perceive problems than they can.

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## FAQ

**Q: If you specialize without extensive relevant proof, how do you handle IRL questions from prospects who might be curious why you have specialized in the particular way you have?**

A: A simple, genuine “origin story” is very helpful in situations like this, and worth planning out ahead of time. Usable options range from, on the one hand, “This guy Philip said it’ll make my services more valuable so I just picked the best specialization option and went with it” to something more personal like, “Our favorite clients in the past tended to be \_\_\_\_\_ and so we focused on serving just clients like that.”

If you really have no simple, genuine origin story for this situation, let me give you an all-purpose one to use: “We

realized that we couldn't level up to producing truly exceptional results for our clients without specializing, so a while back we decided to double down on companies like yours."

**Q: What about relevant proof that is encumbered by NDAs, etc?**

A: The first time you face this situation, you'll probably be surprised at how stupidly risk averse your client's legal team is encouraging them to be. Hopefully, you'll take a deep breath, let yourself be pissed for a moment or two, let it go, and then do the right thing (which is to honor your client's policy or request to not use them in your social proof).

Then in the future, you'll hopefully see this coming and work out a better deal for yourself when you have more of the power in the client relationship, which is at the beginning of the relationship.

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## Your Game Plan



We've defined all the terms, and explored almost all of the necessary concepts. Now let's stitch them together into the newly-minted specialist's plan for winning the proof game. It's actually pretty simple:

1. Provide relevant proof if you have it. The more, the better. Use as many forms of relevant proof from the 9-item checklist above as possible.
  1. If you don't have much relevant proof then you need to construct proof. This takes time, so get started on it as early as possible.
2. Make use of ambient proof. Use a lot of it if you have little relevant proof, and use little or no ambient proof if you have ample relevant proof.

3. Use your interest in the area you are specializing in to amplify all of the above and present yourself as a curious, motivated, informed insider.

## Outbound Not Optional

Let's wrap this up with a note on outbound. I've already identified several challenges to specialization above. There's one more to add to this list: time.

When you decide to specialize, you're already fighting your emotions, inertia, and sundry challenges like the lack of relevant proof. If you add to that the challenge of waiting 6 months or more for content marketing to start bringing you leads, then you're really stacking the deck NOT in your favor.

It really helps if you can make outbound marketing part of your plan for moving into a new specialization. Outbound gives you more opportunities for conversations, which are vital at the beginning of any services business. Those conversations give you feedback, which helps accelerate your learning curve.

## Application

If you have any questions about applying this guidance to your business, please feel free to contact me at [philip@philipmorganconsulting.com](mailto:philip@philipmorganconsulting.com).

If you'd like my direct help navigating the transition from generalist to specialist, my services may be a fit: <https://philipmorganconsulting.com/services/>