

Should I Stay or Should I Go . . . Independent?

by Robbie Kellman Baxter



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I didn't dive into consulting. I looked at the pool for a while, looking for swimmers, then dipped my toe, then actually got wet. Now, four years of laps, diving and free play later, I'm confidently calling myself a consultant—it's a path I'm happy to have taken.

Maybe it was lucky maybe unlucky, but while I was on maternity leave after the birth of my second child, the start-up where I was Director of Brand Marketing laid off most of the marketing department, including me. I was relieved. I had been working 60 hours a week, plus evenings for email, and couldn't imagine doing that with a 12 week old and a 3 year old at home. I was also panicked. I hadn't planned on leaving the workforce—I always saw myself having a career. But I didn't know anyone who seemed to have a good part-time gig. And even if I found something, working half-time (for half-pay) would force us to change our lifestyle, something my husband and I were reluctant to do.

I had heard a rumor that a woman from my business school class had gone independent, was working two-thirds time and making more than she had been earning as a Director of Product Management at a good-sized company. Although I didn't know her really well, I gathered my courage (I was desperate) and called her, laying out my situation in graphic detail. I asked her every dumb, rude, obvious question I could think of:

- How do you charge for your work?
- Who are your clients?
- How did they find you?
- What specifically do you do for them?
- How do you pay taxes?
- Do you need to be a corporation?
- What are the legal/business issues?
- What kind of computer do you have?
- Do you need a laptop or desktop? Do you need a laser printer?

- Do you have to have a work line or is a cell phone OK?
- How did you make your website? Can you help me make mine?

She was nice enough to answer them all, patiently (and I am generally happy to answer the same questions for new consultants). She confirmed the rumors about her success, described every little detail of her business, and gave me enough information that I felt comfortable enough to try consulting. I gave myself 3 months to find a project, and gave myself a low bar: If someone in the marketing department at a company would pay me over \$X/hour, for something qualifying as marketing (I wouldn't walk their dog, for example—I have my pride) I would do it--and re-evaluate in 90 days.

The first 30 days went by and I got 2 small projects—the first was for options only at a pre-funding startup and lasted one week, so it really didn't count (no \$) the second was a 6 week marketing communications project—not my strength, but hey—they paid me and seemed happy with the work. Late in my 3rd month a friend called and asked me to do a 2 week project at a large public company with him. That project turned into 2 years of work at the company, and over 12 discrete projects.

At that point, I evaluated and decided to commit for another 3 years. I focused my message, invested in a website, and started actively networking. That was 4 years ago. I can't imagine doing anything else now.

Today, I have a thriving consulting practice. I have childcare from 8-4, M-Th with a goal of spending about 20 of those hours on work. The rest of the time is for errands, breakfast dishes and family business. There are bad days and good days, but definitely more good than bad. I earn more than I ever did in a corporate job, and I love nearly eve-

rything about my business—especially:

- The hours
- The flexibility
- Variety of projects
- Fact that every project is really needed (or they wouldn't come up with budget)
- The luxury of being paid to tell the truth—no politics in sight

- Being an entrepreneur

Will I ever go back to corporate America? I don't think so. I have found a way to add value, make a living and challenge myself in a way that is inspiring and more fun than I ever imagined.

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