

Time to jump off the career ladder, become a 'supertemp?' - CNN.com

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(CNN) -- For years the word "permatemp" has sent shivers down the spines of professionals around the world, who fear they will never be able to land themselves a permanent job.

But there is now a new breed of temp on the block, one that is not desperate to hold onto the corporate

ladder, but instead chooses to jump off it in order to further their careers.

These so called "supertemps" are top-level managers who have realized that they are often better off, both financially and emotionally, working for various companies on a project-based or temporary basis.

"The number-one reason these high achievers decide to leave their corporate careers behind is for career satisfaction," says Jody Miller, co-founder and CEO of Business Talent Group (BTG), an agency that specializes in pairing up companies with independent business professionals. "They want to choose what type of work they do and for whom. Ultimately they want to be in control of their own life," she adds.

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Tony Evans, a 58-year-old chief executive from York, in the United Kingdom, was ahead of the curve when he decided to "decouple himself from the corporate treadmill" and go it alone in 1994.

"I got to the point where I wanted to do the things that I liked, not just be part of the corporate bureaucracy," he says.

Two years later he set up his interim management services business 3 Graces and he hasn't looked back since.

"I find working as an interim manager incredibly freeing," says Evans. "There is a different level of honesty that you can have with your client when you work as an independent, one which they simply don't get from a permanent employee."

Evans has worked all over the world helping to rescue businesses that are going through a difficult time. "I only get to play when things are complicated, but that's how I like it," he says.

He also is a board member of the Institute of Interim Management (IIM) which supports independent professionals and helps promote them to clients. As with many others who work as an independents, he began his career as an interim when he was made redundant.

A recent survey by the IIM showed that 22% of prospective interims cite the end of employment as a trigger for making the move, but a whopping 70% give professional and lifestyle choices as the principal driver.

This doesn't surprise Miller who says that many of her clients cite a better work-life balance as one of the reasons why they make the switch.

Evans found that when he was made redundant during the recession in the early 1990s he wanted to reassess his life. "I had a young family at the time and although I felt the pressure to ensure I would be able to provide for them I quickly realized that I could earn as much money and do more exciting things if I started to work as an independent," he says.

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But even though recent research by McKinsey found that 58% of U.S. companies are expecting to use more temporary arrangements on all levels in the years ahead, Miller still believes that there is a stigma attached to temp work on executive levels, one which she is keen to shed.

"The idea that a person who works on a project basis is not as successful or as ambitious as someone who sticks to the corporate culture is not true, but it is still something that is part of U.S. conventional business thinking," she says.

"My clients could stay in the corporate world if they wanted to, they just choose not to," adds Miller, who recently wrote about the "Rise of the Supertemp" in the Harvard Business Review.

But the emergence of the "supertemp" is not just an American phenomenon. In Europe, where more stringent labor laws exist, temporary work is even more widespread as companies are reluctant to hire permanent staff, says Miller. She adds that although the majority of this work is in the middle tier or below, it is now spreading in the high end.

According to consultancy firm Booz Allen Hamilton, the UK market for interim managers is one of the best developed, accounting for as much as \$1.8 billion in revenue in 2009; and across Europe, annual growth in the market for interim executives has been over 20%.

But Evans wants to ensure that anyone who toys with the idea of breaking free from the corporate shackles realizes that all this freedom doesn't come stress free.

"For me the hardest time is at the end of an assignment. I like to work and the downtime gives me itchy feet as there is no guarantee that you will get more work," he says.

That's where agencies such as Miller's BTG have created their niche, pairing up companies in need of talent with independents who looking for the next assignment.

"It takes a lot of pressure off when you have an agency looking for new projects on your behalf," says Evans, who adds that about half of his business comes through agencies; "The rest I get through my own contacts," he adds.

Both Miller and Evans believe that most supertemps share some key characteristics that help them succeed.

"These people like to go in and make an impact quickly," says Miller. "They have specific skills and they like variety and a challenge. They can work as an outsider as well as being able to gain people's confidence quickly and they are natural self-starters who are able to network easily."

Although the current economic downturn has resulted in an increasing number of managers and executives being let go, thus saturating the supertemp market, both Evans and Miller are hopeful for the future.

They argue that it is fast becoming a competitive advantage for businesses to know how best to engage this flexible talent model.

"Companies will start realizing that it is more cost effective and more productive to hire the best possible team for a

specific phase, and understand that such a team might not be the team which will manage the next phase," says Miller.

"I think the corporations that embrace that will be the ones that will do best in the future."

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