

Considering a Consulting Career

KATHERINE SPENCER LEE

With the employment market for IT workers continuing to improve, you might feel ready to take your career in a new direction. Perhaps you have dreamed of being your own boss and having the flexibility to set your own hours. Or maybe you want exposure to assignments that push the limits of your talents. If this describes you, one option to consider is consulting.

Many companies rely on consultants for assistance with special projects or for support while determining long-term personnel needs. In a Robert Half survey, 46 percent of executives said their organizations use more temporary and project professionals today than five years ago. Flexible staffing allows companies to respond quickly to changing business needs, helping to increase competitiveness and efficiency.

At the same time, interim professionals experience a variety of benefits, as well. One of the biggest draws for IT consultants is the exposure to new technologies. Working with multiple businesses can boost your knowledge of hardware and software you might not otherwise encounter at a single employer. Additionally, you can learn about different types of companies and industries. Meanwhile, you'll have more control over your schedule because you decide which assignments to accept and which to decline.

Think you're ready to pursue this path? First consider all aspects of the move. The following are some key questions to ask before going out on your own.

Do You Want to Manage a Business?

The freedom and autonomy associated with consulting can be quite attractive. However, make sure you can back up your IT expertise with the drive and motivation to keep a business functioning and successful. Remember, you won't just be helping clients with their computer needs. You also must take care of accounting and operational issues and invest time in developing new business.

If you would rather not assume these management responsibilities, you might consider working with an IT staffing firm. These companies typically handle payroll, marketing and business-generation duties, allowing you to focus completely on client projects.

Stability or Constant Change?

As a consultant, you should enjoy working in a diverse range of work environments. One day you might be helping a large, conservative law firm with a server upgrade, and the next, you might find yourself at a small agricultural company, designing a network

security strategy. Consulting is a good path if you can adjust quickly to different corporate cultures.

The best consultants adapt their work styles and preferences to suit the needs of each client. For instance, a contact might request more frequent project updates than you usually provide on routine assignments or opt to use lower-end products than you'd typically install. An open-minded approach to handling these demands can make all the difference in forming positive working relationships.

Can You Assume Some Financial Risk?

The market is strong for IT consultants in many specialties. However, even if you have potential clients lined up, there might be times when business is slow. If you are going out on your own, it's important to be cautious and save about six months' worth of living expenses to withstand periods of uneven income (see Consultant's Corner, page 12.) You might find that you never need this backup: Many consultants earn more than their counterparts who work full time. But it is always wise to be prepared for any outcome.

Do You Manage Your Time Well?

To be successful as a consultant, you need to be a self-starter who can juggle a variety of client demands with ease. If you want a flexible schedule, strong time management skills will be essential.

Before you begin a project engagement, have your client or staffing firm spell out all the details such as your specific role in the initiative, the timeline and the anticipated result. This will help prevent any misunderstandings and scheduling conflicts. For instance, you might assume you will take the lead in implementing a financial systems conversion, only to discover that many internal staff members also have key decision-making roles throughout the process, creating unanticipated delays. The more you know in advance, the easier it will be to budget your time and resources.

Consulting is an increasingly popular career path for many IT professionals. It can offer professional challenge, variety, scheduling flexibility and even a chance to earn more than your full-time counterparts. But you must honestly assess your skill set, financial situation and preferences to make sure this approach is a good fit for you. 🏠

Katherine Spencer Lee is executive director of Robert Half Technology, a provider of IT professionals on a project and full-time basis. She can be reached at editor@certmag.com.