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You're ready to become an HR consultant if you have what it takes to make things happen

By **DANIEL SCHROEDER**, for *Small Business Times*

Question: I've worked in human resources for 11 years, mostly as an HR generalist. For the last couple of years, I've been doing more OD kinds of things — management development, performance coaching, etc. I'm kicking around the idea of moving into HR consulting. Any suggestions you could offer would be more than greatly appreciated.

Answer: I'm happy to offer a word or two about the realities of consulting on HR matters or the "people practices" of organizations. I've been doing this kind of work for more than 15 years. Hopefully, in this article I can provide you with a basis for doing some further investigation and self-reflection.

One of the first things you need to know about external consulting is that it is very competitive. My firm, Organization Development Consultants Inc., (ODC) is 9 years old, and we have two offices — one serving the Milwaukee area and one serving the Madison area. At our staff meetings, we often discuss the competition.

For us, it ranges from "one-man bands" to national firms that have multiple offices around the country. So, in light of that, I think the first thing you need to do is reflect on your work experience, identify your strongest skills and capabilities, and use them to define what your niche will be.

Identify the things you do best and concentrate on those. You'll find that the competition will still be formidable, but at least you are working from a position of strength, rather than trying to be all things to all clients. In doing so, you'll find that it will be easier to develop an identity and a brand and differentiate you from the competition.

In addition to your generalizable work experience, a second area

to examine is the area of professional credentials. Let's face it - we live in a credential-driven society. Having a few letters behind your name gives you more credibility than if you don't have any letters behind your name.

Now, I'm not going to tell you that you need a Ph.D. to be an external consultant; having a bachelor's degree is probably sufficient. However, having some subject matter-specific certifications probably won't hurt. Again, the idea is to differentiate you from the competition.

So, if you are looking at HR-related consulting, you might want to investigate certification through the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM), the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), or the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI). Additionally, the Institute of Management Consultants (IMC) provides consulting certification that cuts across disciplines.

The question of whether you have what it takes to be a successful external consultant is at the heart of the matter. To answer that question, let me begin by observing that the dictionary definition of consultant is "one who gives expert or professional advice." This is worth noting because we live in an era in which consultants seem to be everywhere. Sometimes, consultants are not viewed in particularly favorable terms. Sometimes, consultants are not viewed as providers of expert counsel, but rather as "snake oil peddlers."

From my point of view, the best way to succeed as a consultant is to concentrate on being a highly effective problem solver who demonstrates the highest standards of ethical and moral integrity in doing so.

If you are going into consulting to get rich because you think you can charge a lofty daily rate, you need to rethink your motives. Prospective clients will see right through you, and your reputation will hinder rather than help you.

A second observation is that to succeed in external consulting, you must be a "rainmaker." I use the term rainmaking as a generic reference to business development and associated activity.

The most effective consultants I know are both highly capable in their disciplines and highly active and visible in their fields and com-

munities. If you are a terrific performance coach, but no one knows about it, you are doomed to fail.

Networking, therefore, needs to be something you vigorously practice. You need to be “in the arena,” not watching from the outside waiting for the phone to ring.

Get involved in professional groups. Reconnect with your alumni group. Join a social or recreational club. Make contacts through your hobbies. Offer to speak at local civic or community groups. The list goes on and on, but the point is: get visible and get connected.

A third observation is that to succeed as an external consultant, you must learn to differentiate what works from what doesn't. This sounds like a no-brainer, right? Well, let me tell you, the reality of external consulting is not that simple. Working on the inside for one organization, you have the ability (or at least the potential) to develop legitimate authority and credibility from your position or role. This gives you leverage to advance your ideas and initiatives.

The external consultant's principal power source is his/her expertise. As an external consultant, you have no position power — any power along those lines derives from the sponsor of your work. That is why it is so important to have the support of top management in your consulting efforts. Often times, I find the hardest part of my work is not in identifying the problem or a relevant solution strategy. Rather, I frequently have more difficulty selling the approach to the “powers that be” and implementing it.

Further, when you work as an internal provider of services, you eventually begin to understand the organization's culture, its nuances, its ways, etc.

On the outside, as you work with a number of different clients, you have a much harder time understanding the culture of each organization. Under such circumstances, the tendency is to focus more on the problem rather than taking a look at its con-

text, as well.

And, speaking from experience, no problem is as simple as it appears - there is always an organizational context, and if that isn't incorporated in your solution strategy, you are not going to be as effective as you would like.

Finally, my sense is that the rigid application of models is the Achilles heel of many consultants. Rather than force-feed clients “your way,” you need to flexibly adapt your approach to their work environments.

Too much consulting today seems to be “boiler plate,” “cookie cutter” or “off-the-shelf.” While it is true that you are selling your expertise and your process, you cannot fall into the trap of miraculously finding a problem with each prospective client that falls neatly into your “bag of tricks.”

That kind of approach will only lead clients to hang the snake oil peddler moniker on you. No, it is better to develop a relationship based on openness and flexibility.

So, is HR consulting the next step for you? Think about what I talked about in this article and do some more digging. Whether you stay inside or make the move to an external role, though, my parting words to you are, “Become a rainmaker.” Rainmakers make things happen—they are problem solvers, referral agents and resources for others. Whether you consult on the inside or the outside, rainmaking is an important tool for you to have at your disposal.



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