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YOUR MONEY

The Lot of the Consultant: Explaining What You Do

By HILLARY CHURA MARCH 4, 2007

FOR the growing number of independent consultants, going solo can offer greater flexibility, better compensation and more family time than would generally be possible in corporate America.

Ah, if only a commensurate amount of respect were part of the benefits package.

It has been three years since Bari Norman started her college admissions counseling service, mycollegecounselor.com. Since then, she has been told how cushy her life must be, has been asked in essence how much she earns and has met with skepticism about her productivity.

While multinational companies have turned consulting into a big money maker, the term can be an albatross for individuals. Consultants, defined as experts who charge a fee for advice or opinions — versus something tangible like completed tax returns — tend to face more questions because they are not attached to a company.

The skepticism is high “when it’s about work that people create themselves,” said Ms. Norman, who is based in New York and Miami.

Before going solo, Ms. Norman earned a Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and evaluated admissions applications at Barnard College. She said that even though she earns more now than she did then, she does not have the same standing.

“People like the cachet that comes with an organization or a university,” she said. “People query me more about my work than they did when I worked in a traditional environment. Then, the conversation was relatively quick, and I got instant credibility.”

She said that in her previous positions, “I had less experience than I have now, but because I was affiliated with a high-end, name-brand institution, I got respect I don’t get now — at least initially.”

The government does not keep statistics on the number of independent contractors, but the Society for Advancement of Consulting, a group based in East Greenwich, R.I., estimates that about 200,000 solo practitioner consultants are incorporated in the United States, at least double the number from the 1970s. About 5 percent of the current total make high six-figure or seven-figure incomes, the group estimates.

Still, many people consider the word consultant a smoke screen for someone who is between jobs. To combat that perception, Mary O’Gorman, a recruiter in New York for the financial services industry, said consultants should be strategic in positioning themselves.

“They can call themselves a company or a business,” she said. “They don’t have to say ‘consultant.’ And they can give themselves a business name and “elaborate on what it is that this business does.”

Consultants who work from home should have an answering machine message that refers to the business, not the family. Present the company “as an entity that looks like an independent business,” said Deirdre MacCallen, a recruiter and partner at Butterfass, Pepe & MacCallen in Mahwah, N.J., an executive search firm that specializes in the investment industry.

Gloria Petersen, a professional protocol expert in Chicago, said she was taken less seriously when her company was called Gloria Petersen & Associates than when she renamed it Global Protocol.

“What an amazing difference that made,” she said. “The name Global Protocol said what I did and made me appear more serious about my profession.”

Experts universally advise against using the word consultant without being more specific. They advise solo practitioners to elaborate on major clients (especially if they are marquee names) and briefly detail projects they have handled.

“It’s not very useful just to say you are a consultant. You just say you are a consultant when you want someone not to know what you do,” said Craig Jenks, president of Airline/Aircraft Projects Inc., an independent airline industry consultancy in New York.

John Challenger, chief executive of Challenger, Gray & Christmas, the outplacement firm based in Chicago, said consultants get a bad rap, either as being “thinkers” rather than “doers,” or as people who are trying to hide a gap on a résumé. He suggested that they position themselves as experts, talk about their current projects and discuss projects they have completed.

International consulting firms have branded themselves so well that anyone else trying to do the same job runs the risk of looking like an also-ran. In actuality, however, independent contractors may be better qualified and more specialized than the do-it-all megaconsultants, said Robert Passikoff, a former solo consultant, who is the founder and president of Brand Keys Inc., a customer loyalty consulting firm based in New York.

THERE is a large bit of territory that the large consulting firms have co-opted, and anyone who positions themselves as offering the same services comes across as less than capable,” he said. “So the issue is, ‘Why can’t you get a job?’ Clearly in certain instances, that’s not the case, but sometimes that is the expectation.”

Perhaps the most important factor in the image of consultants, whether they are on the cocktail party circuit or when trying to drum up business, is how they present themselves.

“You’ve got to show you are proud of your ability,” said Camille Lavington, a marketing strategist based in New York. “You can’t just say you are a marketing

consultant. You have to say you specialize in the technical field or consumer markets. Practice ahead of time what to say and think of a script. It's an attitude they take when they say it so they don't sound like they have a tin cup."

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