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Making a Living, One Project at a Time

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN

Q. *You have noticed some high-level professionals leaving permanent jobs — either by choice or by necessity — to work on a project basis for a variety of different companies. Is this something you should consider doing?*

A. Because the recession caused many companies to push for leaner management teams and to reduce their head counts, they've lost some of the expertise they once had in their ranks. That has made room for the career project professional — a highly experienced professional who works in the short term on specific projects, says Jody Greenstone Miller, founder and C.E.O. of the [Business Talent Group](#), a placement firm in Los Angeles. "These people want control over their time, the kind of work they do and with whom they work," she says.

Career project professionals are generally experts in their fields, with a demonstrable record of high-level accomplishments, Ms. Miller says.

In such work, it's important to have the ability — both financially and emotionally — to live from project to project, without the security that comes with permanent employment, says Wyatt A. Nordstrom, chief executive of [Maven](#), an [online professional marketplace](#) for project-based consultants. "You may work steadily for six to eight months and then there will be down time," he says.

Q. *In what industries is demand greatest for career project professionals?*

A. They are often specialists in a particular area within a certain industry, whether it's nuclear science or supply chain management. Those with experience in information technology are in especially high demand, says Jonathan Thom, vice president for professional staffing at [Express Employment Professionals](#), a staffing firm based in Oklahoma City. There is also rising demand in accounting and marketing, he says. You might be a finance professional brought in to assist with an internal audit, or a marketing professional asked to manage a corporate re-branding.

Q. *How do you get started? Should you register with an agency or a consulting firm that places independent workers?*

A. Registering with an agency that lists projects for high-level professionals is one way to find work. But most career project professionals use their own networks. “Ninety percent of the people we work with get their work from those they know,” says Gene Zaino, chief executive of [MBO Partners](#) in Herndon, Va., which provides back-office support for independent consultants.

If you’ve allowed your professional network to stagnate, you should rebuild it before trying to get project-based work, Mr. Thom says. “You want to be able to ask those in your network what you might be able to help with,” he says.

Because you must sell your skills continuously, you need confidence — and the ability to articulate clearly to prospective clients what you do and why it’s valuable, Mr. Zaino says.

Q. *What can you expect to earn when working on your own?*

A. On an hourly basis, project-based work usually pays 50 percent to 100 percent more than what a full-time salaried professional earns, Mr. Nordstrom says. Much depends on the need for your skills in your geographic market, he says. And remember that at some point in the year, you are likely to be between projects and not earning anything.

One downside of project-based work is that you are responsible for finding and paying for your [health insurance](#). That can be costly, especially if you have to insure an entire family.

Mr. Thom says that having a financial safety net will help you feel more secure during downtime. He suggests putting aside three to six months of living expenses before leaving your permanent job. “Of course,” he says, “people do this every day with less in the bank, sometimes not by choice, and they manage.”

Q. *What are the challenges in leaving permanent salaried employment for a career in project-based work?*

A. Many of those who start working independently don’t really know how to run a business, Mr. Zaino says. “It’s difficult enough to find clients and deliver good service,” he says, “but now you have to navigate taxes, regulatory issues, figure out if you have the right business [insurance](#), how to get invoices out and how to approach clients when payment is overdue.”

You’ll also need a sounding board, so try to find a mentor who has been successful at independent contracting. “Most good companies have mentorship and career advice built in,” he says. “When you’re on your own, you have to build that in yourself.”