

Don't let downturn dash consulting dreams  
Experts say that if you're ready for the challenge and have the right service,  
you can succeed as a solo act

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After recoiling in horror at your RRSPs, the thought of going solo may be  
mutating a case of the butterflies into full-blown nausea.

But experts say those planning a move from employment to consulting  
shouldn't necessarily give up the dream. Choosing to consult should take  
into consideration a host of other factors.

In 2003, Aaron Cruikshank started Fruich Consulting. He's a Vancouver  
researcher and project manager who generally helps private and public  
organizations make organizational decisions (from whether its wise to start  
a particular kind of venture, to preparing for future labour shortages).

He says no matter what industry you're in, you'll probably need two or  
three years to get established, regardless of the state of the economy. "It's  
not necessarily going to be a bad thing if you start when the economy is in  
a downturn, because you're still going to have to fight tooth and nail to get  
contracts for the first few years."

Other factors may play a bigger role in your success, like the size of your  
network.

"I think if you're going to be working in a specific sector, you need to know  
at least 70 per cent of the major players personally. Not even at a deep  
level, but they need to know your name, they need to have heard of you."

Your decision to work within, or outside of, your current industry will also  
play a role. "To switch sectors and start a consulting business is not a good  
idea at any time."

While the economy shouldn't squash your consulting dreams, experts say it  
should affect what services you offer and the markets you go after.

"Anything that has to do with change management -- reorganizing, rethinking, all of that stuff -- is hot right now," says Cruikshank. This can include everything from professional organizers who can help retiring employees deal with over-stuffed filing cabinets, to HR experts specializing in helping companies manage layoffs, to moving services.

Consultants in fields where projects are longer-term -- anything further afield than 24 months -- are also likely to weather the storm, he says. Often, it's the short-term projects that businesses cut first.

Victoria career counsellor Michele Waters agrees that choosing your niche carefully is especially important in a downturn. In fact, every aspect of your new enterprise needs to be carefully considered. "More than ever, you have to do your research, and be creative."

Consider questions like: Do you have a financial cushion and the backing of your family? Are you the type of person who is self-motivated and resilient? Do you know who your clients are and who you'll be competing with?

People who've had several people inquire about their services before they've left their jobs are likely in a good situation to jump.

Make sure to examine your work contract before you do anything hasty, adds Waters. Sometimes contracts may prevent you from working for your employer's competitors for a certain length of time, for instance.

And if you're moonlighting on the side, ensure your work as an employee and as a part-time consultant don't collide.

"If an employer thinks that an employee has been setting up their business and wooing clients on their time, down the road that could really backfire," says Waters, adding that it may result in a lost reference or a loss of credibility. The same is true for your first consulting clients -- bringing your employer's clients with you is bad form.

Consulting has gained momentum as an alternative to employment, and many baby boomers are leaving their jobs to consult at the tail end of their careers. Waters says this is the ideal way to do it -- consulting at the start of your career is generally unwise in any economy.

"I think it has to be part of a natural progression," she says, adding that it's easier to go solo after you've established a large network and a professional reputation.

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