

THE
BIG
IDEA

THE RISE OF THE SUPERTEMP



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Jody Greenstone Miller is a cofounder and the CEO of Business Talent Group.

Matt Miller is a *Washington Post* columnist, the host of the public radio program *Left, Right & Center*, an independent consultant, and a senior adviser at Burson-Marsteller.

THE BEST EXECUTIVE AND PROFESSIONAL JOBS MAY NO LONGER BE FULL-TIME GIGS. BY JODY GREENSTONE MILLER AND MATT MILLER

Ed Trevisani hangs with his young sons when they come home from school. He volunteers as a Boy Scout leader, serves on nonprofit boards, and teaches management at Philadelphia-area universities. He’s even been known to sit on the back porch in the middle of the workday. Not bad for a guy who’s still pulling down as much as he did when he was a partner with IBM and PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Trevisani is a Wharton MBA and GE alum who now manages high-powered projects for *Fortune* 500 companies and advises executives on operational issues, change management, and potential mergers. He does all these assignments on a temporary basis, working as an independent contractor.

Let’s call Trevisani a supertemp. He and others like him belong to the “free agent nation” popularized a decade ago by the author and workplace guru Daniel Pink, but they inhabit its most rarefied precincts. Supertemps are top managers and professionals—from lawyers to CFOs to consultants—who’ve been trained at top schools and companies and choose to pursue project-based careers indepen-

dent of any major firm. They’re increasingly trusted by corporations to do mission-critical work that in the past would have been done by permanent employees or established outside firms. New intermediaries have sprung up to create a market for such marquee talent. Supertemps are growing in number, and we think they’re on the verge of changing how business works.

Most supertemps are refugees from big corporations and law and consulting firms who value the autonomy and flexibility of temporary or project-based work and find that the compensation is comparable to what they earned in full-time jobs—sometimes even better. They leave behind the endless internal meetings and corporate politics, which Trevisani reckons took 30% to 40% of his time back in the day. Now, a decade into the independent life, he digs deep into challenging assignments that exercise his talents—serving as interim CEO for an international trading company, developing an M&A strategy for a global manufacturer, leading the IT selection process for a global insurance company—and devotes just a little time to the administrative side of running his own show. “I’m independent because it’s fun and I’m able to help executives succeed at what they do,” he says. That he can decide to take two months off to reconnect or travel with his family is gravy.

Excerpts from “The Rise of the Supertemp” by Jody and Matt Miller in the *Harvard Business Review*, May 2012

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Idea in Brief

A new employment phenomenon—the supertemp—is beginning to change how business works.

Supertemps are top managers and professionals, from lawyers to CFOs to consultants, who have been trained at the best schools and companies and choose to pursue project-based careers independent of any major organization.

They’re increasingly trusted by corporations to do mission-critical work that in the past would have been done by permanent employees or established outside firms. Intermediaries have sprung up to create a market for such marquee talent.

Supertemp positions offer new flexibility and freedom to highly skilled workers, and new possibilities for growth and innovation to corporations. In the United States, antiquated attitudes and health care and tax systems that punish independent workers are slowing their rise. But it will continue.

As Jody states in the article:

“Knowing how best to engage this lower-risk, flexible, and faster talent model can be a source of competitive advantage.” In fact, one Fortune 500 executive quoted in the piece explains that “Once you see the talent base that’s out there, it’s almost a no-brainer that you would try and tap into it.”

She concludes:

“...Traditional models of work are being upended by a convergence of the emerging desires of top professionals and the evolving needs of 21st century organizations. When the dust clears, the way people think about elite careers, the corporation, and the economy will never again be quite the same.”

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