

Keeping Your Eye on the Ball

As successful executives, we know the importance of maintaining focus when working toward a goal. This is especially crucial as you execute your job search, as it is very easy to become distracted when faced with an uncertain future. I find that watching or listening to news broadcasts or reading the news in the print media can be very unsettling. Stories of layoffs, scandals and stock market gyrations are enough to depress anyone. It doesn't take much to make your career search plan that previously seemed golden, now look like lead. Then panic sets in and you start chasing anything that moves. This is a mistake.

I realize that some of our members are at a crossroads. They have held permanent senior positions in the past then they have taken consulting assignments and are now contemplating a career as a management consultant or will accept either permanent or consulting positions. While some consulting engagements last longer than permanent positions in our present business environment, it is important to remember that whichever avenue you choose, it should be consistent with your goals and career path. I am keenly aware that many of you in transition will consider any reasonable offer and let the future take care of itself. Unless the wolves are at the door, this may not be in your best career interests.

If you have worked exclusively on a permanent basis throughout your career, before you decide to follow the consulting path, consider these points:

- The consultant's life is not for everyone. Many IT executives have told me that they hate the periods of downtime, sitting home alone, doing nothing, waiting for something to happen. They also miss the camaraderie of corporate life.
- An independent consultant is never an insider and never "invited to the table" even when consulting for long-term colleagues and friends. Your relationship changes when you are a consultant. You are a "hired gun" but never part of the team, no matter how valuable your contributions. If you are lucky, your clients will see you as an advisor, if not, you are a necessary evil. The highest compliment a client may pay you will be this question, "What do you think I should do?"
- The independent consultant may spend more time and effort on business development or sales than they do on billable time with clients, leveraging their core expertise. Many who try consulting hate the sales component as much as they do the loneliness and the downtime. Sales can be very demeaning to those who are not trained in proper selling techniques and who have held senior management positions. It is also much easier to sell your services when you have the name and reputation of a global or regional consultancy behind you. How many phone calls did you accept from the top tier consultancies who lavished you with dinners or golf billed to a corporate credit card and how many did you take from the sole practitioners?

- You can't be all things to all people. For many years, we have been in the age of the specialist. Consulting engagements are just as specialized as permanent jobs. Because you have a CIO background, if you come from manufacturing, a hospital, bank or university will have no interest in you. You must operate within your universe of expertise.
- Competition is fierce. The tier-1 consulting companies are feeling the negative effects of our present economy. The "Top 5" firms, while facing uncertain futures in the wake of recent accounting scandals are either merging or re-evaluating themselves. You can be sure that these major consulting firms will not give up without a fight. IBM's recent acquisition of PriceWaterhouse Coopers is a case in point. The credibility of some of these firms may be in question, but if you compete against them, you must have an inside connection with your intended client company to land the engagement. Most of these consulting firms have strong corporate alliances and will still be in business in the future, but will you? This leads to our next item.
- Most companies who hire consultants want to know that they will receive follow-up service when problems or future related needs arise. How will you sell against that? How can you promise that you won't disappear? You may take another job, or worse yet, you may become ill or meet an untimely end. Who is your backup? The people that you hope will hire you as an independent consultant were probably unemployed themselves in the past eighteen months and were doing what you are doing now. They know that when you receive a permanent job offer, you will probably leave them, whereas a consulting firm will in all likelihood complete their engagement, even if with substitute help.
- I have reviewed countless resumes of senior IT executives that show stints as an independent consultant between each permanent position. They appear to be unsuccessful at running a consulting business or sustaining permanent employment.
- Very few people earn as much as independent consultants as they did when permanently employed due to lengthy gaps between engagements, unless they are niche players and bring a special subject matter or technology expertise to the table. However, if they are unable to anticipate trends, retrain and adapt to new specialties, their revenue stream eventually withers away when their expertise is no longer needed due to changes in technology and business processes or industry consolidation. For example, I recently interviewed a management consultant who had built up a highly successful "boutique"-consulting practice with an impressive staff that consulted with large baking companies. These bakeries provide a wide variety of baked breads, dessert and breakfast products to grocery chains and deliver them fresh on a daily basis. For more than ten years, his firm enjoyed repeat business, a national clientele and increasing revenues advising on route delivery management and systems. Recent acquisitions and consolidations in the baking industry have resulted in a few large players remaining on the playing field, with in house staffs who no longer need his advice on state of the art route delivery systems. He had not anticipated this change. When you're a consultant, you don't get paid for education and self-improvement, nor are you paid to study your market to learn where the money will be spent in the future.

It is difficult and oftentimes disheartening to maintain a concerted search for a new position. Complicating that by chasing after random consulting assignments may add to your frustration. If someone is willing to pay you handsomely on an hourly basis and your mortgage payment is late, the choice is easy. But over the long term you may wish to consider a different, more calculated approach:

- Make a decision about how you want your long-term career to play out. Will it be permanent employment only, contract consulting, a mix of the two or interim CIO positions? What are your industry choices and geographical considerations?
- Market yourself to only to those people who are connected with what you want to do. Network heavily with them. If you are seeking permanent work, seek out consulting assignments in the same companies and industries you are targeting, since many permanent CIO's began as contract management consultants. If you are seeking a contract position, a company with a permanent CIO position vacancy might need you on an interim basis until a permanent person is identified and hired. If you have expertise in their industry, you will be a very attractive candidate.
- Elaborating, further on the above item, many consulting engagements can lead to a permanent relationship. My firm is working on a senior level position that is both industry specific and highly specialized. Our client, a smaller firm, is undecided as to whether they want to hire someone on a permanent or contract basis. We have presented three candidates. One will accept only contract work. The other two will work contract or permanent, or will convert from temporary to permanent. In all cases these people have deep experience in both our client's industry and its business processes. As long as they continue to add to their portfolio of skills and add new outstanding references, they will work via either model.
- In any event, be prepared for a slow hiring cycle. The client referenced in the above item has been very indecisive. We have been working on this assignment for four months. We have had two of the candidates for most of that time. At this level, senior management consultants are not hired as quickly as are programmers. You may receive an offer for permanent employment long before a consulting opportunity materializes.

The idea here is to continue to build your network, which you will then use for the remainder of your career. If you focus on an industry(s) and discipline(s), you will achieve greater penetration in your marketplace, becoming connected with an ever-increasing number of potential buyers of your services, either on a permanent or contractual basis. If you do this in a disciplined, habitual manner and maintain your network, you may find the search process to be less arduous the next time you are seeking a new position.

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