

# So You Need To Be a Consultant?

*A survival guide to making the successful transition to being on your own*

*By Richard MacLean*



Many skilled senior professionals are finding themselves on their own, seeking employment for the first time after being forced to leave the "safe womb" of an organization that delivered their paycheck each month like clockwork. Ask these new entrants about this world of uncertainty and they frequently respond, "I'm doing some consulting." Saying it and successfully doing it are two different things. This feature, which is the latest in a continuing series of articles by the author about environmental, health and safety (EHS) careers, examines the chances for success in becoming an independent consultant.

In the distant past, EHS professionals often had a new job lined up before they walked out the door of the old one. Today, that is not the case. More often than not, they can expect many months of searching to find a comparable job. For senior level EHS professionals the chances for quick job placement are even more remote than their junior counterparts. There is a certain bitter irony to this situation, since these are the very individuals who can offer the most from day one in a new assignment. But, the market for these individuals follows the

law of supply and demand, and demand is very low. As a result, more and more senior professionals are re-thinking their employment strategy.

Cash flow, health insurance and retirement positioning dominate this strategy. For seasoned veterans, there also are growing concerns over job satisfaction, location and stress. When you are young and bulletproof, you are open (or too dumb to say no) to most anything. But EHS professionals who have ten or more years under their belt tend to be more discriminating and wise to the advantages

and disadvantages of organizational life. The truths in Dilbert cartoons are not abstract concepts; they are daily life to these veterans. The best employment offers often involve a move and another entrance into company politics with the added disincentive that job security is no more guaranteed than it was in the last position. What are the alternatives?

There are seductive attractions to being an independent consultant. Live anywhere in the world within reach of a laptop, communications links and an airport. Fly in and witness the carnage of cube-life and fly out to your mountaintop retreat (mine is in Flagstaff Ariz. at 7,000 feet). Bill clients exorbitant rates to do the stuff you are good at and like to do. Work barefoot in a t-shirt and shorts. Have flexible hours and see the kids when you feel like it. Be your own boss.

"Where do I sign up for this sweet deal?" readers may be thinking. No doubt, some senior EHS professionals head toward consulting with these visions of bliss. For those of us who live the life, the reality is somewhat different. First, do not confuse being a consultant with operating an independent consulting firm — either on your own or in a cooperative effort with several colleagues. Leaving a company or government organization and joining a consulting firm can be a bit like going from the frying pan into the fire. Consulting firms are phenomenally competitive and cannot afford to keep anyone who is not billable. These firms respond quickly to business cycles and job security can be tenuous at best. Add in all the usual company politics and one can see that this type of consulting career may offer little change from the prior job.

Second, the freedom that comes with independent consulting comes with a heavy price: the potential loss of security. While there is, in reality, greatly diminished security in today's corporate world, being employed in someone else's organi-

zation still carries a degree of stability that most desire. You suddenly gain enormous freedom being on your own, but you may not know where the next dollar is coming from. One needs to be mentally prepared for this reality.

This fact can be particularly disturbing to family members. A year before I left the corporate world, I told my wife that I had to get out and try something fundamentally different. Even after months of

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careful planning, launching my consulting career brought on endless protests of, "Why don't you get a real job?" Her entire family had worked for corporations or the government their entire lives. This form of wild adventurism did not compute as being anything real. After nearly a decade (and, more significantly, showing her the income statements), she has finally stopped protesting.

Third, the statement that "I'm doing some consulting" after leaving an organization is viewed as code for saying "I'm unemployed, please help me find a real job." People look at you with that knowing skeptical glance: here is someone trying to put a positive spin on a bad situation. Some of your great "buddies" inside industry may suddenly not return your calls once you join the ranks of consultants. Let's face it, consultants do not have the greatest reputations (another Dilbert truism) and for good reason.<sup>1</sup>

In summary, the key to a successful entry into consulting is a mental process. Far too many people derive their self worth and image by the positions they hold in their very large and powerful organizations. Individuals

that strut their stuff inside companies become very humble when their power is stripped and it becomes all about their own merit and talent. The employees who used to fawn all over them when they were the big boss instantaneously change their allegiance to the next power-that-be and they become invisible. Most seek entry back into the organizational world, but some try to make it in consulting, drawn forward by those previously mentioned seductive visions of being their own boss. How can one tell if they can make it?

### **Success Factors**

There are 10 factors that will determine your chances of success. While the overall business climate is gloomy, some individuals are all but guaranteed a bright future in consulting, if they are extremely strong in the first five factors and at least minimally adequate in the others.

**1. Extensive network.** A single contact may yield a lucrative contract, but it takes a strong network to yield a continuing stream of work. What you might consider to be a well-developed network may be seen as just a starter list by successful consultants. There are exceptions. Some very successful consultants are virtually unknown, but have been brought on board by one or two clients immediately after leaving their prior employer. Sometimes, it is their former employer that immediately brings them back as a consultant because of their knowledge of the operations.

These extended engagements can last years or even decades. They literally fall into their positions with little or no effort, other than their inherent ability. These single-client engagements are essentially an extension of the former employment status and subject to the same job security issues and internal office politics. There is a risk in becoming too complacent and not aggressively positioning yourself for the day you may need to seek new clients.

## **EHS Career Series**

Parts 1 through 3 of this series on environmental health and safety (EHS) careers described the current market forces that shape the job prospects of our profession. See "Manager's Notebook," "Sustainable Careers," January/February 2003, April 2003 and September 2003, accessible at no charge under "Archives" at [www.eponline.com](http://www.eponline.com).

## 2. Excellent communication skills.

Unless you are well known and in an extremely narrow and intense technical area, excellent communications skills will be needed to bring in the clients and produce a quality work products. Most senior and especially executive-level professionals have excellent verbal skills, since this competency is one of the primary determinants for moving up the corporate ladder. Writing skills are an entirely different matter. Many consulting projects end in some form of written report and this can be a major challenge to those who depended on others to put pen to paper.

Building a network depends on access to potential clients. Face-to-face contacts are the best, but they also are the most time-consuming and expensive. Large consulting firms have dedicated marketing reps who travel the world, knocking on client doors, mixing with the crowds at meetings or giving presentations. Independent consultants rarely have the marketing budget or the time. Publishing quality articles that attract attention is another, potentially more cost-effective approach to getting the word out.

**3. Reputation.** Those with outstanding reputations will have clients calling, even if their personal network is small. An excellent reputation also leads to referrals — an essential element of success. Much of my business is due to referrals and I sometimes wonder if the individuals making these referrals know just how important even a casual remark may be toward securing a new project for someone.

The reverse is also true. For the higher-level management consulting that I do, the senior EHS industry executives are a relatively small knit group. The word, both good and bad, gets around.

**4. People skills.** Managers may have been able to dictate orders to underlings inside industry but dealing with clients takes skill, more than was probably required with their previous management. Consultants have to respond to a much greater array of personalities without much background information on their likes and dislikes. Techniques such as bullying and intimidation that bosses seem to get away with inside companies will get little traction in consulting.

**5. Intelligence.** Yes, brains do count.

Management puts up with a surprising number of employees in the “slow-reader group.” Independent consultants, however, can be dropped in a second if they appear to be less than top-notch. Having phenomenal people skills will bring in the work, but will not necessarily help you hold onto it or get repeat business.

When I worked inside companies, most of the consulting work was done by large firms that had the usual spectrum of talent extending from the good, the bad and the ugly. What was not apparent to me until I started networking on the outside with successful independent consultants is that these individuals were consistently among the brightest people I had ever encountered. They were prospering on their own merits, not the reputation of some company or a team in the background that supported them.

**Senior professionals are re-thinking their employment strategy.**

**6. Willingness to work hard.** Senior managers can be so used to giving orders and going to endless meetings that they may be shocked to discover the effort required to deliver tangible, quality products. Yes, there is flexibility in the work hours, but this is no eight-to-five job (it is Saturday afternoon as I type this).

I have been told by the managers at consulting firms that they are cautious about bringing in senior talent from industry or government because of these concerns. Sometimes they bring them in under the assumption that these senior, well-networked individuals will at least bring in the business, especially from the organization that they just left. This may be the case in the short term, but sustained performance takes effort. They drop these individuals in a heart beat if they do not perform.

One of the greatest mistakes that I have witnessed by new members of the independent consulting ranks is that they do not exercise all available options to build their practice. Some may have fallen immediately into client work and have become complacent. Others may be

straddling the fence and have not made the full commitment as they continue to seek another job. They fail to prepare the marketing materials, obtain a Web domain and aggressively build a presence. Even if this is a holding pattern until the next “real job,” there is no excuse for not projecting a professional image while seeking employment.

**7. Self directed.** Some people just cannot get their act together and need a structured environment. Independence can be freeing, but it can also be lonely; some people require daily, face-to-face interaction. This is especially true of individuals, such as myself, who work out of their home office instead of renting space in some corporate office park. Again, much of consulting is about self-awareness, self-confidence and the ability to go it alone.

**8. Marketing skills.** Some people are just plain shy; others are oblivious to where the new client work may come from. If you are not willing to engage in relentless self-promotion, you may not be able to bring in sufficient new business.

Marketing also can be a humbling experience. I have seen EHS managers, directors and vice-presidents with great and powerful corporations and government organizations look down their nose at my colleagues when all the while these individuals would not have even the slightest chance of survival in our world, away from the safety of their organizational womb.

**9. Niche expertise area.** If the market is already saturated with consultants in your areas of expertise, you may be in for a challenge. On the other hand, if you are in the right place at the right time, your phone could start ringing off the hook: picture the computer expert before Y2K or the security consultant after 9/11.

Many new consultants have expectations of what they will do and usually that centers on what they want to or like to do. The client work can come from a number of different, unanticipated directions. One has to be flexible.

**10. Financially secure.** The independent consulting business can be feast or famine. Very senior EHS professionals tend to be better off financially, especially if they were close to retirement and

received a "package" to induce them to take early retirement. For many, it can be a stomach-wrenching roller coaster ride. Unless you have the financial wherewithal to survive the dry periods, which can last a year or more, reconsider your decision to be an independent consultant.


There are, of course, many trade-offs in the above list. For example, if you do not have a good network and have not yet built a solid reputation, you can gradually work toward success if you are financially independent. Also, these factors are interrelated. For example, professionals with good people skills tend to have excellent verbal skills and be good marketers. The key is to be brutally realistic in your self-assessment. You must be a "jack of all trades" since you are responsible for every aspect of the project. For people who are phenomenally strong in one area such as marketing but very poor in product delivery, they may be much better off teaming up with someone else who can make up for these weaknesses.

## Conclusion

This article began with a description of the magnificent life of the successful independent consultant and then promptly went on and on about how difficult it is to achieve it. Difficult, but not impossible. I know many who have reached that special

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status of "self-made man." Sexist labeling aside, just like the Mafia, there are some EHS professionals who have attained the critical threshold where they get respect, as it were. These are the individuals who never worry about being unemployed. They are well-known by their peers, doing what they want to do, living where ever they want to live, and being financially secure and independent. A review of this 10-point list will help give you an insight

as to whether you can successfully transition into this relatively small group of self-confident individuals. 

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## References

- <sup>1</sup> Richard MacLean, "Why Consultants Generally Suck," *EM Magazine*, December 2000, Pages 7-9.